his living rolling cigars; at 14 he joined the Cigar Makers International Union.

The London-born Gompers had a command of English not shared by many European immigrants in this period. With his fluency and intelligence, he became a spokesman for the cause of working men, rising quickly into leadership roles in the union movement. He proved himself an able administrator and, in 1886, helped to found and became president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Gompers called his approach to labor organizing a “pure and simple” trade unionism. “Our mission,” he explained, “has been the protection of the wage-worker...; to increase his wages; to cut hours off the long workday, which was killing him; to improve the safety and the sanitary conditions of the workshop; to free him from the tyrannies, petty or otherwise, which served to make his existence a slavery.” To Gompers, strong, well-financed trade unions were the key to the humane conduct of industry and the foundation of a society in which all classes could lead satisfying lives. He also believed that an educated working class, whose members enjoyed a comfortable standard of living, was the basis for a fair and democratic society.

Outside of the labor movement, conservative Americans viewed Gompers as a dangerous foreign-born radical and an enemy of private property. Gompers also had opponents inside the labor movement. Some of these thought the AFL should not have limited its membership to skilled workers, thereby leaving the great mass of workers without union organization or protection. They rightly accused Gompers of elitism, saying he cared only for the skilled male workers who occupied the top levels of the working class. More radical labor organizers promoted the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an organization that differed from the AFL in that it promised membership to all workers in all industries, regardless of race, gender, or level of skill.

Nevertheless, many American political and social leaders respected Gompers’s courage and integrity. Throughout his long career, he gave a voice and dignity to struggling members of America’s working class.

SEE ALSO
American Federation of Labor; Industrial Workers of the World; Labor; Labor union movement

FURTHER READING


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**Government reform**

MANY PROGRESSIVES pursued government reform because they hoped it would curb the power of political party bosses. Presiding over political party “machines,” unofficial organizations designed to keep political parties in
power, these bosses were primarily interested in winning the next election. To achieve that end, they rewarded loyal voters with government jobs, many of which offered good salaries and pensions as well as access to payoffs and other kinds of graft. Progressives objected to this spoils system, so called from the saying of an early 19th-century New York politician, Senator William Learned Marcy, “To the victor belong the spoils.” They believed that the spoils system entrusted government to individuals who had no interest in making government either efficient or responsible. Critics of government reformers referred to them derisively as “goo-goos,” a term that stood for “good government” men. Convinced they could make government honest, government reformers remained undeterred.

Government reformers aimed first at setting up a merit-based civil service to regularize the hiring of government employees who were neither elected officials nor members of the military. Administered by an impartial civil service commission, the system would require a prospective employee to take a competitive examination before being hired for a government job, such as building inspector or tax collector. In 1883, Congress passed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, which established a bipartisan Civil Service Commission to oversee a merit system for federal offices with more than 50 employees. The system expanded during the following decades, so that by the 1920s, 80 percent of federal employment (560,000 employees in 1922) operated under a merit system. Moreover, most states and cities also set up civil service commissions. The movement for civil service reform transformed government bureaucracies across the country.

Government reformers also pursued electoral reforms. For some reformers, the goal was more “direct democracy,” that is, more opportunities for ordinary citizens to play a direct role in electing their representatives and influencing political decisions. For others, the goal was a smaller, better informed electorate. Convinced that political machines manipulated poorly educated minority and foreign-born voters, these reformers wanted to restrict the electorate to only “qualified” voters. Thus electoral reform had as much potential for limiting democracy as for expanding it.

The movement for voters to elect all U.S. senators directly, instead of state legislatures choosing their senators, held a central place in electoral reform. Some states had adopted this change as early as 1828, but the U.S. Senate did not act until 1911 when it approved the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, calling for direct election of senators in all states. At the same time, other reformers pursued direct primary elections. Pioneered in Wisconsin by Governor Robert M. La Follette, the direct primary allowed voters, rather than party officials, to choose nominees for office. By 1916, all but three states had a direct primary.

Other electoral reforms included the introduction of the Australian bal-
lot, developed in Australia in the 1850s and adopted in Great Britain and Canada. This government-printed ballot replaced the old system, in which political parties printed their own ballots. In addition, voters marked Australian ballots secretly in a private voting booth. The Australian ballot eliminated illiterate voters, however, for it listed candidates by name instead of party symbol. Ninety percent of the states adopted the Australian ballot by 1896.

Progressives in states and municipalities also pursued four other electoral reforms: initiative, referendum, recall, and proportional representation. An initiative permits a percentage of voters to propose a law and send it directly to the people for ratification. A referendum allows voters to accept or reject laws approved by the legislature. A recall allows a percentage of registered voters to demand a special election to remove an official. And proportional representation awards legislative seats to political parties in proportion to the size of the vote they received. South Dakota’s 1898 constitution was the first to authorize initiative; 20 other states followed. After Los Angeles adopted recall in 1903, almost a dozen states and more than a thousand municipalities followed. Starting in 1915, 22 cities adopted proportional representation, but most later repealed it. Although popular in European countries, proportional representation never took root in the United States, primarily because it occasionally resulted in the election of radicals and members of racial or ethnic minorities with whom mainstream politicians felt they could not work.

The impact of electoral reforms varied according to locale. A sweeping reform passed in 1911 in New Jersey, designed to reduce corruption and the influence of political machines, limited voter registration times and removed party identifications from ballots. The reform ended up reducing voter participation, especially in city wards where many foreign-born lived. In Jersey City, for example, turnout dropped from 69 percent in 1906 to 42 percent in 1913.

Government reformers explained reduced turnouts by claiming that they had rooted out fraudulent registrations. Although this was probably true, it is also true that their reforms disfranchised some voters. The reforms also reduced the power of parties along with the voter enthusiasm that accompanied party loyalty. Voter participation declined from 79 percent in 1896 to 49 percent in 1920. Eventually, voters were drawn to participate in organized interest groups than in political parties.

SEE ALSO
La Follette, Robert Marion, Sr.; Machine politics; Progressive movement; Reform movements; 17th Amendment; Suffrage; Voting

FURTHER READING

Grange

SEE Populism

Greenback Labor party

SEE Monetary policies; Politics