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The Progressive Era that took place between 1890 and 1915 sparked some of the greatest change in the United States. The most prevalent and long term changes took place in the political and social aspects that concerned the American public. For the first time in decades, the government’s focus shifted from big business to the welfare of the people. The role of the federal government expanded and began affecting citizens’ everyday lives with new legislation that affected elections, workers’ rights, the food industry, and women’s rights. Many Progressive leaders during the movement were flamboyant, radical, and outspoken. However, they all felt passionately about the issues they fought and worked to change. Although this type of behavior made some skeptical of the movement, many Americans found themselves in support of great change for the overall improvement of the nation. Many Progressive changes are still in effect today; furthermore, the Progressive mindset remains present within many politicians in office hoping to improve the lives of Americans.

Before the Progressive era, the American government mainly focused on the growth of industry and business and global territorial expansion. Although expansionist views were still highly prevalent during the Progressive era, a substantial amount of focus was shifted to the safety and rights of Americans. More amendments were added to the Constitution during this time period than the in the aftermath of the Civil War. The Sixteenth Amendment established the federal income tax, and the Seventeenth Amendment, requiring direct election of Senators, passed to eliminate unfair practices during the elections. Often, voting practices lacked privacy, and corrupt politicians would persuade, threaten, and bribe citizens for their vote. The Seventeenth Amendment established six year terms for Senators, and it required that two Senators serve from each state. This political reform improved the corrupt practices that involved bribes, the spoils system, and corrupt political groups that negatively affected the passage of legislation to improve the lives of the public. The Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol, passed in hopes of improving family lives by focusing on morality and hard work. Many women fought for prohibition thinking it would make their husbands work harder and non-violent. Furthermore, many Progressive politicians thought the elimination of alcohol would improve society overall. Lastly, the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granted women’s suffrage. Progressives were the most successful political party when creating and passing legislation, especially since three of the four amendments are still in effect today.

In addition to creating substantial additions to the Constitution, Progressives serving in the United States government held businesses to stricter standards concerning employee and consumer safety. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 called a lot of attention to safety in workplaces. Doors were locked in the factory to prevent stealing, and adequate fire escape routes had not been established to ensure the safety of the employees. Because of inadequate exit passages, 146 people died in the fire in New York City. The Factory Investigating Commission was founded by New York State to investigate the safety precautions, and the Commission drafted twenty-eight bills, of which twenty-five passed into law. These bills called for more fire escapes, wider doors, more lighting, fireproof building material, and building inspections.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition to safety standards in workplaces, Congress passed the Workman’s Compensation Act in 1913 that required employers to provide compensation to employees who received injuries while on the job. Congress established commissions to investigate employers and workplace safety between 1908 and 1913, and investigators found extremely hazardous conditions especially in jobs that required mechanical equipment. Although small at the time it started, workplace regulation and workman’s compensation has grown into a substantial part of the business industry as it is currently known. The Act has expanded its coverage to include nearly all occupations, and it covers all groups of employees.

Aside from workplace safety, Congress focused on consumer safety and health too. The unsanitary processing methods of the meat packing industry disgusted the American public, especially after reading *The Jungle*, by muckraker, Upton Sinclair. Because the demand for livestock products soared, industries had to form quicker methods of processing the meat and distributing it to the public. The desire for increased output and higher profits made employers overlook the health and sanitation aspect of the processes, and public outcry soared once the facts were revealed about the industry. The Meat Inspection Act passed in 1906; the Act required that all packinghouses be inspected by federal employees before entering commerce. Furthermore, the Act enforced sanitary handling and processing, the elimination of contaminated meat, and the accurate labeling of meat for consumers.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Meat Inspection Act was one of the first pieces of legislation that prioritized the health of citizens above the success of businesses. The Meat Inspection Act proved worthwhile and successful, because many of its provisions and requirements are still present and enforced in the current meat industry of the United States.

In addition to safety of employees and consumers, the women’s rights movement gained a substantial amount of support during the Progressive Era. Many women fought for the right to vote, use contraception, have abortions, and enjoy the same liberties as men. During this time period, society considered women the moral backbone of families; therefore, most women were expected to stay home, care for children, and provide moral support for their husbands. Many supporters of women’s suffrage argued that women’s morality would be beneficial to the political system; therefore, they should be given full voting rights. During the women’s suffrage movement, women and other supporters picketed the White House to help sway the president and Congress to endorse women’s suffrage. The fight for women’s rights did not end at suffrage; many women fought for the rights to use contraception and receive an abortion if the pregnancy endangered the mother. Women desired to have more input in their marriage and reproductive health; however, laws of the time prohibited women to have this power over their health. The fight for contraceptive rights emerged as a social issue during the Progressive Era; however, it was never legislatively reversed on the Progressive agenda. Progressives maintained focus on women’s suffrage. However, the early work of Progressive women’s rights advocates paid off in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Furthermore, it sparked the push for women’s reproductive rights that remain in question today.

Many leaders of the Progressive movement truly wanted to improve the lives of American citizens through legislation. Progressives were visionaries whose agenda consisted of making laws to make workers and citizens safer and healthier, trust busting to make business fairer and more competitive, and exposing the corrupt business practices that endangered workers and consumers. Some of the most famous Progressives include President Theodore Roosevelt and President Taft. Roosevelt focused on trust busting, conservation of national landmarks, advancing American economic interests abroad by acquiring lands, and worked to rid the political system of corruption. Roosevelt established his own Progressive party, the Bull Moose Party, to help fight for his platforms and beliefs. His successor, William Howard Taft, proved not to be as proactive concerning Progressive policies; however, he fought trusts extremely hard and destroyed more trusts that President Roosevelt had during his presidency. President Taft was not as successful as advancing the Progressive agenda as Roosevelt had been during his presidency, and historians consider Roosevelt the most progressive president.

The muckrakers played a large role in societal change and many considered them Progressives as well. Upton Sinclair, Jacob Riis, Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and other journalists all worked to expose the social problems of society. These journalists worked to report facts, spread the word about problems such as the meat industry, tenement housing, oil trusts, and municipal governments, and gain support from American citizens to change the system. Muckrakers worked to transform social problems as much as politicians; their dedication and commitment to their respective causes definitely make them Progressives. Their work proved to be extremely effective because it unveiled problems, unknown to many, that existed in the United States and caused action to improve and reverse the problems. Most of the problems received legislative attention and saw improvement because of the muckrakers’ tireless dedication to their causes.

Social reform leaders including Jane Addams, Margaret Sanger, Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. DuBois worked to help those victimized by the problems of the era. Jane Addams worked tirelessly in the Hull House to help families who lived in poverty. Margaret Sanger fought for women’s rights to contraception and opened her own birth control clinic to help women overcome the impacts of dangerous or unwanted pregnancies. Addams’ work proved to be effective at the time because she helped the urban poor of Chicago and provided a glimpse of the American dream for those immigrant families. Sanger’s work did not seem as beneficial at the time; however, she illegally provided healthcare opportunities to numerous women in need of medical advice and education. Eugene Debs and Emma Goldman fought against corrupt government systems and the capitalist economic system, and their leadership led to one of the largest socialist movements in the United States. Washington and DuBois both fought for the advancement of African Americans both socially and economically. Like women, their most successful movement would come later in the century, but their movements brought attention to the persisting inequalities facing African Americans. All of these leaders were considered Progressives because they all thought their work would lead to a better America, and they battled tirelessly to improve the quality of life for most minority groups who seemed to be lost in industrial dominated times and areas.

The changes made during the Progressive era crafted the modern United States. The role of government expanded rapidly and began regulating large industries and legally protecting workers. Since this era, a steady growth in the federal government has persisted, and this trend began during the late nineteenth century with the Progressive movement. Leaders of the era all demonstrated effectiveness when advocating their causes, and the leaders were defined by their passion for their cause, dedication to a solution, hard work for improvement, and public statements for the spread of support. The Progressive movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century truly shaped and prepared the country for its rise to become a global superpower in the mid twentieth century.

1. Cornell University. http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/supplemental/timeline.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Texas A&M University. “Meat Inspection.” Accessed September 7, 2012. http://meat.tamu.edu/meatinsp.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)