

Explain and discuss
how wilson and
roosevelt changed
the role of the
presidency i...



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Powerful Progressives in the Presidency The Progressive Era in American history was one of a new and contagious optimism. People felt government had the power, right, and responsibility to improve life for its citizens. After the scandal, hopelessness, and helplessness that marked many presidencies after the Civil War, America was ready for a proactive, effective commander-in-chief who would use the office to its potential. It found two such leaders in Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. These two presidents turned the presidency into a source of legislative initiative and expanded the powers of the presidency.

Roosevelt's legislative sword showed how powerful the presidency can be. He used the Sherman Anti-trust Act of 1890 to do what no one before him had been able to accomplish: attacking the huge Northern Securities Company, which held a monopoly over railroads in the northwest. He filed dozens of antitrust suits ("The Sherman Antitrust Act"). Though his efforts were aggressive, he realized he needed a different tact to achieve widespread victory over the trusts.

Roosevelt continued his legislative attack on the railroads with the Elkins Act, which made it illegal to give rebates to shippers who used particular railroads. In an act of huge significance, it also stated railroads could not change set rates without notifying the public ("The Elkins Act"). The Hepburn Act of 1906 regulated free railroad passes, which the companies passed out as a "perk" to those in Washington, DC, who could provide assistance to the causes of the railroads (Kubiszewski par. 1, 2).

After reading Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Roosevelt led Congress to enact the Meat Inspection Act (1906) to establish cleanliness standards and

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processing requirements for the meatpacking industry. The Pure Food and Drug Act (1906) followed, calling for truth in labeling of food and medical products ("Turn of the Century").

In what would be called a "green" law today, Roosevelt-initiated legislation also extended to conservation of natural resources. He helped pass the National Reclamation Act of 1902, establishing a precedent for the federal government's supervision of water resources in the West and using money from public land sales for irrigation projects ("Reclamation Act/ Newlands Act of 1902").

Roosevelt made the presidency much more powerful in other ways. He took charge of the 1902 coal strike in Pennsylvania, and showed he could be tough and fair when it came to making hard decisions. He also had an aggressive foreign policy. Roosevelt used the law-making powers of Congress, and his own ability to initiate laws and see them to passage, as an effective mechanism of reform ("Turn of the Century").

Woodrow Wilson believed he, too, could guide Congress to make laws that would benefit America. He furthered the antitrust effort by helping Congress pass the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914), which gave the Sherman act more teeth. It prohibited corporations from acquiring stock from others as a way to create monopoly. Congress also passed the Federal Trade Commissions Act during Wilson's tenure. It was a watchdog created to keep an eye on and regulate business practices among corporations ("Wilson - A Portrait").

Wilson also used his legislative power through the Underwood Act (1913), which led to a huge tariff reduction. These operating funds had to be replaced, so the 16th Amendment was passed, authorizing an income tax on

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citizens. Wilson established a decentralized private banking system, with federal control, through the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 ("Wilson - A Portrait"). These are things presidents had never done before and illustrate how Wilson, too, expanded the scope of the presidency.

Unfortunately, Wilson's desire to address domestic reform would be squelched by the international crisis of World War I. However, Roosevelt and Wilson effectively set the stage for a continued expansion of executive powers that would continue through what some historians call the "imperial presidency." They showed that aggressive presidents could expand their power by making the right moves.

References

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