

# Free the roots of the progressive movement essay sample

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Between the 1890s and the 1920s, the state of American society motivated a time of social reform and political activism within the country focused on driving corruption out of government by exposing political machines for what they were and setting up additional paths for direct democracy to work. The progressives also wanted regulation of corporations through the use of antitrust laws, which reformers saw as a way to develop fair levels of competition for consumer benefit. The national leaders of this movement included Robert M. LaFollette, Charles Evans Hughes and Theodore Roosevelt from the Republicans and Woodrow Wilson, Al Smith and William Jennings Bryan from the Democrats (Mowry, p. 91). While the movement initially functioned at the local level, it later grew to include national levels as well. Its primary sources of support included the middle class, with many teachers, attorneys, doctors, clergymen and other businessmen joining the cause. These three decades saw significant changes in the American political process as well as the introduction of laws that protected consumer rights. With regard to government, the Progressives were outraged by the injustice, corruption and outright waste that characterized government in the Gilded Age, as well as the unfair effects that the tariff had on the American economy. Some of the most important changes associated with the Progressive era include the establishment of a national income tax (the Sixteenth Amendment), the provision for direct election of Senators (the Seventeenth Amendment), Prohibition (the Eighteenth Amendment) and the right to vote for women (the Nineteenth Amendment). The income tax made federal revenue a progressive matter, with the rich paying a greater percentage of their income than those at lower levels of wealth. Before the

Seventeenth Amendment, the Senate had been filled with people elected by state legislatures rather than the citizenry. While the Eighteenth Amendment would soon be repealed, it reflected the Progressive belief that government legislation could engineer social change, and that removing alcohol from society would bring about significantly positive outcomes.

There were some Progressives, particularly among the economists in the group, who thought that eugenics would provide a collective solution to families that were either too large or failed to reach their potential (Leonard, p. 210). However, these ideas never made their way to national or even state platforms. Most groups, such as the Catholic Church and other mainstream organization, saw eugenics as too large a step to take. Instead, the national Progressive organization sought other measures to improve the lot of the family. Municipal government began to organize local programs for public assistance to work for keeping families together. Cities set up juvenile courts to manage disruptive adolescents without the use of adult confinement. The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 removed patent medicines from the market that had not yet gone through scientific testing, and laws at the state and national level were enacted to guarantee that water and milk supplies would become pure and that food would be manufactured safely. Laws creating standard working hours meant that families would have more leisure time together, building relationships in time that had been spent working.

Overall, the Progressives sought to create a society in which people would be healthy and safe, growing up within nurturing families. While some of their

initiatives did not find their way to full passage, many others remain important parts of American policy.

## **Works Cited**

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Mowry, George. The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America, 1900-1912.

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