
Lightning Round (20 Seconds to Answer)

What Does It Mean to Be a Progressive?

I do not intend to write another historical account of the Populist, Progressive, New Deal, and Great Society eras. I am neither a historian nor a social theorist, and many others before me have produced important and compelling accounts of these times. But I am a student of politics and intensely curious about how our progressive past—the men, women, leaders, ideas, and movements of previous years—shapes our understanding of progressivism today.

Whenever I'm invited to speak with activists and groups across the country, someone invariably asks, "What is progressivism?" Is it an ideology? Is it a political theory? Is it a disposition? Or is it just a political label with no real meaning? A second related question usually follows: "Isn't a progressive the same thing as a liberal?"

My answer to the first question is straightforward (and serves as the mission of the institution I founded): "Progressives believe that America should be a country of boundless opportunity, where all people can better themselves through education, hard work, fair pay, and the freedom to pursue their dreams. We believe that this will be achieved only with an open and effective government that champions the common good over narrow self-interest while securing the rights and safety of its people."

My usual response to the second question is, “Call me whatever you want.” A less flippant and more historically accurate response is that liberalism and progressivism are distinct but complementary sets of ideas. They share many values and policy prescriptions but they are not exactly the same in substance, emphasis, or origin.

Liberalism throughout history has primarily focused on preserving human liberty and autonomy and protecting individual rights against encroachment by the state or society. It is a well-formulated political theory dating to the Enlightenment that has been refined over centuries in academic and government settings. As a set of ethical standards and beliefs, liberalism is frequently associated with traits such as tolerance, diversity, open-mindedness, rationality, and self-reliance. In its modern, post-New Deal form, liberalism has been chiefly concerned with achieving individual freedom in its fullest sense—freedom from undue governmental intrusion, and freedom to lead an economically secure and meaningful life.

Progressivism, on the other hand, is less theoretically developed and more hands-on in its approach. As a body of thought, progressivism is tied directly to the search for social and economic justice at the turn of the twentieth century. Unlike liberalism, there are no master texts of progressivism even though there are known progressive thinkers such as Herbert Croly and Jane Addams.¹ Political progressivism was primarily focused on breaking the control of privileged economic interests in government and restoring America to its democratic roots, where free people can live their lives and make a decent living from their labor. Progressivism as an ideological label later came into use as an umbrella concept—embraced across party and class lines—to capture a range of reform efforts from women’s suffrage and the direct election of senators to public interest regulations, conservation, and social security measures.

The non-theoretical nature of progressivism derives in part

from the pragmatic origin of many of its ideas and policies. In the late nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century, the American economy was in constant turmoil. Economic depressions were frequent, agricultural work was unstable, and workers faced tremendous hurdles in getting decent pay and working conditions. Widespread poverty and political corruption were real threats to the American way of life. Something had to be done to fix these problems, and the theoretical defense for government action on behalf of people could come later. My parents weren't interested in economic theory—they were interested in putting food on the table during the Great Depression, and getting their kids into a decent public school.

Progressivism was thus rooted in a fierce moral vision of what is right and wrong in society. For progressives, ensuring that people have enough to eat and that kids get a decent chance in life is right. Exploiting workers and using child labor is wrong. Supporting people who work hard and do their part is right. Leaving people vulnerable to the whims of economic forces beyond their control is wrong. "Irish need not apply" signs are wrong. Full equality and opportunity for all is right.

For some progressives, this moral vision is highly theoretically or theologically based, as was the case with turn-of-the-century social scientists such as Richard Ely and Charles Beard or with Social Gospel Protestants such as Walter Rauschenbusch and social justice Catholics such as Monsignor John Ryan and Mother Cabrini, who played an important role for the Italian immigrants in Chicago of my grandparents' generation. But unlike socialists or laissez-faire conservatives (the two ideological extremes at the time), progressives tended to avoid dogmatism in determining how best to legislate and support their moral vision. The experimentation of the New Deal best personifies the progressive commitment to pragmatism grounded in core beliefs about equal opportunity in society.

Turn-of-the-century reformers, like those of today, were motivated by concrete problems—declining crop prices, home foreclosures, paltry wages, long work hours, or Pinkertons beating down union drives. Progressives wanted democracy restored and economic security extended to the masses. They wanted government to be open, transparent, committed to public needs, and focused on helping people make the most of their lives. Progressives wanted reforms that worked to correct these problems and protected ordinary people. They didn't particularly care how or in what form the nation got there. Some progressives wanted to return to a Jeffersonian, republican ideal of small producers and individual freedom that attacked both big government and big corporations. Others wanted a stronger national government to regulate and challenge the prevailing economic powers at the time for the benefit of workers and the nation as a whole.²

Some people who identify with the values I've just described prefer to call themselves liberals. And it's true that after the New Deal, the liberal and progressive projects were closely aligned and the use of the two terms came to embody similar themes and policy prescriptions. Progressivism and liberalism are clearly part of a common project, standing in opposition to conservatism, and designed to improve the lives of everyday Americans by increasing both economic security and economic opportunity.

But given my background and my pragmatic beliefs, I prefer to identify with the distinctly progressive spirit that marked the reform period of around 1890–1920. This is the period of my grandparents' arrival in Chicago and the time when the most significant reforms and ideas about activist government were put into practice. The original Progressive era serves as a useful and inspiring historical moment in helping to understand the challenges we face today.

When comparing this Progressive era to the classical and modern forms of liberalism, there are four primary distinctions that are informative:

- *Faith.* Liberalism is strongly grounded in religious pluralism and the reduction of religious conflict in society. This stems directly from the religious wars of Europe that the Founding Fathers hoped to avoid in America. The liberal perspective leads directly to our First Amendment protections of religious freedom and the separation of church and state as a means to protect both religion and the government from unwarranted intrusion. In contrast, progressivism and many progressive leaders at the turn of the century were far more grounded in specific religious ethics and the social application of religious teachings to politics and society. Progressive Christianity and progressive Judaism have informed reform movements from abolition to women's suffrage to civil rights.
- *The role of government.* Liberalism, post-New Deal, is intimately associated with the rise and defense of federal government action. Progressivism, however, began at the municipal level (for example, the anti-corruption and utility reform efforts of the great cities) before moving on to larger efforts in statehouses and governors' offices. Progressives later took their reform ideas to the federal level as the need for collective efforts on conservation, social protections, and corporate regulations grew beyond their reach. This movement from the local to the federal level is best exemplified in the legislative achievements of Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette. Liberalism's later focus

on federal government action, most commonly associated with FDR and the New Deal, was therefore the culmination of decades of progressive activism and legislative efforts across all levels of society and government. It is equally important to note that progressivism has a rich non-governmental tradition based in the settlement movement and other community-based efforts to improve living conditions for the poor and less educated members of society.

- *Partisanship*. Liberalism, in its post–New Deal form, is also closely tied to the Democratic Party and, in particular, the presidencies of FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. Progressivism, in contrast, emerged as a non-partisan reform effort that sought to clean up corruption and stop the servicing of special interests in both political parties. Progressivism’s main goal was to keep politicians on both sides of the aisle honest and committed to principled actions on behalf of regular Americans. The embrace of “progressive” as a label was perhaps most prevalent among Republican Party reformers such as Teddy Roosevelt, Robert La Follette, and Albert Cummins as they tried to break up the corporate machines that dominated the Republican Party. Dissatisfied with the lack of change in the party, both TR and La Follette later ran as strong third-party candidates for president under the banner of the Progressive Party.
- *Community versus individualism*. In terms of theoretical distinctions, liberalism in all its forms is very much focused on individualism and the rights and opportunities of individuals in society. For conservative liberals today (libertarians), this means minimal government intervention in the economy and in private lives. For left-leaning liberals, this means personal freedom but also the “freedom from want,”

eloquently put forth by Franklin Roosevelt. Progressivism, on the other hand, is much more focused on correcting the excesses of individualism in the economy and government. In its “new nationalist” form, associated most with Herbert Croly and Teddy Roosevelt, progressive theory places much more emphasis on the importance of common purpose, national spirit, and collective needs in society and government. Progressive ethics also offers a more direct challenge to self-interest and materialism as motivators for political action than liberalism. Liberalism has focused more on diffusing the negative consequences of self-interested behavior rather than attempting to eradicate or transform it within society.

As modern progressives, most of us believe in some blending of the distinctions outlined above. We cherish both the liberal insistence on religious freedom and pluralism and the progressive moral vision that sustains political activism through more communitarian ethics and concern for others.

Over the years, I have grown into my faith with greater comfort and intensity, in a way that surprises some of my secular friends. Perhaps that is because I found a bridge between my progressive politics and my religious life at Holy Trinity parish in Georgetown, a church run by the Jesuit fathers, an order whose motto is “Men for others,” that is, an order which seeks to serve the common good.

Similarly, progressives believe that the federal government must play an important role in correcting economic imbalances and in protecting individual rights, but we also believe in the importance of local actions and the primacy of communities and families in solving problems. We believe in individual rights and freedoms and in individual moral agency but also recognize the importance of a

more humanitarian ethics (the Jesuit influence again) that stresses common purposes and collective responses to global problems such as poverty, climate change, and terrorism.

To better understand progressive history and thought, we must understand what drove reformers over a century ago to first challenge the political and economic order of their times. As progressive historian Eric Goldman explains, America at the turn of the twentieth century was a land of great potential and great hardship. Within a short period of time, many of the inventions that improved and enhanced everyday life for Americans were created and put into growing use—home electricity and plumbing, automobiles, telephones, and later radio. Farm prices began to increase after suffering for decades, and public education and college opportunities spread to more Americans.³

Despite this rising aggregate affluence, many Americans lacked basic economic security, steady employment, and humane working conditions. Corporate trusts in railroads and steel rapidly combined during this period to threaten traditional American agriculture and push more people into dangerous and poorly paid factory work. Wages for laborers did not markedly improve even as huge fortunes were amassed by J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller.

The prevailing political attitude at the time was “survival of the fittest,” not cooperation and government support for the working class. William Graham Sumner, a prominent social theorist and defender of *laissez-faire* doctrine (the Charles Murray of his time), summarized the dominant conservative beliefs of this period concisely and rather starkly:

The history of the human race is one long story of attempts by certain persons and classes to obtain control of the power of the State, so as to win earthly gratifications at

the expense of others. People constantly assume that there is something metaphysical and sentimental about government. At bottom there are two chief things with which government has to deal. They are—the property of men and the honor of women.⁴

Without the progressive movement at the turn of the century, America would have been stuck in this retrograde mentality and would have remained a land of opportunity for the few and suffering for the many. The progressive transformation away from the dog-eat-dog world of the late nineteenth century defined an entirely new way of thinking about politics and government. Modern liberalism, and America as we know it today, would not exist without this progressive change.

Rather than explain progressive history in chronological order or cover every player in progressive politics (of whom there are many worth considering), I want to offer four important lessons I've taken from my reading of the progressive past. These lessons serve as core values of progressivism—unifying beliefs that have endured from the early reform days to today. Like my own version of progressivism, most of these lessons come from the practical experiences and ideas of citizens, thinkers, activists, and politicians trying to make sense of a rapidly changing world.