

## Reforms Passed During the Progressive Era

The Progressive Era, the period from 1890 to 1920, was marked by a movement of reformers from diverse political backgrounds who joined together to bring about change in American society. These reformers worked to change the poverty, political corruption, exploitative business practices, labor unrest, environmental damage, and weaknesses in the democratic system apparent in American society at the time. Some reformers pushed for political and labor reforms, such as women's suffrage, environmental protection, worker's rights, and child labor laws. Others sought government regulation of industry to end the abuses of power, such as business monopolies, unfair privilege, and corruption. Still others advocated a radical redistribution of wealth and power, or struggle against racism.

Many businesspeople resisted the reformers and argued against a strong government role in business and societal issues. These industrialists believed that unregulated competition brought out the best in people and strengthened the country. They opposed governmental action except where it might benefit their own interests. Despite their arguments, however, the government became much more active during the Progressive Era. Reform laws were passed in six major areas: labor rights, consumer protection, political reform, environmental regulation, regulation of industry, and redistribution of wealth.

**Labor Rights** During the Progressive Era, several laws were passed that supported workers' rights. Many states passed laws limiting the workday to eight hours. By 1912 three fourths of all states had passed laws banning child labor. State laws also were passed to establish minimum wages for women, who were often paid less than their male counterparts performing the same or similar jobs. Workers' compensation laws were passed that forced employers to pay employees who were injured or contracted a disease because of their jobs.

**Consumer Protection** In response to "muckrakers'" reports, the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act were passed in 1906. These laws gave federal officials the right to inspect meat and prohibited the sale of impure drugs, foods, and liquors.

**Political Reform** Reforms to the democratic process were far-reaching and dramatic. In many cities, corrupt city bosses and political machines were replaced by appointed commissioners and city managers. Many states passed laws allowing citizens to propose new laws through initiatives, strike down laws through referendums, and remove politicians from office through recall. In 1917 the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution required that U.S. senators be directly elected by the populace rather than selected by (often corrupt) state legislatures. In 1920 women gained the right to vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

**Environmental Regulation** Under President Theodore Roosevelt's leadership the federal government designated 140 million acres, an area equal to France and Great Britain combined, as national forest. Within the national forests the federal government regulated the use of all natural resources. Roosevelt also took steps to eliminate the illegal use of public lands by lumber companies and cattle ranchers, promoted the irrigation of western lands, and helped establish five new national parks.

**Regulation of Industry** The Progressive Era saw new precedents in government regulation of business and industry. Using newly passed antitrust legislation, such as the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890) and the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914), the federal government sued large corporations involved in monopolies and prohibited sales of corporations' stock when their sale might lead to a monopoly. Local and state governments and the Interstate Commerce Commission began to regulate railroad and utility rates across the country. Under the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, the federal government began to regulate the entire banking system to control the use of deposits and protect depositors.

**Redistribution of Wealth** An important step in the redistribution of wealth came in 1913 with the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which established an income tax. This amendment required that the wealthy pay taxes on their income for the first time.

While the reforms in all of these areas improved the lives of many Americans, they did not go as far as some reformers wished. Government control over businesses remained limited, and many of the problems afflicting racial minorities were not addressed. Still, the Progressive Era saw some of the most wide-ranging reforms in U.S. history.