Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

LO 1 Discuss the reform efforts of the Progressive era and the groups involved in those efforts.

LO 2 Describe the methods used by the various states to bring about reforms in state governments during the Progressive era.

LO 3 Discuss the involvement of women’s groups in Progressive era reform movements.

LO 4 Compare and contrast the Progressivism of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

LO 5 Describe ways in which American culture was influenced by the Progressive movement.
If Populism was a rural response and unionization the working-class response to the Industrial Revolution, Progressivism is often seen as the middle- and upper-class response.

If Populism was a rural response and unionization the working-class response to the Industrial Revolution, Progressivism is often seen as the middle- and upper-class response. There is some truth to this generalization, but the reality was much more complicated. In fact, the ideas at the heart of Progressivism—that benevolent government intervention could rectify the plight of the people, that the economic playing field needed to be regulated to ensure fair access for everyone, that American society could adapt to the advent of the Industrial Age without overthrowing democratic capitalism—became central to much of American social activism no matter what class proposed it. In this way, the ideas central to early-twentieth-century Progressivism have remained a fixture in modern American liberalism, defined most simply as the ideology that lionizes liberty and freedom, but which by the turn of the twentieth century came to mean the idea that the modern industrial age requires government to play a role in ensuring a fair distribution of wealth.

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century Progressivism began with a specific agenda: to clean up the nation’s cities. But the social and political movement grew from there. Progressivism included reforms on state and national levels, including efforts to mitigate poverty, institute labor reform, create greater worker efficiency, and improve the unsatisfactory conditions of urban housing. Borrowing from the Populists, Progressives also worked to create a more democratic political process. They also sought greater government regulation of industry, the development of conservation efforts like the creation of national parks, and the use of experts to help solve persistent social problems. Indeed, the Progressives cast their nets so widely that some historians have debated the very utility of the word progressive. In general, it is an umbrella term for a host of changes demanded largely by the middle class to rein in the worst abuses of the Industrial Age. Its focus was on the search for stability, efficiency, and democracy within a rapidly changing world. The Progressives’ demands propelled them into the political spotlight from the 1890s until the end of the First World War in 1918. Of the three initial waves of reform that emerged in the late nineteenth century, the Progressives were the most influential.

LO 1 The Reformers

The Progressives were composed mainly of middle-class men and women, most of whom lived in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Most were raised in deeply religious
The Progressive Era

By the late nineteenth century, many women were well educated, and many in this first generation of college graduates worked outside the home. Women thus became involved in the public arena as part of their domestic responsibilities. One of the best-known Progressive reformers, Jane Addams, referred to her work as “municipal housekeeping.” But Addams was not alone. Women were some of the most active reformers of the Progressive era. For example, nurse Margaret Sanger pushed to increase the advertising and availability of contraception. Journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett led the anti-lynching crusade to stop violence against African Americans. And Alice Paul and others fought for female suffrage on the grounds that women’s new role in the public world demanded that they have the right to vote.

Reforming the Cities

The first target of Progressive reform was the nation’s cities. From 1870 to 1900, the urban population of the United States grew from 10 million to more than 30 million. By 1920, the U.S. Census...
declared for the first time that the United States had more urban than nonurban dwellers. This rapid growth made it difficult for urban governments to provide basic services, such as street cleaning, garbage collection, and schools. Progressive reformers focused on fixing these problems and improving living conditions in the poor areas. If many middle-class people had not noticed the urban poverty of the era, journalist Jacob A. Riis’s illustrated book about New York City’s tenements, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), shocked many Americans into “discovering” poverty.

**Settlement Houses**

One of the most effective Progressive solutions to the problem of poverty was the creation of settlement houses, safe residences in poor neighborhoods where reformers could study local conditions. Much like a social scientist’s fieldwork, living in the middle of these neighborhoods gave reformers a firsthand look at what needed to be changed. The settlement houses also provided a place for residents to hold meetings and receive free health care. Settlement houses became fixtures in many cities, including Chicago, Boston, and New York.

**Hull House** was the second but most renowned settlement house in the United States, founded in Chicago in 1889 by Jane Addams. It exemplified the type of contribution reformers could make. Women made up the majority of its residents, and they lobbied the government to pass better construction and safety laws to improve the conditions in the surrounding tenement houses. The women of Hull House also established a new, more effective process for collecting garbage and fought to eradicate prostitution in the cities by closing red-light districts. Addams’s book about her experience, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), became a reform classic and expressed the moral tone of the Progressive era. Addams emphasized that it was not a matter of noblesse oblige that led her into the slums; she wrote that her own life was worthless before she undertook her mission and that the settlement house was as educational and therapeutic for her as its work was beneficial to the poor immigrants around her.

Read Jacob A. Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*.

**Settlement houses**
Safe residences in poor neighborhoods where reformers could study local conditions and where residents could hold meetings and receive free health care

**Hull House**
The second but most renowned settlement house in the United States, founded in Chicago in 1889 by Jane Addams; its residents lobbied the government to pass better construction and safety laws to improve conditions in the surrounding tenement houses

Learn more about Hull House and Progressive reform.
Meanwhile, temperance advocates continued to attack the consumption of alcohol, thinking it had a negative effect on the working classes and on the stability of impoverished urban neighborhoods. Temperance workers also feared that the large number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who by and large came from cultures that had long drinking traditions, were increasing America’s dependence on alcohol. Thus, while the middle-class reformers may have had the best intentions in mind, they also suffered from paternalism and notions of Social Darwinism that were prominent at the time.

To influence legislation, temperance workers started the Anti-Saloon League in 1893, attempting to pass laws at local and state levels. Its interest in politics gave the Anti-Saloon League a higher profile than the Women’s Christian Temperance League (WCTL), which continued to push for local, mandatory temperance education. And, unlike the WCTL, the Anti-Saloon League was composed mostly of men (such as its founder, Howard Hyde Russell, and its most prominent national leader, Wayne Wheeler), who felt that the dirty work of politics should be carried out by men. The Anti-Saloon League became the first modern, single-issue lobbying group in the nation. As in the 1830s and 1840s, temperance was one of the major components of the reform impulse.

**State Political Reform**

Urban reform was just the beginning of the Progressives’ battle to rectify the nation’s problems. Progressives soon realized that improving conditions for the poor required a more democratic political system. They were determined to take the country back from, as they saw it, the corrupt and selfish interests that dominated politics. Many had been influenced by the Galveston hurricane of 1900, which utterly destroyed the once-booming island town of Galveston, Texas. Even though previous storms had barraged the city and its population of 42,000, local leaders did not heed the warnings to build a protective storm wall. After the hurricane killed more than 8,000 people, numerous factions began to reform local and state politics, attempting to give the general population a greater voice.

**Democratizing Trends**

One way Progressive reformers empowered the masses was to change how senators were elected. Hitherto, senators had been chosen by state legislatures. Progressives proposed that senators be directly elected by citizens, enabling citizens to vote for a candidate they trusted. Many senators and businessmen opposed the idea; they both distrusted the voters’ ability to select candidates and had no desire to campaign before the public. But, in 1913, after several years of agitation, the reform became law as the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Another democratizing trend was illustrated by the initiative and the referendum. This device was designed to allow citizens more control over state law. Previously, those who sought to implement change had to create and maintain an expensive lobby in their state capital.
Initiatives and referendums allowed citizens to collect a few thousand signatures on a petition (or referendum) advocating their idea (or initiative) in order to get the initiative on the ballot. On Election Day, voters could give their direct opinion on the question. If a majority of voters favored the reform, it would become state law, even if a majority in the state legislature did not support the measure. Between 1900 and 1920, this new approach was adopted in numerous states, and it is still in use today.

Similar democratic reforms were the primary election and the recall. The primary is a preliminary election designed to let voters choose which political candidates will run for public office, rather than leaving the selection to potentially corrupt politicians plotting in “smoke-filled rooms.” The recall is a device by which petitioning citizens can, with a vote, dismiss state officers, governors, and judges who are deemed to have violated the popular interest.

**Professional Administrators**

In addition to the impulse to extend democracy to individual voters, reformers exhibited a somewhat contradictory impulse to get the right person in the right job. Sometimes this impulse meant that reformers sought to make certain government positions exempt from voting altogether. One chronic complaint against city political machines was that important administrative posts always went to friends of the “bosses” rather than to experts.

To get rid of cronyism, most Progressives supported the creation of a professional corps of administrators. The corps required anyone who wanted a government job to take a competitive exam. Only those who passed could get a job, and only those who excelled could rise to influential, decision-making positions. Ideally, no matter what political party won each new election, job-holders would be allowed to maintain their positions. This system ensured continuity and efficiency rather than a chaotic turnover of personnel each time a new party came into office.

**Progress of Reforms**

One by one, states adopted these various reforms, mostly beginning in the West and the Midwest. In Wisconsin at the turn of the century, Robert “Battling Bob” La Follette, the first Progressive governor of Wisconsin, created a Legislative Reference Bureau that became known as the “Wisconsin Idea.” It was a board of experts such as Richard T. Ely, who ensured sound drafting of Wisconsin’s laws for such things as worker’s compensation, government regulation of railroad companies, and conservation of natural resources. The keys to reform were appointed commissions of experts working in the name of civil service.

New York City, where political machines remained strong, also changed local politics. In response to residents’ complaints, and in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire, leaders of Tammany Hall began to advocate moderate reforms. These included the abolition of child labor and the improvement of safety standards in the workplace.

**LO3 Women’s Progressivism**

Although women spearheaded many significant Progressive era reforms, they were still denied the right to vote. This became increasingly problematic once more and more women understood that individuals in the Industrial Age were buffeted by social and economic forces that were beyond their control and that required the involvement of the federal government. The denial of suffrage changed during the Progressive era, beginning in the western states (see Map 20.1).

Two main groups furthered the cause of women’s suffrage: (1) the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), founded in 1890, and
(2) the National Women’s Party (NWP), founded in 1913 and led by Alice Paul. The NAWSA worked state to state (between 1911 and 1914 it achieved the vote for women in California, Oregon, Kansas, Arizona, Montana, and Nevada) to convince opponents that women were valuable assets to society and deserved the vote. Paul and the NWP, on the other hand, pursued a more aggressive national strategy. On the eve of President Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration in 1913, Alice Paul organized a rally of 5,000 women to demand a federal constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. She also held a six-month vigil outside the White House to protest restrictions of woman suffrage.

The combined efforts of these two groups ultimately led to victory. In 1920, just after the end of World War I, the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, and women won the right to vote.

Nonpolitical women’s clubs were also vitally important to the Progressive cause. These clubs provided meeting places for African American and southern white women. They also organized social work, invited speakers to discuss topics of the day, and grew networks of women who discussed how issues uniquely affected women. Through these organizations, several women rose to national prominence. Margaret Sanger promoted reproductive rights for women, including advocating birth control. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s extensive writings exposed the inherent paternalism of early-twentieth-century America, especially the organization of its economic life.

**Progressivism in National Politics**

Progressives had pursued reform at the city and state levels, but the real power of reform lay at the national level. The expansion of Progressivism into the federal arena came after the initial reforms at the state level in the late 1800s and continued under the presidential administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.

**Theodore Roosevelt, Reformer**

During his eight years in the White House (1901–1909), President Theodore Roosevelt strongly advocated (from what he called his “bully pulpit” in the White House) Progressive reform and intervened more decisively in national affairs than any president since Abraham Lincoln. His larger-than-life personality had made him a celebrity. He built
on this image during his presidency and developed what he called a “square deal” (a term he borrowed from his poker habit) because he offered an evenhanded approach to the relationship between labor and business.

Roosevelt believed that industrial society was threatened by the immorality of big businessmen, who were more interested in personal gain than in the good of society. Monopolies were the worst offenders, and yet Roosevelt did not believe in hastily breaking up concentrations of wealth and power. Rather, he hoped that large corporations or trusts could benefit the nation by providing more equitable employment and economic expansion. Thus, in 1902, he arbitrated a coal strike in West Virginia by finding a middle ground between the miners and the owners. Similarly, in 1903, he asked Congress to create a Bureau of Corporations to examine the conduct of businesses in America. As a result of the bureau’s findings, Roosevelt prosecuted several companies for breaking the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which was the federal government’s first attempt to break up monopolies, but which was not widely used until Roosevelt took office.

Roosevelt also developed and used the Hepburn Act of 1906, which limited prices that railroads could charge and allowed the federal government to monitor the financial books of the large railroad companies. Roosevelt’s actions showed that he was willing to put the force of the federal government behind antitrust laws, garnering him the nickname of trustbuster.

And, as a big-game hunter, Roosevelt shared the concern of most Progressives about the loss of the countryside and the conservation of nature. In particular, he was concerned about the nation’s dwindling natural preserves. In response, he created five new national parks and fifty wildlife refuges designed to protect local animal species, preserving millions of acres—the greatest amount of land ever protected by a U.S. president. Roosevelt also supervised the creation of the National Forest Service.

William Howard Taft, Reformer?

Roosevelt’s successor, William Howard Taft, was a distinguished lawyer and later chief justice of the Supreme Court (1921–1930). He busted more trusts than Roosevelt, and he was key in bringing down the Standard Oil Company in 1911. But Taft was never as politically capable as Roosevelt, and on a few accounts he failed to continue Roosevelt’s success in passing reform legislation.

In 1912, a dispute between Teddy Roosevelt and Taft over the issue of conservation led Roosevelt himself to form a third party, the Progressive Party, to win back the presidency from his successor. But in the end, Roosevelt and Taft split allegiances and lost to the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson.

“When I say I believe in a square deal I do not mean to give every man the best hand. If the cards do not come to any man, or if they do come, and he has not got the power to play them, that is his affair. All I mean is that there shall be no crookedness in the dealing.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

Sherman Antitrust Act
Passed in 1890, the federal government’s first attempt to break up monopolies

Hepburn Act of 1906
An act that limited prices railroads could charge and allowed the federal government to monitor the financial books of the large railroad companies

trustbuster
A nickname for those in government advocating antitrust laws

National Forest Service
Government agency created by Theodore Roosevelt to preserve land and protect local animal species

Progressive Party
Political party created by Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 to win back the presidency from Taft

>>  “The Last Eruption of the Great American Volcano”—Roosevelt depicted as the engineer of corporate reform and trustbusting.
who advocated parts of the Progressive mission with just as much zeal as Roosevelt.

**Woodrow Wilson, Reformer**

Woodrow Wilson became president in 1913, when Progressive ideas were at their most influential. But Wilson did not trust big business as much as Roosevelt. In his platform message, entitled “The New Freedom,” Wilson pledged to use government power to destroy big businesses and give smaller ones greater ability to compete. He passed a series of laws that increased the size and power of the federal government, and he helped pass the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, which established a regional banking system under the control of the federal government. The act also included a massive tariff reduction, the first since the Civil War, known as the Underwood Tariff. Because Wilson believed that high protectionist tariffs were unfairly enriching America’s industrialists, this tariff reduction served as a symbol of his suspicion of big business.

In 1914, Wilson assisted in passing the **Clayton Antitrust Act**, which outlawed unfair practices among businesses. Also in 1914, Wilson supported the creation of the **Federal Trade Commission**, a government agency that had the right to investigate business practices and issue rulings to prevent businesses from continuing such practices.

Wilson focused on Progressive reforms to regulate businesses, but he never fully supported the social reforms that other Progressives rallied for, such as child labor reform, women’s suffrage, and regulation of laborer workdays. Because of the popularity of these ideas, however, Wilson eventually supported the passage of several bills, including the **Keating-Owen Child Labor Act**, which prevented the employment of children under the age of sixteen, and a bill that mandated a maximum eight-hour workday for American railroad laborers.

By the time he was reelected president in 1916, Wilson had fulfilled many of his Progressive goals, even some of the less benign ones. Claiming to “clean up” federal government in behalf of the common good, for instance, Wilson allowed the racial segregation of a variety of federal departments within the nation’s capital, including the Post Office and the Treasury. Wilson was, of course, a member of the Democratic Party, which, in the South at least, was premised on white supremacy. Thus, as conscientious as they were about the common good, most Progressives like Wilson were not beyond the common racial perceptions of the time.

**LO5 Progressive Influences on American Culture**

Progressive reformers did not limit their efforts to improving urban conditions and reforming political systems. Their ideas influenced business and educational practices and attempted to improve the overall quality of life for many Americans. It was about more than just politics. (To understand why the Progressive era occurred when it did, see “The reasons why . . .” box.)

**The Muckrakers**

In fact, Progressive ideas spread throughout the nation mainly through the voices of journalists, novelists, professors, and public intellectuals. Among the best remembered are the muckrakers, investigative writers who exposed miserable conditions in American factories, political corruption in city machines, and the financial deceptions of corporations. Through diverse means, the muckrakers used these exposés to influence city dwellers to be active in flushing out immorality and to understand the positive effects of an urban democracy. Jacob Riis, Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Upton Sinclair were the best-known muckrakers. All wrote classic books in the Progressive tradition, including Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Steffens’s *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), Tarbell’s *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), and, most notable of all, Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), which told the harrowing tale of life in a Chicago meatpacking plant.

The details of Sinclair’s factory were real, and middle-class meat-eaters, including President Roosevelt, were horrified. Sinclair described rats running over piles of rotten meat, embalming fluid mixed into the sausages to...
disguise the rot, and workers spitting tuberculosis germs into heaps of meat as it baked in the midsummer sun. Roosevelt’s staff investigated these tales and found that the writer had not been exaggerating. This prompted Congress to pass, in 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. The first national legislation of their kind, these acts gave the federal government responsibility for ensuring that meat would reach its customers fresh and disease-free.

Progressivism in Business

In business, Progressives sought to improve working conditions and professional standards, but also to improve efficiency. While one of the first measures the Progressives undertook was to improve the relationship between owners and labor, these efforts often fell flat. For instance, the National Civic Federation, founded in 1900, sought to build a partnership between owners and workers. But the organization never accomplished its goal because there were simply not enough business owners who wanted to help their workers, and many workers did not trust the motivations of owners to help them.

Besides, many Progressives were more interested in improving efficiency, no one more so than the engineer Frederick W. Taylor. Like Progressives who sought to open the political process to more...
Efficient methods, Taylor believed that businesses could also be made more efficient if they changed some of their practices. Taylor’s key interests were scientific management (the detailed study of the best ways to schedule, organize, and standardize tasks) and time-and-motion studies (the study of exactly how factory jobs functioned). Using minute scrutiny, cameras, and stopwatches, he worked out the most efficient way to wield a shovel full of coal and showed business managers that systematic employment of his methods could boost productivity. He published his results in 1911. However, because these results were mostly fabricated, they led owners to make impossible demands of their workers. Thus, Taylor’s efforts to improve efficiency made working conditions even more miserable.

The Role of Laws

Above all, the Progressives avowed a stern belief in laws as vital instruments of social change. Instead of using large social movements or force, Progressives sought to change the way Americans lived by crafting laws against what they saw as social wrongs. In addition to the many trustbusting, tariff, and voting laws they advocated, Progressives used the courts to limit the number of hours women and children could work and to end the most brutal forms of racial antagonism. They sometimes succeeded, as in the case of Muller v. Oregon (1908), which upheld a law limiting the number of hours that women could work in a day. Progressives were, however, unsuccessful in passing child labor laws and in promoting a federal antilynching law.

The Progressives’ love of laws led in dark directions as well. In the name of improving human genetic qualities on behalf of the common good, some Progressives argued that it would be better to sterilize people with so-called less desirable qualities. This movement, called eugenics, was a worldwide phenomenon, led by the Briton Sir Francis Galton, who was Charles Darwin’s cousin and who was infatuated with applying his cousin’s ideas beyond the forces of biological evolution. In the United States, beginning in 1896, many states began prohibiting anyone who was “epileptic, imbecile, or feeble-minded” from getting married. In 1907, Indiana was the first of more than thirty states to require compulsory sterilization of certain kinds of criminals and the mentally ill. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of these laws in
1927, and they continued to be the law of the land in certain states until the 1970s. Prominent supporters of eugenics included Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Margaret Sanger.

And in the end . . .

By the 1910s and into the 1920s, three sizeable challenges to the politics and society of the Industrial Age had arisen. All were in some way a reaction to the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The establishment of the first labor unions created a system of industrial labor that has existed throughout much of the twentieth century. The agrarian interests associated with the Populists may have failed politically, but some of the principal tenets of their cause eventually came to fruition. Finally, the Progressives, who were the most influential of the three, enacted political, social, and educational reforms that are with us today.

By the 1910s, the word progressive had become almost synonymous with decency and cleanliness, and politicians of all kinds were careful to depict themselves as Progressives, even if their record showed them to be dyed-in-the-wool conservatives. The fact that such a wide array of political types claimed the Progressive label illustrates how powerful the Progressive impulse had become.

Many Progressives also sought to spread their ideals throughout the world, with the best of intentions. But promoting Progressive ideals abroad would generate a host of critics both at home and abroad. And it is to America's renewed interest in world affairs that we turn next.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Electric lights are first used on a Christmas tree.</td>
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<td>1883</td>
<td>Germany institutes the world's first universal health care system.</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td>The teddy bear (“Teddy’s bear”) is created by a Brooklyn shop owner after he sees a newspaper cartoon depicting hunter Theodore Roosevelt with a bear cub.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>Crayola crayons go on sale.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Great Britain passes the National Insurance Act, creating a system of social welfare to protect workers against illness and unemployment, as well as providing retirement pensions.</td>
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What else was happening . . .

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