

Goals of the Progressives

The Progressive Movement was an effort to cure many of the ills of American society that had developed during the great spurt of industrial growth in the last quarter of the 19th century. The frontier had been tamed, great cities and businesses developed, and an overseas empire established, but not all citizens shared in the new wealth, prestige, and optimism.

The Progressive era began during Reconstruction (1865-) and lasted until the American entry into World War I (-1914). The struggle for women's rights and the prohibition of alcohol were the initial issues addressed. A farm movement also emerged to make up for the declining importance of rural areas in an increasingly urbanized America. Progressives rejected Social Darwinism – the idea that rich people are wealthy because of natural selection – the position taken by many rich and powerful figures of the day.

Progressives used politics to reach their goals and rejected religious beliefs as the driving force for change. The changes the progressives wanted to make included:

- Removing corruption within governments and big businesses.
- Including people more directly in the political process – voting, campaigning, exposing people to the goals and ideas of politicians.
- Solving social problems and establishing fairness in economic matters through the efforts of the government, popular culture and everyday Americans.

The success of progressivism owed much to the work of muckrakers, writers who showed the negatives of poverty, urban slums, dangerous factory conditions, and child labor, among other other problems in order to encourage people to support Progressive Reform and take action themselves.

Successes were many, beginning with the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890) – legislation that made monopolies and trusts illegal in an effort to take power away from big business. Progressives differed over the most effective way to deal with the problems of the trusts; some favored political demonstrations and protests, others preferred a regulatory approach – passing laws and government policies to keep an eye on big business.

Some progressives even supported socialism, made popular by Eugene V. Debs. In this system government owned all of the means of production rather than corporations driven by self-interest – like Standard Oil and US Steel.

Other progressive reforms followed in the form of a conservation movement to protect the young nation's natural resources. Some progressives wanted railroad legislation to take power out of the hands of railroad barons like JP Morgan and Cornelius Vanderbilt. Progressives fought for food and drug laws to create food standards and regulate the food industry – like having health inspectors check factories for cleanliness and posting nutrition labels on foods!

The progressive spirit also was evident in new amendments added to the Constitution, such as the 17th and 19th amendments which ensured people elect senators, and gave suffrage to women – gave women the right to vote!

Urban problems were addressed by professional social workers who operated settlement houses as a means to protect and improve the prospects of the poor. Journalists such as Upton Sinclair and Jacob Riis published articles, books and photo journals to expose the bad conditions people were living in.

Progressive reforms were carried out not only on the national level, but in states and municipalities. Prominent governors devoted to change included Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin. La Follette worked for the direct primary, secret ballot, and the initiative, referendum, and recall were affected.

In the end, although the Progressive Party really gained momentum and many of the visions the Progressives had never really took shape, we can thank the Progressives for many of the luxuries we enjoy today, such as an 8-hour work day, workmen's compensation, child labor laws, minimum wage, the Food and Drug Administration and the regulations on Wall Street and big business to check the tremendous power of big business in a Capitalist society.