in the Dred Scott case.” He was referring to the 1857 Supreme Court case that denied freedom and citizenship rights to a slave who had been taken to a free state.

Harlan was right. Americans would forever cite Plessy v. Ferguson as the case that gave legitimacy to a vicious system of segregation. The system would survive until 1954, when the Supreme Court officially overturned segregation in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.

SEE ALSO
African Americans; Race relations; Segregation; Supreme Court, U.S.

FURTHER READING

Politics

THE TERM politics refers to the processes and institutions by which people negotiate their differences and govern themselves. In the United States, the term can encompass a wide range of subjects, such as elections, developments in political parties, changes in the suffrage (the right to vote), and the actions of interest groups that seek to influence public policy. Four issues dominated political discussions during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: the link between politics and government jobs, the extent to which government should curb the power of business and industry, government’s role in providing social assistance to the needy, and citizenship rights for minorities and women.

Gilded Age politics began with a secret political agreement, the so-called Compromise of 1877, which resolved the disputed national election of 1876. A federal commission, organized to investigate claims by both Republican and Democratic parties that their candidate had won the presidential election, became dominated by Republicans. Announcing it had reached a compromise, the commission awarded the presidency to Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes. The Compromise marked the end of Reconstruction, or the period of rebuilding the nation after the Civil War, and signaled the end of efforts to secure the rights of former slaves. A contentious period in American politics followed. During this period, the two major political parties—the Democrats and the Republicans—remained fairly equal in strength. Between 1872 and 1896, no President won a majority of the popular vote. Only rarely did one of them command a party majority in Congress.
Republicans, who captured six of the eight Presidencies of the era, tended to be pro-business. They favored high protective tariffs, subsidies for railroad development, and aggressive foreign investments. They also sought to control immigrant and working-class behavior by regulating commercial amusements and the sale of liquor. In the late 1800s, disputes over the system of awarding government offices to party loyalists divided the party. In the early 1900s, disagreements over how far government should limit the power of the railroads, banks, and great industrialists divided the party even further. In the election of 1912, Republicans split between a progressive wing favoring a return of Theodore Roosevelt to the Presidency and a more conservative wing supporting a second term for William Howard Taft. The rift created the short-lived and unsuccessful Progressive, or Bull Moose, party and helped to propel Democrat Woodrow Wilson into the Presidency that year.

In the late 1800s, the Democratic party drew much of its strength from southern whites, thereby becoming identified with racial segregation and the disfranchisement of African Americans. In the 1890s, populist William Jennings Bryan brought western and southern farmers into the party, which also won adherents among northern factory workers and immigrants. These new followers shifted the party toward favoring a stronger government role in the economy. Woodrow Wilson's approval of such a role increased his appeal to progressives, who in 1916 helped him win a second term. Republicans recaptured the Presidency in the 1920s and held it until the election of Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932.

Of the four most important political issues of the era, the debate over the relationship between politics and government jobs surfaced first. In this era, the party in power could award government jobs as “patronage” to loyal followers. Government reformers...
opposed this arrangement, arguing that it could result in unqualified and dishonest people holding government posts. In 1883, as a first step toward weakening the link between politics and government jobs, reformers won passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Act, which established competitive examinations for some federal jobs and ended the practice of demanding political contributions from federal officeholders.

Eventually, many cities and states established similar civil service systems. This development, along with reforms that reduced party control over nominations and primary elections, weakened the power of political parties. Ironically, as the influence of parties declined, so did voter enthusiasm about elections. In the 1896 Presidential election, 70 percent of eligible northern voters turned out on election day; by 1920, less than 50 percent of such voters went to the polls.

Several new political parties emerged in this period, most of them anxious to curb the political influence of the nation's powerful industrial and financial elites and to expand the government's role in providing relief to the unemployed and the needy. The Greenback, Populist, Progressive, and Socialist parties all mounted campaigns to win elective posts from the Presidency on down. Only rarely were they victorious at the polls. Because election to the Presidency required an absolute majority in the Electoral College, minority candidates had almost no chance of winning. Nonetheless, over time, minority parties affected the platforms of the major parties. Populist calls in the 1890s for a graduated income tax and the direct election of U.S. senators, for example, became mainstream political goals in the 1910s. By the 1920s, Americans had accepted the idea of government regulation of business practices, and in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, most Americans expected the government to take responsibility for the social welfare of its citizens.

Minority and women's voting rights were major political issues in this period. Southern states used fraud, intimidation, poll taxes, and literacy tests to prevent African Americans from voting. Convinced that immigrants were unduly influenced by political party machines, which were unofficial organizations designed to keep parties in power, progressives won laws that restricted immigrant voting rights. Awarded suffrage in a rising number of states during this era, women continued to campaign for full political citizenship. A National Woman's Party pursued a militant strategy to win woman suffrage, which included demonstrations in front of the White House during World War I. This strategy landed a number of its supporters in jail. Throughout the era, but especially during and immediately after World War I, political radicals—anarchists, socialists, and communists—also found themselves jailed and sometimes deported.

SEE ALSO
Bryan, William Jennings; Compromise of 1877; Democratic party; Government reform; Monetary policies; National Woman's Party; Political machines; Populist party; Presidency; Progressive movement; Progressive party; Republican party; Roosevelt, Theodore; Socialism; Suffrage; Taft, William Howard; Taxes and tariffs; Voting; Wilson, Woodrow T.

FURTHER READING