



1 The Gilded Age and Progressive Reform

Objectives

1. Identify the problems in American politics during the Gilded Age.
2. Describe the political reforms the Progressives supported.
3. Explain how journalists contributed to reform efforts.

Main Idea

Many Americans sought to fight corruption by ending the spoils system and controlling big business.

Vocabulary Builder

enrich (ehn RIHCH) *v.* to make wealthy; to increase in quality or wealth

Prepare to Read

Reading Skill

Place Events in a Matrix of Time and Place As you read this textbook, notice that chapters often cover overlapping time periods. History is complex and involves many continuing issues. To gain a better understanding of a period, place events from one chapter in the context of other events from the same time period. Think back to other chapters and to your own knowledge for these connections.

Vocabulary Builder

High-Use Words

enrich, p. 644

exert, p. 645

Key Terms

civil service, p. 645

primary, p. 646

recall, p. 647

initiative, p. 647

referendum, p. 647

graduated income tax, p. 647

muckraker, p. 648

★ **Background Knowledge** As you have read, by the late 1800s giant corporations controlled much of American business. In this section, you will learn why many Americans began to demand that the government control the power of these huge trusts and monopolies.

Reform in the Gilded Age

The period after the Civil War came to be known as the Gilded Age. *Gilded* means “coated with a thin layer of gold paint.” It suggests falseness beneath surface glitter. Some Americans worried that the glitter of American society was hiding serious problems. The Gilded Age lasted from the 1870s through the 1890s.

Two concerns shaped politics during the Gilded Age. Many Americans feared that industrialists and other wealthy men were **enriching** themselves at the expense of the public. The other worry was **corruption**, or **dishonesty** in government. Bribery and voter fraud appeared to be widespread.

Taming the Spoils System Critics said a key source of corruption was the spoils system, the practice of rewarding political supporters with government jobs. The spoils system had grown since the Age of Jackson. Whenever a new President took office, job seekers swarmed to Washington, demanding rewards for their political support.

In 1881, James Garfield became President. He was soon swamped with people seeking jobs. Four months later, Garfield was shot by a disappointed office seeker. He died two months later. The assassination sparked new efforts to end the spoils system.

Vice President Chester A. Arthur succeeded Garfield. Arthur, a New York politician, owed his own rise to the spoils system. Yet, he worked with Congress to reform how people got government jobs.

In 1883, Arthur signed the Pendleton Act. It created the Civil Service Commission. The civil service is a system that includes most government jobs, except elected positions, the judiciary, and the military. The aim of the Civil Service Commission was to fill jobs on the basis of merit. Jobs went to those with the highest scores on civil service examinations. At first, the Commission controlled only a few jobs. Over time, however, the civil service grew to include more jobs.

Controlling Big Business In the late 1800s, big business exerted a strong influence over politics. Railroad owners and industrialists bribed members of Congress in order to secure their votes. Outraged by such actions, many Americans demanded that something be done to limit the power of railroads and monopolies.

Under the Constitution, the federal government has the power to regulate interstate commerce, or trade that crosses state lines. In 1887, President Grover Cleveland signed the Interstate Commerce Act. It forbade practices such as rebates. It also set up the Interstate Commerce Commission to oversee railroads.

Vocabulary Builder

exert (ehks ZERT) *v.* to use; to put into action

The Problem of Corruption



The Capitol building is where Congress meets.

This hand is coming out of a window labeled "Trusts."

Reading Political Cartoons

Skills Activity

In many cities, illegal businesses often paid "protection" to police in order to avoid arrest. This 1894 cartoon compares this practice to corruption in the federal government.

- Interpret Cartoons** Who is the man on the right? What is he getting from the man in the window?
- Draw Inferences** What do you think the giver expects in return?



Thomas Nast cartoon of Boss Tweed

Main Idea

Political reformers called Progressives worked to give more power to voters and expose social problems.

President Benjamin Harrison signed the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890. It prohibited businesses from trying to limit or destroy competition. The law sounded tough but proved difficult to enforce. Judges sympathetic to business ruled in favor of trusts. Instead of regulating trusts, the Sherman Act was used to limit the power of labor unions. The courts said strikes blocked free trade and thus threatened competition.

Corruption in the Cities Corruption was a particularly serious problem in city governments. As cities grew, they needed to expand services such as sewers, garbage collection, and roads. Often, politicians accepted money to award these jobs to friends. As a result, corruption became a way of life.

In many cities, powerful politicians called bosses controlled work done locally and demanded payoffs from businesses. City bosses were popular with the poor, especially immigrants. The bosses handed out turkeys at Thanksgiving and extra coal in winter. Often, they provided jobs. In return, the poor voted for the boss or his chosen candidate.

William Tweed, commonly known as Boss Tweed, carried corruption to new extremes. During the 1860s and 1870s, he cheated New York City out of more than \$100 million. Journalists exposed Tweed's crimes. Cartoonist Thomas Nast pictured Tweed as a greedy giant and as a vulture feeding on the city. Faced with prison, Tweed fled to Spain. There, local police arrested him when they recognized him from Nast's cartoons. Still, when Tweed died in jail in 1878, thousands of poor New Yorkers mourned for him.

Checkpoint How did the civil service system limit corruption?

Progressives and Political Reform

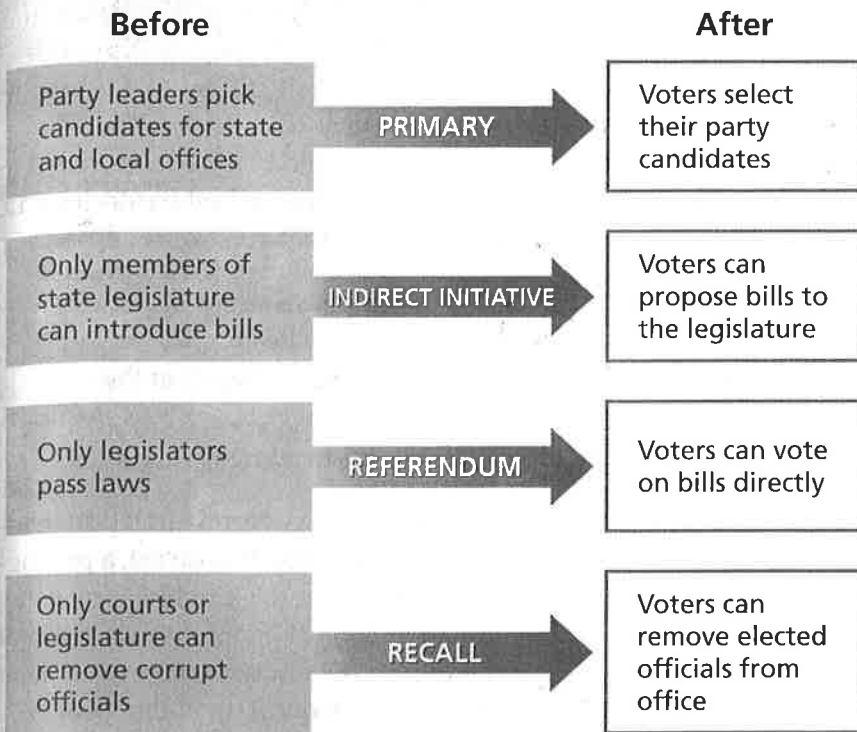
Opposition to corruption led to the rise of the Progressive movement. The Progressives were a diverse group of reformers united by a belief in the public interest, or the good of all the people. The public interest, they said, must not be sacrificed to the greed of a few huge trusts and city bosses.

The Wisconsin Idea Wisconsin was one of the first states to adopt Progressive reforms. Wisconsin governor Robert La Follette, known as Battling Bob, introduced various Progressive reforms that became known as the Wisconsin Idea.

La Follette opposed political bosses. He appointed commissions of experts to solve problems. For example, his railroad commission recommended lowering railroad rates. As rates decreased, rail traffic increased, which helped both railroad owners and customers...

Since the Age of Jackson, party leaders had picked candidates for local and state offices. In 1903, Wisconsin was the first state to adopt a primary run by state government officials. A **primary** is an election in which voters, rather than party leaders, choose their party's candidate. By 1917, all but four states had followed Wisconsin's lead.

Progressive Political Reforms



Reading Charts

Skills Activity

During the Progressive Era, reforms put more power in the hands of voters.

- Read a Chart** What was the recall? Which reform allowed voters to propose laws?
- Identify Benefits** What were the benefits of the primary system?
- Draw Conclusions** Which of these reforms would you say is most important? Why?

More Power to Voters Some states instituted reforms to put more power in the hands of voters. One such reform was the **recall**, a process by which people may vote to remove an elected official from office. The recall made it easier to get rid of corrupt officials.

Other reforms gave voters a direct say in the lawmaking process. The **initiative** is a process that allows voters to put a bill before a state legislature. In order to propose an initiative, voters must collect a certain number of signatures on a petition. The **referendum** is a way for people to vote directly on a proposed new law.

Two Constitutional Amendments Many Progressive reformers backed a **graduated income tax**, a method of taxation that taxes people at different rates depending on income. The wealthy pay taxes at a higher rate than the poor or the middle class. When the Supreme Court ruled that a federal income tax was unconstitutional, Progressives called for a constitutional amendment. The Sixteenth Amendment, which gave Congress the power to pass an income tax, was ratified in 1913.

Since 1789, United States senators had been elected by state legislatures. Powerful interest groups often bribed lawmakers to vote for certain candidates. Progressives wanted to end this abuse by having people vote for senators directly. The Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, required the direct election of senators.

Checkpoint What reforms put more power in the hands of voters?



Place Events in a Matrix of Time and Place

In the 1890s, the Populists had also supported an income tax. How did the roots of Populism differ from the roots of Progressivism?

Main Idea

By exposing corruption and other problems, journalists won public support for Progressive reform.

The Muckrakers

The press played an important role in exposing corruption and other problems. President Theodore Roosevelt compared reporters who uncovered problems to men who raked up dirt, or muck, in stables. **Muckraker** became a term for a crusading journalist.

Some muckrakers targeted big business. Ida Tarbell's work led to demands for more controls on trusts. She accused oil baron John D. Rockefeller of unfair business methods. Tarbell wrote:

“Every great campaign against rival interests which the Standard Oil Company has carried on has been inaugurated . . . to build up and sustain a monopoly in the oil industry.”

—Ida M. Tarbell, *History of the Standard Oil Company*

Others described how corruption in city government led to inadequate fire, police, and sanitation services. Jacob Riis (REES), a photographer and writer, provided shocking images of slum life.

In 1906, Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* told grisly details about the meatpacking industry. Sinclair described how packers used meat from sick animals and how rats often got ground up in the meat.

Checkpoint How did muckrakers stir public opinion?

★ **Looking Back and Ahead** The Progressive movement began at local and state levels. In the next section, you will see how three Presidents brought Progressive ideas into the White House.

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Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) Recall** How was the spoils system reformed during the Gilded Age?
(b) Analyze Cause and Effect What abuses do you think were occurring under the spoils system that made reform necessary?
- (a) Identify** Who were some of the principal muckrakers during the Progressive Era, and what did each try to do?
(b) Link Past and Present What impact do you think their efforts had on life in the United States today?

Reading Skill

- 3. Place Events in a Matrix of Time and Place** Ida Tarbell wrote muckraking articles about the Standard Oil Company. Why did she think this was necessary? How had Standard Oil's business practices changed American industry? Think back to the previous chapter to answer these questions.

Vocabulary Builder

Answer the following questions in complete sentences that show your understanding of the key terms.

- 4.** Which jobs are civil service positions?

- 5.** What happens in a primary election?
- 6.** What did muckrakers try to do?
- 7.** What happens in a successful referendum?
- 8.** How are tax rates structured under the graduated income tax?

Writing

- 9.** Write a statement supporting the work of the muckrakers. Then, write a statement opposing their work. For each statement, write one question to ask the muckrakers about their methods and their goals.