



Parade for suffrage in New York City, October 23, 1915, in which 20,000 women marched.

The Progressive Tradition in American Politics

Part Two of the Progressive Tradition Series

Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin April 2010

Center for American Progress



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With the rise of the contemporary progressive movement and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, there is extensive public interest in better understanding the origins, values, and intellectual strands of progressivism. Who were the original progressive thinkers and activists? Where did their ideas come from and what motivated their beliefs and actions? What were their main goals for society and government? How did their ideas influence or diverge from alternative social doctrines? How do their ideas and beliefs relate to contemporary progressivism?

The new Progressive Tradition Series from the Center for American Progress traces the development of progressivism as a social and political tradition stretching from the late 19th century reform efforts to the current day. The series is designed primarily for educational and leadership development purposes to help students and activists better understand the foundations of progressive thought and its relationship to politics and social movements. Although the Progressive Studies Program has its own views about the relative merit of the various values, ideas, and actors discussed within the progressive tradition, the essays included in the series are descriptive and analytical rather than opinion based. We envision the essays serving as primers for exploring progressivism and liberalism in more depth through core texts—and in contrast to the conservative intellectual tradition and canon. We hope that these papers will promote ongoing discourse about the proper role of the state and individual in society, the relationship between empirical evidence and policymaking, and how progressives today might approach specific issues involving the economy, health care, energy-climate change, education, financial regulation, social and cultural affairs, and international relations and national security.

Part two examines the politics of national progressivism from the agrarian populists to the Great Society.

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Introduction

Accompanying the transformation of America's public philosophy away from the predominant laissez-faire vision of the late 19th century and toward stronger forms of democratic governance in the 20th century, numerous changes occurred in the issue agendas, constituencies, and policy platforms of the major political parties in the United States as they came to grips with rising progressive sentiment.

Progressivism has always found expressions both within and outside the major political parties, beginning with the early protest movements of the populists and other third party insurgencies to the transformative candidacies of William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. As Herbert Croly, co-founder of *The New Republic*, notes, the most distinctive progressive faction—as opposed to the more populist and agrarian one represented by Bryan—was located within the Republican Party and most fiercely advocated by prominent voices such as Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette of Wisconsin. Roosevelt and La Follette both formed outside Progressive Parties to promote the ideas of national reform after failing to transform the Republican Party into a genuinely progressive vehicle.

Meanwhile, the slow conversion of Woodrow Wilson from his southern conservative background into a national progressive president solidified progressivism within the Democratic Party—a legacy that was greatly extended under the long tenure of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt's aggressive national actions to repair and transform our society and government in the wake of the Great Depression set the course for the midcentury liberalism of Harry Truman, the New Frontier of John Kennedy, and the great civil rights advances under Lyndon Johnson.

Improvements in American life would not have happened without the pioneering ideas of these early progressives. The shift from conservatism toward progressivism helped to structure our society in far more humane and effective ways and gave real meaning to our founding principles of liberty, equality, and opportunity. Progressives built on this new foundation and expanding levels of support from the American public, successfully amassing a worthy list of policy accomplishments over the last century. These included such landmarks of equality and social justice as the eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek; the constitutional right to vote, full legal equality, and the elimination of

formal discrimination for women and minorities; and Social Security and Medicare to aid the elderly and Medicaid to help low-income families and children. (See sidebar for an extensive list of key reforms.)

This paper will trace the political lineage of progressivism from the late 1890s to the late 1960s. In doing so, we show how the demand for progressive policies went from outsider protest to dominance of the American political mainstream. Future papers in our Progressive Traditions series will explore more contemporary political expressions of progressivism.

Progressive reforms

A century of accomplishments

- The eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek
- Worker's compensation for on-the-job accidents
- Unemployment insurance
- Prohibitions against child labor and workplace exploitations
- The legal right of people to organize within labor unions and engage in collective bargaining for fair wages and benefits
- The constitutional right to vote, full legal equality, and the elimination of formal discrimination for women and minorities
- The graduated income and inheritance tax
- Protections against contaminated food and medicines
- Hundreds of millions of acres of protected wilderness areas, waterways, and national parks
- Antimonopoly and anticompetitive regulations of corporations
- Direct elections of U.S. senators, direct primary elections of political candidates, and the initiative and referendum process in the states
- Civil service tests to replace political patronage
- National supervision of banks and the creation of a flexible national currency
- Regulation of the securities industry
- Federal insurance of bank deposits
- Bans on speculative banking practices
- Refinancing and foreclosure protections for home and farm owners
- National infrastructure including electrification, railways, airports, bridges and roads, and the Internet
- Social Security and Medicare to aid the elderly and Medicaid and CHIP to help low-income families and children
- Minimum wage laws and income support for the working poor
- Public education, college loans and grants for students, and the GI Bill

Populism, progressivism, and post-Civil War America

America in 1890 was a far different country than it was right after the Civil War. The U.S. population had increased by 75 percent, from 36 million to 63 million people. This growth was disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, so that the rural proportion of the population fell steadily from 78 percent to 65 percent, a decline of about half a percentage point a year.¹

The second industrial revolution gathered force throughout this period. A wave of technical innovation created or transformed the chemical, electrical, petroleum, and steel industries. And massive infrastructure development knitted the country together into a powerful world-class economy. There was twice as much railroad track by the mid-1870s as there was in 1860 and the network of rails stretched from coast to coast. Workers laid 75,000 more miles of track in the 1880s alone, doubling again the amount of track crisscrossing the country. By around the same time, telegraph lines were dense enough that a merchant anywhere in the country could order goods instantaneously and have them delivered within a week. Perhaps only 13 percent of the country's population could not be reached by rail or steamship in 1890. Labor productivity rose overall about 2 percent per year during this period, making the American worker the most productive in the world, and the overall economy (gross national product) grew by about 4 percent per year.²

But this tremendous growth did not translate into commensurate social and economic progress, thereby disappointing vast swathes of Americans. While income growth in the post-Civil War era started out well—there was 4 percent annual growth in real per capita income in the 1870s—it ran into severe problems in the 1880s. In that decade, per capita income growth fell to just .4 percent per year. The situation worsened in the first half of the 1890s, as the recession of 1893 increased unemployment from 4 percent to 18 percent and sharply reduced incomes. Per capita income by 1895 was no higher than it had been 15 years before in 1880, leading to bitter resentment among the working class. The gap between the rich and poor worsened over the entire post-Civil War period, with the wealthiest American amassing fabulous fortunes, while workers, particularly immigrant workers, lived in appalling conditions in the cities.³

Then there were the farmers. This group was isolated from the urban-industrial life that was beginning to dominate the country, promoting a sense of relative decline and obsolescence. And with the declining farm prices initiated by the 1873 recession, they were suffering materially as well. Wholesale farm prices had declined by 28 percent by the end



of the 1870, and they fell another 43 percent by the mid-1890s. The price of wheat fell from \$1.12 a bushel to 50 cents or less between the early 1870s and the mid-1890s, while the price of corn decreased from 48 cents a bushel to 21 cents a bushel.⁴

Finally, the rising “new middle class,” especially its professional component, felt deeply aggrieved by the country’s failure to make more progress. They were increasingly convinced that their careful documentation of social problems and scientific approach to solving them held the key to social advance. But there was little scope for the new middle class to apply its knowledge, as status quo interests fiercely resisted any kind of meliorative agenda. Thus, while the middle class’s economic situation was typically far better than the workers and farmers, their sense of frustration was as deep or deeper.

No one in America was really happy with the state of the country—save the wealthy—by the time the 1890s rolled around. Dissatisfaction was concentrated in three general areas: the evils of bigness, the evils of corruption, and the evils of injustice. The concern with bigness was centered on the super rich and the monopolies they controlled, which were believed by the public to rig the economic game in their favor and impoverish the workers and farmers. The concern with corruption reflected the public’s perception that the

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political parties were under the control of the big interests, uninterested in solving social problems and using government to enrich themselves and fix elections. The concern with injustice included everything from the raw economic facts of workers' low wages and farm prices to urban living conditions to the lack of women's suffrage and racial oppression.

The solution, broadly speaking, was to break up and regulate bigness, reform government and elections to root out corruption, and utilize expertise and direct this reformed government toward the goal of social justice. The stage was set for progressive politics.

The middle class had numerous organizations and projects working on various aspects of these problems in the 1880s and early 1890s. These included movements for political reform in the cities, for helping the poor (such as Hull House in Chicago, founded by Jane Addams, where middle-class reformers lived with the poor and sought to uplift them materially and educationally) and for women's suffrage. Workers had some success in self-organization through Terence Powderly's Knights of Labor, which peaked at 700,000 members in 1886. But first out of the gate in terms of real political impact were the farmers. Starting with the Grange movement and then the Alliances, farmers bound themselves together in organizations that promoted cooperation for mutual benefit, fought against the railroad monopolies, and sought reforms to better the farmers' lot.

The rise and fall of the Populist Party

Farmers built on these organizations and eventually formed a political party, the Populist Party. The party pressed an ambitious reform agenda focused on limiting the power of big banks, brokers, and merchants and reforming government to make it more democratic. The Omaha Platform adopted at the Populist Party convention in 1892 called for the abolition of national banks; a graduated income tax; direct election of Senators; civil service reform; a working day of eight hours; government control of all railroads, telegraphs, and telephones; and replacing the gold standard with free coinage of silver. The latter provision was designed to combat the deflation of farm prices and make it easier for farmers to repay their debts.

The Populist Party did well in the 1892 election—extremely well for a third party in America. They pulled over a million votes, 8 percent of the total, and carried five states: Kansas, North Dakota, Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada. This strong showing raised the political profile of serious reform. But the party itself would not last long due to the embrace of their free silver idea (though little else) by the Democrats under William Jennings Bryan in 1896. This led the People's Party to make Bryan their presidential candidate as well and essentially ended their role as an independent political force.

The 1896 election was a disaster for both the Democrats and the Populists. Both parties were indelibly identified with the economic interests of the farmers in the countryside that,

in this case, was in direct conflict with the economic interests of the workers in the cities. Free silver would certainly help the farmers but workers would wind up with paychecks that bought less, thereby lowering their standard of living. Moreover, William McKinley and the Republicans defended high protective tariffs, while the Democrats/Populists opposed them. Again, this counterposed the interests of workers in the cities, who benefited from protection of the industries in which they worked, to those of farmers in the countryside.

In short, the 1896 election, despite Bryan's efforts to invoke a coalition of the "toiling masses" in the cities and countryside, pitted the interests of a declining class, the farmers, against those of a rising class, the urban workers. That was a recipe for defeat and defeat duly followed, driven by uniformly sharp Democratic losses in urban areas such as Boston (19 percentage points), Baltimore (19 points), New York (17 points), and Philadelphia (16 points).⁵ While some of this vote would come back to the Democrats in future presidential elections—and remain there for many state and local elections—the Republican claim on a significant share of the urban working-class vote would remain.

Progress lives

Although the Populists were dead and Republicans ascendant, progressive reformers were still very much alive—in fact, they were just beginning a period of tremendous success. There were several reasons for this.

First, very little progress had actually been made in addressing the evils of bigness, corruption, and social injustice. Not much had changed since 1880, despite the efforts of Populists and reform activists. There were a few exceptions—the secret ballot had become widespread and a number of state legislatures had passed safety and workers' compensation laws. But this was very small beer compared to the problems progressive reformers were trying to remedy. So their agenda was, if anything, more relevant than ever.

Second, a key effect of the realigning election of 1896 was to spread reform sentiment more uniformly across the two parties—paradoxically since the common interpretation at the time was that conservative Republicans had overcome radical Democrats. Ex-Republican urban reformers or "Mugwumps" who had joined the Democrats in the 1880s returned to their original party and promoted successful reform mayors such as Hazen Pingree of Detroit and Golden Rule Jones of Toledo. Ex-Republican agrarian reformers who had joined the Populist Party also returned in large numbers to their original party. These returned Populists joined forces with agrarian reformers who had never left the party to create an insurgent reformist strand of Republicanism in a number of states, including Wisconsin (led by Robert La Follette, governor of the state from 1901-06 and then senator from 1906-25) and Iowa (led by Albert Cummins, governor of the state from 1902-08 and senator from 1908-26).



Despite William Jennings Bryan's efforts to invoke a coalition of the "toiling masses" in the cities and countryside, the election of 1896 pitted the interests of a declining class, the farmers, against those of a rising class, the urban workers.

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Third, McKinley's election ushered in an era of strong economic growth that benefited all classes. Poor harvests in Europe increased demand for American farm products, while the availability of gold suddenly increased (Alaska gold rush), loosening credit and the money supply. That eliminated the deflation problem that had particularly bedeviled the farmers, while the rise of mass production in sectors such as auto and steel boosted American industry. The intense conflict between free silver and tariff protection swiftly faded into irrelevance as a result.

Indeed, the economy more than doubled in size between 1896 and 1913, and real per capita income rose by 2.3 percent per year. Unemployment, which was still 14 percent in 1896, fell to 4 percent by 1901 and stayed near that level until World War I when it fell even lower. Manufacturing workers did particularly well, with their annual earnings rising steadily, including a spurt from \$550 to \$900 between 1908 and 1917.⁶

This concatenation of factors produced an exceptionally favorable climate for progressive reform after 1896. A far-reaching reform program, thanks to the Populists and others, was now widely known to the public. And reform had a powerful presence within both parties, in each case spreading far beyond the ranks of middle-class activists, who were particularly exercised by the corruption issue, to workers and farmers concerned with social and economic justice. Even within the Democratic Party, where ethnic working-class based "bossism" had played such a central role, reformers (among them Al Smith and Robert F. Wagner of New York and David Walsh of Massachusetts) emerged from this milieu and played prominent roles. And the improved economic situation ended the conflict over free silver, which had divided workers and farmers and diverted political energy from the central parts of the reform program. It also toned down nativist and other intolerant, backward-looking sentiments that always lurked at the edges of populism and promoted an optimistic orientation toward change and the common good.

Most of the reform victories in McKinley's term were at the state and municipal level. While these victories were gratifying, reformers nevertheless felt frustrated because they knew many of their most important issues could only be addressed at the national level. But with McKinley's death through assassination in 1901 and his succession by Teddy Roosevelt, reform suddenly had the national-level advocate it needed.



The 1896 election of William McKinley is often considered a realigning election that transformed the two major political parties, changed the presidency, and set in motion reactions that culminated in the Progressive Era.

PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and the progressive moment

Roosevelt moved cautiously during his first term, looking toward 1904 when he could be elected president in his own right. But he did move to establish the power of the federal government to expose and act upon monopolistic corporate practices. He initiated a suit in 1902 against a new and powerful railroad combination, the Northern Securities Company. He also moved to make government more of an impartial regulator of labor and business, rather than leaning toward business as had been the traditional Republican approach. In the 1902 United Mine Workers strike, he actually threatened to seize the mines if employers did not agree to impartial federal arbitration. The UMW eventually won a nine-hour day and a 10 percent wage increase.

Roosevelt promised a “Square Deal” for everyone in the 1904 campaign and won re-election with a thumping 57 percent of the vote, losing no states outside the South. He then proceeded to move more authoritatively in a reform direction. The Hepburn Railroad Regulation Act was passed in 1906, giving the Interstate Commerce Commission—whose purview had been strictly limited by the courts—the right to inspect the books of railroad companies. The Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection Acts were also passed in 1906, getting the federal government into the business of protecting the people’s health. He proposed even bolder reforms in 1907, including the eight-hour day, broader worker compensation, inheritance and income taxes, and regulation of the stock market. He also vastly expanded the national forest system to take millions of acres out of private development hands.

Roosevelt had promised not to serve more than two terms and did in fact face serious opposition from conservatives in his own party who were outraged by his “radical” actions and rhetoric as president. He elected not to run for president in 1908 and instead designated his hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, to carry on the progressive cause as the Republican nomination. Taft ran as a reformer, even adding some of his opponent William Jennings Bryan’s reform ideas to the portfolio he inherited from Roosevelt.

Taft easily won the 1908 election with roughly the same coalition that elected Roosevelt in 1904, albeit on a somewhat lower level. Once Taft assumed office, however, it became apparent that his reform commitments were considerably tempered by his attentiveness to business interests. He failed to meaningfully lower protective tariffs, which reform-



With Teddy Roosevelt, reform suddenly had the national-level advocate it needed.

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ers increasingly believed was essential to undermining the power of the trusts. He also removed Roosevelt's conservationist Secretary of the Interior James Garfield, replacing him with Richard Ballinger, a corporate lawyer. Ballinger promptly attempted to remove a million acres from public lands for private development.

These and other actions infuriated the reform wing of the Republicans, who ran insurgent candidates against conservatives in party primaries in 1910, defeating many of them, while suffering no losses of their own. Democrats hopped on the reform bandwagon as well, running progressive candidates of their own. They succeeded in taking control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 16 years and made significant gains in the Senate. The electorate was clearly ready for further and bolder reforms.

Taft was not impervious to these sentiments and attempted on other fronts to prove his reformist bona fides. He was active on the trust-busting front, prosecuting 80 lawsuits against the trusts. He also further strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission, reformed the postal system, and expanded the civil service. And he supported both the 16th Amendment (allowing a federal income tax) and the 17th Amendment (direct election of senators by voters to replace selection by state legislatures).

Nevertheless, these moves were not enough to appease Republican progressives and he wound up facing challenges for the 1912 Republican nomination. First this came from Robert La Follette but then more consequentially from Roosevelt himself, who returned to active politics in September 1910 with his famous "New Nationalism" speech in Osawatimie, Kansas. Roosevelt argued that only a strong federal government could effectively seek social justice and promote the common good. He supported, among other things, progressive income and inheritance taxes, child labor laws, workers' compensation for industrial accidents, and tougher regulation of corporations.

Taft would not yield to Roosevelt's challenge and the Republican Party split in two for the 1912 election. The progressive Republicans formed a new party, the Progressive Party, with Roosevelt as their candidate and the conservative Republicans renominated Taft. Rounding out the field were Woodrow Wilson for the Democrats and Eugene Debs for the Socialists.

The Progressive Party brought together numerous social reformers, activists, and political insurgents under an expansive banner of national political change. Arguing that the country had reached the pinnacle of progressive sentiment, the Progressive Party put forth its "contract with the people" to help eliminate the "hazards of sickness, accident, invalidism, involuntary unemployment and old age."⁷

Wilson's candidacy for the Democrats was hugely significant since it was the first time Democrats nominated a truly progressive, as opposed to populist, reformer. The Democrats' New Freedom platform of 1912 had much in common with Roosevelt's New



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Nationalism approach, differing primarily in approaches to trusts and economic concentration: Roosevelt wanted aggressive regulation of the trusts, while Wilson argued that breaking up the trusts, rather than regulating them, was the real solution.

Taken together then, the voters in 1912 had three candidates offering progressive policies (including Debs) to choose from and one conservative candidate. The result was a landslide for progressivism. Three of every four votes cast was for Wilson, Roosevelt, or Debs. Taft received a meager 23 percent of the vote, carrying only the states of Utah and Vermont. Roosevelt carried 27 percent of the vote and the states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, South Dakota, California, and Washington. But Wilson's 42 percent plurality sufficed to carry every other state, giving him an overwhelming 435 electoral votes.

The 1912 progressive vote, while spread across three different candidates, prefigured the progressive coalition that would come to dominate the country in the New Deal era. Perhaps for the first time, the rising working class was completely in the progressive camp, along with the urban middle class and significant sections of the farmers. The future for progressivism seemed full of promise.

And in many ways, the Wilson era delivered on that promise. In 1913, the 16th (allowing income taxes) and 17th (direct election of senators) Amendments finally were ratified by enough states, thanks to the unstinting efforts of progressives. Wilson followed up on the 16th Amendment by getting Congress to pass a progressive federal income tax. Also in 1913, he succeeded in reforming the banking sector through the Federal Reserve Act, which created a system of 12 regional banks to manage and stabilize banking activity. He proposed and Congress passed the Federal Trade Commission Act in 1914, creating a federal agency with considerable regulatory power to police business. Interestingly, Roosevelt had originally proposed this latter idea, which was more characteristic of his New Nationalism approach than Wilson's New Freedom approach.

Later on in Wilson's presidency, he appointed progressive Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court in 1916. Brandeis was also the first Jew to serve on the Court. Wilson also supported a measure creating a system of workers' compensation for federal employees and another measure, the Keating-Owen Act, the first federal law regulating child labor. When the Supreme Court struck down the latter law, he had another law passed that heavily taxed products using child labor.

Wilson, however, was not so friendly to other progressive reform efforts, refusing, for example, to support the ongoing drive for women's suffrage. Despite his lack of support, enough states finally ratified the 19th Amendment, giving women the vote in 1920. And shamefully he supported legal segregation in federal agencies, reversing much of the work Roosevelt had done to eliminate racial barriers.

He also did little that could keep the progressive movement going once his presidency was over. In his second term, he became preoccupied with international affairs due to the U.S. entry into World War I. And, as his general intolerance of dissent during World I became exacerbated by fear of the 1917 Russian Revolution, he played a central role in promoting the Red Scare of 1917-20. The Red Scare made domestic activism a target of both police suppression and nativist sentiment, producing an atmosphere hardly conducive to the cause of progressive reform.

Twilight of the Progressive Era

To some extent, the progressive movement was also a victim of its own success.

Progressives experienced dramatic success on a number of fronts by 1920. They broke up corrupt political machines in cities, promoted the hiring of more technical experts such as city managers, and expanded democracy in the states through initiatives, referenda, and recall. And they had implemented much of their reform agenda: direct election of senators, a progressive federal income tax, much tougher regulation of business, lowering of protective tariffs, women's suffrage, action against child labor, federal regulation of food safety, a workmen's compensation law, civil service reform, and a stable banking system that was fair to the South and the West.

Finally, the national spirit of optimism that buoyed the progressives during most of the Progressive Era withered in the face of economic problems that set in soon after the end of World War I. America suffered four separate recessions between 1918 and 1927 and a fifth, which initiated the Great Depression, came in 1929. Price deflation had returned by 1921, affecting both industrial and farm prices. In the 11 years between 1918 and 1929, real per capita income rose in four (including 1929), declined in three and was roughly unchanged in four. Real per capita income rose over that period by an average of only 1 percent annually, two-fifths the rate of the previous two decades.⁸ Since the 1920s were also a period of rising inequality, we can be sure that the typical family did even worse than these statistics imply.

As a result of all this, the progressive movement found itself adrift and, in remarkably short order, removed from national power. Conservative Warren Harding secured the Republican nomination in 1920, an indicator of the fading fortunes of progressives within the Republican Party. Harding ran on a promise to "Return to Normalcy," a slogan with nativist, isolationist, and antiprogressive connotations. Harding's priorities were an accurate precursor of the politics of the 1920s, which saw a sharp increase in racial violence and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, new restrictions on immigration, rises in protective tariffs, increases in economic concentration, and tax cuts for the rich.

Harding easily defeated progressive Democrat James Cox for the presidency in 1920. Cox, in fact, only received 34 percent of the popular vote and carried no states outside of the South. As poorly as Cox fared, he did better than the Democrats' next presidential nominee, conservative corporate lawyer John Davis, in 1924. Davis received just 29 percent of the vote, carrying roughly the same states as Cox, and losing handily to

conservative Republican Calvin Coolidge, the incumbent (Coolidge had assumed the presidency upon Harding's death in 1923).

The Democrats' nomination of Davis also provided political space for progressives to run their own candidate in 1924. They nominated Robert La Follette, who ran on the same Progressive Party line Roosevelt did in 1912. La Follette did not do quite as well as Roosevelt, though he did very well for a third party presidential candidate. He received 17 percent of the vote, but carried only his home state of Wisconsin. He did relatively well in the northern states running from Wisconsin to the Pacific Coast and in California. But he did relatively poorly in the east.

Other than La Follette's 1924 candidacy, the real progressive action in this period was in the states—for example, the rise of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party, a progressive third party that became the dominant force in that state. State-level progressives kept the torch burning, seeking to build their strength for their next big opportunity. Their efforts bore some fruit in 1928, when Democrats, hoping to capitalize on discontent among urban workers and rural farmers, made progressive Al Smith their nominee.

Smith, a New York City born-and-bred Irish Catholic, was perhaps not perfectly suited to appeal to rural America, but nevertheless made significant Democratic gains in these areas. Case in point: He carried 45 counties in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and North Dakota that had not been carried by any Democrat since Wilson.⁹ Smith was well suited, however, to increasing Democratic penetration of the urban working class, particularly in the Northeast, regaining ground that Democrats struggled to hold ever since the McKinley election of 1896.

Smith's huge majority in Boston converted Republican Massachusetts into Democratic Massachusetts, where it remains to this day. He also turned Providence and the state of Rhode Island Democratic, as well as the cities of New Haven, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and Albany, and expanded Democratic majorities in urban areas like New York City and Jersey City. In this sense, Smith's losing effort to conservative Republican Herbert Hoover, who carried 58 percent of the vote and 444 electoral votes, prefigured the far different electoral results of 1932—the landslide victory of Franklin D. Roosevelt.



Robert La Follette led an insurgent reformist strand of Republicans created when populists joined forces with agrarian reformers.

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Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal

Fulfilling the progressive promise

The 1932 election was held against the backdrop of the Great Depression and 24 percent unemployment. The Democrats turned to Franklin Delano Roosevelt as their standard-bearer, a long-time progressive within the party who was governor of New York and had run for vice president on the 1920 Democratic ticket. FDR ran as a full-throated progressive who promised to use the tools of government to build from the bottom up and help the “forgotten man.” Many people, including his rival for the nomination, 1928 Democratic candidate Al Smith, tagged FDR with the “class war” label for this emphasis. Smith and some others considered themselves progressive, but thought that FDR was just going too far and verging on antibusiness radicalism.

But that was not how the voters saw it. FDR was elected in a landslide with 57 percent of the vote to Hoover’s 40 percent and carried every state save Pennsylvania, Delaware, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The group of voters that elected FDR was the first appearance of what came to be known as the New Deal coalition. The coalition was based around Democratic domination of the rising blue-collar working class—which was now two-and-a-half times as large as America’s farmers and farmworkers—especially urban Catholic ethnics and voters who worked in mass production industries. This coalition also included blacks and Jews who suffered discrimination in addition to their own economic problems, and white southerners generally, who had a historical attachment to the Democratic Party.

With this coalition backing him and a dire situation confronting the country, FDR launched a wave of reform that considerably expanded the role of government in regulating the economy and achieving social justice. This was consistent with the aims and philosophy of progressivism, but went beyond anything progressives had previously attempted. In the famous first “Hundred Days,” he created the Civilian Conservation Corps to provide jobs, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to provide urban income support, and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration to provide farm price supports and mortgage refinancing.

Congress in those first hundred days appropriated substantial funds for new jobs-creating public works programs, which eventually evolved into the Works Progress

Administration. Congress also passed the Emergency Banking Act, reopening banks and instituting a bank inspection regime, and the Glass-Steagall Act, strengthening bank safety, controlling speculation, and creating the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. Another financial safeguard, the Federal Securities Act, became law, mandating full disclosure of financial information in stock sales.

FDR was under strong pressure to move in this progressive direction and keep moving in these first hundred days and thereafter. This pressure was not just from Congress itself, where progressive Democrats were in a mood to take decisive action, but also outside of Congress and, in some cases, outside of the major party structure. Father Coughlin, a fiery priest from Michigan who was an early and very militant supporter of the New Deal, had a radio audience of 10 million and was seeking to organize a National Union for Social Justice. Francis Townsend of California, a physician whose ideas were a precursor to the Social Security system, championed a radical pension plan, forming Townsend Clubs across the country. The muckracking novelist Upton Sinclair ran for governor of California in 1934 on his End Poverty in California or EPIC program. Then there was Huey Long in Louisiana and his Share Our Wealth movement, Floyd Olson of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and the La Follettes in Wisconsin who left the GOP in 1934, forming a state-level Progressive Party that swept the state. And perhaps most important of all, there were the labor unions, especially the insurgent industrial unions that eventually formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Their unstinting support for continuing and deepening the New Deal was crucial to the progress of reform.

With this pressure and deep economic difficulties to overcome, the progressive advance continued long after the first hundred days were over. The Securities and Exchange Commission was formed to strengthen stock market regulation. The Tennessee Valley Authority and Rural Electrification Administration were established. The U.S. Housing Authority was created to provide housing for low-income families. The Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act was passed, the beginning of modern drug regulation. The Social Security system was established. Union organizing was encouraged through the Wagner Act and the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board. And the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, specifying the 40-hour regular workweek, mandating time and a half for overtime, prohibiting most child labor, and setting a minimum wage.

FDR pulled the country out of the depths of the Great Depression with the help of these reforms and their associated spending and regulation, though full economic health did not return until World War II. The robustness of the U.S. economy continued after the war and throughout the immediate postwar era (1946-1973), with real per capita income rising at a rate of 2.4 percent per year and real median family income rising at 2.8 per year. Moreover, this was an era of increasing equality, so the average family was fully sharing in the benefits of economic growth.

The New Deal coalition gave the progressive-dominated Democratic Party high levels of electoral support until almost the very end of this era. Progressives had delivered a better and ever-richer society and deserved that support as far as these voters were concerned. Democratic presidential support averaged 55 percent in the six elections between 1932 and 1948. After the liberal Republican Dwight Eisenhower won two terms in 1952 and 1956, the Democrats again averaged 55 percent presidential support in 1960 and 1964. And the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress during almost all of this period.

Post-War liberalism and the challenges of the 1960s

The progressive approach for the first two decades after the war concentrated not on new reforms, but on consolidating the emerging U.S. welfare state, with its implicit social contract and greatly expanded role for government. Returning GIs were provided with a free college education and low-interest, zero down payment home loans through the GI Bill. And as a roaring U.S. economy delivered the goods, government poured money into roads, science, schools, and whatever else seemed necessary to build up the country. This era created the first mass middle class in the world—a middle class that even factory workers could enter, since they could earn relatively comfortable livings even without high levels of education or professional skills.

But progressives realized that as impressive and beneficial as these achievements were there was an unfinished agenda—an agenda that continued economic growth, by itself, could not address. It fell to Lyndon Johnson, who assumed the presidency after John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, to launch a new wave of reform to address this agenda.

First on that agenda was the continued existence of racial discrimination and oppression. The civil rights movement was gaining more and more support and escalating its tactics to end segregation. Johnson responded to this pressure and did the right thing, though it angered many of his fellow southerners. He signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Then there was the continued existence of poverty, an issue popularized by Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, published in 1962. This was addressed through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which launched the "War on Poverty." The War on Poverty included such initiatives as the Job Corps, VISTA, the Model Cities program, Upward Bound, and Project Head Start.

The 1965 creation of Medicare, a universal health insurance program for the elderly, addressed the financial hardship of health care for older Americans. Medicaid was established in the same year to provide basic medical care for the poor.

The federal government targeted environmental issues through a wide range of new initiatives going far beyond its traditionally limited commitments in this area. Congress passed the Clean Water, Water Quality, and Clean Water Restoration Acts. The Wilderness Act,



the Endangered Species Preservation Act, the Solid Waster Disposal Act, and many others also became law. The stage was set for creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and the activist environmental policy we are used to today.

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

CECIL STOUGHTON, WHITE HOUSE PRESS OFFICE (WHPO)

The federal government addressed the chronic money problems of low-income schools by getting into the education funding business through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Higher Education Act increased federal support for colleges and universities and provided greater assistance to low-income students who wanted to attend college.

The Motor Vehicle Safety Act, the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, the Child Safety Act, the Wholesome Meat and Poultry Acts, and a number of other laws enhanced consumer protection. These acts raised the bar for consumer protection far higher than it had previously been.

Finally, the federal government stepped in to promote culture and the arts, which did not fit well into a profit-making model. It established the National Foundations for the Arts and Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and built the Kennedy Center. The CPB gave rise to National Public Radio several years later.

Progressive decline

After 1965, however, things did not go so well politically for progressives. It was clear by 1968 that conservatives were in the ascendance and progressives in retreat, a situation that lasted for several decades. How did this happen? How did progressives go very quickly from the high point of bold reform in the mid-1960s to conservative domination?

One way to look at it is that progressives were victims of their own success. Start with this sketch of the philosophy and politics of New Deal progressives. A combination of the Democrats' historic populist commitment to the average working American and their experience in battling the Great Depression (and building their political coalition) through increased government spending and regulation and the promotion of labor unions shaped these progressives' worldview. It was really a rather simple philosophy, if the application of it was complex. Government should help the average person through vigorous government spending. Capitalism needs regulation to work properly. Labor unions are good. Putting money in the average person's pocket is more important than rarified worries about the quality of life. Traditional morality is to be respected, not challenged. Racism and the like are bad, but not so bad that the party should depart from its main mission of material uplift for the average American.

That worldview had deep roots in an economy dominated by mass production industries and was politically based among the overwhelmingly white workers in those industries. And it helped make the Democrats the undisputed party of the white working class. Their dominance among these voters was, in turn, the key to their political success. To be sure, there were important divisions among these voters—by country of origin (German, Scandinavian, Eastern European, English, Irish, Italian, etc.), by religion (Protestants versus Catholics), and by region (South versus non-South)—that greatly complicated the politics of this group, but the New Deal progressives mastered these complications and maintained a deep base among these voters.

Of course, the New Deal coalition as originally forged did include most blacks and was certainly cross-class, especially among Jews and southerners. But the prototypical member of the coalition was an ethnic white worker—commonly visualized as working in a unionized factory—even though the coalition also included those who weren't in unions or who toiled in other blue-collar jobs such as construction or transportation. It was these voters who powered four FDR election victories and the victories of Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson, as well as the Democrats' congressional domination.

So New Deal progressives depended on the white working class for political support and the white working class depended on progressives to run government and the economy in a way that kept that upward escalator to the middle class moving. Social and cultural issues were not particularly important to this mutually beneficial relationship. Indeed, they had only a peripheral role in the uncomplicated progressivism that animated the Democratic

Party of the '30s, '40s, and '50s. But that arrangement and that uncomplicated progressivism could not and did not survive the dynamic evolution of postwar capitalism—an evolution that progressives so expertly shepherded.

The changing face of America

The changes wrought by this evolution start with the most dramatic shifts in American class structure since the World War II era. Consider education levels. Incredible as it may seem today, in 1940 three-quarters of adults 25 and over were high school dropouts (or never made it as far as high school), and just 5 percent had a four-year college degree or higher. But educational credentials exploded in the postwar period. The proportion of adults lacking a high school diploma in 1960 was down to 59 percent; by 1980, that number was less than a third, and by 2007, it was down to only 14 percent.

Concomitantly, the proportion of Americans with a bachelor's degree or higher rose steadily and reached 29 percent in 2007. Moreover, those with some college (but not a four-year degree) constituted another 25 percent of the population, making a total of 54 percent who had at least some college education.¹⁰ Quite a change: moving from a country where the typical adult was a high school dropout, or more accurately, never even reached high school, to a country where the typical adult not only has a high school diploma but some college as well.

Or consider the occupational structure. Only about 32 percent of employed U.S. workers in 1940 held white-collar jobs (professional, managerial, clerical, and sales). That proportion had almost doubled to 60 percent by 2006, including rises from 8 percent to 20 percent among professionals and from 17 percent to 26 percent among clerical-sales jobs. On the other end of the occupational distribution, manual workers (production, operatives, craft, and laborers) declined from 36 percent to 23 percent between 1940 and 2006.¹¹ The country moved from an occupational structure where there were more manual than white-collar workers, to one where there are nearly three times as many white-collar as manual workers.

Finally, consider income levels. The median family income in 1947 was under \$26,000 (in 2008 dollars). Median family income was around \$62,000 by 2008, almost two-and-a-half times as high as in 1947. Looked at another way, in 1947, 60 percent of families made under \$29,000. But in 2008, under 20 percent made less than that figure and 40 percent made more than \$75,000, a figure that fewer than 5 percent of families exceeded in 1947.¹²

These shifts and other changes (the decline of mass production industries, the entry of women into the workforce) transformed the white working class itself. About two-thirds of the workforce in 1948 was made up of white men, and the bulk of these white men worked at blue-collar manufacturing and construction jobs or at blue-collar service jobs

like janitor or warehouseman. And they were heavily unionized, especially in certain areas of the country: By the late 1940s, unions claimed around 60 percent or more of the northern blue-collar workforce.¹³

But the last 60 years have changed all that. The white working class has become much more diverse—today, there are almost as many women workers as men—even as unionization has declined. And only a relatively small proportion (17 percent) of the white working class works in manufacturing (even among men, the proportion is still less than one-quarter). In fact, the entire goods-producing sector, which includes construction, mining, and agriculture, as well as manufacturing, only covers 30 percent of the white working class. This leaves the overwhelming majority—7 in 10 workers—in the service sector, which includes government. There are almost as many members of the new white working class working in trade alone (especially retail) as there are in all goods-producing jobs.¹⁴

The collapse of the New Deal coalition

While this great transformation was changing the character of the white working class, reducing the size and influence of the Democrats' traditional blue-collar constituencies, the evolution of postwar capitalism was creating new constituencies and movements with new demands. These new constituencies and movements wanted more out of the welfare state than steady economic growth, copious infrastructure spending, and the opportunity to raise a family in the traditional manner.

During the '60s, these new demands on the welfare state came to a head. Americans' concern about their quality of life overflowed from the two-car garage to clean air and water and safe automobiles; from higher wages to government-guaranteed health care in old age; and from access to jobs to equal opportunities for men and women and blacks and whites. Out of these concerns came the environmental, consumer, civil rights, and feminist movements of the '60s. Americans abandoned the older ideal of self-denial and the taboos that accompanied it, and they embraced a libertarian ethic of personal life. Women asserted their sexual independence through the use of birth control pills and exercising the right to have an abortion. Adolescents experimented with sex and courtship. Homosexuals "came out" and openly congregated in bars and neighborhoods.

One of the most far-reaching political effects of these changes was the civil rights movement and its demands for equality and economic progress for black America. Democratic progressives, both because of their traditional, if usually downplayed, antiracist ideology and their political relationship to the black community, had no choice but to respond to those demands, as Lyndon Johnson finally did in 1964 and 1965. The result was a great victory for social justice, but one that created huge political difficulties for the Democrats among their white working-class supporters. Kevin Phillips captured these developments well in his book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*:

The principal force which broke up the Democratic (New Deal) coalition is the Negro socioeconomic revolution and liberal Democratic ideological inability to cope with it. Democratic "Great Society" programs aligned that party with many Negro demands, but the party was unable to defuse the racial tension sundering the nation. The South, the West, and the Catholic sidewalks of New York were the focus points of conservative opposition to the welfare liberalism of the federal government; however, the general opposition ... came in large part from prospering Democrats who objected to Washington dissipating their tax dollars on programs which did them no good. The Democratic party fell victim to the ideological impetus of a liberalism which had carried it beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many ... to programs taxing the many on behalf of the few.¹⁵

But if race was the chief vehicle by which the New Deal coalition was torn apart, it was by no means the only one. White working-class voters also reacted poorly to the extremes with which the rest of the new social movements became identified. Feminism became identified with bra-burners, lesbians, and hostility to the nuclear family; the antiwar movement with appeasement of the Third World radicals and the Soviet Union; the environmental movement with a Luddite opposition to economic growth; and the move toward more personal freedom with a complete abdication of personal responsibility.

Thus the progressive mainstream that dominated the Democratic Party was confronted with a challenge. The uncomplicated New Deal commitments to government spending, economic regulation, and labor unions that had defined the party's progressivism for more than 30 years suddenly provided little guidance for dealing with an explosion of potential new constituencies for the party. Their demands for equality, and for a better, as opposed to merely richer, life were starting to redefine what progressivism meant and the Democrats had to struggle to catch up. Progressive action more and more seemed to be outside the party in radical organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society and in the new social movements.

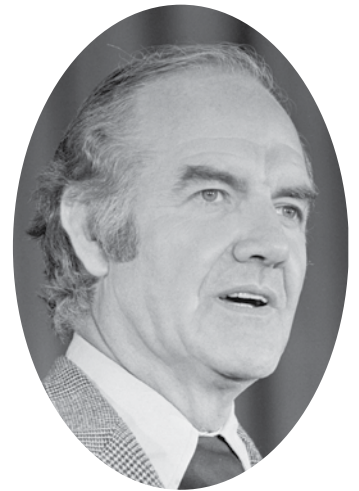
Progressive Democrat politicians initially responded to these changes in the fashion of politicians since time immemorial: They sought to co-opt these new movements by absorbing many of their demands, while holding onto the party's basic ideology and style of governing. This was the first step away from the standard New Deal model of progressivism. Progressive Democrats of the '60s didn't change their fundamental commitment to the New Deal welfare state, but grafted onto support for all the various new constituencies and their key demands. After Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the party moved over the next eight years to give the women's, antiwar, consumers' and environmental movements prominent places within the party. This reflected both the politician's standard interest in capturing the votes of new constituencies *and* the ongoing expansion in the definition of what it meant to be a Democrat, particularly a progressive one.

But there was no guarantee, of course, that gains among these new constituencies wouldn't be more than counterbalanced by losses among the Democrats' old constituency—the white working class—who had precious little interest in this expansion of what it meant to be a progressive and a Democrat. And indeed that turned out to be the case with the nomination and disastrous defeat of George McGovern—an enthusiastic advocate of this new approach—in 1972. McGovern's commitment to the traditional Democratic welfare state was unmistakable. But so was his commitment to all the various social movements and constituencies that were reshaping the party, whose demands were enshrined in McGovern's campaign platform. That made it easy for the Nixon campaign to typecast McGovern as the candidate of “acid, amnesty, and abortion.” The white working class reacted accordingly and gave Nixon overwhelming support at the polls, casting 70 percent of their votes for the Republican candidate.¹⁶

Just how far the Democratic Party fell in the white working class' eyes over this time period can be seen by comparing the average white working-class vote for the Democrats in 1960 and 1964 (55 percent) to their average vote for the Democrats in 1968 and 1972 (35 percent).¹⁷ That's a drop of 20 points. The Democrats were the party of the white working class no longer.

The Democrats were able to develop enough political momentum to retake the White House in 1976, with Jimmy Carter's narrow defeat of Gerald Ford as a result of the sharp economic recession and Nixon scandals of 1973 and 1974. But their political revival did not last long. Not only did the Carter administration fail to do much to defuse white working-class hostility to the new social movements, especially the black liberation movement, but economic events—namely the stagflation of the late 1970s—conspired to make that hostility even sharper. Though stagflation (combined inflation and unemployment with slow economic growth) first appeared during the 1973-1975 recession, it persisted during the Carter administration and was peaking on the eve of the 1980 election. As the economy slid once more into recession, the inflation rate in that year was 12.5 percent. Combined with an unemployment rate of 7.1 percent, it produced a “misery index” of nearly 20 percent.

The stagflation fed resentments about race, about high taxes for welfare (which were assumed to go primarily to minorities), and about affirmative action. But it also sowed doubts about Democrats' ability to manage the economy and made Republican and business explanations of stagflation—blaming it on government regulation, high taxes, and spending—more plausible. The white backlash and doubts about Democratic economic policies had helped to fuel a nationwide tax revolt in 1978. These factors reproduced the massive exodus in 1980 of white working-class voters from the Democratic tickets first seen in 1968 and 1972. Reagan averaged 61 percent support among the white working class in the 1980 and 1984 elections, compared to an average of 35 percent support for his Democratic opponents, Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale.¹⁸



George McGovern's was committed to all the various social movements and constituencies that were reshaping the Democratic party, whose demands were enshrined in his campaign platform.

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Conclusion

Democrats appeared powerless to stop this juggernaut, saddled as they were with a double-barreled progressivism that increasingly seemed like a dual liability. On the one hand they were committed to a model of the welfare state economy that no longer worked and, on the other, they were tied to a set of constituency groups whose priorities seemed alien to middle America. Especially after their preferred candidate, Walter Mondale, got blown away in the 1984 election, losing every state but Minnesota and the District of Columbia, it seemed to many progressives that their cause was hopeless.

It would take a quarter of a century from that low point for progressives to rise again to a position of strength. Now, with Barack Obama in office, powered by a new coalition quite different from the New Deal coalition that midcentury progressives relied on, progressives are once again in a position to change American society in big ways. We will take up the story of how progressives rebuilt their political strength since 1984 in another installment of the Progressive Tradition series.

Endnotes

- 1 Authors' analysis of data in Bureau of the Census, "Historical Statistics of the United State, Colonial Times to 1970," Series A 6-8, series A 57-72.
- 2 Data in this paragraph from Jeff Madrick, *The End of Affluence: The Causes and Consequences of America's Economic Dilemma* (New York: Random, 1995), p. 13-14, 33, 44-45.
- 3 Data in this paragraph from Benjamin Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York: Vintage, 2005), p. 117.
- 4 Ibid, p. 116.
- 5 James Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1983), p. 163.
- 6 Data in this paragraph from Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, p. 132.
- 7 James Chace, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs—The Election That Changed the Country* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p.167.
- 8 Data in the paragraph from Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, p. 145-147.
- 9 Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, p. 189-190.
- 10 Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1940-2000 Census data and 2007 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement education data.
- 11 Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1940 Census data and 2006 American Community Survey occupation data. Occupational categories used by the government have shifted between 1940 and 2007, but at this very broad level of occupational aggregation the effects on trend should be small.
- 12 Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1947 and 2008 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data.
- 13 All data in this paragraph from John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002).
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- 15 Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New York: Arlington House, 1969).
- 16 Teixeira and Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority*, p. 6.
- 17 Ibid., p. 32
- 18 Ibid.

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