The Populist/Progressive Era

1880 - 1918
Context for Change

- Urbanization, industrialization and immigration were reshaping American society after Reconstruction.
- In spite of these changes, many Americans distrusted calls for “drastic” changes as they were often lumped together with calls for racial, gender, and social equality.
- Americans who were content to accept 19th century society, found themselves under siege.
- Eventually, most people were forced to acknowledge that the “new” America required change.
Who were the Populists?

- **Origins of Populism**
  - Roots of Populism can be traced to the Granger movement of the 1870s
    - Farmers hurt by declining crop prices and the devaluation of currency.
    - Farmers hurt by protective tariffs in manufacturing and natural monopolies of railroads
  - Generally, the Populists had a broader agenda and a more insistent manner of advancing it
  - Populists were a political party that had tremendous success in the west (Kansas)
  - Populists were generally rural Americans
Who were the Populists?

- Bi-Metallism
  - Coinage of silver dominated discussion of monetary policy
  - The U.S. traditionally had a bi-metallic standard
  - Gov’t set ratios of silver to gold, correlated to market value of the metals
  - A minimal amount of silver was minted in the 1860’s and gold became the standard backing of U.S. currency
  - When an abundance of silver was reintroduced (Sherman Silver Purchase Act) the price of silver was further driven down
  - Farmers demanded a return to the coinage of silver at pre 1873 ratios to help alleviate debt issues
  - Became the central issue of the 1896 presidential campaign
Who were the Populists?

- Populists’ ideas
  - Women’s suffrage
  - Direct election of Senators
  - Constitutional amendment authorizing a federal income tax
  - Campaigns against monopolies and trusts
  - Alerting the American people to abuses of an unregulated economy

- The successes of the Progressives would have been impossible without the Populists
Who were the Populists?

- Election of 1896
  - Candidates:
    - William McKinley:
      - Republican
      - Fiscal conservative
      - Gold standard
    - William Jennings Bryan:
      - Democrat/Populist
      - Fiscally liberal
      - Pro-Silver
  - Issues:
    - Bi-Metallism
    - Class struggles
    - Party loyalties were split by the currency issue
Origins of Progressivism

- **Attitudes and Motives**
  - Who were the Progressives?
    - Unlike Populists, Progressives were generally from the urban middle-class
    - Progressives could be from either of the two major political parties
  - What was the Progressive philosophy?
    - Generally shared commitment to democratic values and belief that honest government could improve the human condition
Origins of Progressivism

- The Muckrakers
  - Origins
    - Name attributed to Theodore Roosevelt
    - Writers specializing in stories that uncovered the “dirty realities” of politics were referred to as muckrakers
  - Magazines
    - *McClure’s Magazine, Collier’s and Cosmopolitan* competed fiercely by running a series of muckraking articles
    - They combined careful research with sensationalism which became the standard for muckraking articles
Origins of Progressivism

- **The Muckrakers**
  - **Books**
    - The most popular muckraking series were collected and sold as best-selling books
      - *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) – Jacob Riis
      - *The Shame on the Cities* (1904) – Lincoln Steffens
      - The Jungle (1906) – Upton Sinclair

- Another Famous Muckraker
  - Ida Tarbell – exposed the shady practices of Standard Oil Co.

- Muckraking had a lasting effect on the Progressive era
  - Exposed inequities, educated the public and prepared the way for corrective action
Political Reforms in Cities and States

- **Voter participation**
  - Australian ballot – the secret ballot
    - Ensures privacy of the vote
    - Adopted by all states by 1910
  - Direct primaries
    - An intra-party election to choose a candidate
    - Allowed the people to choose candidates for office rather than party bosses
  - Direct election of senators
    - Senators usually chosen by state legislatures
    - Senate had become a “millionaire’s club” dominated by big business
Political Reforms in Cities and States

- Initiative, referendum and recall
  - All tools used to give the people more voice in government
  - Initiative – voters could compel the legislature to consider a bill
  - Referendum - voters could vote on proposed laws printed on their ballots
  - Recall – enabled voters to remove a corrupt or unsatisfactory politician from office

- Social Welfare
  - Social justice programs were started to help improve life particularly in the cities
    - Jane Addams – Hull House
Political Reform in the Nation

- Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal
  - Trust-busting
    - Roosevelt becomes first president to actively enforce Sherman Anti-trust Act
    - Bad trusts vs. good trusts
      - Bad trusts harmed the public and stifled competition
      - Good trusts dominated a market through efficiency and low prices
  - Railroad regulation
    - Roosevelt persuaded Congress to pass two laws to strengthen the ICC
      - Elkins Act (1903) – gave greater authority to stop railroads from giving rebates to favored customers
      - Hepburn Act (1906) – Gave ICC power to fix “just and reasonable” rates for railroads
Political Reform in the Nation

- Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal
  - Consumer protection
    - Public outcry arose following publication of *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair
    - Congress passes two regulatory laws
      - *Pure Food and Drug Act* - forbade manufacture, sale and transportation of mislabeled food and drugs
      - *Meat Inspection Act* – required that federal inspectors visit meatpacking plants to ensure they met minimum standards of sanitation
  - Conservation
    - Roosevelt’s life had made him an ardent champion of wilderness and outdoor life
    - Most original and lasting contribution to domestic policy may have been his efforts to protect the nation’s natural resources
Political Reform in the Nation

- Taft’s Presidency
  - More trust-busting and conservation
    - Taft continues Roosevelt’s Progressive policies
      - Taft orders the prosecution of twice as many antitrust cases as Roosevelt
      - Established Bureau of Mines and included large tracts of Appalachian Mountains in national forest systems
    - Taft supports two other important pieces of Progressive legislation
      - *Mann-Elkins Act* (1910) – authorizes ICC suspend new railroad rates and oversee telephone, telegraph and cable companies
      - Sixteenth Amendment – authorized the U.S. government to collect an income tax
Political Reform in the Nation

- Split in the Republican party
- Progressives in the Republican party felt that Taft hadn’t gone far enough
- Party became split between Conservative faction loyal to Taft and Progressive faction
Political Reform in the Nation

- Rise of the Socialist Party
  - Socialist Party of America advocated more radical reforms than the Progressives favored
  - Eugene V. Debs
    - One of the party founders was a 5 time presidential candidate
    - An outspoken critic of business and a champion of labor
  - Influence
    - Progressives generally wanted to distance themselves from the Socialists who were seen as too radical
    - Some Socialist ideas were eventually adopted
      - Public ownership of utilities
      - The 8 – hour workday
      - Pension for employees
Political Reform in the Nation

The Election of 1912

Candidates

- Republican renominated William Howard Taft
- Disaffected Progressives abandoned Republican party and nominated Theodore Roosevelt (Bull Moose)
- Socialist Party candidate was Eugene V. Debs
- Democrats nominate governor of New Jersey Woodrow Wilson

Campaign
The Election of 1912

- Taft was very unpopular and Debs considered too radical
- Race came down to Roosevelt and Wilson
  - Roosevelt called for a New Nationalism – more government regulation of business and unions, women’s suffrage and more social welfare programs
  - Wilson pledged a New Freedom which would limit both big business and big government, reform to end corruption and revive competition by supporting small business
- Results
  - With Republican split, Wilson easily wins election
  - Democrats regained control of Congress
  - Progressive party will not last but ideas become instrumental in the future
Political Reform in the Nation

- Woodrow Wilson’s Progressive Program
  - Tariff reduction
    - Within first days of Presidency, Wilson called a special session of Congress to lower tariffs
    - Passage of the *Underwood Tariff Act* (1913) substantially lowered tariffs for the first time in 50 years; however also included a graduated income tax (of 1 – 6 %) to offset reduced tariff revenues
  - Banking reform
    - Wilson was convinced that gold standard was too inflexible
    - Went to Congress to propose a Federal Reserve Banking system
    - Congress passed *Federal Reserve Act* (1914)
Political Reform in the Nation

- Woodrow Wilson’s Progressive Program
  - Business regulation
    - Clayton Antitrust Act
      - Strengthened provisions of Sherman Antitrust Act
      - Contained a clause exempting labor union from being considered trusts
    - Federal Trade Commission
      - Created a regulatory agency empowered to investigate and take action against any “unfair trade practice” in every industry except banking and transportation
  - Other reforms
    - Federal Farm Loan Act – created 12 federal farm loan banks to provide loans at low interest
    - Child Labor Act – prohibited the shipment in interstate commerce of goods manufactured using labor by children under 14 years of age
      - Supreme Court did find this law unconstitutional in 1918 Hammer v. Dagenhart
Black Americans in the Progressive Era

- The Impact of *Plessy v. Ferguson*
  - Leaders ignored plight of black Americans during the Progressive era
  - Status of black American had been steadily declining since the end of Reconstruction
  - *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) – Court declares that “separate but equal” was okay
  - Progressive era coincides with thousands of lynchings
  - Progressives failed to take action for two reasons
    - They shared general prejudices of the times
    - They considered other reforms more important because they benefited all of society not just one group
Black Americans in the Progressive Era

- Two approaches to how best to attain black rights
  - Booker T. Washington
    - Stated that black Americans needed to improve their educational and economic standing before achieving political and social equality
  - W.E.B. Du Bois
    - Argued that political and social rights were a prerequisite for economic independence

- Urban Migration
  - At the end of the 19th century, 9 out of 10 black Americans lived in the South
  - A huge migration to the North took place between 1910 and 1930
  - Reasons for the change
    - Deteriorating race relations in the South
    - Destruction of cotton crops by boll weevils
    - Greater job opportunities created by WWI
Black Americans in the Progressive Era

- Civil Rights organizations
  - Increased racial discrimination caused a proliferation of civil rights organization to be founded in the early 20th century
    - 1905 – Niagara Movement founded by DuBois and a group of black intellectuals
    - 1908 – NAACP founded by DuBois – 100,000 members by 1920
    - 1911 National Urban League founded to help blacks migrating to northern cities
Women, Suffrage, and the Progressive Movement

- The campaign for women’s suffrage
  - Although many younger Progressive men were generally more liberal towards the women’s suffrage movement the “old guard” generally was not.
  - President Wilson refused to support the suffragists’ call for national amendment until late in his term
  - Carrie Chapman Catt – leader of NAWSA called for a women’s right to vote; at first worked at state level, later changed to national level
  - Militant suffragists
    - Approach using mass pickets, parades and hunger strikes to achieve the vote
    - Led by Alice Paul they broke away from NAWSA to sin support of Congress and president
  - Nineteenth Amendment (1920) –
    - Effort of women on the home front during WWI finally convinced Congress and President Wilson to adopt a women’s suffrage amendment
    - Catt organized the League of Women Voters to help women register to vote and keep the informed