

# LESSON 4: PROGRESSIVE REFORMS, 1906–1913

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## Student Handout 3

### OUTCOMES

#### PROBLEM 1—WORKERS’ WAGES AND CONDITIONS

##### What Actually Happened:

All of these proposals—limiting hours, eliminating child labor, and workers’ compensation—helped workers. But they also raised problems. Limited-hours legislation was first passed for women. It made the lives of women less hectic, but it also separated them from mainstream male labor, since women were singled out for special treatment. It also reinforced stereotypes of women as primarily homemakers, not workers in the paid labor force, and as needing special help.

Restricting child labor reduced the income of some families and was opposed by many families. In the long run, however, most children were healthier and better educated.

Workers’ compensation increased the cost of maintaining workers, so it probably increased unemployment and raised the price of goods. However, the laws made it fairer for workers to get help when they were injured on the job and probably helped many business owners. Workers’ compensation laws reduced the number of injury cases that went to court, which in turn reduced the number of lawsuits that had cost businesses a great deal of money in the past.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court reacted to the laws, striking down a maximum-hours law (*Lochner v. New York*) in one case, and upholding maximum hours for women (*Muller v. Oregon*) in another case. Did you think about the courts or whether the laws were constitutional?

Under pressure from labor unions and labor parties, other industrializing countries enacted unemployment benefits and workers’ compensation laws at this same time, so it was not unusual for the United States to have experienced these changes as well.

None of these laws had a dramatic impact on labor. Not until the New Deal did the government truly enforce comprehensive reform of child labor, working hours, and workers’ compensation.

## PROBLEM 2—FOOD SAFETY

### What Actually Happened:

The author of *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair, was hoping to influence people to support socialism. President Roosevelt was moved to action by the book, intending to clean up the meatpacking industry. But he considered Sinclair's socialist message to be a "ridiculous socialistic rant." Nevertheless, Congress passed both the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act.

In the short run, sales from drug manufacturers and meatpackers increased greatly after the laws were passed. The public felt the government had taken action to protect them through labeling and inspections. Exports of these products also increased for the same reasons.



Upton Sinclair

In the long run, Congress added new powers to the new Food and Drug Administration. Eventually drugs had to be proven "safe and effective." These increased regulations cost businesses time and money. Sometimes necessary drugs were (and are today) kept off the market because government regulators did not want to be held liable for allowing the sale a drug that harms people. Still, the public continues to desire inspection and accurate labeling of its food and medications. Eric Schlosser's 2001 muckraking book *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (along with other studies and sources) revealed there are still problems with the sanitation of meat and other food products.

## PROBLEM 3—CORRUPTION IN GOVERNMENT

### What Actually Happened:

All of these political reforms made the U.S. more democratic. The secret ballot, direct election of senators, initiative, referendum, recall, and direct primary all gave more power to the people. However, there were also some **unintended consequences**:

- These reforms broke the power of political parties. Consequently, more voters became independents, and voter participation dropped. Since they were not part of a larger group (political party), voters were not as politicized and did not vote as often.
- The recall threatened the independence of the judicial branch, since judges could be removed from office for making unpopular rulings
- With the reduced power of political parties, each candidate had to educate voters on particular positions on the issues, as well as on the candidate's qualifications. (Before this change, each candidate could rely somewhat on saying he was a Democrat or Republican. Voters identified strongly with political parties.) These more personal campaigns, which ended up costing more, kept poorer people from running for office. As campaign costs increased, candidates became more indebted to campaign contributors, which led—and leads—to greater power for lobbyists.

Unfortunately, some Progressives also wanted to improve government and cut corruption by improving the quality of voters. They wanted to prevent those they regarded as ignorant from voting. African Americans were largely disenfranchised during this time period, and immigrants were often prevented from voting.

#### **PROBLEM 4—INEQUALITY/MONOPOLIES**

##### What Actually Happened:

The progressive income tax reduced inequality in the U.S., but it might also have reduced economic growth by reducing incentives for individuals make more money. Do wealthy people in society have an obligation to pay higher taxes to the government?

The Progressives enacted proposals 13 and 14 on monopolies, regulating certain trusts and breaking up others. Two of the famous antitrust cases broke up Standard Oil and American Tobacco, both in 1911. The government also set up the Federal Trade Commission and strengthened other agencies to regulate big business. In the U.S. there are still many large businesses that are subject to government regulations. But the government also breaks up large businesses, as it did with AT&T and Microsoft. The debate continues on the merits of breaking up or regulating big business. The Progressives did not propose having the government take over and run monopolies (proposal 15). This is socialism, and while socialism was popular at the time (socialist candidates received 900,000 votes in the 1912 election—6% of the vote) most Americans opposed it.

In general, the regulation probably helped businesses significantly. Businesses stayed involved in the regulation of their own industries long after reformers had moved on to other causes. So businessmen were able to quietly make their wishes known to the government officials regulating their products, rather than in the public debates of legislatures.

#### **PROBLEM 5—CITY PROBLEMS**

##### What Actually Happened:

In general, simplifying city governments (proposal 16) seems to have worked well. Corruption and needless delays were reduced, and efficient governments could better handle the rapid changes of modern society. Cutting corruption was a necessary change. However, the efficient administrations led to more business influence over local governments and less influence by poorer residents. The poor used to have a city council representative for each of their districts; now they had no one to specifically represent their interests.

The Progressives adopted proposals 17 and 18, to improve police forces and offer more services. These reforms increased taxes but also made cities more livable. These changes did not completely solve city problems, but they did help. The purification of contaminated water supplies was especially beneficial.

Progressives also attempted to control the behavior of city residents (proposal 19). These reforms (cracking down on prostitution, and closing saloons and bars) were not very successful and gained the resentment of many people, especially immigrants, who felt they were looked at as inferior people who needed to be controlled.

While some Progressives favored sterilization, others opposed the idea. Only a few states had sterilization programs. The idea of reducing the population of undesirables through sterilization became a source of embarrassment for most Americans after the Nazis took the idea much further—to genocide.

Some Progressives worked hard to pass laws restricting immigration. However, many other Progressives opposed the restriction of immigration. Progressive reformer Jane Addams, for example, worked diligently to improve the lives of immigrants. Laws restricting immigration did not pass in this time period.



Jane Addams

Overall:

Historians have very different interpretations of Progressive reforms. Some historians see the reforms as necessary adjustments to an industrializing society, while others note the mixed results of this era's reforms. Conservative commentators believe that the Progressive reforms were the beginning of the expansion of government, including bureaucracy and corruption, into many areas of people's lives. Liberals largely see the Progressive reforms as the necessary expansion of a social safety net later achieved more fully by FDR's New Deal.

### QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Explain why the Progressives made the same or different decisions you did.
2. Which of the following was the most important factor in the reform decisions of the Progressives?
  - a. Politics in the U.S. (public opinion, elections)
  - b. Economics (trade, investments, finance, economic power)
  - c. Beliefs (capitalism, democracy, social Darwinism, religion)
  - d. Technology (improved transportation; improved communications; large industrial businesses; inventions)
  - e. Social change (migration; changes in social class)
  - f. Individual choices by Progressive leaders
3. Which of these assumptions, if any, did you make in your decision about proposal 11 on a progressive income tax?
  - a. Taxes should be based on fairness. Wealthy individuals should pay a higher percentage than poor people.
  - b. The government misuses money, so we should keep taxes as low as possible.
  - c. Higher taxes slow down economic growth.