

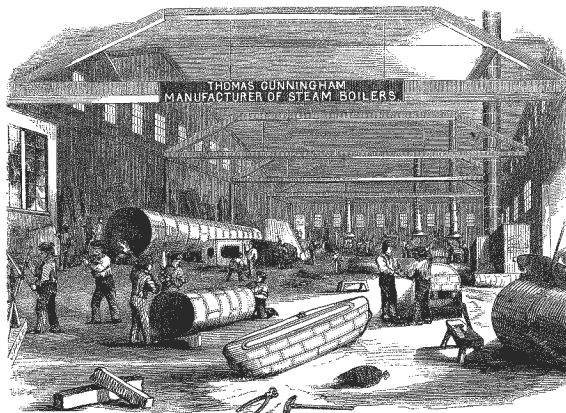
## Introduction

The period in American history from about 1890 to 1917 is called the *Progressive Era*. The Progressive Era ended with America's entry into World War I. During this era, many people worked to improve, or make progress, in society. These people were called **progressives**, or reformers. They discovered abuses both in big business and government and pressured government to pass laws to end abuses and protect the rights of American citizens and immigrants.

Three United States Presidents led the progressive, or reform, movement. They were *Theodore Roosevelt*, *William Howard Taft*, and *Woodrow Wilson*. Under these men, important changes took place in government, big business, and urban life.

## Problems with Big Business

The Industrial Revolution that followed the Civil War produced many affordable goods for Americans. It also produced many problems. Big business, the owners and controllers of industry, became more and more powerful. American businessmen used their growing wealth to control and manipulate the government. They had laws passed to benefit and protect business. Many laws that helped business and industry, however, hurt the American worker and consumer.



Large companies joined together and created monopolies and trusts to end competition and control the prices of their goods and services. Because these owners were so powerful, they paid workers very low wages and did little to create safe working conditions. They even produced some products such as drugs and food that were unsafe for

consumers. These problems were fairly new and had not been anticipated by the government. By using their influence, big business could keep government from interfering in their unfair practices.

## The Progressive Movement

The people who tried to change laws and social practices, or make reforms, were called *progressives*. Some progressives were politicians such as mayors of cities or even Presidents of the United States. Some were union leaders who represented workers. And some were citizens exercising their rights to speak out and protest to help improve society.

Some progressives worked to reform government; others brought reform to housing and health. Still others worked to reform working conditions for women and to end child labor.

Some of the most influential progressives were writers and journalists. They wrote books and articles for newspapers and magazines about the problems of big business and the difficult conditions in cities. They also wrote about the corruption in government. President Roosevelt nicknamed them the **muckrakers** because they were “raking up muck” and bringing it out into the open for all to see. Muckrakers exposed crime and corruption wherever they found it.

One of the muckraker writers was *Ida Tarbell*. Her books and articles attacked big business, especially the Standard Oil Company. Journalist *Lincoln Steffens* wrote magazine articles about corruption in city governments. And *Upton Sinclair* wrote a novel called *The Jungle* exposing the unsanitary conditions of the meat-packing industry.

With improved printing presses, cheap newspapers, and low mail rates, the muckrakers’ message spread rapidly and helped to unite people against unfair practices.

### Muckrakers

“Muckrakers” is a term coined by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. It was used to condemn journalism that specialized in sensational stories of political procedures and corrupt businesses. President Roosevelt said that they were so busy raking the muck at their feet that they ignored the glories of the heavens above. Although Roosevelt meant to insult the journalists by calling them muckrakers, they accepted the name proudly. The muckrakers included *Lincoln Steffens* who wrote about political corruption, *Ira Tarbell* who exposed the practices of the large Standard Oil company, and *Upton Sinclair* who uncovered deplorable conditions in the Chicago meat-packing industry. These writers pioneered the investigative journalism of today.

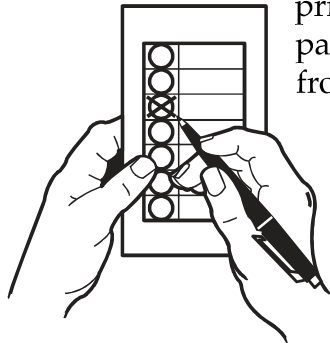
## Reforms in City Government

Important reforms were made in city governments during the Progressive Era. Large cities were controlled by powerful groups called **political machines**. Political machines controlled political parties and decided on candidates for city government offices. They also often decided what actions their city government would take. Members of the “machine” received bribes from companies wanting to do business in their cities. The head of a machine was called the **city boss**. To keep themselves in power, members of the political machine often bribed voters with money or jobs.

Reformers developed new systems of government to help prevent corruption in city governments. Some city governments appointed managers who had no political connections and were free from the political machine’s control of elections. Others cities were run by a council, whose members were elected by voters from all political parties.

## Reforms in State Government

State governments also underwent several reforms. The **secret ballot** system of voting was adopted by several states. This replaced ballots that allowed everyone to see the marks on a ballot when it was turned in. Some



*The secret ballot was one of the reforms state government underwent.*

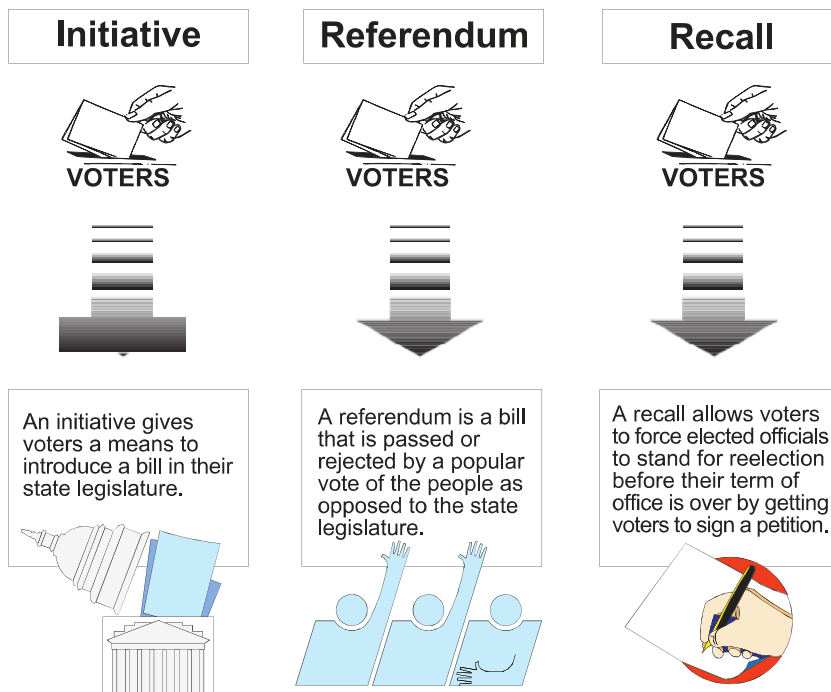
states began to use the **direct primary**. A direct primary is an election in which voters select their party’s *candidate* for a state office. Then the winners from different parties run against each other in the general election. This helped break the power of political party bosses.

Another reform was the way United States senators were elected. The United States Constitution required that state legislatures select United States senators. Congress amended, or changed, the Constitution and the **17<sup>th</sup> Amendment** gave voters the right to vote directly for their senators in 1913.

Three other important reforms in state government were the **initiative**, **referendum**, and **recall**. The *initiative* gives voters a means to initiate, or introduce, a bill in their state legislature. A *referendum* is a bill that is passed or rejected by a popular vote of the people as opposed to the state legislature.

The *recall* allows voters to remove public officials from elected positions. It forces public officials to face another election before the end of their term if enough voters ask for a recall. Citizens do this by getting voters to sign a petition. The use of the recall helps remove corrupt politicians. These three methods increased the control and participation by citizens over state governments.

## Reforms in State Government



## The Spoils System

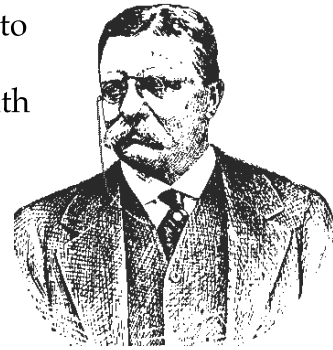
Under President Andrew Jackson, 1829–1833, a **spoils system** had developed. This meant that government jobs were given to people who had helped an official get elected. Many of the people who received jobs, however, were neither qualified nor honest. In 1883 Congress passed the **Pendleton Act**. This act required people to pass a test to determine whether they were qualified for a particular job. This act also said that a person could not be hired or fired because of his political beliefs.

City, state, and federal governments underwent many reforms during the Progressive Era. These reforms helped create a more democratic way of life for Americans.



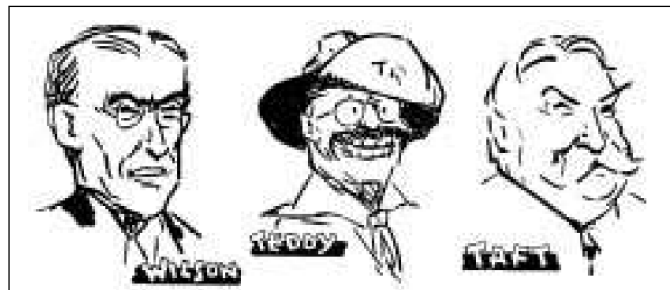
## Reforms in Business

The muckrakers made people aware of the abuses and corruption in big business. Americans then began to pressure government to reform business practices. President *Theodore Roosevelt* (1900–1908) agreed with the muckrakers and their supporters. He believed that government had the right to regulate business. He supported strengthening the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate railroads operating in more than one state. In 1906 the **Hepburn Act** gave the Interstate Commerce Commission the right to investigate complaints against railroads. The Hepburn Act helped reform the railroad business.



*President Theodore Roosevelt*

Business monopolies were hurting small companies and forcing many of them out of business. President Roosevelt used the **Sherman Antitrust Act** (1890) to break up some monopolies and trusts. This helped lower the prices of many goods and services and made competition between big and small businesses more fair. President Roosevelt's efforts earned him the nickname **trustbuster**. In 1914 the **Federal Trade Commission** was established, which gave the government the right to regulate business.



*Candidates for President in 1912*

Courtesy of the J. N. "Ding" Darling Foundation

## Other Economic Reforms

Under President *William Howard Taft* (1908–1912), the **16<sup>th</sup> Amendment** to the Constitution established a federal **income tax**. The tax was needed to pay the expenses of the federal government. President *Woodrow Wilson*

took office in 1913 and worked to create a more stable money and banking system. Under President Wilson, Congress passed the **Federal Reserve Act**. This act achieved two goals: (1) it established a new national currency; and (2) it created a national system of banks under federal regulation.

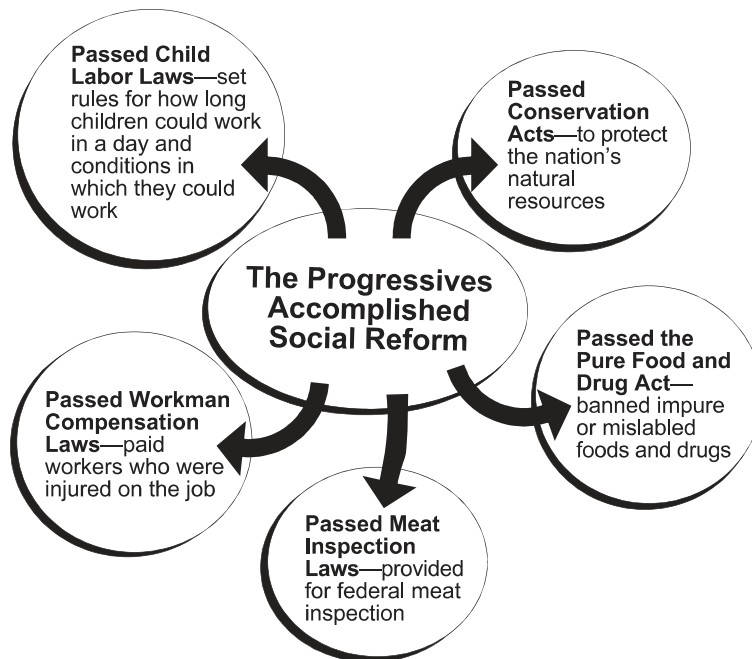


*President William  
Howard Taft*

## Social Reforms

In addition to political and business reforms, the progressives also accomplished social reform. This means they improved the living and working conditions for Americans in many ways. For example, most states passed child labor laws that set rules for how long children could work in a day and what conditions in which they could work. Many states began to require children to attend school.

Congress passed laws that improved working conditions in factories for employees of all ages. By the end of the Progressive Era, most states had **Workmen's Compensation** laws that paid workers who were injured on the job.



Congress also passed laws to protect the consumer. During the early 1900s, food processing plants were extremely unsanitary. Impure drugs and liquors were being manufactured and sold. In response, Congress passed the **Meat Inspection Act** and the **Pure Food and Drug Act** in

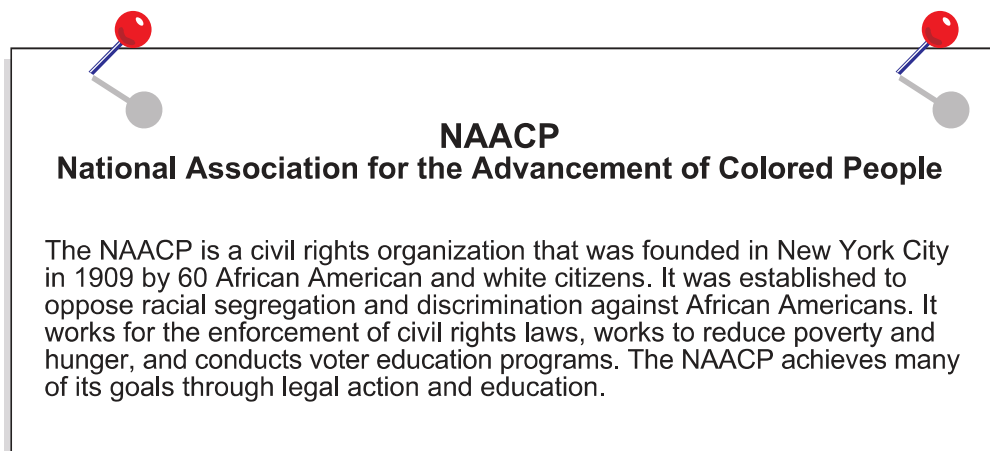
1906. Both of these laws set standards for industries that improved goods sold to the public.

Another area of great concern during the Progressive Era was the destruction of the natural environment. The government took important steps to protect the nation's natural resources. Congress passed the first conservation acts in the 1890s. These acts regulated the use of public lands and set up the first national and state parks in the country.

Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson worked for a wide variety of reforms, including those that limited the unfair practices of big business and created a more stable banking system. The reforms begun under these three men made life better for most Americans. In addition, many of the legislative acts adopted under these Presidents' administrations set up ways to protect the lives of future Americans.

## Problems of African Americans

The Progressive Era did not focus on the problems of African Americans. Several groups, however, were working to improve their conditions. In 1909 African Americans established two important organizations. One was the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**. One of its founders was *W. E. B. DuBois*, a historian and sociologist. The NAACP worked to ensure that African Americans were treated fairly. This group included a number of white progressives sympathetic to the cause of racial equality.



**NAACP**  
**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**

The NAACP is a civil rights organization that was founded in New York City in 1909 by 60 African American and white citizens. It was established to oppose racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. It works for the enforcement of civil rights laws, works to reduce poverty and hunger, and conducts voter education programs. The NAACP achieves many of its goals through legal action and education.

A second major organization was the **National Urban League**. The Urban League was a biracial organization. That means it included black and white Americans. Its goal was to secure equal opportunity for African Americans in education and employment. Both the NAACP and the National Urban League continue to be active today.



### National Urban League

The National Urban League is an interracial organization that was founded in 1910 to aid southern African Americans migrating to northern cities. Its goal was to secure equal opportunity for African Americans in education and employment. After World War II, it became more directly involved in civil rights issues.

## Role of American Women

American women had few rights before the Progressive Era. They had difficulty getting an education or entering professions. Their wages were lower than those paid to men for the same work; often they were paid half as much as men. They had no political power because they could not vote. Women became involved in the reform movements working to improve conditions for themselves and all Americans.

One important female reformer was *Jane Addams*. She created a **settlement house** called Hull House, a center where poor immigrants could get help and an education in the slums of Chicago. Addams also helped get child labor laws passed. *Ida Wells-Barnett*, a former slave, worked for African-Americans' rights and, in 1909, helped organize the NAACP. She also led the crusade against the lynching of African Americans by mobs.

*Frances Willard* was another important reformer who worked for women's **suffrage**, or the right to vote. Due to efforts like hers, women were granted suffrage when the **19<sup>th</sup> Amendment** was added to the Constitution in 1920.



*The Grand Rush of the Reception Committee*

Courtesy of the J. N. "Ding" Darling Foundation

## Summary

Progressive reform was concerned mainly with problems created by industry and its control of government. The progressives helped persuade local, state, and federal governments to pass laws to regulate business and protect Americans against abuses of all kinds. In addition, they helped to take government control out of the hands of powerful political machines and restore it to the people. Many progressives were not satisfied with the gains made between 1890 and 1917. However, many of their reforms served as a basis for others that would come later.