# The 1920s

### Politics

The funny thing about American politics is that you can usually tell when historians are going to start pulling out the descriptions of "weak," "small," and "corrupt"—in times of massive prosperity. The Gilded Age was characterized by laissez-faire government and politicians tucked all snugly into businessmen's pockets. In the Roaring Twenties, much the same thing happened all over again.

The **Republicans**took the helm after World War I killed the Progressive Party, and they advertised their "return to normalcy" policies. Think government became way too big in the war? Time to shrink it. Think the economy was stifled by too much regulation? Put the businessmen back in the driver's seat. **Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge,**and **Herbert Hoover's**presidencies were characterized by pro-business policies and some suspicious canoodling between big bankers and business leaders.

Harding was handsome, good at poker, and not terribly interested in the presidency. His advisors, called the**Poker Cabinet,**included some unsavory characters who became known for corrupt dealings. In the **Teapot Dome Scandal,**political officials accepted bribes from oil companies to drill on public lands.

Coolidge hardly talked at all and worked maybe four or five hours a day. He had a reputation for being so hands-off that he pleased no one—and alienated people like World War I vets (whose bonuses he refused to pay) and farmers (whose demands for price supports he ignored).

Hoover came to power with the same kind of laissez-faire attitude. He believed in the whole, "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" and "be-a-self-made-man" kind of American spirit. He wasn't going to run a government that gave handouts—people had to work to improve their ownconditions.

This, as you'll see in a following section, would prove the absolute worst kind of thinking for the Great Depression that slammed headlong into Hoover's administration.

### Modern Business, Modern Culture

In the 1920s, a Depression seemed totally unthinkable. Americans had emerged from World War I more powerful and confident than ever before—especially since it seemed to a lot of people that America had saved the world by entering the fight.

Although labor unions took a lot of hits at this time, because of all the fears of communism and socialism, things didn't regress to Gilded Age abuse. Employers were happy that unions were suffering some heat, but they also weren't cocky yet—many wanted to take advantage of the relative quiet to make their own changes. Employers started trying a practice called **welfare capitalism.**The idea was kind of similar to the Lowell System way back in the 1820s. Employers thought if they gave their workers all sorts of nice benefits—pension plans, rewards, and fun community and social events—they would wantto work hard. Plus, they would feel like their employer was on their side, so wouldn't need to join labor unions.

In the meantime, employers were trying out new strategies that made production almost unthinkably fast. A lot of the genius behind this new speed lay with **Henry Ford**and **Frederick Taylor.**In Ford's auto industries, for example, each worker had some specialized line of work. He would be put on an assembly line to work on his particular segment. When he was done, he would pass it on to the next worker, who would add his own work, and then it was finally passed to the last worker in line, who presented the finished product. Ford's cars came off the assembly line in three-minute intervals.

Nothing changed American society, culture, landscape and environment more than the automobile. That's the reason the 1920s "roared." They roared with the fast pace of technology, of production, and, especially, of autos zooming down every-expanding roads. With Ford's techniques making production so much faster, auto prices could plummet so low that almost every middle-class family could afford one. One immediate effect was**suburbanization**: what with a car, more and more families left the city to settle in more spacious, cheaper areas that were located an easy drive away from the city center.

Since things could be made so much more quickly and so much cheaper, the **advertising industry**grew at a similar breakneck pace to keep up. It had to be someone'sjob to alertthe American people of all the fabulous new things they could buy, and to give them the heads-up whenever these things were changed or improved. Magazines, billboards, and giant department store window displays glittered with consumer products and made people's mouths water and fingers itch. Plus, with the **electric grid**crisscrossing the nation and giving millions access to electric power, the **radio**spread advertisements to almost every house in the nation.

You can imagine the change in the landscape all this would create, right? Cars need roads, and roads need trees cut down, and bridges built, and tunnels carved. Plus, car-owners want suburbs built, and this means more homes, supermarkets, and highways in previously empty places. This also means more factories, which means more space and more pollution.

It also had a massive impact on American society and culture. Think of it this way: before cars, it was hard for a young person to escape their family. If a boy wanted to "court" a girl, he had to come to her house. He would need to sit in her parlor and make small talk with her mom, compliment her flowers, and sing happy songs by the piano. With an auto, however, he could whisk her away to a back seat and take her anywhere he wanted. Mommy couldn't come.

Youth culture suddenly took off in a direction that downright appalled the older, Victorian generation. More and more young people were going to college, which also took them away from family supervision, and with the arrival of the car came the start of "dating." College kids at this time talked about how a person's popularity was based on how many dates they could collect. No one "went steady"—it was all about how many admirers you could count off on your fingers. Girls wrote in their diaries about having three or four dates a night—sometimes at the same time.

The **flapper**emerged—a woman, often college-educated, who threw away old-fashioned corsets and wore short skirts and dresses. She chopped off all her hair into a bob, played sports, wore makeup (previously only for prostitutes), smoked cigarettes, drove in fast cars with fast boys, and partied 'till the wee hours.

**Movies**romanticized these flappers, and the youth culture in general. Stars like **Clara Bow**and **Louise Brooks**wowed their audiences with modernized outfits (thanks to fashion designers like **Coco Chanel**). **Jazz clubs**played a new music inspired by African-American forms, and white youth tripped down to **Harlem**to dance in new, provocative, body-grinding ways.

Harlem was suddenly the place to be—and not only for those jazz clubs with their smoky, tantalizing atmospheres. Black culture there was experiencing a whole new revolution—called the **Harlem Renaissance.**Theaters, jazz halls, newspapers, literary clubs all sprang up, and famous writers like **Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston**chronicled the African-American experience for the first time. And, amazingly, whiteAmericans showed interest, bought the books, danced the dance, and sang the tunes.

The most famous white writers of the period didn't actually stay in America. They shipped off to Europe, where they formed an **expatriate**community in Paris, spending lots of time gossiping in cafés, drinking themselves into toxic puddles in bars, and writing some of the greatest American fiction while in intoxicated hazes. **F. Scott Fitzgerald,**for example, was especially popular for chronicling the flapper, famously writing a sentence that shocked the nation: "None of the Victorian mothers had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomedto being kissed." Not kissing?

He, along with others like **Ernest Hemingway**and **Eugene O'Neil,**were part of the so-called **"Lost Generation."**Disgusted with the mindless destruction of the war and disillusioned with America's carefree descent into consumerism (and thoughtless splashing in puddles of wealth), they wrote of their sense of alienation from modernity.

They weren't the only ones who looked around this vortex of change and felt appalled. Just as many Americansfeared the changes of the 1920s as welcomed them. The whole decade was characterized by a total paradox. On the one hand, change was happening faster than anyone could have expected. On the other, Americans were digging in their heels and crying out for the preservation of tradition.

One way they did this was by cracking down on immigration. After the war, fear of foreigners grew—especially foreigners from countries that flirted with communism, like Russia and Eastern Europe. One case that became famous for being proof of America's xenophobia was **Sacco and Vanzetti.**Two Italians—who were, albeit, anarchists—were arrested on charges of murder. Despite the fact that the evidence against them was mighty sparse, they were both executed.

The government finally caved to this anti-immigrant feeling by passing the **Emergency Quota Act of 1924.**The idea of this act was to stop the "bad immigrants" from coming, but continue allowing a few "good immigrants." Here was the question: how could they tell one from the other?

It was generally considered that white "Anglo-Saxons"—aka Irish, Germans, and English—were "good" immigrants. The "bad" ones were those who weren't actually considered "white"—the Italians, the Jews, and the Eastern Europeans. To make sure that the "good" ones were allowed, immigration was restricted to 2% of the immigrant population that had existed in America in 1890. Since there had been more northern than southern or Eastern Europeans back then, more were allowed in after 1924.

As for Asians, the act cut them off entirely. Relations between the U.S. and Asian countries weren't good—especially with Japan. That country had signed the **Gentleman's Agreement**with the U.S. in 1907 to try to smooth bad relations. Japan agreed to cut off Japanese immigration to the U.S. In return, the U.S. promised to stop discriminating against the Japanese who lived in the country, and allowed the families of Japanese citizens to emigrate.

This didn't work out so well, because Americans didn't care to make the difference between Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, or Korean. Discrimination worsened, and Japan—which was at this time becoming increasingly industrialized and powerful—gathered even more chips on its shoulders. This would be bad news for the U.S. when World War II broke out…

Finally, conservative Americans staged their own backlash against all the "roaring" changes. In 1925, the **Scopes Monkey Trial**pitted scientific thought on Darwinian evolution against Biblical teachings of Adam and Eve. The debate swept the nation, showing America exactly how divided it was between "progressive" thought and "traditional" thinkers.

Conservatives also finally achieved a goal they had been pushing for decades: **Prohibition.**Thanks to the woman's vote, the **Eighteenth Amendment**was passed to outlaw drinking. Many people cheered, thinking this would end all sort of social ills. Instead, ironically, it only increased gangster activity. Guys like **Al Capone**would take huge advantage of the fact that, although it was illegal, Americans still wanted to drink—and were more than willing to pay **bootleggers**huge sums to acquire alcohol.

At the same time that all these changes were going on andbeing challenged, the American economy was like a steam engine going at breakneck speed. It was an era of huge speculation—people invested their every last penny in the stock market, and it soon became clear that there was more "pretend" money circulating than real, hard cash. So, when the stock market finally crashed, banks were revealed to have empty, echoing vaults. The roar of the 20s would end with the crash of the 30s.