



Parade for suffrage in New York City, October 23, 1915, in which 20,000 women marched.

The Progressive Tradition in American Politics

Part Two of the Progressive Tradition Series

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Introduction

Accompanying the transformation of America's public philosophy away from the predominant laissez-faire vision of the late 19th century and toward stronger forms of democratic governance in the 20th century, numerous changes occurred in the issue agendas, constituencies, and policy platforms of the major political parties in the United States as they came to grips with rising progressive sentiment.

Progressivism has always found expressions both within and outside the major political parties, beginning with the early protest movements of the populists and other third party insurgencies to the transformative candidacies of William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. As Herbert Croly, co-founder of *The New Republic*, notes, the most distinctive progressive faction—as opposed to the more populist and agrarian one represented by Bryan—was located within the Republican Party and most fiercely advocated by prominent voices such as Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette of Wisconsin. Roosevelt and La Follette both formed outside Progressive Parties to promote the ideas of national reform after failing to transform the Republican Party into a genuinely progressive vehicle.

Meanwhile, the slow conversion of Woodrow Wilson from his southern conservative background into a national progressive president solidified progressivism within the Democratic Party—a legacy that was greatly extended under the long tenure of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt's aggressive national actions to repair and transform our society and government in the wake of the Great Depression set the course for the midcentury liberalism of Harry Truman, the New Frontier of John Kennedy, and the great civil rights advances under Lyndon Johnson.

Improvements in American life would not have happened without the pioneering ideas of these early progressives. The shift from conservatism toward progressivism helped to structure our society in far more humane and effective ways and gave real meaning to our founding principles of liberty, equality, and opportunity. Progressives built on this new foundation and expanding levels of support from the American public, successfully amassing a worthy list of policy accomplishments over the last century. These included such landmarks of equality and social justice as the eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek; the constitutional right to vote, full legal equality, and the elimination of

formal discrimination for women and minorities; and Social Security and Medicare to aid the elderly and Medicaid to help low-income families and children. (See sidebar for an extensive list of key reforms.)

This paper will trace the political lineage of progressivism from the late 1890s to the late 1960s. In doing so, we show how the demand for progressive policies went from outsider protest to dominance of the American political mainstream. Future papers in our Progressive Traditions series will explore more contemporary political expressions of progressivism.

Progressive reforms

A century of accomplishments

- The eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek
- Worker's compensation for on-the-job accidents
- Unemployment insurance
- Prohibitions against child labor and workplace exploitations
- The legal right of people to organize within labor unions and engage in collective bargaining for fair wages and benefits
- The constitutional right to vote, full legal equality, and the elimination of formal discrimination for women and minorities
- The graduated income and inheritance tax
- Protections against contaminated food and medicines
- Hundreds of millions of acres of protected wilderness areas, waterways, and national parks
- Antimonopoly and anticompetitive regulations of corporations
- Direct elections of U.S. senators, direct primary elections of political candidates, and the initiative and referendum process in the states
- Civil service tests to replace political patronage
- National supervision of banks and the creation of a flexible national currency
- Regulation of the securities industry
- Federal insurance of bank deposits
- Bans on speculative banking practices
- Refinancing and foreclosure protections for home and farm owners
- National infrastructure including electrification, railways, airports, bridges and roads, and the Internet
- Social Security and Medicare to aid the elderly and Medicaid and CHIP to help low-income families and children
- Minimum wage laws and income support for the working poor
- Public education, college loans and grants for students, and the GI Bill

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