

# THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

**Gregory M. Browne, Ph.D.**

The Progressive Era (roughly, 1901-1921) was the beginning, in the United States, of the growth in the role of government in the 20th-century. During this era, and its prelude (1887-1901), the American people saw the beginnings of federal regulation of business through the regulatory commissions and antitrust laws, the income tax system that we have today, federal food and drug regulation, the Federal Reserve Board, and government conservation.

This period was also the beginning of many things we may not associate with the Progressive Era: zoning, federal regulation of alcohol, immigration restriction, involvement in an overseas war (World War I), the drafting of men to be sent overseas, and more. The enactment of these policies in the same period is not an accident: all of them increased the role of government in society, and were generally intended to do so, as the outcome of a rise of statist political philosophies across the Western World: that is, those that fostered, nourished, and contributed to the growth of what has become a centralized, bureaucratically-administered state. The ideas embodied in these philosophies created intellectual and mass movements favoring the growth of the state, expansion of state power, and dependency on state-run programs. Statist political ideas and movements, especially those of the egalitarian variety of statism, gathered momentum in the period 1870-1900, became strongest in the period from 1900 to at least World War I, and challenged the traditional notions of civil society and personal life, particularly the Founders' doctrine of limited government, and replaced traditional hierarchies with new ones. These policies, movements and ideas, insofar as they existed in the United States, will be the object of study in this course.

Of those periods in U.S. politics in which the growth of centralized state functions occurred, the Progressive Era was the first in which state power was increased for allegedly egalitarian reasons. Whether these policies had egalitarian effects, and whether they were truly enacted for egalitarian purposes, and how egalitarian the genuinely egalitarian movements of this era were, are things that have been subject to much questioning, for some have seen the Progressive movement as a movement to restrain big business, while others have seen the legislation of this era as designed by business to serve its own interest. We shall deal extensively with these questions, delving as best we can into the histories of this era, histories written, for the most part, by scholars for whom the Progressive Era is seen as a positive good, and not the beginning of the end of American liberty.

Of course, it may turn out that the answers to the questions are different for different sections of the Progressive movement. So we shall look at various types of Progressives and of the growth of Progressive ideology and its opposition to the philosophy of limited government of the Founders of the Constitution of the United States. For surely, the revolution that the Founders of the United States carried out was negated on almost every count by the revolutionaries of the Progressive Era. In that sense, the Progressive Era constituted the first true revolution on American soil.

Thus we shall examine these policies and the ideas behind them, with special attention to the question of egalitarianism and to types of Progressivism, and contrast them to the philosophy of limited government of the Founders. In our examination, we do not start with the assumption that any of these policies of the Progressive Era are good, and so we shall subject them to a more critical scrutiny than they get in most academic settings (though many authors who do assume these policies are good will have a chance to be heard, because their works shall be among those we consult).

**TEXTS:** Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History* (The Free Press, a division of McMillan, 1963)

Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Harper Torchbooks: The University Library, from Harper and Row, 1954)

George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (Harper Torchbooks: The University Library, from Harper and Row, 1958)

Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *Progressivism in America* (New Viewpoints, a division of Franklin Watts, Inc., 1974)

A coursepack

## **OUTLINE OF TOPICS**

### **Week 1: Introduction**

#### **Overview of Events**

### **Week 2: Background: Intellectual**

#### **Background: Political: The 19th Century** (briefly)

#### **Prelude: 1887-1901**

Readings: Ekirch, 19-33; Mowry, 16-38, 85-105; Thomas Gilligan, W. Marshall and B. Weingast, "Regulation and the Theory of Economic Choice: the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887"; Christopher W. Grandy, "Original Intent and the Sherman Antitrust Act"; Donald J. Boudreaux, Thomas J. DiLorenzo and Steven Parker, "The Origins of Antitrust: An Empirical Study"

### **Week 3: The Administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, through 1906:**

Regulation of Business, First Term: Conservation, Antitrust prosecutions

The Election of 1904

Regulation of Business, Second Term: the Hepburn railroad act, the Pure Food and Drug Act, further conservation and antitrust issues

Labor Issues

Later Years, 1906-8

Conservatives in the Roosevelt Years

Readings: Mowry, p. 106-42, 165-80, 197-209; Kolko, 57-112; Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 1-4, 27-48; George Bittlingmayer, "The Stock Market and Early Antitrust Enforcement"; Gabriel Kolko, *Railroads and Regulation*, 1-7, 127-54, 179-95

**Week 4: The Administration of Theodore Roosevelt, 1906-8:  
The Election of 1908**

**The Administration of William Howard Taft, through 1910**

Tariff and Income Tax, 1909-11

Regulation of Business, 1909-11: the Ballinger-Pinchot affair,  
the Mann-Elkins act

Postal Savings Bank

1910: Punishing the insurgents, Roosevelt returns, the election

Consumer and Labor Issues

Conservatives in the Taft Years

Readings: Roosevelt: Mowry, 209-25; Kolko, 113-39

The Election: Mowry, 226-31

Taft: Mowry, 231-73; Kolko, 159-81

**Week 5: The Administration of William Howard Taft, 1910-3**

Tariff, 1911-13: Canadian Reciprocity

Regulation of Business: Antitrust prosecutions

**Political Process Issues**

Readings: Taft: James C. German, Jr., *The Taft Administration and the Sherman Antitrust Act*,  
22-36; Mowry, 282-95,

Political Process Issues: Ekirch, 106-18; Mowry, 59-64, 67-71, 264-5

**Week 6: The Election of 1912**

**The First Administration of Woodrow Wilson, 1913-1914:**

Regulation of Business and Antitrust: the Clayton Antitrust and  
Federal Trade Commission acts

Conservatives, 1913-4

Readings: The Election: Link, 1-24, Kolko, 90-216

Wilson Administration: Link, 66-76, 255-78; Kolko, 90-216; Alan L. Seltzer,

“Woodrow Wilson as Corporate Liberal: Toward a Reconstruction of Left Revisionist  
Historiography”; Robert H. Wiebe, “Business Disunity and the Progressive

Movement, 1901-14”; Robert Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform*, 35-40, 154

**Week 7: The First Administration of Woodrow Wilson, 1913-1914 (continued):**

Banking Issues: The Federal Reserve

Tariff

**Drug and Alcohol Issues**

**Racial and Ethnic Issues**

Readings: Wilson Administration: Link, 25-53,; Kolko, 217-54

Drug and Alcohol Issues: Ekirch 121-3; Mowry, 58-64

Racial and Ethnic Issues: Ekirch, 83-5; Link, 60-1, 63-5, 84-7

**Week 8: The First Administration of Woodrow Wilson, 1914-16: Domestic policy**

Income Tax

Rural Issues

Labor and Social Welfare Issues

**Foreign Policy, 1901-1916**

**The Election of 1916**

Readings: Wilson Administration: Link, 223-30; Link, 56-9; Ekirch, 68-83, 85-9, 118-21;  
Mowry, 65-67, 83-4; Link, 59-63; Richard Abrams, "Woodrow Wilson and Southern  
Congressman, 1913-16";

Foreign Policy: Mowry, 143-64, 181-96, 275-82; Link, 81-223, 81-2; 84-7, 93-104,  
150-73, 174-223

The Election: Link, 230-51

**Week 9: The Second Administration of Woodrow Wilson, 1916-18:**

The Final Steps to War

War and the Growth of Government

Conservatives, 1914-21

Readings: Final Steps to War: Link, 174-223, 252-82

War and the Growth of Government: Ekirch, 260-76

**Week 10: The Aftermath, 1918-21**

Reading: G. Cullom Davis, "The Transformation of the Federal Trade Commission"