

The progressive era – liberal or conservative essay sample



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During the latter part of the nineteenth century, presumably around the 1890's, it became known as the Progressive Era, a time of change, reform, and adaptation. As Vernon L. Parrington put it, it was a " democratic renaissance" (Vernon L. Parrington in *The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative*). So what was Progressivism? Well, its main goals were to curb corporate power, to end business monopolies, and to wipe out political corruption. They also wanted to democratize electoral procedures, protect working people, and bridge the gap between social classes. They called for reforms such as the referendum, initiative, and the recall.

They wanted the Americanization of the immigrant and the regulation of child and woman labor. But many historians argue what the main idea was behind the Progressive Movement; whether it was to help democratize the nation, or was just a cover up for a group of well-to-do-middle-class people who wanted to climb back up the social ladder and reassert its declining position of leadership. Although it had its many failures, and there were many reasons to believe it as a conservative movement, the Progressive Movement was in fact a liberal movement.

The term liberal is used to describe someone or something that is not strict, that has a loose interpretation of things, and is not limited to or by established, traditional, orthodox, or authoritarian attitudes or views. People who are liberal favor proposals for reform, are open to new ideas for progress and are tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others (Dictionary.com: Liberal). So with that being said, the question is was the Progressive Movement liberal. According to many historians such as Vernon L. Parrington and John D. Hicks believe it was. The Progressive Movement was " a

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movement of the masses against a ' plutocracy' that had been corrupting the very fabric of American society since the Civil War" (The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative). In other words, ever since the Civil War, America had been becoming more and more corrupt, and the progressives wanted to restore the nation back to how it was before the Civil War.

Hicks believed that although the Populists ultimately failed, they were victorious in the long run, for it was they that set the stage for future movements such as the Progressive Movement (John D. Hicks in The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative). David P. Thelen would definitely be one historian to classify the Progressive movement as liberal. In his quote, " All groups could unite on the urgent necessity for tax reform and the need to control ' corporate arrogance'...'When the progressive characteristically spoke of reform as a fight of the people or the public interest against selfish interests, he was speaking quite literally of his political coalition because the important fact about progressivism...was the degree of cooperation between previously discrete social groups now united under the banner of the public interest'" one can see that Thelen easily supported the notion that it was a reform and therefore liberal movement.

Two more prime examples of historians who believed that the Progressive Movement was a liberal one would be that of Richard L. McCormick, and Daniel T. Rodgers. As Rodgers said, " progressivism can only be understood in terms of dynamic and changing social and political structures" (The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative). Therefore it meant they wanted to change society which means that it was a liberal movement.

Richard McCormick said that " the regulatory authority of government at this <https://assignbuster.com/the-progressive-era-liberal-or-conservative-essay-sample/>

time increased in precisely the same period that voter turnout declined, ticket-splitting increased, and organized pressure groups gained power at the expense of party. In discovering that business corrupted politics during this era Americans created a demand for the regulatory and administrative state, thus facilitating the activities of organizationally minded individuals from business and the professions determined to complete a political transformation" (The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative). It is clear here that he supported that the Progressive Movement was liberal.

The term conservative is used to describe someone or something that favors traditional views and values, and tends to oppose change (Dictionary. com: Conservative). Unlike the historians like Hicks and Parrington, others, such as John Chamberlain and Richard Hofstadter believed that the Progressive Movement was that of a conservative one. Instead of seeing progressivism as a movement to correct American society, John Chamberlain saw it as a complete and abysmal failure, nothing but a bunch of people who " were motivated by an escapist desire to return to a golden past where honesty and virtue had dominated over egoism and evil" (The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative). If the Progressive Movement is looked at as a conservative movement, one can concur that it was just a cover up for a moral crusade. During the latter part of the nineteenth century people of high status such as lawyers, professors, and clergymen were being ousted out of power. In response, these people went on a moral crusade to restore individualistic values based on the idea that only men of character should rule. (Richard Hofstadter in The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative).

According to George E. Mowry, progressivism was nothing but a “ movement by a particular class aimed at reasserting its declining position of leadership” (George E. Mowry in *The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative*).

Louis Hartz felt that America never experienced the struggles between liberals and conservatives that characterized the history of the European countries. Therefore to interpret progressivism as a struggle between the people and special interests is incorrect. He felt that America never had a conservative tradition in the European sense of the term, because “ American liberalism, by virtue of its continuity, was a conservative tradition” (Louis Hartz in *The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative*).

People like Samuel P. Hays saw the Progressive Movement as a “ movement of scientists and planners interested in ‘ rational planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources’ and that ‘ support for reform in municipal government came from business and professional groups” (Samuel P. Hays in *The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative*). Robert H. Wiebe referred to the Progressive Era as an “ age of organization.” What he meant by that, was that in the nineteenth century America was nothing but many autonomous and semiautonomous “ island communities” as he put it, but during the 1880’s because of technology and economic forces, it caused “ dislocation and bewilderment” which led to a “ search for order” (Robert H. Weibe in *The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative*). Gabriel Kolko felt the movement was anything but a reform movement. “ Both major political parties shared a common ideology and set of values. This ideology - what Kolko called political capitalism - sought the

elimination of a growing competition in the economy” (The Progressive Movement: Liberal or Conservative).

Samuel P. Hays is one of many historians who believe that the Progressive Movement was that of a liberal one. Why does he believe this one might ask? Well the most notable reason for why some historians believe the Progressive Movement to be that of a conservative one is because they feel, as George E Mowry said, the Progressive Movement was nothing but a movement by a particular class, presumably the middle-class working men, aimed at reasserting its declining position of leadership. In other words, in order for the middle class to gain power. Well one of Hays’ strongest arguments was that the Progressive Movement was in fact not a movement for middle class workers to gain power.

One of the reasons he felt this way was that “ for the most part their interest in reform stemmed from the inherent dynamics of their professions rather than from their class connections...They were not older professional men, seeking to preserve the past against change; they were in the vanguard of professional life, actively seeking to apply expertise more widely to public affairs” (Samuel P. Hays). Another point that Hays brings to the case, is that people like Hofstadter say that the men of high status, educated men like lawyers, ministers, teachers, and editors wanted to gain back power. Hays on the other hand, says that Hofstadter fails to determine who within those professions, became reformers and who didn’t. Obviously if only a small percentage of those people became reformers, one can easily reject the idea the Progressive Movement was a movement for people to regain their declining position of power.

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Reformers, therefore, wished not to simply replace bad men with good; they proposed to change the occupational and class origins of decision-makers. Toward this end they sought innovations in the formal machinery of government which would concentrate political power by sharply centralizing the processes of decision-making rather than distribute it through more popular participation in public affairs. According to the liberal view of the Progressive Era, the major political innovations of reform involved the equalization of power through the primary, the direct election of public officials, in the initiative, referendum, and recall.

From this quote by Samuel P. Hays, it is most evident why Hays would be classified as a historian who sees the Progressive Movement as a liberal one. People who are liberal, favor proposals for reform, are open to new ideas for progress and are tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others. Obviously from that quote by Hays, it is evident that the main purpose behind the Progressive Movement was to make reform and change the way the government was, to get rid of corrupt practices and curb special interests. There is not enough evidence to portray the movement as a moral crusade for a group of people who wanted to regain a lost position of power.

In conclusion, the Progressive Movement was in fact a liberal movement. Because progressives wanted to make reform and did indeed make reform, that is why they are classified as liberal. They wanted to regulate women and child labor. They passed the initiative, the referendum, and the recall, all of which were reform policies. However, to some degree, the Progressive Movement was a conservative one. One can say that the real reason behind it was not to make reform and curb special interest. Therefore it would not <https://assignbuster.com/the-progressive-era-liberal-or-conservative-essay-sample/>

be liberal. One can say that to some degree it was just a movement where some people could regain the power that they once had, that it wasn't to curb special interests and make reform, that it wasn't for the general good, but for personal gain. Whichever it was, whether the Progressive Movement was liberal or conservative, no one will ever know. There's always going to be reasons that support both. All one can conclude from this is that during the Progressive Era, many reforms were made that helped this nation get to where it is today. Yes, maybe the reasons behind those reforms were immoral ones, but still they did indeed help this nation.