

Chapter 27: The Progressive Era

1. Corruption

Political Abuse

In the late 1800s, political parties ran many cities through an organization called a political machine. These organizations got members of their party elected to office using legal and illegal methods. Parties would get jobs for people in exchange for their votes; they bribed voters; they altered vote counts in their favor. These methods allowed a political party to control local government.

Politicians often used their office to make money through immoral or illegal ways. Politicians often accepted bribes from people who wanted government jobs or from businesses who wanted to pass government inspections. Using information not available to the public, politicians would buy worthless land before a road or construction project would raise property values.

Even in the federal government, corruption caused problems. Although an honest man himself, President Ulysses S. Grant had people in his administration that took bribes. Despite Grant's protests, many people got government jobs they were not qualified to have. As muckraker journalists brought these incidents to the attention of the public, people demanded change for the better.

2. Political Reforms

State Reforms

Progressives wanted to see government use its power to **regulate** society to make it better. States began taking steps to reduce the power of political machines. In

Wisconsin, Governor Robert La Follette led Republicans to reform the election process. For years party bosses chose candidates for office, but under La Follette voters got to pick who they wanted to run for office for their political party. Other states soon followed this method. In Oregon, voters could put measures on the ballot, repeal unpopular laws, and remove politicians from office.

Progressive Presidents

Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901 after an assassin shot President William McKinley. The first of the progressive presidents, Roosevelt believed in government action to regulate the economy. He broke up corporate trusts that controlled too much of a particular industry. He urged Congress to pass laws to regulate railroad shipping rates. He supported the government inspection of the food industry to guarantee a safe food supply. He also had the federal government set aside millions of acres of land for preservation.

In 1908, William Howard Taft went into the White House. Taft broke up more trusts and set aside more land for preservation than Roosevelt.

In 1912, Woodrow Wilson became president. To lower prices for consumers, Wilson pushed for a lower tariff on imported goods. With the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment, the **income tax** became legal in the United States. Government greatly increased its budget and its control over the economy.

3. Labor

Working Conditions

By the beginning of the twentieth century, union membership began to increase dramatically. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) led by Samuel Gompers pushed for better wages and better working conditions. Other unions began calling for an 8 hour workday.

Children had long been used as a source of cheap labor. Beginning in the early 1900s, child labor reform organizations forced states to pass laws restricting the use of children in the workplace. Reform took many decades to achieve.



Children working in the coal mines in Pennsylvania around the turn of the twentieth century. Source: Detroit Publishing Co. *Breaker boys, Woodward coal breakers, Kingston, Pa.* Library of Congress. c. 1890. Photograph.

Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

The Triangle Shirtwaist factory, located on the upper floors of a high rise building in New York, made clothing for women. On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out ending in the deaths of 146 people, mostly women.

The labor union protested the working conditions that caused so many to die. New York politicians passed the

Sullivan-Hoey Fire Prevention Law that required a sprinkler system in all New York factories.

4. Women's Causes

Suffrage

Women had demanded the right to vote for decades. In the West, states began granting **suffrage** to women. First Wyoming in 1890 and then other states followed. By the early twentieth century the momentum was firmly on the side of women. In 1919, Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote. The following year, three-fourths of the states ratified the amendment making it a part of the Constitution.

Temperance

For over a hundred years, women had called for **temperance**, or abolishing the use of alcohol. They cited that alcohol led to violence between men and too often against women. Alcohol also caused poverty and unemployment. It had no place in a civil and productive society.

Once again, states led the way. After several states banned alcohol, Congress felt the need to pass the Eighteenth Amendment banning the manufacture, sale, and use of alcohol. The states ratified the amendment in 1919.

America was suppose to stop drinking. It failed. Criminals like Al Capone imported alcohol or made their own to sell illegally. People continued to drink in secret and it became impossible to enforce these prohibition laws. In 1933, the Twenty-First Amendment repealed the Eighteenth Amendment ending Prohibition.