ment in their solution. The reformers came primarily from the urban middle classes and from groups associated with the populist and farm-labor movements of the West. They were most active from the 1880s onward, but the height of their political success came during the period from approximately 1890 through World War I. Thus most historians use the dates 1890 to 1920 as the period’s chronological boundaries. But progressive ideas carried on long afterward, especially at local and state levels, where organized groups of new women voters were prominent in fostering them.

The idea that government should intervene in the economy and take responsibility for the care of the people was relatively new in the United States. Many Americans resisted it. Moreover, progressives themselves did not agree on all reform programs. They functioned primarily through coalitions, or temporary alliances of diverse interests pursuing different but related reform goals. Because of this diversity of opinion about reform, some historians dislike the term Progressive Era, for it implies that reformers pursued a unified program during a specific time period and that the vast majority of Americans supported their ideas. Most historians continue to use the term, however. They argue that many reformers identified themselves as progressives, and for a number of years supported a Progressive political party.

SEE ALSO
Progressive movement; Progressive party

FURTHER READING

Progressive movement

AROUND THE TURN of the 20th century, some Americans began to call themselves “progressives.” These citizens came primarily from the business and professional worlds and included many college-educated women. Some farm-labor and populist groups who had been active in the West also thought of themselves as progressives. Beginning around the 1880s and 1890s, these diverse groups developed new ideas about how to solve the nation’s economic, social, and political problems. These problems, which included great disparities of wealth created by an unchecked and unregulated industrialization, had become so massive that private efforts, such as charity or social settlement work, could not solve them. Government, progressives argued, needed to play a larger role in regulating the economy and taking responsibility for human welfare.

These reformers thought that their ideas would lead to “progress” for the entire American nation. Thus they contrasted themselves both with conservatives, who wanted government’s role to remain minimal, and with radicals, such as socialists and communists, who wanted to abolish capitalism. Progressives believed that American capitalism had given them both a high standard of living and a high degree of personal liberty. They did not want to lose those benefits.

The most general progressive goals were to lessen the exploitation of industrial workers, preserve the nation’s natural resources, and make its cities more livable. To accomplish these goals, progressives argued that government must regulate large businesses.
Although they opposed government control of all businesses, they hoped that government would take over and run the businesses that supplied essential services, such as gas, water, electricity, and transportation.

Progressives also believed that government should increase its responsibility for human welfare. At the time, workers had no guaranteed living wage or retirement fund, no protection from workplace hazards or unemployment during business downturns, and no reliable assistance in the event of accident or death. Progressives proposed that government pass laws to protect workers from unsafe and exploitative factory conditions. They also asked for social welfare programs, such as unemployment, accident and health insurance, and a social security system to cover disability and old age. Progressives presumed that government would use trained experts, not politicians, to formulate and administer these programs.

Since most progressives were based in cities, municipal reform became an important element in the progressive movement. Municipal reformers opposed the power of political machines (unofficial organizations designed to keep parties in power) and appointments to government posts on the basis of party loyalty instead of merit. They thought that a professional, nonpartisan civil service would make government more honest. They also favored saving taxpayer money with streamlined government structures, and they worked for "home rule," or the independence of cities from state governments, which were often dominated by people who had little knowledge or experience of urban problems.

In addition to business regulation, security for laboring people, and municipal reform, most progressives also wanted votes for women and an increased level of government control over housing, health, and even private morality. Convinced that drinking alcoholic beverages led to poverty and family violence, many progressives favored prohibition. They also supported the censoring of motion pictures and even of dancing styles and the playing of jazz music, which they believed led to premarital sex and family tragedy. To control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, they sought to abolish prostitution by closing down brothels. These measures, intended to protect those in society least able to protect themselves, were humanitarian in motive but increased government control over individuals and were thus highly controversial.

Progressives worked systematically. First, they collected data on issues that concerned them, such as slum or sweatshop conditions. Next, they used scientists and other experts to interpret the data. Then they publicized the results and put pressure on legislators to pass reforms. Finally, they monitored the enforcement and amendment of the laws they won. Popular investigative writers, known as muckrakers, were critical in creating a groundswell of public opinion in favor of reform. Using the new mass-circulation media—daily newspapers
and popular magazines—these writers alerted the public to corruption or wrongdoing, mostly on the part of political bosses or big businesses. Middle-class women’s organizations, including clubs and charitable groups, were key means for publicizing, advocating, and monitoring legislation.

The progressive movement had broad impact. At the urban level, reform followed a variety of patterns, depending on local circumstances and leadership. In the summer of 1900, a hurricane and tidal wave killed one out of every six residents in Galveston, Texas. When the politicians on the city council botched the relief operation, city business leaders set up a nonpartisan commission to run the government. Other cities, such as Dayton, Ohio, used a “city manager” system. Under this arrangement, elected commissioners hired a professional manager to run city departments. By 1924, some 500 American cities had adopted government by commission; at least 167 had a city manager.

Many cities took over utilities. Reform mayors Hazen S. Pingree of Detroit, Samuel M. (“Golden Rule”) Jones of Toledo, and Tom Johnson of Cleveland pioneered the city control or ownership of utilities. By 1915, nearly two out of three cities had some form of city-owned utilities. In some cities, machine politicians allied with reformers to develop voter registration projects and improve city services, including public health programs, tenement codes, and parks.

Progressive governors and legislators were also active at state levels. Governors Robert (“Fighting Bob”) La Follette in Wisconsin, Hiram Johnson in California, and Woodrow Wilson in New Jersey introduced structural reforms to make government more efficient and responsive to the electorate. La Follette, a lawyer and former congressman who had won the governorship in 1900, brought about direct primary elections in his state. By 1916, all but three states had a direct primary, which permitted the voters, instead of party officers, to choose nominees for office.

Other reforms at the state level included the adoption of initiative, referendum, and recall. These measures allowed voters to propose and enact laws directly (initiative), vote on specific proposed legislation (referendum), and remove a person from office (recall). By 1912, a dozen states had initiative and referendum, and seven had recall. Political reforms peaked in 1912 with the passage of a significant progressive electoral reform, the 17th Amendment to the Constitution. Following this amendment, all U.S. senators would be elected directly by voters instead of indirectly by state legislatures.

State activists also targeted the workplace for reform. Applying the principle that employers and employees had to negotiate their differences, states established labor departments to provide information and services, including mediation, to both sides. By 1920, all but five states had established workers’ accident insurance and compensation systems.

Making the workplace safer and less exploitative proved more difficult. Government efforts to control working conditions met legal opposition at every turn. In *Lochner v. New York* (1905), the Supreme Court invalidated a New York law setting maximum working hours for bakers. A few years later, in 1908, however, the Supreme Court in *Muller v. Oregon* upheld an Oregon law that limited women laundry workers to 10 hours a day. The Court came to this decision when convinced that women would be harmed
by longer hours at laundry work. Other protectionist measures included the limitations on child labor in some 30 states by 1907. Minimum-wage legislation for women and children also made headway. Florence Kelley, head of the National Consumers' League, led the national campaign for state passage, and after Massachusetts adopted a minimum wage in 1912, eight other states followed.

Progressivism appeared at the national level in four areas: labor and industrial relations, the regulation of business and commerce, the preservation of the environment, and social welfare legislation. President Theodore Roosevelt used his powers vigorously in the area of labor and industrial relations. In May 1902, the United Mine Workers called a national strike. As winter approached and mine owners refused to talk to the union, a "coal famine" loomed. Roosevelt insisted that both sides submit to arbitration. In 1903, a commission granted the miners a 10 percent raise and reduced their workday from 10 to 9 hours. Roosevelt called this a "square deal" for both sides, a phrase that became his Presidency's slogan.

Although the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890) was supposed to prevent business combinations from restraining trade, previous Presidents had not enforced it vigorously. Calling for an end to special privileges for capitalists, Roosevelt instructed his attorney general to file suit against the Northern Securities Company—a huge holding company that had formed to control northwest railroading and drive out competitors. The suit forced the company to break up. Under Roosevelt, the government filed 43 antitrust actions against the beef, oil, tobacco, and railroad industries, thus earning Roosevelt his reputation as a trustbuster.

The environment also came in for further regulation. In the early 1900s, the government called in experts to develop a workable land and water use policy. In 1905, Roosevelt named Gifford Pinchot, a scientific forester, to head a new U.S. Forest Service. Pinchot supported conservation, but he also favored planned, regulated, and multiple uses for national land. At his recommendation, Roosevelt set aside more than 200 million acres of land for national forests, mineral reserves, and water projects. He also established 16 national monuments and 51 wildlife refuges. In 1916, a National Park Service was established to supervise them.

The federal government was active in social legislation as well. In response to pressure from social settlements and labor organizations, in 1912 the government established a Children's Bureau within the Department of Labor. A Women's Bureau was formed in 1920. These two bureaus provided information and support to advocates of legislation benefiting women and children.

Although not all progressives favored prohibition, many thought it would protect society from the poverty and violence associated with drinking. Urban reformers, social workers, and middle- and upper-class businesspeople regarded saloons as wasteful of workers' time and money. When prohibition legislation passed Congress in 1918, President Woodrow Wilson vetoed it, but Congress overrode him. The 18th Amendment became law in 1919. Until its repeal in 1933, Americans could not legally make, sell, or import liquor. They did not give up drinking it, however. A vast illegal trade in the manufacture and distribution of alcoholic beverages dominated the 1920s.
Following up on measures taken under Roosevelt, in 1914 Wilson created a Federal Trade Commission to watch over business compliance with federal trade regulations. The Clayton Antitrust Act spelled out specific activities big businesses could not do in restraint of trade. Wilson also lowered many tariffs, thereby encouraging U.S. factories to operate more efficiently and stimulating international trade. He was less active in social justice legislation. He allowed his cabinet officers to extend racially discriminatory practices in federal offices that had begun in previous administrations. He also opposed a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote because his party had not endorsed it.

Progressives left a mixed legacy. Some of them supported ideas that few today would call “progressive.” For example, they favored immigration restriction, literacy tests for voters, and the forced sterilization of persons presumed “mentally deficient” or criminal. Instead of fulfilling the promise of a greater democracy, some Progressive Era electoral reforms, such as those designed to curb the power of political machines, actually reduced the involvement of voters in political life. Most of the Progressive Era efforts to reform human morality failed.

Moreover, despite their general concerns for human welfare, progressives ignored some elements of the population. Only the few settlement workers and intellectuals who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People felt obliged to do something about the worsening race relations of the era. Finally, many progressives uncritically supported imperialism. Just as they believed in the uplift of the slums and ghettos of American cities, they favored the “civilizing” of undeveloped nations.

The progressive movement laid the groundwork for President Franklin Roosevelt’s response to the Great Depression of 1929. The Social Security system and boards of labor arbitration set up during the New Deal, which was Franklin Roosevelt’s program for reforming the national economy, fulfilled progressives’ ideas for an expanded governmental role in guaranteeing the welfare of its citizens.

SEE ALSO

Antitrust laws; Child labor; Children’s Bureau, U.S.; Conservation; Education; Federal Reserve Act (1913); Government reform; Kelley, Florence; Muckrakers; Muller v. Oregon (1908); Politics; Progressive Era; Progressive party; Reform movements; Regulation; Roosevelt, Theodore; 17th Amendment; Temperance and prohibition movements; Women’s Bureau, U.S.