The United States in the Progressive Era

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The Progressive Era, a period of great change in the United States, began in the 1890s and continued to flourish until the 1920s. It was preceded by the Gilded Age, a period of economic growth following the Civil War that attracted millions of people from Europe.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Progressive Era consisted of social activism and political reform by not only the government, but also the ordinary people of America. The Progressives aspired to transform American society to one that everyone could benefit from; this meant refining government on the federal, state, and city levels by getting rid of political corruption. They wanted to free America of all the problems bludgeoning society by bringing public awareness to previously unknown tribulations. The Progressives introduced unprecedented agendas and goals to revamp the existing government, making them a distinct and recognizable entity in the present society at the time. The effectiveness of their work is a direct correlation to the withstanding ideologies and laws that had repercussions on both government and society. While some of their policies were short lived, the Progressives experienced an overall success in their efforts.

The Progressives were primarily concerned with exposing government and society related wrongdoings as a mechanism for change. One way this occurred was through the implementation of muckrakers, who were journalists that specifically exposed these wrongdoings. A prominent muckraker at the time was Upton Sinclair, whose novel, *The Jungle,* brought to light the extreme working conditions of the meatpacking industry. Sinclair and other muckrakers alike were successful in gaining an audience and exposing corruption within the United States. This growing audience led to a growing momentum toward the movements, but mostly opened the eyes of ordinary Americans and not so much lawmakers and big businesses. The Progressive Era covered such a wide range of these exposed movements from immigration all the way to social sciences that it is nearly impossible to cover everything. The main reform movements worthy of discussion, however, involved politics, race and gender.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Politics in the Progressive Era started with local and state levels before it reached national levels. For example, in 1888, Massachusetts was the first to use a secret ballot to vote in elections and was also the first state to institute direct primaries. Instead of the state legislature choosing the state candidates, individual voters were now allowed to do so. Correspondingly, the federal government also improved during the Progressive Era. Under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, the 16th Amendment was adopted into the United States Constitution in 1913. This Amendment imposed a small income tax on higher incomes, which ultimately put more money in the hands of the federal government. As a result, tax revenues began to exceed tariff revenues.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though this amendment generated more money, it was negligible in determining a sense of financial security for the United States. As exemplified, Wilson was concerned with America’s economy; in that same year, the Federal Reserve Act was passed, which eventually led to the creation of the Federal Reserve System. This system would issue dollar bills, and the nation would finally have a national bank since Andrew Jackson terminated the Second Bank of the United States.[[4]](#footnote-4) From these examples, it is obvious the Progressives were effective in initiating change all the way up to the level of the federal government; however, they wanted to extend democracy to all people, so they didn’t just keep the focus of their reform efforts in the confines of government.

In regards to race, the Progressives, who were mainly white, middle class citizens, generally ignored the minorities when it came to considering the dynamics of their platforms. At the end of the Reconstruction Era, African American civil rights decreased as the government failed to recognize the negative effects of segregation plaguing society. As a result, the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* court case of 1896 upheld “separate but equal” as a justification to continue segregation. Therefore, progressive reforms hardly affected minorities, specifically African Americans. This in turn led to the formation of many organizations with the purpose of improving racial equality. One group specifically, the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), emerged because of rights concerns regarding race riots and the future of African-Americans in America. These groups criticized Jim Crow laws, and even though they failed to terminate them, they began to lay a strong foundation for the future of ending racial discrimination all together.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Finally, women during the Progressive Era were very active in expressing their rights as citizens of the United States. Though they were denied the right to vote during most of the period, they still exercised their opinion on many controversial issues. Women during this time began to recognize that they could take part in issues, mostly those concerning morality, and still be great mothers at the same time. Just like African Americans, women began to form organizations to express their opinions on issues. An example of this is the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). This union grew out of the Woman’s Crusade of 1873. Women in the United States had no political power and decided to take action against liquor trafficking and wanted to seek change across the country. The WCTU was the first mass organization among women devoted to reform movements and sought out to improve society around the world.[[6]](#footnote-6)They encouraged women to become involved in politics and never stop standing up for what they believe in.

Furthermore, during the Progressive Era, government also seemed to greatly transform between 1890 and 1916. Earlier in the Progressive movement, government was typically hands off, but as time went on, it began to be more hands on and involved in society. There wasn’t a big jump in change from 1890 to 1916; instead, it happened gradually as more and more reform movements were completed. In 1890, the Sherman Antitrust Act was passed in an attempt to break up the monopolies in America that were ruling the economy. This act prohibited the creation of trusts that were intended to control trade, but it had a problem differentiating between which trusts were harmful and which trusts were beneficial to consumers. Even though this act didn’t perform as intended, it prompted the government to take control of the economy and not allow businesses to do so.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On the other hand, there were two new political parties built during this era. The first party, the Populist (People’s) Party, aspired to represent the welfares of farmers and laborers during the 1890s. They believed in the unlimited coinage of silver, a graduated income tax, public ownership of railroads, an eight-hour workday and other advancements to help the people. In the election of 1892, the Populist Party did not come close to winning but they did have about one million popular votes and 22 electoral votes. Evidently, the party did attract some U.S. citizens, but not enough to keep the party alive in all the elections to follow. The next party, the Progressive Party, emerged in the election of 1912. It was also known as the Bull Moose Party and it made the election a three-way race. Both William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt wanted the republican nomination, while Woodrow Wilson took the Democratic nomination. However, the Republicans chose Taft, so Roosevelt bolted and formed the Progressive Party. His platform called for reform movements such as tariffs, women’s suffrage, and prohibition of child labor. However, since the Republican Party was split in two, Woodrow Wilson won the election.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Nevertheless, the addition of new parties didn’t mark the end of governmental changes made during the Progressive Era. Most government officials during this period desired reform movements to better help America grow; in fact, the first three presidents elected in the 20th century supported reform laws. On the local levels, government passed laws to help the poor, strengthen education, and protect workers in factories. As for foreign policy, the United States hardly paid any attention to it during the 1870s and 80s, was weak militarily, and had little authority over international affairs. Conversely, in the 1880s and 1900s, the United States began to strengthen and become an international leader. For example, the Spanish-American War showed the transformation that the United States made during these periods. As Spain controlled Cuba, Puerto Rico and other properties, Cuba revolted, in which America aided them and quickly defeated Spain. The war ended under the Treaty of Paris.

Even though there are many other topics that characterized the reform movements in the Progressive Era, politics, race, and gender are three issues that constituted a majority of these efforts. Consequent to these mechanisms of change, America’s government grew quickly between 1890 and 1916 as it became more involved in national and international conflicts. However, some aspects seized to change. For example, issues involving minorities such as African and Native Americans were not addressed to the full extent of problems surrounding the white majority. However, despite the failure to address these latter issues, the contributions from the Progressive Era led to a period of overall social activism and reform that allowed the United States to flourish.

1. . “Gilded Age (1878-1889),” *America’s Story from America’s Library,* accessed November 22, 2012. http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/gilded/jb\_gilded\_subj.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . “Society in Muckrakers & Reformers,” *Shmoop University, Inc.,* lastmodified November 11, 2008. http://www.shmoop.com/muckrakers-reformers/society.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . Ellen Terrell, “History of the US Income Tax,” *The Library of Congress*, modified 2012, http://www.loc.gov/rr/business/hottopic/irs\_history.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . 4. “What is the purpose of the Federal Reserve System?,” *Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System,* last modified March 30, 2012. http://www.federalreserve.gov/faqs/about\_12594.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. .“NAACP: 100 Years of History,” *NAACP,* date accessed November 22, 2012. http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. .“Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *History Channel*, date accessed November 23, 2012. http://www.history.com/topics/womans-christian-temperance-union- [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . “The Sherman Anti-Trust Act 1890,” *America.gov*, last modified April 3, 2008. http://www.america.gov/st/educ-english/2008/April/20080423212813eaifas0.42149.html [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8. Kenneth Drexler, “Presidential Election of 1912: A Resource Guide,” *Library of Congress*, last modified October 11, 2012. http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1912.html [↑](#footnote-ref-8)