

Chapter 17

The Progressives Respond

Who were the progressives, and how did they address the problems they saw?

17.1 Introduction

Garbage was a big problem in American cities at the start of the 20th century. Most cities did not have decent garbage collection, so trash just piled up. One historian described the garbage problem in a poor neighborhood in Chicago called the 19th Ward:

In some of its alleys putrefying rubbish was piled a story and more high; its rotting wooden streets were clogged with manure, decaying garbage, and the bloated corpses of dogs and horses; and its plank-board sidewalks were lined with large uncovered garbage boxes filled to overflowing because of erratic pickup service by city-licensed scavengers.

—Donald Miller, *City of the Century*, 1996

Jane Addams, a social worker and cofounder of **Hull House**, the city's first settlement house, lived in the 19th Ward. Addams knew that rats bred in the trash and that children played there. Garbage heaps, she wrote, "were the first objects that the toddling children learned to climb." She worried that these conditions promoted the spread of disease in Chicago's poor neighborhoods.

Addams decided to take action. She badgered Chicago's leaders about the trash problem. When she got no response, she applied for the job of garbage collector for her ward. Instead, she was appointed garbage inspector. In that position, Addams made sure that garbage collectors did their job.

Addams was one of many social and political reformers of the early 1900s. These reformers called themselves **progressives** because they were committed to improving conditions in American life. Cleaning up city streets was just one of the reforms that progressives supported.

In this chapter, you will learn who the progressives were and what they believed. You will read about their efforts to improve urban life, eliminate government corruption, and expand American democracy.



Jane Addams was a cofounder of Chicago's Hull House, a settlement house that provided support for poor urban residents, including many new immigrants. Hull House was one of a number of settlement houses founded in American cities around the turn of the century. Addams also worked to keep Chicago's streets free of garbage.

Many progressives were women. They also tended to be white, middle class, and college educated. Progressives believed that government should actively address the problems caused by the rapid growth of industry and cities. The women in this photograph were factory inspectors in 1914. The third woman from the left is Florence Kelley, a noted reformer and colleague of Jane Addams.



17.2 The Origins of Progressivism

By 1900, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were contributing to great changes in American life. These changes brought new opportunities but also created new problems, particularly in cities. The progressives took action in response to these problems. They wanted to improve society by promoting social welfare, protecting the environment, and making government more efficient and democratic. The progressives had great faith in the future and a strong belief in the nation's founding ideals. They wanted to put those ideals into practice. President Woodrow Wilson described these goals in a speech in 1913:

We have been refreshed by a new insight into our own life . . . We have made up our minds to square every process of our national life again with the standards we so proudly set up at the beginning and have always carried at our hearts. Our work is a work of restoration.

—Woodrow Wilson, inaugural address of 1913

Progressives See Problems and Seek Solutions Progressives worried about the growing problems they saw in society and were determined to solve them. Until then, responsibility for addressing such issues did not lie with the government. Taking a new approach, the progressives became **activists** who were prepared to use political action to achieve reforms. They wanted government to solve society's problems.

Most progressives were urban, middle class, and college educated. The great majority were white, and many were women. The progressives included people with many different ideas about what to reform, how to reform it, and how far reforms should go. They represented many smaller reform movements rather than joining together as a single movement. But they all shared a commitment to progress and the belief that they could improve society.

The Political and Religious Roots of Progressivism The progressives were inspired by two reform movements of the late 1800s. One was the political movement called populism. The other was the religious movement called the **Social Gospel**.

Progressivism and populism had much in common, though their social origins were different. Populism was primarily a rural movement, whereas progressivism was born mainly among the urban middle class. Despite this difference, progressives embraced many populist goals. They wanted to improve conditions for farmers and industrial workers. They wanted to curb the power of big business and make government more accessible to average citizens. They also sought to expand economic opportunity and make American society more democratic.

Many progressives were also inspired by the religious ideals of the Social Gospel movement. This movement was based on the idea that social reform and Christianity went hand in hand. Followers of the Social Gospel applied Christian teachings to social and economic problems. They believed, for example, that the single-minded pursuit of wealth had taken some Americans down the wrong moral path. Walter Rauschenbusch, a Social Gospel minister, described the problem this way:

If a man sacrifices his human dignity and self-respect to increase his income . . . he is . . . denying God. Likewise if he uses up and injures the life of his fellow-men to make money for himself, he . . . denies God. But our industrial order . . . makes property the end, and man the means to produce it.

—Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 1907

Followers of the Social Gospel believed that society must take responsibility for those who are less fortunate. Many progressives embraced this ideal and infused their reform efforts with a strong emphasis on Christian morality.

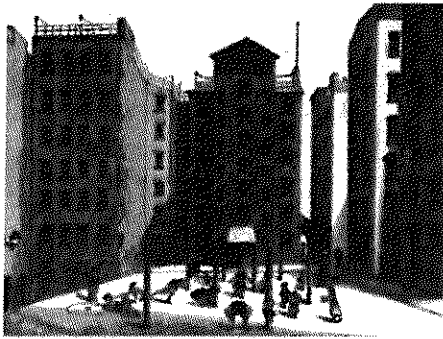
The Progressive Challenge to Social Darwinism Progressives strongly opposed social Darwinism, the social theory based loosely on Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. Darwin had written that in nature only the fittest survive. Social Darwinists believed that in human society the fittest individuals—and corporations—would thrive, while others would fall behind. They asserted that the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of business owners and monopolies reflected the natural order.

In rejecting social Darwinism, progressives argued that domination by the rich and powerful was a distortion of democracy. They declared that most Americans were harmed when monopolies controlled the economy and corrupted politics. Progressives believed that government should play an active role in defending the political and economic rights of average citizens against the power of big business. They also wanted government to promote social reforms to clean up the cities and help those in need.

Although progressives criticized big business, most were not radicals. Unlike many socialists, they believed in private enterprise. They thought that government should balance the interests of business owners and workers, while promoting order and efficiency. They favored helping the needy but also believed that aid should go to those willing to help themselves. Although some radical reformers worked with the progressives, the progressives generally pursued moderate political goals.



Some progressives volunteered their time to provide services and solve problems in poor urban neighborhoods. This nurse is visiting a family at a New York City tenement.



Progressives worked to improve run-down tenements. A New York law said that tenements must be built around an open courtyard to give residents light and fresh air. It also required that there be at least one toilet for every three rooms. The illustrations above show tenement housing before and after progressive reforms.

17.3 Progressives Fight for Social Reforms

In 1904, social worker Robert Hunter wrote a book about the poverty that trapped millions of city dwellers. He described the plight of urban workers: “In the main, they live miserably, they know not why. They work sore, yet gain nothing. They know the meaning of hunger and the dread of want.” Along with other progressives, Hunter worked to improve conditions for the poor.

Improving Living Conditions in Cities Living conditions for the urban poor were terrible during the early 1900s. Many city dwellers were jammed into tenements and lived in unsanitary conditions. The streets were often filled with garbage, as Jane Addams knew well.

Progressives took on the challenge of making cities cleaner and more livable. Under pressure from progressives, the state of New York passed the Tenement House Act in 1901. This law required each new tenement to be built with a central courtyard and to have a bathroom in each apartment.

Progressives like Addams also wanted the government to take responsibility for getting rid of trash. In New York, the Department of Street Cleaning took charge of garbage collection. Their collectors were called the White Wings because they wore clean, white uniforms. Muckraker Jacob Riis wrote that because of the White Wings, “Streets that had been dirty were swept. The ash barrels which had befouled the sidewalks disappeared.” By cleaning up unhealthy conditions, Riis said, the White Wings “saved more lives in the crowded tenements than a squad of doctors.”

Fighting to Keep Children out of Factories and in School Progressives also addressed the problem of child labor. Since many children worked in factories and sweatshops to help support their families, they could not attend school. In 1890, only 4 percent of American teenagers went to school.

Progressives pushed for laws to restrict or ban child labor. Florence Kelley, a colleague of Addams at Hull House, persuaded the Illinois state legislature to outlaw child labor in 1893. In 1904, she helped found the **National Child Labor Committee**. Addams also served as a board member of this organization. By 1912, the committee had convinced 39 states to pass child labor laws. These laws prohibited children under age 14 from working. Some also limited the number of hours that older children could work.

The decline in child labor meant that more children could get an education, thus creating a demand for more schools. In 1870, there were only 500 high schools throughout the nation. By 1910, that number had grown to 10,000. By 1930, almost half of all high-school-aged youth were attending school.

Progressives wanted children not only to be educated but also to be “Americanized.” They believed in pressuring immigrant schoolchildren to give up their cultural traditions and become assimilated into American society.

Progressives also protested the treatment of children by the criminal justice system. In many places, the law required juvenile offenders to be sentenced to reform school, but accused children did not always get a trial. Even if the children were not convicted, they might be sent away for rehabilitation. In addition, destitute children living on the streets were often treated as juvenile offenders.

A number of progressives tried to identify and address the causes of juvenile delinquency. One of these reformers was Judge Ben Lindsey of Denver, Colorado. Like many progressives, Lindsey believed that juvenile offenders were basically good but that their surroundings led them astray. If their living environment were improved, he argued, the delinquency would disappear. Lindsey also thought that promoting good relationships between troubled youths and fair-minded judges would help young delinquents.

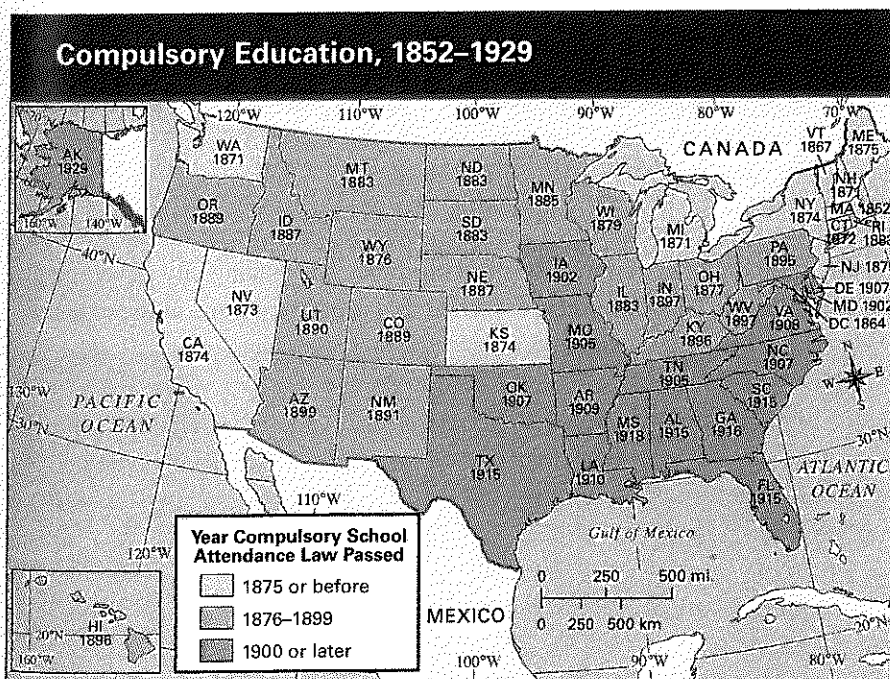
Lindsey and other progressives advocated creating a separate court system for juveniles. In 1905, only about 10 states had juvenile courts. By 1915, all but two states had them.

Improving Conditions in the Workplace Progressives had mixed success in helping adult workers. A law passed in New York to limit the number of hours bakers could work in a week was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1905. In *Lochner v. New York*, the Court ruled that such laws interfere with freedoms protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. “The right to purchase or to sell labor is part of the liberty protected by this amendment,” wrote Justice Rufus Peckam, “unless there are circumstances which exclude the right.”

Efforts to protect women fared better, perhaps because most men believed the “weaker sex” needed special protection. In 1908, the Supreme Court ruled in *Muller v. Oregon* that states could limit work hours for women. “As healthy mothers are essential to vigorous offspring,” the Court ruled, “the physical well-being of woman is an object of public interest . . . [and] does not conflict with the due process or equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment.”

Reformers also pushed for legislation to provide benefits to workers who were injured on the job. By 1916, almost two thirds of the states had **workers’ compensation** laws. Under these laws, workers who were hurt at work still received some pay, even if their injuries prevented them from working.

Reformers supported efforts to get children out of the workforce and into school. As this map shows, by 1900 many states required school attendance, even though child labor was still legal in many places. Southern states were among the last to pass compulsory school attendance laws.



Source: *Digest of Education Statistics*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004.



Tom Johnson was the reform mayor of Cleveland, Ohio, from 1901 to 1909. As mayor, he worked to clean up government and help average citizens. He reduced streetcar fares to 3¢, despite strong opposition from business leaders. This lower fare was featured on tokens handed out during his 1907 mayoral campaign.

17.4 Progressives Push for Political Reforms

Journalist Lincoln Steffens was among the muckrakers who exposed urban corruption at the turn of the century. Like many progressives, he did more than just expose and criticize. He proposed a solution. He said that citizens could improve city government by making demands on local politicians. He wrote, "If our political leaders are to be always a lot of political merchants, they will supply any demand we may create. All we have to do is to establish a steady demand for good government."

Fighting for Honest, Effective Local Government At the start of the 20th century, corrupt political machines ran many local governments. Bribery was commonplace. Businesses paid politicians to cast votes that favored their interests, and people who wanted public service jobs often had to buy their way in. Getting a job as a teacher in Philadelphia, for example, was costly. New teachers had to pay the political machine \$120 of the first \$141 they earned.

With the goal of improving democracy, progressives took aim at corruption in city governments. One strategy was to elect progressive mayors who would support reform. In Toledo, Ohio, Mayor Samuel M. Jones reformed the police department, set a minimum wage for city workers, and improved city services. In Cleveland, Ohio, Mayor Tom Johnson reduced streetcar fares, set up public baths, and increased the number of parks and playgrounds.

Progressives also wanted to reform the structure of local governments. In the early 1900s, a typical city was run by an elected mayor, and elected city councilors represented each of the city's wards, or districts. The system made it easy for political machines to control local government.

A devastating hurricane in Galveston, Texas, in 1900 set the stage for one type of reform. Unable to solve the problems of rebuilding, Galveston's government handed control to a five-person city commission appointed by the governor. Each commissioner was an expert in a field, such as finance or public safety. The positions later became elected offices. The Galveston city commission's work was so successful that by 1913 more than 350 American cities had adopted a city commission form of government.

Other cities set up a city manager form of government, in which an elected city council hired a professional city manager. This official was selected based on skills and experience rather than party loyalty. Some progressives saw this system as limiting the power of political machines and making city governments more competent. However, others worried that efficiency came at the expense of democracy because voters did not elect the city manager.

Reforming State Government Progressives also fought corruption at the state level. In many states, big business controlled government, leaving average citizens little influence. To return power to the people, progressives advocated various election reforms.

One of these reforms was the secret ballot. In the early 1900s, each party usually printed ballots in its own color, which meant voters' choices were apparent for all to see. With the secret ballot, citizens voted in a private booth and used an official ballot. Over time, secret voting was used in most elections.

Another reform was the direct primary, in which voters hold elections to choose candidates from each party to run for office in general elections. Direct primaries replaced a system in which party leaders picked the candidates.

A third reform was the **recall**, the process by which voters can remove an elected official before his or her term expires. For a recall to be placed on the ballot, enough voters must sign a petition to demand a special election.

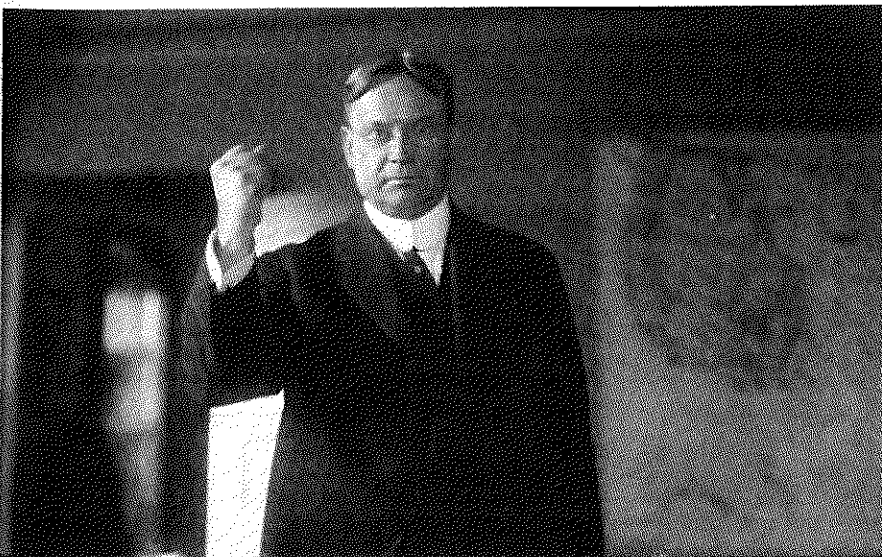
A fourth reform was the direct **initiative**. This is a law-making reform that enables citizens to propose and pass a law directly without involving the state legislature. Enough voters must first sign a petition to place the proposal on the ballot. It then becomes law if voters approve it on election day. This reform was more common in western states, where many progressives inherited a populist distrust of state legislatures.

Another lawmaking reform favored in western states was the **referendum**. In this process, a law passed by a state legislature is placed on the ballot for approval or rejection by the voters. The referendum is similar to the initiative, but less commonly used.

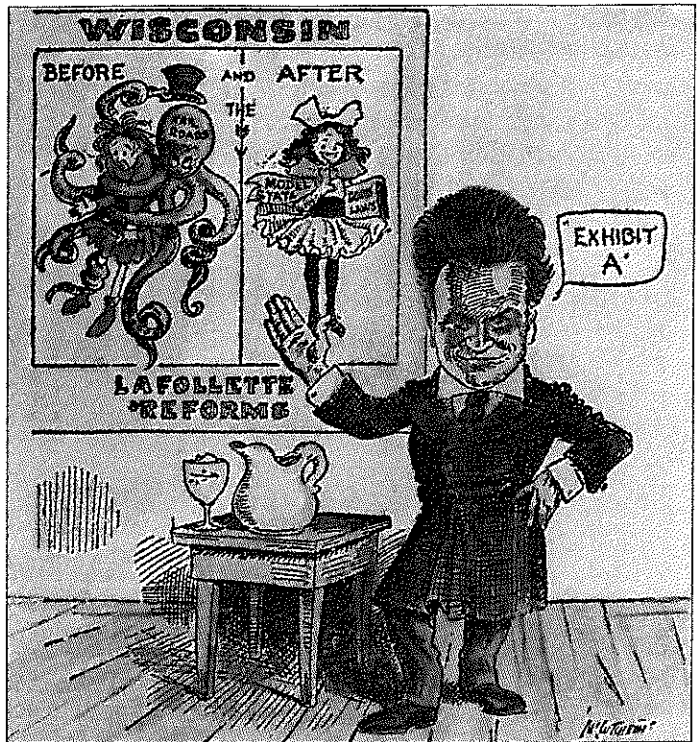
In addition to pressing for election reforms, progressives elected reform-minded governors. One famous progressive was Robert La Follette, governor of Wisconsin from 1900 to 1906. Under his guidance, the state passed laws to limit lobbying, conserve forests and other natural resources, and support workers.

Known as “Battling Bob,” La Follette took a strong stand against the railroads, which controlled the distribution of many products, including meat and grain. By charging favored customers lower rates for carrying freight, the railroads made it hard for other businesses to compete. With reduced competition, consumers paid more for many products. La Follette responded by forming a commission to regulate railroad rates. He also convinced the legislature to increase taxes on the railroads.

Governor Hiram Johnson of California also promoted progressive reforms. Like La Follette, he wanted to limit the power of the railroads. His campaign slogan was “Kick the Southern Pacific Railroad Out of Politics.” Johnson also regulated utilities, limited child labor, and signed into law an eight-hour workday for women.



Progressive state governors, like Wisconsin's Robert La Follette, used their positions to advance reform. This cartoon highlights La Follette's success in controlling railroad monopolies. He won three terms as governor and was later elected to the U.S. Senate.



Hiram Johnson was a two-term governor of California and later served nearly 30 years in the U.S. Senate. A lawyer by training, Johnson had never held public office before his election as governor in 1910. He was a strong supporter of progressive reform and a staunch opponent of corruption in public life.

17.5 Progressives Confront Social Inequality

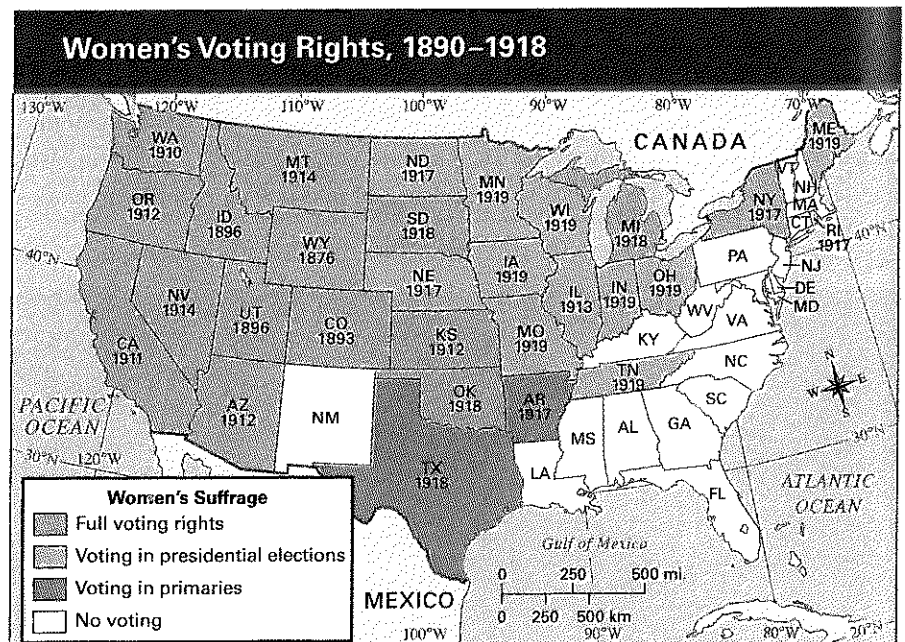
Although progressives faced issues of poverty, workers' rights, and corrupt government, many did not address the inequality confronting women and African Americans. However, progressive activism prompted many women and African Americans to struggle for their rights.

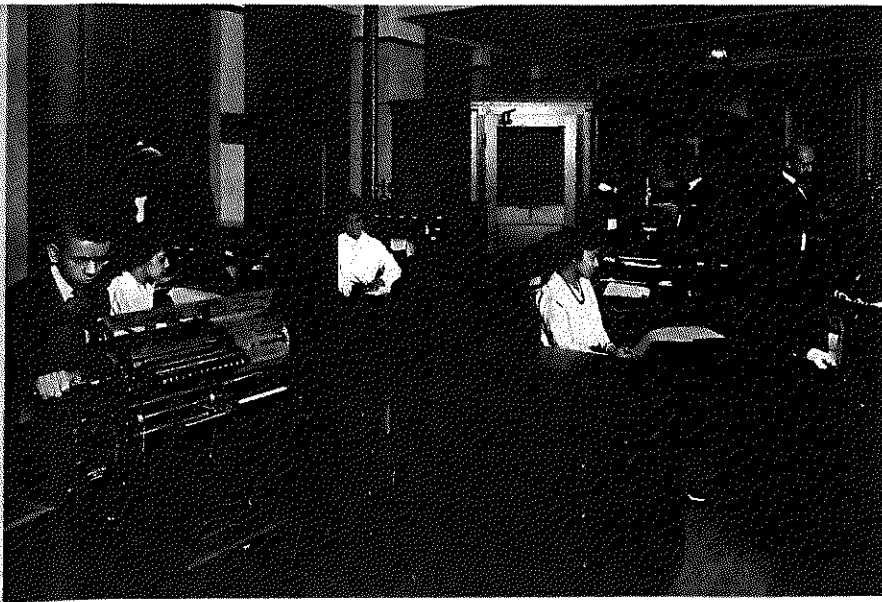
Women Fight for the Right to Vote Many progressive women saw themselves as “social housekeepers.” They defined their public work as an extension of the work they did at home. If they could clean up their homes, they believed, they could clean up society, too. But without the right to vote, their chances for success were limited. After the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, for example, a journalist asked a New York machine politician why women factory workers had no fire protection. “That’s easy,” he replied. “They ain’t got no votes!”

Women had demanded the right to vote as early as 1848, when a group of 300 women and men met at Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss women’s rights. At the Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that “the power to make laws was the right through which all other rights could be secured.” Progress toward that goal, however, was painfully slow. Women continued to agitate for women’s suffrage throughout the late 1800s. During this period, leading suffragists joined together to form the **National American Woman Suffrage Association**, or **NAWSA**, with Stanton as its first president. This group helped organize the suffrage movement into a powerful political force at the state and national levels.

The first victories in the struggle for women’s suffrage came at the state level. By 1898, four western states had granted women the right to vote. By 1918, women had voting rights in 15 states. As a result, they began to influence elections. In Montana, they helped elect Jeannette Rankin to the House of Representatives in 1916, four years before women had the right to vote nationwide. Rankin was the first woman to serve in Congress.

Western states were the first to grant women voting rights. By 1918, women had full voting rights in 15 states, many of them in the West. Women also had partial voting rights in another 23 states. Partial voting rights usually meant that women could vote in state and local elections but not in national elections.





In 1909, a group of progressives, including both blacks and whites, formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to bring an end to segregation. The NAACP published a journal, *The Crisis*, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois appears on the right in this photograph, with members of *The Crisis* staff.

African Americans Struggle for Equality African Americans faced an even tougher battle for their rights. In the early 1900s, four fifths of African Americans lived in the South. Most struggled to make a living as farmers and were subjected to strict segregation. Southern blacks were also disenfranchised, as literacy tests, poll taxes, and other methods denied them the right to vote. Nevertheless, many African Americans were inspired by progressive ideals and worked to improve their conditions.

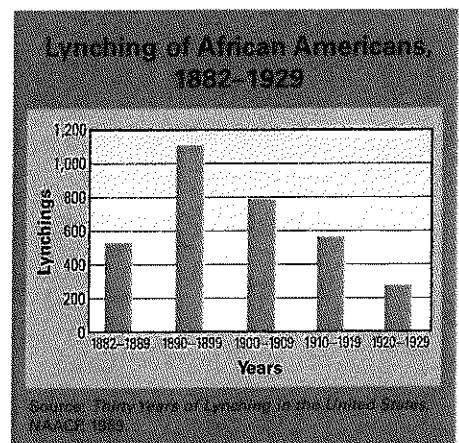
One leading proponent of advancement was Booker T. Washington, an African American educator. Washington founded the **Tuskegee Institute**, a vocational college for African Americans in Alabama. He encouraged blacks to gain respect and status by working their way up in society.

Some progressives favored confronting racism. In 1909, one group formed the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**, or **NAACP**. The NAACP fought through the courts to end segregation. It also tried to ensure that African American men could exercise voting rights under the Fifteenth Amendment.

One of the founding members of the NAACP was W. E. B. Du Bois, a distinguished African American scholar and activist. Between 1910 and 1934, he edited *The Crisis*, an NAACP journal that focused on issues important to African Americans.

In addition to its legal work, the NAACP protested lynching and other racist violence. Between 1894 and 1898, about 550 African Americans were lynched. Among the progressives who spoke out against this violence was Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a cofounder of the NAACP. In 1892, Wells-Barnett protested the lynching of three African American grocers in Memphis, Tennessee. She expressed her outrage in *The Memphis Free Speech*, a newspaper she co-owned and edited. She also urged African Americans to leave Memphis. In response, a mob ransacked her offices.

Based on systematic research, Wells-Barnett concluded that lynching had an economic motive. She argued that whites used lynching “to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property.” Despite the efforts of Wells-Barnett and other progressives, the federal government did not pass any laws against lynching.



This graph shows the number of African Americans lynched between 1880 and 1930. Lynchings rose sharply in the 1890s but declined after that. Although activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett protested, the federal government did not pass antilynching laws.



Booker T. Washington was a noted educator and director of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. This school offered vocational training to African Americans. Washington believed that blacks should work in trades that were open to them.

Differing Viewpoints

17.6 Confronting Racism

During the Progressive Era, African Americans used different strategies to combat racism and improve their status in society. The strategy championed by educator Booker T. Washington called for gradual economic advancement. The strategy favored by scholar W. E. B. Du Bois advocated the more radical path of political activism.

Booker T. Washington: Economic Advancement Booker T. Washington believed that the best way for African Americans to get ahead was to work hard and improve their economic condition. He urged blacks to “cast down your bucket where you are”—to be patient and take advantage of current opportunities rather than agitating for quicker or more radical solutions. Because Washington called on blacks to adapt themselves to the limits imposed by white society, his strategy was sometimes called accommodation. He expressed his ideas in a speech in 1895:

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are”—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions . . . Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life . . . No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

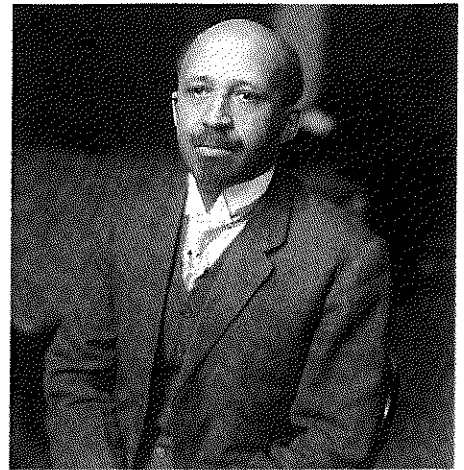
The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing . . . It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.

—Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Compromise” address, 1895

W. E. B. Du Bois: Political Activism Du Bois disagreed with Washington's approach. His strategy was to push hard for civil rights through political action. He believed that African Americans should protest unfair treatment and fight for equality. In a book published in 1903, Du Bois criticized Washington's perspective:

The black men of America have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate . . . So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him . . . But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds,—so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this,—we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them. By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain [gladly] forget: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903



In 1895, W. E. B. Du Bois became the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard. He went on to have a distinguished career as a scholar and political activist. Du Bois argued that African Americans must demand civil rights and encouraged them to protest when equality was denied.

Summary

In the early 1900s, progressives worked to reform American society. Inspired by reform movements like populism and the Social Gospel, progressives tackled a variety of problems. They tried to improve living and working conditions in cities, clean up state and local government, and advance the rights of women and minorities.

Urban living conditions Progressives like Jane Addams, the cofounder of Hull House, worked to fix up poor city neighborhoods. They tried to improve tenement housing, sanitation, and garbage collection.

Worker protection Progressives fought to improve working conditions. They promoted laws limiting work hours and guaranteeing workers' compensation. They formed the National Child Labor Committee to campaign against child labor and get more children into school.

Clean, responsive government Progressives sought to end government corruption at the local level. They worked to curb the power of political machines and restructure local government. They also worked to expand democracy at the state level. They supported reform governors like Robert La Follette and passed electoral reforms like the secret ballot, direct primary, recall, initiative, and referendum.

Struggle for equal rights Women and African Americans sought to advance their rights. Reform goals included voting rights for women and an end to lynching and segregation. NAWSA led the struggle for women's suffrage, while the NAACP tried to secure equality for African Americans.