

America's History

James A. Henretta , *University of Maryland*, Rebecca Edwards , *Vassar College*, Robert O. Self , *Brown University*

Whose Government? Politics, Populists, and Progressives 1880–1917

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this chapter and the related materials, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What was the role of political parties in domestic politics before 1900? What choices did political parties provide to voters?
2. How and why did political affairs play a central role in American culture in the late nineteenth century? How did women participate in political culture?
3. What were the origins and aims of the Progressive movement?
4. In what ways did the political structure in the South change after 1877? How were blacks gradually disenfranchised?
5. Explain how the reform movement changed and how major politicians approached the reform movement after 1900.

Reform Visions, 1880–1892

Electoral Politics after Reconstruction

In the 1880s and 1890s, labor unions and agrarian or farmers' groups took the lead in critiquing the new industrial order and demanding change. Over time, more and more middle-class and elite Americans also took up the call, eventually earning the name **progressives**. On the whole, middle-class progressives proposed more limited measures than radical labor and farmer advocates did, but since they wielded more political clout, they often had greater success in winning passage of new laws.

There were five presidents from 1877 to 1893: Rutherford B. Hayes (R), James A. Garfield (R), Chester A. Arthur (R), Grover Cleveland (D), and Benjamin Harrison (R). Close elections inspired fierce party loyalty among many voters. As early as the 1880s, though, other Americans became frustrated with electoral politics. Republicans had enacted emancipation and other major achievements, but after Reconstruction ended, they gradually became defenders of the economic status quo.

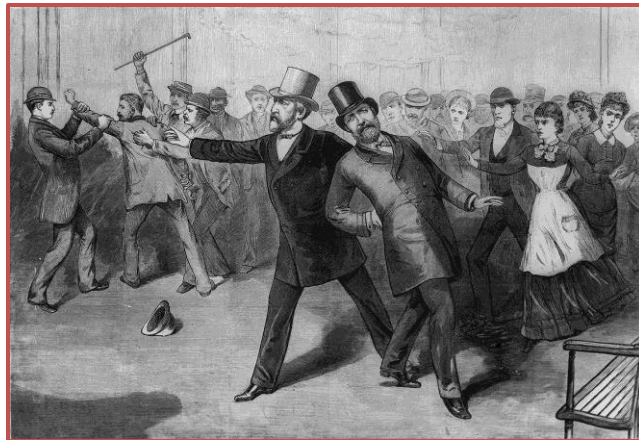
Disillusioned with both Republicans and Democrats, some reformers created new parties. For a brief moment in the early 1890s, it appeared that a new People’s Party might displace Republicans in the South or Democrats in the West and become a major party in its own right.



New Initiatives in the 1880s

After the assassination of President Garfield in 1881, reform of the **spoils system** became urgent even though this system was not the immediate motive for the murder. Prior to that, the president’s most demanding task had been to dispense political **patronage**.

The Pendleton Act of 1883 created a list of jobs to be filled on the basis of examinations administered by the new Civil Service Commission, but patronage still accounted for the bulk of government posts. Leaders of the civil service movement included many proponents of **classical liberalism**, a term that was used very differently in the late nineteenth century than it is today. At the time, the word “liberal” was used to describe those Americans, especially former Republicans, who became disillusioned with Reconstruction and advocated more limited and professionalized government.



Engraving of assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881

In 1890, Congress extended pensions to all Union veterans, whether or not they were disabled, to protect them from poverty in old age. Republicans also yielded to growing public outrage over trusts by passing a law to regulate interstate corporations.

Though it proved difficult to enforce and was soon weakened by the Supreme Court, the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890) was the first federal attempt to forbid any “combination, in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of trade.”

President Benjamin Harrison sought to protect black voting rights in the South. He found allies in Congress. Massachusetts Representative Henry Cabot Lodge drafted a bill to create a bipartisan federal elections board. Whenever one hundred citizens, in any district or city of 20,000 or more,

appealed for intervention, the board would investigate. If they found sufficient evidence of fraud or disfranchisement, they could work with federal courts to seat the rightful winner. Amid cries of outrage from southern Democrats—who warned that this so-called “Force bill” meant “Negro supremacy”—the House passed the measure. But the bill met deep resistance in the Senate. Northern liberals, who wanted the “best men” to rule through professional expertise, thought it provided for too much democracy.

Most damaging of all was the opposition of Republicans from the trans-Mississippi West. With the entry of ten new states since 1863, and thus twenty new U.S. senators, westerners had gained enormous clout. Senator William Stewart of Nevada, who had southern family ties, claimed Lodge’s proposal would bring “monarchy or revolution.” He and his allies killed the bill by a single vote. The defeat was a devastating blow to those who sought to defend black voting rights. The episode marked the demise of the party of emancipation.

<u>State</u>	<u>Date of Admission to Union</u>
Kansas	Jan. 29, 1861
West Virginia	June 20, 1863
Nevada	Oct. 31, 1864
Nebraska	Mar. 1, 1867
Colorado	Aug. 1, 1876
North Dakota	Nov. 2, 1889
South Dakota	Nov. 2, 1889
Montana	Nov. 8, 1889
Washington	Nov. 11, 1889
Idaho	July 3, 1890
Wyoming	July 10, 1890
Utah	Jan. 4, 1896
Oklahoma	Nov. 16, 1907
New Mexico	Jan. 6, 1912
Arizona	Feb. 14, 1912

The Populist Program

In Kansas, a state chock full of Union veterans and railroad boosters, Republicans dominated the political scene. They treated the Kansas Farmers’ Alliance with contempt. In a breakthrough election in 1890, the Alliance joined with the state Knights of Labor and created a new People’s Party. They stunned the nation by capturing four-fifths of the lower house of the Kansas legislature and most of the state’s congressional seats. The victory electrified Knights of Labor (major union at the time) and Alliance (major farmers’ organization) members nationwide.

In July 1892, delegates from these groups met at Omaha, Nebraska, and formally created the national People’s Party. They nominated former Union general and Greenbacker James B. Weaver for president. In November, the “Populists,” as they became known, captured a million votes and carried four western states. Though farmers’ votes were its chief instrument of victory,

the People’s Party attracted support from other groups. Labor planks won the movement a strong base among such groups as Alabama steel workers and Rocky Mountain miners.

Anti-liquor and women’s suffrage leaders, including Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, attended the party’s organizing conferences in 1891 and 1892, hoping that Populists would adopt their causes, but they were disappointed.

II. The Political Earthquakes of the 1890s

Depression and Reaction

For Americans who had lived through the terrible 1870s, the depression of the 1890s looked grimly familiar. Even fresher in the public mind were recent labor uprisings, including the 1886 Haymarket bombing and the 1892 showdown at Homestead—followed, during the depression’s first year, by a massive Pennsylvania coal strike and a Pullman railroad boycott that ended with bloody clashes between angry crowds and the U.S. Army.

In the summer of 1894, another protest jolted Americans. Radical reformer Jacob Coxey of Ohio proposed that the U.S. government hire the unemployed to fix the nation’s roads. In 1894, he organized jobless men to carry out a peaceful march to Washington to appeal for the program.



Jacob Coxey’s Army marching to Washington DC

President Cleveland was out of step with his party on a major issue: expansion of federal coinage to include silver as well as gold coinage. Advocates of “free silver” (“free” because, under this plan, the U.S. Mint would not charge a fee for minting silver coins) believed the policy would expand the U.S. money supply, encourage borrowing, and stimulate industry. But Cleveland was a firm advocate of the “gold standard”; he believed the money supply should not be expanded, but instead closely tied to the nation’s reserves of gold.

On Election Day, large numbers of voters chose the Republicans, who promised to support business, put down social unrest, and bring back prosperity. In western states where Populists had won power, voters turned them out of office. In the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states, voters handed the Democrats crushing defeats.

In the next congressional session, Republicans controlled the House by a margin of 245 to 105. The election set the pattern for sixteen years of Republican dominance in national politics.

Democrats and the “Solid South”

In the South, the only region where Democrats gained strength in the 1890s, the People’s Party met defeat for distinctive reasons.

After the rollback of Reconstruction, while some states adopted poll taxes and other measures to limit voting, African Americans had continued to vote in significant numbers in many areas. As long as Democrats competed for (and sometimes bought) black votes, the possibility remained that other parties could win their loyalty.

As ex-Confederates had done during Reconstruction, Democrats struck back, calling themselves the “white man’s party” and denouncing Populists for promoting “Negro rule.” From Georgia to Texas, many white farmers, tenants, and wage-earners ignored such appeals and continued to support Populism.

Having suppressed the political revolt, Democrats vowed that white supremacy was nonnegotiable—but they looked for new ways to enforce it. As early as 1890, a state constitutional convention in Mississippi adopted a key innovation: an “understanding clause” that required would-be voters to interpret a clause of the state constitution, with local Democratic officials deciding who met the standard.

After the Populist uprising, anti-voting measures spread to other southern states. Louisiana’s grandfather clause, which denied the vote to any man whose grandfather, in slavery days, had been unable to vote, was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court. But in *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), the Court allowed poll taxes and literacy tests to stand. By 1908, every southern state had adopted such measures.

In most of the South, voter turnout plunged, from above 70 percent to 34 percent or even lower. Not only blacks but also many poor whites ceased to vote.

Segregation laws proliferated, barring blacks not only from white schools and railroad cars but also from hotels, parks, and public drinking fountains. Lynching of African Americans increasingly occurred in broad daylight.

The Election of 1896 and Its Aftermath



William Jennings Bryan

After their crushing defeats outside the South, in 1894, Democrats astonished the country by embracing parts of the agrarian-labor program in the presidential election of 1896. They nominated young free-silver advocate William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, who sealed his nomination with a passionate defense of farmers and an attack on the gold standard.

Populists, reeling from their recent defeats, endorsed Bryan for president. But their power was waning. Bryan ignored them, running as a straight Democrat without ever acknowledging the People’s Party nomination.

The Populists never recovered from their defeats in 1894 or from Democrats' ruthless opposition in the South. By 1900, the party largely faded away. Agrarian voters pursued their reform efforts elsewhere, particularly through the newly energized Bryan wing of the Democrats.

The Republicans' brilliant manager, Ohio manufacturer Mark Hanna, orchestrated an unprecedented fundraising campaign for McKinley in 1896 among corporate leaders. Republicans denounced Bryan's supporters as "revolutionary and anarchistic."

Under Hanna's guidance, the party backed away from moral issues such as prohibition of liquor and reached out to invite new immigrants to vote with them. McKinley won handily, with 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176.

Nationwide, as in the South, the 1894–1896 realignment prompted a wave of political changes—but they were the kind of "reforms" that excluded voters, rather than enhancing democracy. Major-party leaders worked to shut out future threats from new movements like the Populists.

As in the South, many northern states imposed literacy tests and restrictions on voting by new immigrants. In the wake of such laws, voter turnout declined. In all parts of the United States, the electorate became more narrowly based, native born, and wealthier.

Both major parties increasingly turned to the direct primary, asking voters rather than party leaders to choose nominees.

Another measure that enhanced democratic participation was the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution (1913), which required that U.S. senators no longer be chosen by the state legislatures, but by popular vote. Though many states had already adopted the practice, southern states had resisted, since Democrats feared that it might give more power to their political foes.

The Courts Reject Reform

While the major political parties restricted suffrage, federal courts invalidated many of the regulatory laws that states had passed to protect workers and promote public welfare.

As early as *In re Jacobs* (1885), the New York State Court of Appeals struck down a public-health law that prohibited cigar manufacturing in tenements, arguing that such regulation exceeded the state's police powers.

In its landmark decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court put the nation's stamp of approval on racial discrimination.

Advocates hoped to challenge the growing number of southern Jim Crow laws, which segregated whites and blacks in hotels, trains, streetcars, and even cemeteries. The Court

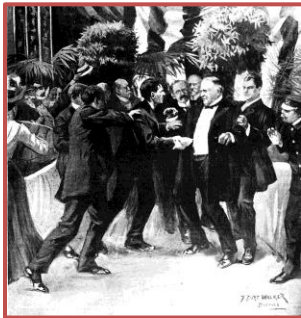
ruled that such segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment as long as blacks had access to accommodations equal to those of whites.

III. Reform Reshaped: 1901–1917

Theodore Roosevelt in the White House

In 1900, William McKinley easily won his second political face-off against Democrat William Jennings Bryan. Only six months into his second term, however, on September 14, 1901, the president was shot as he attended a fair in Buffalo, New York. He died eight days later.

In an effort to neutralize the rising star—Theodore Roosevelt—Republican bosses chose him as McKinley’s running mate in 1900, hoping the vice presidency would be a political dead end. Instead, they suddenly found Roosevelt in the White House following McKinley’s assassination in September, 1901.



Assassination of William McKinley

Roosevelt did not prove to be quite the rebel his critics feared. He was, after all, a Republican who had denounced the “extreme” views of Populists, and he blended reform with the needs of private enterprise. Roosevelt won fame as an environmentalist, for example, but many of his conservation policies had a strong pro-business bent.

He increased the amount of land held in federal forest reserves and turned their management over to a new, independent U.S. Forest Service. But Roosevelt’s forestry chief, Gifford Pinchot, insisted on fire suppression to maximize logging potential.

In addition, Roosevelt lent his support to the Newlands Reclamation Act (1902), which had much in common with earlier Republican policies to promote economic development in the West. Under the Newlands Act, the federal government sold public lands to raise money for irrigation projects that expanded agriculture on arid lands.

Despite his generally supportive attitude toward business, Roosevelt undertook some marked departures from his predecessors. During a bitter 1902 coal strike, he threatened to nationalize the big coal companies if their owners refused to negotiate with the miners’ union. The owners hastily came to the table.

Roosevelt also sought better enforcement of the Interstate Commerce Act and the Sherman Antitrust Act. In 1903, he pushed through the Elkins Act, which prohibited discriminatory railway rates that favored powerful customers. That same year, he created a Bureau of Corporations, empowered to investigate business practices and bolster the Justice Department’s capacity to mount antitrust suits.

Theodore Roosevelt was a man of contradictions whose presidency left a mixed legacy. An unabashed believer in what he called “Anglo-Saxon” superiority, Roosevelt nonetheless

invited Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House, earning fierce denunciation from white supremacists.

Similarly, Roosevelt was an advocate of elite rule who called for the “best men” to enter politics, but he also defended the dignity of labor. Later in his public career, Roosevelt read and recommended works by European socialists. This complex mix of condescension and social-justice activism was characteristic of many elite and middle-class progressives.

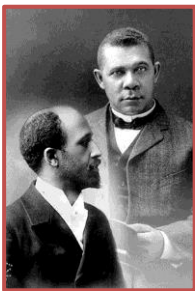
Grassroots Progressive Movements

In part, President Roosevelt provided reform leadership because he faced increasing pressure for government action. At the grassroots, agrarians and labor leaders continued to demand stronger remedies for dangerous working conditions, low pay, and concentrated corporate power. Building on earlier movements such as civil service reform and the anti-liquor cause, elite and middle-class progressives were also mobilizing for change.

As they had since the 1880s, women played prominent roles in reform. Justifying their work through maternalism—the claim that women should expand their motherly role in the public sphere—they focused especially on the welfare of working-class women and children.

Progressives were partly inspired by the emerging fields of social work and social science. Social scientists focused special attention on the plight of the urban poor. They argued that unemployment and crowded slums were not caused by individual laziness and ignorance, as elite Americans had long believed.

By 1899, the National Consumers’ League was founded. Five years later, the group had grown to sixty-four leagues in twenty states. At its head stood the outspoken Florence Kelley, a Hull House worker and, for a brief time, chief factory inspector of Illinois. Kelley believed only government oversight could protect exploited workers. Under her crusading leadership, the Consumers’ League became a powerful advocate for protective legislation.



Du Bois and Washington

One of the League’s greatest triumphs was the Supreme Court’s decision in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908), which upheld an Oregon law limiting women’s workday to ten hours.

In the wake of the Plessy decision and southern disfranchisement, African American leaders grappled with a distinct set of political challenges. Faced with the obvious deterioration of African American rights, a new generation of African American leaders challenged the leadership of Tuskegee educator Booker T. Washington.

Harvard-educated sociologist W.E.B. DuBois called for a “talented tenth” of educated blacks to develop new strategies. Ida Wells Barnett, a fearless journalist who undertook a one-woman crusade against lynching, joined the call for new ideas.

In 1905, DuBois and Trotter called a meeting at Niagara Falls—on the Canadian side, because no hotel on the U.S. side would admit blacks. The resulting Niagara Movement had a broad impact. The group’s Niagara Principles called for full voting rights; the end of segregation; equal treatment in the justice system; and equal opportunity in education, jobs, health care, and military service. These principles, based on black pride and an uncompromising demand for full equality, guided the civil rights movement throughout the twentieth century.

Not long after the Niagara conference, a shocking atrocity brought public attention to the civil rights cause. In 1908, a bloody race riot broke out in Springfield, Illinois, hometown of Abraham Lincoln.

Appalled by the violence against blacks, New York settlement worker Mary White Ovington called together a small group of sympathetic progressives. Their meeting led in 1909 to the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Most leaders of the Niagara Movement soon joined, and W.E.B. DuBois became editor of the NAACP journal, *The Crisis*.

The fledgling NAACP found allies in the black churches and the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. It also cooperated with the National Urban League (1911), a union of agencies that assisted black migrants in the North. Over the coming decades, these groups grew into a powerful force for racial justice.

As reform emerged at the grassroots, some states served as important seedbeds of reform. Theodore Roosevelt dubbed Wisconsin a “laboratory of democracy” under energetic Republican Governor Robert La Follette (1901–1905).

La Follette promoted what he called the “**Wisconsin Idea**”—greater government intervention in the economy. To promote this goal, he relied heavily on experts at the University of Wisconsin, particularly economists, for policy recommendations.

LaFollette combined respect for experts with a strong commitment to democracy. He won battles to restrict lobbying and give Wisconsin citizens the right of recall (voting to remove unpopular politicians from office) and referendum (voting directly on a proposed policy measure, rather than leaving it in the hands of elected legislators). Going on to a long career in the U.S. Senate, LaFollette, like Roosevelt, advocated increasingly aggressive measures to protect workers and rein in corporate power.

Labor reforms also advanced steadily through state initiatives, most notably workmen’s compensation laws. The U.S. industrial workplace was incredibly dangerous; coal miners, for example, died from cave-ins and explosions at a rate 50 percent higher than in German mines.

Between 1910 and 1917, all the industrial states enacted insurance laws covering on-the-job accidents, so that workers’ families would not starve if a breadwinner was injured or killed.

The failure to pass labor laws reflected Republican political dominance, and also unions’ reluctance to engage in politics. Leaders of the nation’s dominant union, the American

Federation of Labor, had long preached that workers should improve wages and working conditions through self-help. Voluntarism, as trade unionists called this doctrine, centered on strikes and direct negotiations with employers, not political action.

But voluntarism began to weaken by the 1910s. As muckraking journalists exposed the plight of workers and progressive reformers came forward with solutions, organized labor leaders in state after state began to join the cause.

At the same time, the nation confronted a daring wave of militancy from more radical labor groups. In 1905, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), led by fiery leaders like “Big Bill” Haywood, joined with other radicals to create a new movement, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

The Wobblies, as the IWW was called, were fervent supporters of the Marxist class struggle. As syndicalists, they believed that by resisting in the workplace and ultimately launching a general strike, workers could overthrow capitalism.

Taft and the Election of 1912

Taft’s Democratic opponent in 1908 was William Jennings Bryan. Eloquent as ever, Bryan attacked Republicans as the party of “plutocrats,” men who used their wealth to buy political influence. He outdid Taft in urging tougher antitrust and pro-labor legislation, but Taft won comfortably.

In the wake of Taft’s victory, reform politics began to divide Republicans. Conservatives dug in against further reforms, while militant progressives within the party thought Roosevelt and his successor had not gone far enough.



William Howard Taft

Reconciling these conflicting forces was a daunting task, and for Taft it spelled disaster. Through various incidents, he found himself on the opposite side of progressive Republicans, who began to call themselves “Insurgents” and plot their own path.

After completing a year-long safari in Africa, Roosevelt yearned to reenter the political fray. Taft’s dispute with the Insurgents gave him the cause he needed. In a speech in Osawatimie, Kansas, in August 1910, Roosevelt made the case for what he called a New Nationalism.

Early in 1912, Roosevelt announced himself as a Republican candidate for president, sweeping Insurgents into his camp. A bitter battle within the party ensued. Roosevelt won the states that held primary elections, but Taft controlled party caucuses elsewhere. Dominated

by regulars, the Republican convention chose Taft. Roosevelt led his followers into what became known as the Progressive Party, offering his New Nationalism directly to the people.

Roosevelt was not the only rebel on the ballot in 1912. The major parties also faced a challenge from charismatic socialist Eugene V. Debs.

In the 1890s, Debs had founded the American Railway Union (ARU), a broad-based union that included both skilled and unskilled workers. In 1894, amid the upheavals of depression and popular protest, the ARU had boycotted luxury Pullman sleeping cars, in support of a strike by workers at the Pullman Company. Railroad managers, claiming that the strike obstructed the U.S. mail, persuaded the Cleveland administration to intervene against the union. The strike failed. Along with other ARU leaders, Debs served time in prison.

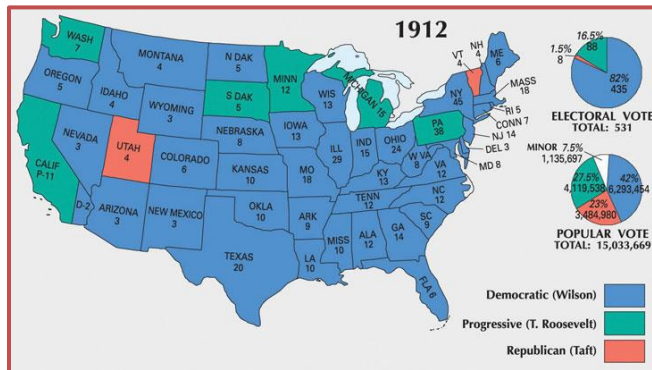
The experience radicalized Debs, and in 1901 he launched the Socialist Party of America. Debs translated socialism into an American idiom, emphasizing the democratic process as a means to defeat capitalism. By the early 1910s, his party had secured a minor but persistent role in politics.

Among their new generation of leaders was Virginia-born Woodrow Wilson, a political scientist who had served as president of Princeton University. As governor of New Jersey, Wilson had compiled an impressive reform record, including passage of a direct primary, workers' compensation, and utility regulation. In 1912, he won the Democratic presidential nomination.

With four candidates in the field—Taft, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Debs—the 1912 campaign generated intense excitement. But the division of former Republicans between Taft and Roosevelt made the results fairly easy to predict.

Wilson won, though he received only 42 percent of the popular vote, and almost certainly would have lost if Roosevelt had not been in the race. With his warnings about “free enterprise” and his markedly southern racial views, Wilson appeared to be a rather old-fashioned choice. But with labor protests reaching new peaks of visibility, and middle-class

progressives gathering public support, Wilson faced intense pressure to act.



1912 Election Results Map

Wilson and the New Freedom

Wilson was a Democrat, and labor interests and farmers made up important components of his party's base. Thus, though the Greenback-Labor

and People's Parties had faded away, agrarian Democrats played a central role in the reforms achieved under Wilson. In an era of rising corporate power, such Democrats had come to believe that workers needed stronger government to intervene on their behalf.

Democrats continued to have an enormous blind spot: their opposition to African American rights, a position to which the national party adhered until 1948, and to which southern Democrats clung even longer. There was no hope, for example, that Democrats would pass federal anti-lynching legislation.

But Republicans, who had had plentiful opportunities, had also conspicuously failed to pass such a law. In 1912, the Progressive Party had refused to seat southern black delegates and failed to take a stand for racial equality. African Americans had no reason to vote for Democrats—but they found few reasons to vote for Republicans or progressives, either.

The new president also reorganized the nation's financial system to address problems caused by the absence of a central bank. The main function of central banks at the time was to back up commercial banks in case they could not meet their obligations. In the United States, the great private banks of New York assumed this role; if they weakened, the entire system could collapse. This had nearly happened in 1907, when the Knickerbocker Trust Company failed and caused a financial panic.

The **Federal Reserve Act of 1913** gave the nation a banking system more resistant to financial panic. It created twelve district reserve banks funded and controlled by their member banks, with a central **Federal Reserve Board** to impose public regulation.

Wilson and the Democratic Congress turned next to the trusts. Wilson relied heavily on Louis D. Brandeis, the celebrated "people's lawyer." Brandeis believed vigorous competition in a free market was most efficient. The trick was to prevent trusts from unfairly using their power to curb such competition.

In the **Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914**, which amended the Sherman Act, the definition of illegal practices was left flexible, subject to the test of whether an action "substantially lessen[ed] competition or tend[ed] to create a monopoly." A new **Federal Trade Commission** received broad powers to decide what was fair, investigating companies and issuing "cease and desist" orders against anti-competitive practices.

Progressive Legacies

In the post-Civil War era, millions of Americans understood that the political system needed to adjust to new industrial conditions.

In the 1880s, agrarians and radical labor advocates proposed sweeping limitations on industrial capitalism; though they exerted substantial political pressure, especially within the Democratic Party after 1896, only a portion of their vision was fulfilled.

By the turn of the century, economic reform gained increasing support from middle-class and elite progressives, especially in the cities. They tended to propose more modest measures,

often shying away from Democratic solutions in favor of expert commissions and political management by the “best men.” But they held substantial clout.

Whether they were rural, working-class, or middle-class, reformers faced fierce opposition from powerful business interests. If, at last, reformers managed to win a key regulatory law, they often found it struck down by hostile courts. Thus, the Progressive Era in the United States should be understood partly by its limitations.

Racial prejudice and increasing elitism warped the cause of reform; African Americans, their plight ignored by many white reformers, faced segregation and violence, and along with some immigrants and poor whites, they found themselves disfranchised.

Meanwhile, federal courts slowed down the progress of key reforms like state protections for labor. Divided power in a federalist system blocked the passage of uniform national laws on such key issues as child labor. Urgently needed social welfare programs—including national health insurance and old-age pensions, which became popular in Europe during these decades—scarcely made it onto the American agenda until the New Deal of the 1930s.

Another limitation to progressive reform was the fact that business interests in the United States were exceptionally successful and powerful, flush with recent expansion. During the era of industrialization, voters in countries with older, more native-born populations supported more robust government regulation and social welfare spending than voters in younger countries populated with many immigrants. Younger voters seemed, logically, to be less concerned about health insurance and security in old age.

Divisions within the American working class also played a role in limiting progressive reforms. Native-born whites, blacks, and immigrants often viewed one another as enemies or strangers rather than as members of a unified class with common interests. This helps explain why the Socialist Party drew, at its peak, less than 6 percent of the U.S. vote at a time when its counterparts in Finland, Germany, and France drew 40 percent or more. Lack of pressure from a strong, self-conscious Working Men’s Party led to more limited results in the United States.

But it would be wrong to underestimate the achievements of agrarian, labor, and urban progressive reformers. Over the course of several decades, they persuaded more and more comfortable, prosperous Americans that the industrial economy required stronger government regulation.

Even the most cautious, elite progressives recognized that the United States had entered a new era. Giant multinational corporations overshadowed small businesses; with immigrants and farmers’ children crowding into vast cities, ties of kin and village melted away. Outdated political methods—from the “spoils system” to corrupt urban machines—would no longer do.

Progressives created new wisdom. Between 1883 and 1917, they drew the blueprints for a modern American state, one whose powers began to suit the needs of an industrial era. At the same time, a stronger, more assertive United States began to exercise new influence on the world stage.

KEY TERMS

progressives A loose term for political reformers, used especially during the Progressive Era (1880s–1910s) to describe those working to improve the political system, fight poverty, and increase government involvement in the economy. The term “progressive” was most often applied to urban and middle-class or elite reformers. The work of such reformers, however, was frequently prompted by protests from rural and working-class activists, who tended to propose more radical measures to combat the ills of industrialization.

patronage The power of elected officials to grant government jobs. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, politicians systematically used—and abused—patronage to create and maintain strong party loyalties. After 1870, political reformers gradually introduced merit-based civil service systems in the federal and state governments.

spoils system The widespread award of public jobs to political supporters following an electoral victory. Underlying this practice was the view that in a democracy, rotation in office was preferable to a permanent class of officeholders. In 1829 Andrew Jackson began this practice on the national level, and it became a central, and corrupting, feature of American political life.

patronage The power of elected officials to grant government jobs. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, politicians systematically used—and abused—patronage to create and maintain strong party loyalties. After 1870, political reformers gradually introduced merit-based civil service systems in the federal and state governments.

grandfather clause A law permitting citizens to register as voters only if their grandfathers had been eligible to vote. Such laws were passed in southern states such as Louisiana, in an attempt to enfranchise all native-born white men and exclude African Americans from the polls, on the grounds that their grandfathers, during slavery times, had not been voters.

literacy tests The requirement that an ability to read be demonstrated as a qualification for the right to vote. It was a device easily used by registrars to prevent blacks from voting, whether they could read or not, and was widely adopted across the South beginning with Mississippi in 1890.

tariff A tax on imports, which has two purposes: raising revenue for the government and protecting domestic products from foreign competition. A hot political issue throughout much of American history, in the late nineteenth century the tariff became particularly controversial as protection-minded Republicans and pro-free-trade Democrats made the tariff the centerpiece of their political campaigns.

states’ rights An interpretation of the Constitution that exalts the sovereignty of the states and circumscribes the authority of the national government. Expressed first by Antifederalists in the debate over the Constitution, and then in the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions of 1798, the ideology of states’ rights became especially important in the South. It informed white southerners’ resistance to the high tariffs of the 1820s and 1830s, to legislation to limit the spread of slavery, and to attempts by the national government in the mid-twentieth century to end Jim Crow practices and, more generally, to extend its authority.

direct primary The selection of party candidates by a popular vote rather than by the party convention. The progressive reform that led to the direct primary was especially pressed by Robert La Follette, who viewed it as an instrument for breaking the grip of political machines on the parties. In the South, where it was limited to whites, the direct primary was a means of disenfranchising blacks.

Jim Crow A term first heard in antebellum minstrel shows to designate black behavior and used in the age of segregation to designate facilities restricted to blacks, such as Jim Crow railway cars.

recall A law that permits voters to remove an elected official from his post and elect a replacement, if they are dissatisfied with his or her performance, before the official has completed the full term for which he or she was elected.

referendum A direct vote on whether or not to adopt a particular law or government policy. The referendum allows citizens to make policy decisions directly, rather than (or in addition to) choosing elected officials who pledge to carry out specific policies.

voluntarism The view that citizens should themselves improve their lives, rather than rely on the efforts of government. Especially favored by Samuel Gompers, voluntarism was a key idea within the labor movement, but one gradually abandoned over the course of the twentieth century.

syndicalists Members of a revolutionary movement that, like socialists, believed in the Marxist principle of class struggle and advocated the organization of society on the basis of industrial unionism. The syndicalist approach was advocated by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) at the start of the twentieth century.

general strike A strike that draws in all the workers in a society, with the intention of shutting the entire system down. Radical groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), in the early twentieth century, saw the general strike as the means for initiating a social revolution.