

Progressivism and the Wisconsin Idea

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In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Wisconsin leaders began to seek new answers to problems caused by an increasingly industrial and technological society. To a people born and raised mostly on farms, the explosive growth of cities, rising importance of large-scale industry, transformation of the workforce by new immigrants and rigid class stratification, and the overall speed of daily life brought uncertainty and confusion. In other states social movements such as the Greenback Party and Populist Party tried to address these changes, but little was accomplished in Wisconsin until after the year 1900 when "Progressives" gained control of the Republican Party.

The Republicans were the party of Lincoln and the Union Army, and in the decades following the Civil War, they held a virtual monopoly on state government by organizing and satisfying the needs of Civil War veterans. Until the 1890s, a few party leaders tightly controlled Wisconsin's legislative agenda. At the same time, the rise of big business after 1870 had concentrated economic power in the hands of a few privileged individuals. These two groups, party leaders and business leaders, often overlapped, personally and pragmatically, as the interests and actions of government and business converged.

Progressive Republicans, in contrast, believed that the business of government was to serve the people. They sought to restrict the power of corporations when it interfered with the needs of individual citizens. The Progressive Movement appealed to citizens who wanted honest government and moderate economic reforms that would expand democracy and improve public morality. In their crusade for reform on a state and national level, Progressive Republicans were led by Robert La Follette, Wisconsin's governor from 1901 to 1906, and U.S. Senator from 1906 to 1925.

In Wisconsin, La Follette developed the techniques and ideas that made him a nationwide symbol of Progressive reform and made the state an emblem of progressive experimentation. The Wisconsin Idea, as it came to be called, was that efficient government required control of institutions by the voters rather than special interests, and that the involvement of specialists in law, economics, and social and natural sciences would produce the most effective government.

Faculty from the University of Wisconsin, therefore, played a significant part in Progressive reform efforts, helping legislators draft laws and serving as experts on governmental commissions. While advocating for more scientific and efficient government, many of these specialists were equally persistent in their efforts to expand educational opportunities. University President Charles Van Hise, for example, sought to extend the services of the University throughout the state by means of a new Extension Division. The state's Legislative Reference Library, led by Charles McCarthy, was a similar product of the impulse toward educational opportunity and access. Created in 1901, the Legislative Reference Bureau (or LRB, as it came to be known) assisted legislators in their search for facts on which to base improved laws. Providing legislators with fast service from trained research talent, McCarthy's LRB added a bill-drafting service in 1907 that was emulated in countries around the globe.

Although he was widely associated with the Progressive Movement, by no means were all of Wisconsin's progressive achievements the work of La Follette himself. Wisconsin's Progressive movement began as a small faction within the Republican Party that grew in strength by drawing support from a variety of constituencies. There were even factions within factions, each with leaders who were influential in enlisting different groups of citizens to Progressive causes. The complex program associated with Wisconsin progressive reform therefore required the efforts and support of many politicians and interest groups.

Germans and organized labor, who had not supported the Progressive movement in its early years, became important later as the composition of the movement changed.

What did the Progressive Movement accomplish in Wisconsin? During James Davidson's terms as governor, from 1906 to 1911, considerable progressive legislation was enacted, including laws providing for state control of corporation stock issues, an extension of the power of the railroad commission to regulate transportation, a fixing of railroad fares, and stricter regulation of insurance companies. The most important and influential progressive legislation, however, was passed during the next (1911) session, under the governorship of Francis McGovern. The 1911 legislature created a model workers' compensation law to protect people injured on the job. It passed laws to regulate factory safety, encouraged the formation of cooperatives, established a state income tax, formed a state life insurance fund, limited working hours for women and children, and passed forest and waterpower conservation acts.