# Progressive Era

The nation saw the dawn of the 20th century as a big possibility for change. The late 19th century had been characterized, as you saw, by radical change in almost every sector of American life. The nation seemed to be redefining itself almost every decade. And, more and more, the word "progress" started to gain a new synonym: reform.

Enter the Progressives. The Populists had taken the first plunge in American politics, proving that a third party could be organized and—almost—win a national election. They had been farmers, but the new reformers, the Progressives, were mostly from the urban middle-class. They looked at urban blight, and the massive pit that divided rich and poor, and decided that it was their responsibility to change it.

The Progressives thought industrialization, capitalism, and progress were good things.They also thought they were dangerous things, however, and that it was the responsibility of the governmentto control their excesses and make sure that when the American pie was cut into, everyone received a fair share.

The Progressives were more successful than the Populists for a number of reasons. It helped that they were urban middle class—they had more money and political power to accomplish their goals. Plus, they had a horde of journalists behind them. And, as all you modern people know, having the power of the press is a formidable power, indeed.

These journalists were nicknamed **"muckrakers."**Their whole intention was to peel the "gilt" off the base metal—to rake away the pristine coverings to expose the "muck" underneath. These journalists took it upon themselves to expose all sorts of sordid things: the corruption of monopolies (like **Ida Tarbell's History of Standard Oil**), the disgusting conditions of certain industries (like **Upton Sinclair's**exposé of the meatpacking industry in **The Jungle**), and the heartbreaking lives of working children and their poverty-stricken families (like **Jacob Reis'sHow the Other Half Lives)**

People realized they couldn't ignore this stuff anymore. Sinclair's book was like today's Fast Food Nation: it frightened and totally grossed people out. They were inspired to change conditions immediately. Reis's photographs of emaciated children [so hard-worked they looked like tiny old men](http://leighmckolay.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/child-labor.jpg?w=500&h=353) went straight to the social conscience. Progressive reforms quickly started sweeping through the states: railroad regulation, Food and Drug safety regulations, minimum wage requirements and child labor laws, urban housing codes, and educational reform.

In Wisconsin, U.S. Senator **Robert La Follette**initiated the **Wisconsin Experiment.**That Progressive idea was to give voters more power by using a **secret ballot,**and instituting the **ballot initiative**and **recall and referendum,**and the **direct elections of senators**(which eventually became the **Seventeenth Amendment**, allowing voters and not state legislatures to appoint candidates). Plus, he instituted**progressive taxation systems,**so people were taxed according to their incomes. This worked out so well for Wisconsin that other states started implementing the changes, too.

Then the Progressives proved that they could spread their power all the way to the federal level, as well. In 1901, Theodore Roosevelt became the first Progressive President.

### Roosevelt Presidency

Teddy was a force to be reckoned with. He radiated a kind of aggressive masculinity that resonated well with a lot of Americans. He had been a boxer at Harvard, was an avid hunter (and especially liked shooting buffalo), and had proved his strength when he had led the volunteer regiment of **Rough Riders**to Cuba during the **Spanish-American War.**That rag-tag group of cowboys, college kids, and Native Americans were victorious, and gained "Rough and Ready" Roosevelt hero status.

Teddy totally reversed the trends of weak presidents: he was the first to step in and make sweeping changes, and especially to side with the labor movement and take a stance against big business. His big plan for change was called the **Square Deal.**A way to remember that: a square has four sides, and Teddy's idea had four main points.

Firstly, he wanted to bust the big trusts, which he found harmful to the economy and society, squashing the idea of American enterprise and competition. One of the trusts he busted was the powerful railroad monopoly,**Northern Securities Company.**He was the first to use the **Sherman Anti-Trust Act**(which had been passed—and then ignored—more than a decade ago)against monopolies. Americans cheered, and big businessmen quaked in their boots.

Second, he finally had the gumption to declare the government's right and duty to regulate big business. In 1903 and 1906, the **Elkins Act**and **Hepburn Act**stopped the railroad's corrupt practice of giving big discounts to "favored" customers while bleeding everyone else, especially farmers, dry. After reading Sinclair's The Jungle**,**Roosevelt was grossed out enough to pass the **Pure Food and Drug Act**and the **Meat Inspection Act,**siding with consumers over producers. The amazing thing about all this was that Roosevelt swept Congress right along with him, setting goals and rallying support. That leadership has caused some historians to call him the first "modern president."

Third, he was the first president to side with the labor movement. When a coal miner's strike threatened to become violent, Roosevelt didn't only agree to send in federal troops like other presidents before him. He actually brought both sides—labor and management—to the White House and had them sit down to discuss the situation. When both proved stubborn, he finally sided with labor, forcing the company to agree to more pay and a shorter workday.

Finally, he was the first president with an environmental agenda. Before the 1890s, Americans didn't think all that much about environmental conservation: the American landscape was there to use,not to protect. As it became clearer that big industry and western migration were ruining some of America's most gorgeous landscapes, however—the landscapes that so defined America's identity and inspired its artists and writers—people began motivating for change. Guys like **John Muir**and Roosevelt were the muscle behind the creation of national reserves. If you've ever been lucky enough to see **Yosemite,**for example, you can thank those two.

### Other Progressive Presidents

The Progressives' heyday didn't end with Teddy—he just gave them a powerful start. The next Progressive president was **William Taft,**elected in 1909. He continued many of Teddy's trust-busting policies. While Teddy especially went after railroads and other transportation monopolies Taft's **Mann-Elkins Act**imposed government regulation over communication systems like the telegraph.

Plus, Taft saw the passage of two new constitutional amendments—the **16th Amendment,**which instituted a national income tax, and the **17th Amendment,**which instituted the direct election of senators.

In 1912, **Woodrow Wilson**became president. He continued the trust busting of his predecessors, passing the**Clayton Anti-Trust Act**in 1913 which was way more powerful and effective than the well-intended but toothless Sherman Antitrust Act.

He also pushed some new stuff through: lower tariffs (like the **Underwood Tariff Bill,** which benefited consumers over manufacturers) and new banking systems (like the **Federal Reserve Act,**which created the first national bank since Andrew Jackson smashed the last one).

Labor loved Wilson—the new antitrust act gave them new protections that they saw as a god-send. Plus, Wilson created the **Federal Trade Commission**to regulate interstate businesses. This one, too, had some teeth: the agency was empowered to forcecompanies who misbehaved to toe the line.

Of course, Wilson isn't known as a Progressive president so much as a war president. He would see the expansion of the federal government and executive power at an incredible rate. World War I would actually kill the Progressive Party. However, that's a story for a little later. Stay with us.

### Women in the Progressive Era

The Progressive party was the first to allow women big, important roles. After all, it had started out as a social reform movement spearheaded by the ladies. By the time it started snuggling into the seat of power in Washington, women were clamoring to be more than the power behind the throne. It was time for suffrage.

This was also aided by the fact that women were entering the workforce and the professions in ever-greater numbers. Suddenly, there were "white collar jobs" that were deemed "respectable" enough for women—like operators, secretaries, and retailers. More and more women were going to college, too. When they graduated, they saw the doors to higher professions and political offices slammed closed before them. Women like **Carrie Chapman Catt**and **Alice Paul**determined to break them down, forming the **National American Woman Suffrage Association**and the **National Woman's Party.**

These women became more aggressive than any in earlier women's movements. They went on loud marches, screamed insults at politicians, were arrested, hung out in jail, went on hunger strikes, and even chained themselves to the White House gates. Some Americans were interested and inspired—others, unfortunately including the president, were disgusted.

It was the Great War—or World War I—that finally secured women the vote, because it was there that they proved their patriotism, power for mobilization, and skillful management of a national crisis. In 1920, the **Nineteenth Amendment**finally gave women the vote.

Many cheered, put down their demonstration signs, and went back to their daily lives. Others, like Alice Paul, felt that this was only the beginning. They began pushing for equal rights as well, drafting the **Equal Rights Amendment.**That legislation would continue to split the women's movement for decades—we'll see it rearing its head again in the 1960s and 70s. Stay tuned.

### African Americans

The Progressives weren't all that interested in helping African Americans. Actually, they proved to be racist: the**Ku Klux Klan**experienced a revival and was allowed to march through the streets of DC, and sit on the White House steps.

Leaders like Booker T. Washington and Du Bois continued to fight for their rights, though in different ways. In 1908, the **National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People**(NAACP) was formed, dedicating itself to ending racism, segregation, and disenfranchisement.

However, life was still atrocious for many blacks in the South. The Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups kept their repulsive practices of lynching, and the state and federal governments seemed totally oblivious **Ida B. Wells,**a young African-American woman, took it upon herself to write **The Red Record,**a stunning exposé of lynching that finally pushed the government to begin cracking down.

Change also wasn't happening fast enough for many African Americans. Faced with segregation, disenfranchisement, and terrorism in the South, as well as new employment opportunities in the North, many began to leave. All sorts of new industries were springing forth in the North and, especially, the Northwest, in areas like Chicago and Detroit.

Newspapers written by northern African Americans, like the **Chicago Defender,**urged blacks to leave the South and chase after better opportunities. When World War I snatched a large percentage of the white, male labor force away to Europe, blacks began finding all sorts of new jobs open to them. The **Great Migration**occurred roughly between 1910 and 1930, when millions packed their belongings and left in search of better lives.

All over the country, previously disadvantaged groups—women, workers, and African Americans—were taking stances to improve their conditions. New opportunities brought by industrialization, war, imperialism, and growth gave America a growing sense of its own power and influence. The "teenage" years were over: America felt ready to flex its muscles—stick its flag in foreign soils—declare how special it was—even compete with Europe. The 20th century would give the fledgling superpower the opportunity to spread its wings.