

LESSON 4: PROGRESSIVE REFORMS, 1906–1913

Student Handout 2



The year is 1906, and you are a member of the U.S. Congress. Over the past few decades, the U.S. has grown tremendously in terms of its size, population, and economy. Countries in Europe are undergoing similar changes: larger businesses engaged in mass production and the migration of the labor force from farm to city. But there are still many problems. For each of the following problems, the Progressives have proposed solutions. Decide whether you would vote for or against the proposal based on whether it will be good for the country, not on trading votes or on what will help your own area, state, or reelection prospects.

PROBLEM 1—WORKERS' WAGES AND CONDITIONS

Workers face dangerous working conditions in many businesses, including the steel, meatpacking, and mining industries. Industrial accidents kill about 35,000 workers each year and maim about 500,000. In some industries, workers must prove the company's negligence before they can collect compensation. Few workers can afford to go to court to prove negligence. In addition, pay is extremely low. Workers have formed unions and have gone on strike to improve wages and conditions and to shorten the number of hours they must work per week (currently about 60–84 hours per week). Owners have generally defeated strikes with lockouts, blacklists, by hiring scabs, and by getting the government to side with them against workers.



Child laborers in a glassmaking factory

PROPOSALS FOR PROBLEM 1:

1. Limit hours for workers per week, especially for women
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

2. Enact laws to limit—or eliminate in some industries—child labor
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

3. Enact laws requiring workers' compensation. Owners would have to pay (compensate) workers who are injured on the job, whether or not workers could prove it was the owners' fault for the injury.
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

PROBLEM 2—FOOD SAFETY

The way food is sold has changed over the past 30 years. With improved transportation, food is delivered and sold to larger markets. But the greater distances and greater time to deliver food has meant that chemicals have been added to many foods, and packaging has become more important. In the past 27 years, 190 bills have been introduced into Congress to regulate food and medicines, but only eight have passed. Last year, Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* argued that the meat industry has very poor sanitation and sells diseased and contaminated meat.



Workers at a meatpacking plant

Recent magazine articles have revealed many problems with food. In addition, Congress investigated various foods in 1898 and 1902 and revealed that additives were harming people. For example, charcoal is added to pepper, bleaching agents are added to molasses, and milk is watered down. In 1902, Dr. Harvey Wiley, chief chemist at the Department of Agriculture, led “Poison Squad” experiments, which seemed to show the connection between food additives and poor health. Wiley feels that chemical additives are sometimes necessary, but only rarely. He wants accurate labeling of all ingredients.

In addition, some companies are making misleading statements about their products. In 1905, *Collier's Weekly* ran a series of articles about medicines in America. The investigative reporter argued, “Gullible America will spend this year some seventy-five millions of dollars in the purchase of patent medicines. In consideration of this sum it will swallow huge quantities of alcohol, [and] an appalling amount of opiates and narcotics.” Cocaine and opium relieve pain but turn many users into drug addicts. Other medicines

contain large quantities of alcohol (as much as 44%), leading to higher rates of alcoholism. Some medicines are 99% water—not harmful, but a complete fraud.

Now two new proposals, described below, have been introduced: the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act.

PROPOSALS FOR PROBLEM 2:

4. The Meat Inspection Act: Meat would be inspected by government officials who would stamp the meat that passed inspection (“U.S.D.A. inspected”)

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

5. The Pure Food and Drug Act, to set up the Food and Drug Administration: This government agency would test food and drugs and only allow the safe ones onto the market. The law is intended to prevent the manufacture or sale of “adulterated or misbranded or poisonous or deleterious foods, drugs, medicines, or liquors.”

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

To help make your decisions on which of the two proposals to support, you may ask your teacher for the answers to two of the following questions:

1. What is the public’s view of the issue of food safety?
2. How does the food industry feel about the issue of food safety?
3. What have other industrialized countries done to address this issue?
4. Why have so many bills addressing this issue been defeated over the past 27 years?
5. What are the arguments against the proposed Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act?

PROBLEM 3—CORRUPTION IN GOVERNMENT

Government at all levels was corrupt to some extent in the Gilded Age (1865–1900). Presidents, senators, and representatives received campaign contributions from special-interest groups, especially from big business. Senators are elected by state legislatures, which has led to the election of many wealthy businessmen as a result of backroom deals. The Senate was cynically referred to as the “millionaire’s club.”

Election fraud is common, especially since people vote in public. People can see how others vote, since the election ballots for each party are of different colors. Many government workers are installed by elected officials, which leads to the appointment of unqualified people, including campaign workers.

PROPOSALS FOR PROBLEM 3:

6. The secret ballot, so people can be free of influence when they vote
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

7. The direct election of senators, breaking the control of the wealthy over the Senate. Citizens, rather than state legislatures, would now choose the senators.
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

8. The initiative and the referendum, so citizens can propose laws and vote on them directly to get around legislatures that aren't responsive to the wishes of the people
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

9. The recall, so the people can remove a corrupt politician from office right away, rather than having to wait until the next election
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

10. The direct primary, so the people can choose candidates for themselves. Currently, the leaders of the parties select which candidates will run. Voters are therefore only able to choose between the candidates put up by the parties.
Vote for the proposal? Explain:

PROBLEM 4—INEQUALITY/MONOPOLIES

According to the magazine *Arena*, the gap between wealthy and poor has increased during the past decade. The magazine estimates that about 1% of the population owns about 50% of the wealth, while 50% of the people own almost nothing. Government statistics also attest to the widening gap between rich and poor, even as the middle class is growing. The newly rich build huge mansions and other extravagances, while the poor live in rundown tenements.

The economy is growing at an amazing yearly rate of 6% (3% is considered good). Big business is also growing rapidly. In the past eight years, more than 4200 companies have merged into only 257 corporations. The 300 largest corporations own more than 40% of the industrial wealth of the country. The formation of trusts by large corporations illustrates the problem of the wealthy having unfair advantages. Monopolies or near-monopolies in industries such as sugar, steel, oil, meatpacking, railroads, and chemicals provide huge profits for their owners, since monopolies can gouge consumers with higher, noncompetitive prices.

PROPOSALS FOR PROBLEM 4:

11. A progressive income tax, which will tax the rich at a higher percentage than the poor

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

12. A reduction in the tariff on imported goods

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

13. Break up the monopolies through antitrust lawsuits. If the monopolies do anything wrong to drive other companies out of business, or if they are too large to make competition fair, we'll have the government sue to break them into smaller businesses.

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

14. Regulate the monopolies by setting up government agencies to monitor them, such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Bureau of Corporations

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

15. Have the government take over monopolies and run them for the good of the workers and consumers

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

PROBLEM 5—CITY PROBLEMS

More and more these days, Americans live in cities, partly due to high immigration and migration from farms. Unfortunately, cities have many problems, such as high crime rates, overcrowding, and poor sanitation. For example, Pittsburgh, PA has one of the highest death rates of any large city in the world, due mainly to its impure water supply. The rate of venereal disease is also high and increasing.

Corrupt urban bosses, who commit fraud and take kickbacks on city contracts, run many cities. For example, in the 1870s, Boss Tweed made \$2 million on a courthouse that was supposed to cost \$250,000. If you need something done quickly in a city, you must to pay a bribe to “grease the wheels” of the slow, bureaucratic city government. Specific examples of corruption have been documented in Lincoln Steffens’s book *The Shame of the Cities*, which was published this year. Even where there aren’t political bosses, cities are having a hard time expanding services (housing, schools, sanitation, etc.) and keeping up with such rapid growth.



Lincoln Steffens

PROPOSALS FOR PROBLEM 5:

16. Simplify city government so that things get done more quickly. That way, people won’t need to pay off officials to speed up the process. For example, eliminate political parties at the city level, and reorganize the government under a small city council and a mayor with more direct authority to solve problems. The money saved from reducing corruption could be used to provide better city services. Vote for the proposal? Explain:

17. Improve police forces by making them more professional (for example, using fingerprinting to help identify criminals) and by offering policemen higher wages. Society should also work harder to reform criminals, not just punish them. Vote for the proposal? Explain:

18. Offer better social services to urban residents, including hospitals, sewer systems, schools, playgrounds, and public concerts. Better housing would reduce overcrowding and tuberculosis, while playgrounds would reduce juvenile delinquency. City planning and zoning will help to use space more wisely. The goal is to make cities beautiful and healthy places to live. Vote for the proposal? Explain:

19. Improve the behavior of poor city residents by cracking down on prostitution and closing saloons and bars. By improving the way people live, government can reduce the rates of venereal disease, crime, and alcoholism. Public schools should be used to Americanize the immigrants who inhabit our cities. They'll learn English and the habits of good citizens. For example, they'll say the Pledge of Allegiance every day in school.

Vote for the proposal? Explain:

20. Improve the population of cities by setting up sterilization programs for the poor, immigrants, and criminals. People would be given information on the advantages of sterilization and asked if they would like to be sterilized—it would be entirely voluntary. The population of cities can also be reduced by restricting immigration to the U.S.

Vote for the proposal? Explain: