

LESSON 18 What Brought About the Progressive Movement?

The Progressive Movement was an era of reform from roughly 1900 to 1914 (the outbreak of World War I). The movement was comprised of a number of groups, many of whom lived in cities. The Progressives passed reforms to clean up government and regulate (rules that prevent businesses from doing certain things or forcing them to do things) businesses, mostly at the local and state levels but also at the national level. These reformers believed that the government had to take an active role to protect the common good. The Progressives

created such reforms as the initiative, referendum, and recall to give more power to the people in government, and the Pure Food and Drug Law and Federal Trade Commission to regulate business. The three Progressive presidents were Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.

In this lesson you will read three interpretations of what the driving force in the Progressive Movement was. Read the interpretations and answer the questions that follow.

Interpretation A

(1) One of the main forces driving the Progressive Movement was the discovery, around 1900, that big business interests were corrupting politics in their efforts to gain special privileges. The outraged public acted to reform the situation. The Progressives moved to clean up the government and then to use government to clean up (through regulation) business.

(2) There is abundant evidence showing this trend. The autobiographies of the leading Progressives, such as Theodore Roosevelt, Robert La Follette, and Lincoln

Steffens, detail how their authors awakened to the corrupt alliance of business and government.¹ Muckraking magazines, which exposed corruption, increased their circulation tremendously during this time. The newspaper editorials condemning big business privilege show the public's concern with the issue.

(3) The result of this focus of the public's attention was progressive legislation (laws) to reform big business practices.

Endnotes for Interpretation A

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1913), 85-86; Robert La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1960), 3-97; Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1931), 357-627.

Interpretation B

(1) For years historians have stated that an important part of the Progressive Movement was the outraged public's drive to stop big business's corruption

of government. This view has misled us about the causes, intentions, and results of the progressive reforms. Actually,

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Interpretation B

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the Progressive Movement did much to encourage big business.

(2) While some people in the Progressive Movement were upset by business corruption in politics and wanted reform, this was not an all-important goal. First, corruption in government was certainly nothing new. Americans had always realized it existed. Second, the Progressive Movement was made up of more than just the poor people who were fed up with rich business privileges. There were several diverse groups in the movement, including business men and professionals, who wanted to help business, not control it.

(3) When one looks at the results of the progressive reforms against business,

the picture becomes even clearer. What the Progressives set up were regulatory agencies to watch over business. These agencies were set up just like corporations, with groups of people working together (called bureaucracies). So, the Progressives actually accelerated the trend toward bigness by making government more like big business.

(4) Moreover, the regulatory agencies set up by the Progressives were controlled by business for the benefit of business. The progressive reforms looked like an attack on business when, in fact, the new laws actually were passed by businessmen to help businesses operate more efficiently.

Interpretation C

(1) At first, historians believed that the Progressive Movement passed business reforms in order to control business because the people were outraged by corruption in business and government. Then, a different group of historians argued that the progressive reforms were passed by businessmen in order to help business. These historians said the reforms actually speeded up the trend toward the corporate form which has dominated our society in the twentieth century. To these historians, the reforms were passed to satisfy the people so they would leave business alone.

(2) Most historians accept the second interpretation. The evidence shows, however, that the average people really were upset by reports of corruption and the reforms really were to control business.

(3) Americans had always believed that the government should give no special privileges to any individuals or groups. People knew that government could be a breeding ground for corruption. While

there had been reports of scandals and corruption in government in the nineteenth century, the abuses disclosed in the first decade of the twentieth century were of an entirely different magnitude. Muckraking articles (articles that reveal corruption or scandals in government or business) revealed corruption in almost every area of government and business. Americans realized that the sheer size of big business was causing more serious problems. Industrialism, it seemed, had made business larger and stronger than government, making it easy for business to use government for its own special privileges. Progressives believed that reforms had to be passed to help the government control business rather than the other way around.¹

(4) The evidence strongly indicates that it was the public's perception of big-business corruption which led to the reforms. The great bulk of muckraking articles on corruption were published in 1905 and 1906. Scandal after scandal

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Interpretation C

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was revealed in national magazines, local newspapers, and legislative halls across the country. The result was that party platforms and political leaders emphasized the issue in the years that followed.

(5) Everyone, it seemed, was now concerned with business corrupting government.² Table 1 below shows the dramatic increase in legislation to regulate business by state governments in the period after the muckraking articles.

(6) The main result of these reforms was to actually help business. Once government agencies were set up, the public lost interest in the reforms. In the meantime, businessmen gained control of

the positions on the regulatory agencies, which is natural, since the businesses had the most interest in the regulations. The bureaucratic agencies accelerated the trend toward the corporate form, which also helped business in the long run. This does not mean, however, that the reforms were a fake passed by businessmen to help themselves and pacify the public. The evidence shows that the progressive business reforms were passed by a public outraged by the perceived corruption of government by big business. The fact that the reforms actually helped business should not lead us to the conclusion that the reforms were not originally passed to control business.

Table 1

Selected Categories of State Legislation 1903-08				
Type of Legislation	1903-04	1905-06	1907-08	Total 1903-08
Regulation of Lobbying	0	2	10	12
Prohibition of Corporate Campaign Contributions	0	3	19	22
Regulation or Prohibition of Free Railroad Passes for Public Officials	4	6	14	24
Mandatory Direct Primary	4	9	18	31
Regulation of Railroad Corporation by Commission	5	8	28	41
Totals	13	28	89	130

NOTE: Figures represent the number of states that passed legislation in the given category during the specified years.

From: New York Library, *Index of Legislation* (Albany, N.Y., 1904-9).

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Endnotes for Interpretation C

- ¹ Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., “The Progressive Era and the Reform Tradition,” *Mid-America*, 46 (1964), 224-35.
- ² Examples: Republican platform, 1906: The Party was opposed to the “domination of corporate influences in public affairs.” Democratic platform, 1906: “We favor the complete elimination of railway and other public service corporations from the politics of the state.”



Interpretation A

1. What is the main point of Interpretation A?
2. One type of reasoning used in the argument is proof. List below the other two types of reasoning, the key questions (see the boxes on pages 5-10 in the “Guide to Critical Thinking”), and how well the argument answers these questions.

A.

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

B.

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

3. Write a description or draw a diagram of how this author views the Progressive Movement (for example, what groups made it up and how decisions were made).

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What is your judgment of this view of the makeup of the Progressive Movement?

4. Describe or draw a model of this author's view of the operation of politics.

What is your judgment of this view of how politics works?

5. How strong is the evidence given in endnote 1?



Interpretation B

6. What is the main point of Interpretation B?

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7. List below the three types of reasoning used in this argument (refer to the paragraph indicated), the key questions, and how well the argument answers these questions.

A. Paragraph 1

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

B. Paragraph 2, sentences 4 and 5

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

C. Paragraph 3

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

8. Write a description or draw a diagram of how this author views the Progressive Movement.

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9. Write your opinion of why progressive reforms in the area of business were probably passed and how they affected business.

Q Interpretation C

10. What is the main point of Interpretation C?
11. List below the four kinds of reasoning used in this argument (refer to paragraphs and sentences indicated), the key questions, and how well the argument answers these questions.

A. Paragraphs 1 and 2

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

B. Paragraph 3, sentence 3

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

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C. Paragraph 4

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

D. Paragraph 5, including Table 1

Type of Reasoning	Key Question	How Well Answered

12. Describe or draw a diagram of how this author views the Progressive Movement.

13. Describe or draw a diagram of the author's view of the operation of politics.

14. Write your opinion of why progressive reforms in the area of business were probably passed and how they affected business.

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