


# THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

## AN AGE OF REFORM

 I can describe and assess the various reforms pushed by the Progressives in the early 1900s.

### INTRODUCTION

It's the turn of the century, and the spirit of reform is in the air. The growth of the nation over the last few decades has produced many problems in society, and the people of your state are looking to make some changes. The biggest cities of your state are facing problems with overcrowding, disease, and crime, and political machines are running the show in the cities. Politics in general is becoming more influenced by special interest groups instead of the average American, and corruption and fraud are common in all levels of government. As industry grew, so did the problems of the working class, with workers suffering from long hours, low wages, and horrible conditions. Consumers are suffering as well since there are no laws regulating industry, especially in food processing. Big businesses and monopolies are still controlling industries, fixing prices, and exerting their power over the average American. Small farmers continue to lose money due to overproduction and the huge charges of railroad companies. There is a huge gap between the rich and the rest of the population in terms of power and wealth. Women are still considered second-class citizens and are consistently denied equal rights, as are African Americans and other minority groups in society. The environment is also being adversely affected by the growth of industry, as resources are being used up and pollution is spreading at an alarming rate. What should be done about these problems ... and who should do it? Enter ... the PROGRESSIVES!!

Sit back, relax, and watch *America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – The Progressive Era* from Discovery Education. As you watch, look for each of the topics, ideas, and terms listed below. (Yup - they go in order.- but don't think you need to memorize these.)

- The problems of the Gilded Age
- Federal Civil Service
- Populists and their ideas
- Socialists and their ideas
- Muckrakers
- Sinclair, Tarbell, Riis, Steffens
- "Fighting Bob" LaFollette
- New city governments
- Election reforms – secret ballot, initiative, recall, direct primary
- 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment
- New labor laws
- Minimum wage
- Triangle Fire
- Prohibition – 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment
- Settlement Houses
- Suffrage – 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment
- National Progressives
- Theodore Roosevelt
- The Square Deal
- TR the Trustbuster
- Hepburn Act
- Federal Interstate Commerce Commission
- The Jungle
- Meat Inspection Act
- Pure Food and Drug Act
- Conservation
- National Parks and Monuments
- William Howard Taft
- Income Tax – 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment
- Election of 1912
- Woodrow Wilson
- Reducing Tariffs
- Federal Reserve
- Federal Trade Commission
- Lack of Civil Rights
- NAACP

So ... do you understand how this was a time of reform?  
See any connections to today? Got any questions?

## ***Progressive Era***

The Progressive Era encompassed the 20 or so years surrounding the turn of the 20th century and is generally identified as the years 1890–1913. The era was notable for the attempts of its most influential thinkers and activists to improve U.S. society—that is, to progress—through reforms, both legislative and social.

While an American phenomenon, Progressivism had its roots in European social reform. German thinkers were especially influential in the transportation of reform ideals across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. This wide-ranging movement encompassed the efforts of a variety of social sectors. Primarily, though, the Progressives can be characterized as middle-class, white American men and women who shared a concern about threats to society. The source of those threats, they believed, was the change wrought by industrialization and urbanization.

Those forces fundamentally and permanently altered the nature of life in the United States; by the turn of the 20th century, the nation had been utterly transformed. Since the end of the Civil War in 1865, the number of people living in urban centers increased exponentially, forever changing the demographic makeup of the previously rural nation. Additionally, the Industrial Revolution that had begun in the United States before the Civil War reached a crescendo during the years 1865–1900, the period known as the Gilded Age.

As a result of those two trends, profound problems emerged that were previously unknown in the United States. In the developing urban centers, scores of people crowded into tenement houses, sometimes several families to one or two small, overcrowded, and rodent-infested rooms. Embryonic municipal governments failed to address adequately such severe problems as lack of sewage removal and insufficient—often nonexistent—public health care programs and facilities. Further, the emerging factory system in which many of these people worked was highly dangerous, providing little or no protection to employees or the families of employees hurt, maimed, or killed on the job. Complicating all those things was the surge in European and Asian immigration that reached its height at the same time. The physical makeup of the nation, the way in which citizens lived and worked, and increased ethnic and racial tensions combined to make the United States a seemingly completely different nation than it had been in the early decades of the republic.

All those changes led many Americans, particularly those educated in the country's new universities, to worry about the nation's social and moral fabric. Those reformers sought to rectify the problems in a number of ways, both individually and in groups. They worked through voluntary organizations and state and federal governmental agencies, in what one historian has called a "search for order" amid the chaos. The most prominent Progressive reforms took place in the areas of labor protection, health care services, urban living, and environmental protection. Eventually Progressive activists were able to pressure governmental bodies to enact legislative protections in all those areas.