Chapter One

Reconstructing the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

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No one today is quite sure what time period the Gilded Age and Progressive Era covers. It sprawls somewhere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but few historians can agree on where its edges lie. Some argue for a period that begins in 1865 with the end of the Civil War, or in 1873, with economic overproduction, or in 1877, with the alleged death of Reconstruction (Schneirov 2006). The end of the era is even more problematic. Perhaps the period ended in 1898, when the Spanish–American War launched the nation into imperialism, or in 1901, with the ascension of Theodore Roosevelt to the White House, or in 1917 with the outbreak of World War I or in 1918, with its end. There is even a good argument that it might stretch all the way to the Stock Market Crash in October 1929 (Edwards 2009, 464). In trying to section off the late nineteenth century in America, there is also the problem of figuring out where the Gilded Age and Progressive Era overlaps with the period termed Reconstruction, which everyone agrees was also crucial to the rise of modern America.

Even the names Gilded Age and Progressive Era make historians chafe. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner published *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* in 1873, but the name was not then applied to the era. It was only in the early twentieth century that critics trying to create what one called a usable past, men such as Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford, called the era from the 1870s to 1900 the Gilded Age. Their intent was to indict the post-Civil War materialism they despised, although Twain and Warner wrote their book to highlight the political corruption they insisted characterized the early 1870s. The twentieth-century part of the equation labeled the Progressive Era comes by its moniker more honestly, for contemporaries did, in fact, call themselves and their causes Progressive. But the label was hardly new to the twentieth century.

There was enough confusion over the terms that in 1988, when scholars interested in creating a society to study the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tried to find a name, only 49 of the 97 casting a ballot chose the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; the other options were Society for Historians of the Early Modern Era (1865–1917) or Society for Historians of Emerging Modern America (1865–1917) (Calhoun 2002).

And, again, where does Reconstruction fit? It overlaps significantly with the Gilded Age, and what whites and blacks sought to accomplish in that period certainly exemplified progressive policies.

This historical confusion is bad enough, but it is also missing a vital piece: How did people who lived through the time see their era? Surely, weighing their perspective is important to make sense of the period. And yet, nineteenth-century Americans did not see as epoch-making any of the dates commonly used to define those years. For them, some of the period's most crucial dates were ones that historians rarely use as benchmarks: 1870, when Georgia's senators and representatives were sworn into Congress, thus formally ending Reconstruction; 1883, when the Supreme Court handed down the Civil Rights Cases, overturning the 1875 Civil Rights Act; 1913, when a Democratic Congress passed and Woodrow Wilson signed a revenue act that shifted the weight of government funding from tariffs to taxes.

The ways scholars periodize the chaos of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflect what they consider its unifying theme. Over that, too, historians argue. Early attempts to come to grips with the history of the late nineteenth century occurred while it was going on, and so were embedded in contemporary culture and politics. The first major study of Reconstruction was written by a key player in the destruction of black rights: when Congressman

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Hilary A. Herbert and his politician co-authors wrote *Why the Solid South?* (1890), they were justifying their suppression of the black vote by "proving" that African Americans had corrupted politics and driven the South into the ground. Herbert's "scholarly" construction shoehorned Reconstruction into dates that served his argument: 1865, when the Republican Congress began its own process of rebuilding the South, to 1877, when Democratic governments took over the last of the southern states. Those dates, chosen to justify the disfranchisement of black Americans, have perverted understanding of the era until the present, as historians studying Reconstruction have until recently been boxed into the frame dictated by the late nineteenth-century purveyors of a political travesty. Scholars either endorsed the Herbert thesis or excoriated it, but they accepted its boundaries as the significant ones for Reconstruction.

Setting Reconstruction off as its own unique period warped early studies of the rest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When historians turned their attention to those years in the early twentieth century, they focused on issues of industrialization as separate from the racial questions of Reconstruction. They also tended to divide the Gilded Age from the Progressive Era, creating distinct periods, albeit ones with fuzzy edges. In this early formulation, the Gilded Age was an era in which unrestricted capitalism enabled wealthy industrialists to run amok, bending the government to their will and crushing workers. The Progressive Era was a reaction to this oligarchical corruption of America, a period in which reformers softened the edges of industrialization and took back the nation for democracy. Most notably outlining this distinction were two classic works: John R. Commons and his associates traced the rise of labor unions in their ten-volume *History of Labor in the United States*, published between 1918 and 1935; and Matthew Josephson's 1934 *The Robber Barons* traced the concentration of money and power in the hands of grasping capitalists in the late nineteenth century. The exception to this rule was Angie Debo's landmark *And Still the Waters Run*, which looked to the western prairies rather than the eastern cities to examine the contours of economic expansion. Her exploration of how legislation marginalized Indians focused on the racial issues that interested Reconstruction historians: she illustrated the way that America's allegedly color-blind government codified race into law. She wrote the book in 1936, but it was too controversial to be published until 1940.

The consensus historians who tried to explain American success after World War II did little to redefine the boundaries that had sprung up around three apparently distinct eras between the Civil War and World War I. Their concerns focused on how ideas translated into a distinct American identity, rendering questions of both race and economics to a subordinate status. Instead, consensus scholars like Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter tended to play down race and to dismiss the economic strife of the late nineteenth century, bundling all Americans and all eras into a single national narrative characterized by widely shared liberal values. While C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) did take on race, it suggested that it was law, rather than differences Americans developed organically, that created segregation.

Studies of the peculiar era of the turn of the century heated up again in the 1960s. In 1963, scholars launched a reexamination of the period from 1865 to 1900 with a collection of essays edited by H. Wayne Morgan. The studies of politics, labor, currency, and popular culture in *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* brought nuance to a period that had previously been characterized by cartoonish images of robber barons and radical workers. Scholars in this volume also reexamined the traditional periodization of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. This collection of essays suggested that the era should start in 1865. Four years later, David Montgomery's *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* challenged scholars of Reconstruction by reading the major concerns of Gilded Age and Progressive Era scholars—concerns about labor and capitalism—into a study of Reconstruction.

But the impulse to erase the boundaries between eras would not last. At the same time scholars were rethinking the late nineteenth century, dynamic new scholarship about the black experience after the Civil War, notably Kenneth Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877*, published in 1965, set out to demolish Hilary Herbert's perversion of the era. In doing so, historians set off Reconstruction definitively as its own territory in which issues of race were paramount. This construction of the era as a distinct period in which black Americans and their white allies sought to redefine the nation would last for the next generation, culminating, most notably, in Eric Foner's 1988 *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*. This separation meant that new scholarship on the era maintained the division of Reconstruction from the rest of the period, even as scholars blended and redefined the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era.

That redefining took place immediately on the heels of the Morgan volume. In the mid-1960s, two key books insisted that historians focusing on the triumph of conservatism in the Gilded Age and progress in the Progressive Era had the story wrong. They erased the distinction between the two to create new interpretations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gabriel Kolko's 1965 *Railroads and Regulation, 1877–1916* argued that, far from marking the triumph of popular determination to rein in big business, railroad regulation in the Progressive Era resulted, at least in part, from the demands of the railroad barons themselves. This was a case study of the argument he had made two years before in *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916*, whose title summed up the argument that the Progressive Era, popularly interpreted as a victory for the people, was in fact

characterized by the triumph of a cultural and economic system that reinforced capitalism. In 1967, Robert H. Wiebe's *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* also erased the boundary between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era but shifted the focus away from the economic interpretations that had dominated previous studies. Wiebe argued that the period from 1877 to 1920 should be understood as one in which a forming middle class wrenched order out of the chaos of industrialization, transforming a country of isolated small towns into a nation of bureaucrats.

With barriers breaking down, historians of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century banded together to reexamine the era. By 1988, scholars of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era had their own historical society, and in 1996, Charles W. Calhoun's edited volume, *The Gilded Age*, brought these new visions together in a set of essays that updated the Morgan volume of the previous generation.

This reexamination of the turn of the century has challenged the traditional understanding of the outlines of the era. Previous studies of labor, for example, had focused on class consciousness, an investigation that required eliding the racial divisions among workers and emphasized the different interests of workers and employers. When Eric Arnesen reintroduced the problem of race to labor studies with his *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (1991) he complicated the idea of a working-class consciousness by explaining how black workers and white workers cooperated—or not—depending on circumstances. Lawrence B. Glickman also pushed a new understanding of workers by examining how workers conceived of themselves as consumers. His *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of a Consumer Society* (1997) showed how workers shaped the market for their own benefit, and advocated a living wage not as a protest but as a positive adjustment to the modern era. Another crucial reworking of historical understanding of class in the era came from Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, whose *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (1996) suggested that class lines could blur race lines in the fight for access to equality at the turn of the century.

A reexamination of the Progressive Era also produced a more complicated picture. Many studies followed Kolko in examining how reform exerted social and economic control over workers, especially workers of color, women, or immigrants. Lori D. Ginzberg's (1990) *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, for example, examined how a gender-based movement became a class-based one. But others emphasized that the era was more radical than conservative. Two notable biographies—Kathryn Kish Sklar's *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work* (1995), and Joan Waugh's *Unsentimental Reformer* (1997), a biography of Josephine Shaw Lowell, interpreted their subjects as less interested in social control than in a fundamental reordering of industrial America.

Still, with a few notable exceptions, these studies tended to focus on the period after 1877 and, with the exception of studies of Populism—which have always been their own cottage industry—on the East. Reconstruction, with its emphasis on race, still largely stood apart from the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, which emphasized labor and capital. So, for the most part, did studies of the American West. Exceptions to this rule came from scholars who followed in the wake of the consensus historians to look at the origins of American liberalism and the creation of the American state. Richard Schneirov's 1998 *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864–97*, and Nancy Cohen's 2002 *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914*, took a question of much interest to Progressive Era scholars—the origins of American liberalism—and found them not in the twentieth century, but in the immediate post-Civil War years. Interestingly, the gulf between Reconstruction and the Gilded Age persisted: despite Cohen's book title and the 1865 boundary the author set for her study, the publisher's description of the book explained that she found the origins of liberalism in the Gilded Age.

Scholars of state-making also tended to reach backward to the Civil War to explain the changes of the late nineteenth century. Three studies of the Civil War government found the roots of the American state not in the late nineteenth century, but in the war years. In 1997, my *Greatest Nation of the Earth: Republican Economic Policies During the Civil War* sought to explain the era of the robber barons by examining the years during which Republicans codified their economic ideology into law. Two years later, Scott Nelson's *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* looked at the rise of capitalism and labor strife beginning during the Civil War. Most notably, Mark R. Wilson's powerful 2010 book, *The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861–1865* discovered the contours of the construction of the American state in wartime military contracting.

Other scholars have turned not to the war to understand the development of the state, but to the immediate postwar years. Recent scholars focusing on issues of gender and on the West have shaken ideas about the American state most dramatically. Rebecca Edward's *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (1997) persuasively argued that gender roles lay at the heart of the creation of the American state, as politicians sought to shore up the image of the traditional American family amid the dislocations of the late nineteenth century. Barbara Young Welke's 2001 *Recasting American Liberty* rounded up ideas about labor, capital, and gender to argue that the crucial concept in the creation of the state was the idea of liberty, in which individuals accepted a loss of autonomy in exchange for protection, protection usually dedicated to women.

As Gilded Age scholars were beginning to reach earlier in time, Reconstruction scholars were reaching later to

challenge both the traditional temporal and geographic boundaries of their field of study. Several studies in the early 2000s broke the time barrier, building on Gaines Foster's remarkably prescient 1982 *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913*, which argued that later myths of the Civil War enabled white southerners to obscure their own fondness for a modern economy. My own *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1965–1901* (2001) sought to erase the boundaries established in 1890 by Hilary Herbert and to reexamine the late nineteenth century on its own terms. In 2003, Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, and Jane Turner Censer's *Reconstruction of Southern White Womanhood 1865–1895*, both found the patterns of the war and postwar years stretching far into the future.

The reexamination of the American state as period boundaries eroded gave Western historians, with their long tradition of examining state development, a newly powerful voice in Reconstruction history. In his *The West and Reconstruction* (1981), Eugene H. Berwanger had tried to tie the West to Reconstruction, but it took more than a decade for the idea to take off. Richard White's *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (1991) sparked interest with its tight focus on the interrelationship of the West and the federal government. In 2003, T.J. Stiles's *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* interpreted the western outlaw as a key player in the Reconstruction era's fight over the power of the federal government. In 2007, I explicitly tied Reconstruction to the West in *West From Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America After the Civil War*, which argued that the defining characteristic of the postwar years was the consolidation of an American middle-class ideology, made possible by the imagery of the American West. In 2009, Elliott West's *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* irrevocably intertwined the history of the West and Reconstruction when he reread the story of the Nez Perce as the final chapter of Civil War Era national redefinitions of citizenship.

Studies of the West also quite deliberately began to take on the issue of race after the traditional boundary of Reconstruction. In 2009, Peggy Pascoe's *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* masterfully moved questions of race and Reconstruction to the West. In 2014, Stacey L. Smith examined how race and Reconstruction played out among the Chinese in California in *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*. Most recently, in 2015, the essays in Gregory Downs's and Kate Masur's edited collection *The World the Civil War Made* interpreted the post-Civil War American West as a reflection of the racial contours of Reconstruction.

From both sides of the divide between Reconstruction and the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, scholars since the mid-2000s have begun to recognize that questions of race and the state both demand the examination of the creation of citizenship. Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet* made the theme of African American citizenship the centerpiece of America in the years from the Civil War to the Great Migration; so much other scholarship had covered this idea that three years later I tied together recent books on race and the state in the years from the Civil War to 1900 and suggested that Reconstruction was being redefined as "the Era of Citizenship" (Richardson 2006, 69). Christopher Capozzola took the story through World War I in his *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (2008), which examined how the demands of world war required Americans to define the lines between the rights of individuals and the lawful demands of the state. The next year, Sidney M. Milkis looked at conceptions of citizenship in the Progressive Era. His *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* (2009) examined the Progressive Party's conception of a new American state as its members redefined the rights and duties of citizens. Scholars from both sides of the historical divide have also looked at the limits of state control over citizens. In 2002, Gaines Foster's *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (2002) examined the limits of state power on citizens as Americans rejected the efforts of postwar reformers to make America a Christian nation by law. Michael Willrich also examined the limits of state power on citizens in his 2011 *Pox: An American History*, which looked at the conflict over smallpox vaccinations at the turn of the century.

The recent churning of eras, regions, and periodization suggests that the time is ripe for a redefinition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But how?

Redefining the Era

Grouping the years from the election of 1860 to the landslide election of November 1920 offers a new interpretation of this crucial period in American history. That new interpretation both draws from the new work that has so revolutionized American history since the 1960s and continues the process of breaking down the artificial walls separating Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era. This new periodization, reaching from one to another epoch-making election, incorporates Reconstruction historians' emphasis on race and citizenship with the emphasis of scholars of the Gilded Age and Progressive era on labor and capital, the construction of American liberalism, and the construction of the American state—all of which are inseparable.

Viewing the era from Lincoln to Harding identifies the crucial theme of late nineteenth-century America as a ferocious contest over the proper role of government in American society. In the years from the stunning victory of

a fledgling political party pledged to use the government to promote economic opportunity for poor Americans to 1920, when voters overwhelmingly backed a government limited to promoting big business, Americans struggled over the nature of government, for that government defined the nation. This was the theme that contemporaries recognized as the most important one in the national consciousness. It is the one that made the most lasting impact on American history.

This contest, of course, was also over citizenship, for what the nation's government would become depended on who would have a say in it. From 1860 to 1920, a constant struggle waged over who would be permitted to vote and to exercise the rights of citizenship. While historians have focused on the racial dimension of political participation, race was hardly the only factor; gender, class, and ethnicity also played major roles. The Civil War had thrown a monkey wrench into the traditional American belief that a good voter must be a white man who owned property. Wealthy white men were the very people who had just spent four years trying to destroy the nation. In summer 1865, President Andrew Johnson's pardoning of the same Confederates who had attacked the government, thus readmitting them to political participation and threatening to reestablish the antebellum government, began several decades of debate over who should have a say in American government. This debate included every adult American.

Looking at the era from 1860 to 1920 as one of a contest over political participation and the nature of government does more than restore the themes that were central to the participants. It also offers two major new conceptual directions for historians. First, it promises to rejuvenate political history. Political history, the study of politicians and parties and policies, fell into neglect in the American academy with the dramatic growth of social history in the 1970s, and yet the nation itself is, and has always been, a political entity. Scholars recently have attempted to create a New Political History by integrating the study of politics with social history, focusing on the populace—African Americans, women, consumers, and other groups—to emphasize that political leaders depended on popular support. This examination of the concerns and organization of specific groups, however, means these studies downplay the overarching national political story through which all American individuals in the late nineteenth-century interpreted their own economic, racial, social, and cultural interests. It is *Hamlet* without the prince. Restoring the construction of the national government and its citizenry to centrality with the addition of the new, vastly expanded understanding of social forces in America offers a chance to redefine political history, seeing it as a space in which various voices contended for control over the emerging American government.

Even more profoundly, redefining this pivotal era as one of contest charts a way to reclaim narrative history for the profession in general. Since the 1970s, academic historians have rejected historical narrative because they believed it served an entrenched social order, privileging the voices that had always dominated American society and thus reinforcing their continued power. But recognizing the theme of the nineteenth century as one of contestation rather than the triumph of a specific historical development suggests that it will be possible to construct an inclusive narrative of American history. Americans argued, marched, sued, wrote, voted, and even killed to influence the development of government. As different groups hashed out the proper role of government, there were winners and losers, sometimes different ones at different times. Their results constructed the nation, citizenry, and ideology that formed modern America. Placing the thread of contest at the center of the era suggests that it is possible to write a new inclusive narrative of American history.

Writing a New Narrative

If a new narrative history emerged around the theme of political contest, what might it look like?

It would start with the notion that the struggle in 1860 was over two different concepts of the American government. Southern whites believed in a government that served a few rich men by focusing on the protection of property. Allowing them to amass huge amounts of capital, the argument went, would enable them to direct the labor of lesser men, thus producing a prosperous economy and a higher civilization. Northerners believed in a government that would protect equality of opportunity, thus allowing men at the lowest rungs of society to work their way up to prosperity, using their labor to produce capital that would, in turn, hire others.

During the war, the Republicans who controlled the country had turned the previously inactive national government into one of dramatic activism. They had fielded an army and navy that ultimately included more than 2 million men; invented a national system of taxes and tariffs to fund a war that cost more than $6 billion; put regular men on their own land and provided for their higher education; chartered a railroad corporation and funded immigration to develop the country; brought western Territories and States into the Union, dividing the West into political units that looked much like they do today; and, finally, freed the slaves and provided funding for destitute white and black southerners to transition to free labor. Their program reoriented the government from the protection of the wealthy to advancing the economic interests of regular men. The victory of the United States government over the Confederacy in 1865 dedicated the whole nation to a theory of political economy rooted in the idea that all men had a right to the fruits of their own labor.

But what would these changes mean for the postwar years? Was an active government just a product of the war?

Would the government continue to serve all men in the booming North, devastated South, and new West, or would it revert back to the prewar inaction that served the wealthy? That question would dominate the next fifty years of American history.

To answer it, American men and women from all races, ethnicities, and economic groups demanded a say in their government. African American men wanted to participate, of course, but so did northern women, who had given their husbands and sons to the cause of the Union, then worked in fields and factories to keep the northern economy booming, and had invested heavily in the US bonds that funded the war effort. White northern men simply assumed they would have a say, since they had fought and won the war. Southern white men also assumed they would be welcome participants, since they had always before been members of the body politic. Immigrants believed they, too, had an important role to play in the formation of the national government, as did the Mexican Americans who had become part of the nation when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo moved the national border from one side of them to the other. American Indians also took a stand on what the government could and could not do. And, finally, the people living in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, Samoa, and the other islands that America would absorb at the turn of the century also had a role to play in the creation of the United States.

The widespread demand for inclusion at this moment was fraught. Thanks to the Republicans' novel system of national taxation, every American citizen paid money to the treasury. This meant that, for the first time in American history, the government spent funds collected directly from taxpayers. The people literally owned the government. And the right to determine what the government did—the right to vote—became the right to spend other people's money.

This link between an active government that promoted equality of opportunity for all and taxation would dominate the national debate until voters definitively rejected the use of the government to promote equality in the landslide election of 1920. After 1860, Americans fought ideologically, politically, and, indeed, literally, over the proper nature of the American government.

The Universal Suffrage Years

The immediate postwar years saw Americans embracing universal suffrage and an activist government that answered to all citizens. They got there because President Andrew Johnson, who assumed sole control of the initial postwar reconstruction of the national government when Lincoln died during a congressional recess, hated the new concept of government. To restore the antebellum system, he offered generous amnesty to the white southerners who had taken up arms against the US government, pardoned high-ranking ex-Confederates, and backed the readmission of the eleven seceded states after they had abolished slavery, nullified the articles of secession, and repudiated Confederate debts. Southern legislatures followed this prescription—barely—then also passed the Black Codes that remanded ex-slaves to a situation as close to slavery as the legislators could construct. Nonetheless, when Congress reconvened in December 1865, Johnson announced that, once congressmen admitted the newly elected southern representatives and senators to their seats, the process of restoration of southern states to the Union would be complete. He had hurried the process, he explained, because leaving the military in the South would cost tax dollars and upset white southern Democrats.

This was an especially bitter pill for northerners because the upcoming 1870 census would count African Americans as full people, rather than three-fifths of a person. Southern leaders would have more power after the war than they had had before it. Northerners objected to Johnson's resurrection of the prewar body politic, and to protect black southerners while they tried to develop their own plan, congressmen passed a bill to protect civil rights and established federal courts that would hear black testimony. But Johnson vetoed these bills on the grounds that they would require taxation that fell largely on white men to pay for bureaucrats who helped African Americans. He claimed that the new concept of government that served the people was actually a redistribution of wealth. This linkage would hamstring efforts to use the government to help regular Americans from this time onward.

Johnson's attempt to restore the antebellum concept of government pushed Republicans to nudge southern states toward black suffrage—or at least to undercut the advantage southerners would gain with the 1870 census—with the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which threatened to trim congressional representation according to the numbers of men allowed to vote in a state. When southern states refused to ratify the amendment, Congress in 1867 passed the Military Reconstruction Act. By calling for black men to vote for delegates to state constitutional conventions, Republicans created a sea change in the nature of the American electorate. In 1868, the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment established that anyone born in America was a citizen, and that any state abridging voting privileges for any reason other than crime would lose representation in Congress. Finally, the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 ostensibly guaranteed that the right of citizens to vote could not be denied on account of race or previous condition of servitude.

To those prospering in the nation's booming industries, it seemed the promise of free labor had now been engrafted onto the nation's political system, and the way was clear for every man to rise. In the wake of the war, industry boomed in the North. Immigrants came to America to try their luck; cities grew. In the West, ranching and mining took off and farmers poured onto the plains. The transcontinental

railroads sparked economic development across the nation as they required the development of new financial tools as well as a new bureaucracy that created well-to-do middle managers. It seemed that postwar free-labor America would fulfill the Republicans' most hopeful predictions. Horatio Alger's 1868 bestseller *Ragged Dick* summed up the hope of the era when it promised that anyone, even an illiterate New York City bootblack, could make it in America, so long as he was willing to work hard.

But to others, the new structure seemed simply to emphasize their exclusion from the upward mobility of the free-labor vision. During the war, high employment and support for the war government had encouraged workers to look beyond the inflation that kept their real wages from rising. The war years had dramatically increased industrialization in the North as government contracts flowed to larger companies, and workers had lost ground as employers increased their hours without increasing their wages. After the war, workers dismayed by the financial inequities of the postwar economy demanded that Congress redress those inequalities. In 1866, the fledgling National Labor Union called for higher wages, better working conditions and for Congress to establish an eight-hour workday.

Workers were not the only ones left behind in postwar America. Notably missing from the guarantees of citizenship in the Fourteenth Amendment were "Indians not taxed": native peoples who either lived on reservations or roamed on their ancestral lands in what were now newly organized Territories. Far from offering these people economic opportunity, America's free labor system threatened their lands and resources. Plains Indians fought back against American interlopers. Warfare on the plains prompted the head of the army to transfer William Tecumseh Sherman from the South to the plains in summer 1865. Three years later, he would have to admit defeat at the hands of Lakota warrior Red Cloud.

But Red Cloud's victory would be short-lived. The Plains Indians' defense against free labor ideology could not survive. To move Indians out of the path of the transcontinental railroad, Sherman proposed pushing them onto two large reservations. The 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge and the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie did just that, forcing southern Indians into the land that is now Oklahoma and the northern Indians onto a large reservation that covered much of what is now South Dakota. Government commitments to protecting that land and providing for its inhabitants briefly promised peace, but the government's inability to keep settlers out of Indian lands would reignite warfare within a decade.

Also apparently unwelcome to have a say in government were American women. Women had agitated for the right to vote since the 1830s, but had been persuaded to defer their claims to equality in favor of those of American slaves. During the war, they had supported the US government with their labor, cash, and menfolk. If former Confederates and African American men were to have a say in their government, surely women should not be excluded. As women's rights leader Julia Ward Howe wrote: "The Civil War came to an end, leaving the slave not only emancipated, but endowed with the full dignity of citizenship. The women of the North had greatly helped to open the door which admitted him to freedom and its safeguard, the ballot. Was this door to be shut in their face?" (Howe 1900, 373).

Activist women were determined to have the right to shape the laws under which they lived. After Congress refused to include women in the Fourteenth Amendment, women in 1869 organized two suffrage associations: The National Women's Suffrage Association, which advocated a wide range of legislative reforms as well as suffrage, and, a few months later, the American Women's Suffrage Association, which advocated suffrage alone under the conviction that once women could vote, they could change other discriminatory laws under the normal electoral process. Their pressure worked. In 1869, Wyoming Territory accorded women the vote. The following year the Utah legislature followed suit.

When the Fifteenth Amendment did not protect women's suffrage, activists forced the issue in the election of 1872. Women demanded to vote under the Fourteenth Amendment's declaration that all persons born or naturalized in America were citizens, and thus had the right to vote. In Rochester, New York, Susan B. Anthony successfully cast a ballot, but was arrested, tried, and convicted for the crime of illegal voting. In Missouri, Virginia Minor didn't make it as far as Anthony did. The St. Louis County registrar Reese Happersett denied Minor the right to register to vote. She sued him on the grounds that her citizenship gave her that right.

As Minor's challenge worked its way through the courts, many Americans were reexamining the idea of universal suffrage. Anthony herself explained that her problem with political inequality was simply that it was applied against women: "An oligarchy of wealth, where the rich govern the poor; an oligarchy of learning, where the educated govern the ignorant; or even an oligarchy of race, where the Saxon rules the African, might be endured" (Harper 1898, 978).

Anthony's statement reflected that Americans served by the new economy were increasingly uncomfortable with the political demands coming from the newly enfranchised voices. Republicans based their free-labor theory on the idea that all Americans shared the same economic interests. What was good for workers was good for employers and vice versa, they thought, in a boundless system that enabled everyone to rise together. But this idea came from the rural antebellum world, a world increasingly obsolete in the industrial and urban growth of the postwar years. Encouraged by Democratic leaders eager to make inroads on the Republican majority, those at the bottom of the economic scale increasingly spoke of the economy and society as a class struggle for limited resources. The division of the nation into warring

classes struck terror into the hearts of Republicans, not just because of the economic and social dangers it evoked, but also because the minute the government began to legislate in favor of one class over another, their concept of a harmony of economic interest would fall apart and would not be able to be resurrected.

The idea that classes struggled to control America emerged as a powerful concept in politics in 1866. In that year, the new National Labor Union declared: "There is [a] dividing line—that which separates mankind into two great classes, the class that labors and the class that lives by others' labor" (Richardson 2007, 65). In the same year, a crucial political shift exacerbated the growing rift between Republican leaders and workers. Johnson's attacks on Republican congressmen and his defense of the white southerners who rioted in Memphis and New Orleans in 1866 created a landslide for Republicans in the midterm elections of that year. This landslide swept moderate Democrats from power, leaving only the most extremist Democrats in ironclad districts to speak for the party. In 1867, they rallied Democratic workers to attack Republicans for catering to rich men by paying the interest on the national debt in gold, rather than in greenbacks. Devaluing the national debt would destroy the nation's credit, and threatened a very real attack on the stability of the government.

Farmers and entrepreneurs, too, especially in the Midwest, demanded government policies that would enable them to compete in the new economy. Most significantly, they wanted the nation to continue to use inflationary greenbacks as legal tender, a policy popular with borrowers and anathema to wealthy lenders, who wanted to return to a gold standard. Farmers also wanted government to regulate businesses. They were at the mercy of railroads and elevator operators that stored and transported their grain, and wanted the government to regulate the practices of those industries. In a series of laws known as the Granger Laws, after the Granger Movement that brought farmers together first socially and then politically, midwestern state legislatures curtailed the monopolies and discriminatory price scales of the industries on which farmers depended.

It was not just Democratic workers and farmers who seemed to want policies that would benefit them at the expense of others. With their newly acquired political voice, black Americans began to press for a government that protected their rights in the face of abuse from former masters. While Republicans tended to focus on light-skinned black leaders, who embraced the idea that men must work hard to accumulate wealth and rise, most former slaves saw former masters trying to cheat them of their hard-earned wages. To them, the idea of a harmony of economic interests seemed laughable. They began to strike for wages and better conditions, and to back political leaders who would curtail the power of the white landowners and employers.

Women, too, demanded government policies that mainstream white men did not necessarily see as promoting the general welfare. Most notably, men in the Utah state legislature had given women the vote with the expectation that they would throw Mormon leaders out of office. When women instead voted with their husbands and supported those leaders, mainstream white men worried that women would perhaps not advance American society after all.

Restricting the Suffrage

The Fifteenth Amendment was the high-water mark for the idea that every man should have a say in his own government. By 1870, the idea that universal suffrage was the key to a successful government was under attack as Republican men who controlled the government turned against the inclusion of new voices in the body politic and began to roll back the suffrage they had just expanded. Using the wedge Johnson had used against the activist government, these opponents complained that widespread suffrage meant poor men would devise policies paid for with money collected from richer men. They began their assault on universal suffrage by harnessing racism to their cause, attacking the voting rights of southern black men.

In the early 1870s, new southern state governments elected in part with black votes called for the reconstruction of the broken states. At the same time, the Democratic machine in New York City, run by Tammany Hall, garnered votes from workers in part by providing them with jobs on public works programs. In both cases, officials financed improvements to infrastructure through tax levies.

Democrats who loathed the Republican state governments in the South argued that black voters were electing representatives who cemented their votes by enacting policies that redistributed wealth. Black men were voting for governments that would rebuild the South after the devastating war, and the roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals would have to be funded through taxation. Those taxes, opponents wailed, came from the pockets of hardworking white men. When South Carolina seated a legislature that had a majority of black men, white Democrats immediately railed against the "crow-congress," the "monkey-show," that was prostituting the government to the interests of ex-slaves. African American voters were plundering white property owners, they insisted, overseeing "a proletariat Parliament… the like of which could not be produced under the widest suffrage in any part of the world save in some of these Southern States" (Richardson 2007, 103).

By 1871, members of a rising northern middle class were willing to listen to the idea that lazy men endangered the government. In March 1871, workers took over Paris in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War and established the Paris Commune. Americans looked on, horrified, at the violence that American newspapers attributed—incorrectly—only to the Communards. Communards' call for legislation based on economic classes sounded to Americans thriving in the

postwar economy much like the language embraced by American workers. To men who believed that the genius of America depended the idea of economic harmony, workers' calls for apparent class-based legislation threatened the nation. Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* had extolled the virtues of success through hard work and warned against labor organization. Only three years later, though, that warning had turned apocalyptic. Famous urban reformer Charles Loring Brace worried that, "In the judgment of one who has been familiar with our 'dangerous classes' for twenty years, there are just the same explosive social elements beneath the surface of New York as of Paris" (Brace 1872, 29).

It also appeared that women did not necessarily contribute to a free-labor society. Reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony wanted to rework the laws governing property, marriage, and divorce, challenging the very tenets of society. And, just as in the South, where observers looked at governments elected with the help of black votes and saw socialism, in the West, observers looked at Mormon leaders elected with the help of women's votes and saw social breakdown. Perhaps widespread suffrage was not, in fact, a way to guarantee a strong, progressive society.

Meanwhile, other Americans worried that the government had been corrupted by the influence of wealthy businessmen who had swung it in their favor. In 1872, Congress retired the income tax and placed the weight of the treasury on tariffs. These levies on imported goods kept the prices on consumer goods high, and people began to grumble that Congress was weighting laws to favor businessmen. Grant's opponents leveraged this fear in the 1872 election, attacking the president for his alleged corruption. They claimed the administration supported African Americans in the South solely to garner voters who would keep it in power so it could do the bidding of a minority of wealthy businessmen. It was this sentiment Twain and Warner inscribed into their 1873 political novel *The Gilded Age*.

As ideas about the proper role of government were shifting, the Panic of 1873 helped to increase Americans' sense that the nation's economy was not, in fact, harmonious, but rather characterized by class struggle. Voters agreed with Democrats that the cause of the panic was the Republicans' insistence on policies that protected big business at the expense of labor. Their main example was the tariff, which, at almost half a product's value, protected domestic business and enabled industrialists to collude to set prices, but that was not their only complaint. In a routine reworking of the currency in 1873, Congress demonetized silver, just as new silver mines would have created the inflation that workers and farmers craved. Angry at what seemed to be Republicans' use of the government to help wealthy businessmen, voters handed control of the House of Representatives to Democrats in the midterm elections of 1874.

Republicans and their business supporters pushed back against the voters' dictum. The problem with the economy was not their policies, they thought, but rather businessmen's fears that demands for government intervention in the economy on behalf of workers and farmers would come to pass. In 1875, the Secretary of the Treasury abandoned the inflationary greenbacks and resumed specie payments.

In the same year, the Supreme Court revised the idea that everyone should have a say in the American government. In *Minor v. Happersett*, the Court declared that women were citizens. But in a stunning conclusion, it also reworked the nature of government. Citizenship, the justices said, did not necessarily convey the right to vote.

Defining the Government

Once the Supreme Court had blessed suffrage restriction, the rest of the nineteenth century would be a battleground over whether the government should advance the interests of all Americans or support the businessmen who argued that their sector of the economy was central because it employed everyone else. In the service of that war, Americans enlisted politics, art, and culture, developing ideologies that would echo to the present. Each side sought to read the other out of the American tradition. And each side sought to disenfranchise its political opponents.

Republicans monopolized the national government, and they insisted that their legislation promoted the economic welfare of every American. Ironically, they illustrated that, in part, by continuing to back the spread of settlers into the Great Plains, sparking Indian wars that endangered farmers and miners, and ultimately devastated the tribes there. Leaders like Comanche Quanah, Apache Geronimo, and Lakotas Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse demanded the same right to their land American citizens claimed, only to be forced onto reservations too poor to support the free-labor economy the government tried to impose. Republicans also threw their weight behind tariffs, insisting that the protection of big business created a thriving economy that helped everyone. Those unable to thrive in that economy were, they argued, lazy or wasteful.

By the mid-1870s, opponents characterized Republican governance as a corruption of true American government. While historians tend to emphasize the issue of race in the South in the 1876 election, as paramilitary groups kept black men from voting, Democrats framed the central issue of the campaign as the corruption of the body politic by a special interest that wanted other people to subsidize the people it represented. In the South, that meant African Americans; in the North, for Democrats, it meant big businessmen. For all Americans, the concept that special interests were ruining the nation by perverting the government to their own ends made sense of the terrible economic and social turmoil of industrialization.

Democrats insisted that Republicans were the party of big business, and were deliberately monopolizing the government to keep themselves in power, in part by catering to

lazy black voters in the South, offering them social services and jobs on government projects, paid for with taxpayers'—assumed to be white taxpayers—money. In the South, "Redeemers," led in South Carolina, for example, by Wade Hampton's Red Shirts, set out to take the state government out of the hands of the Republicans by keeping black voters from the polls. As a presidential candidate, Democrats ran New York reformer Samuel J. Tilden, who had gained popularity by busting New York City's Tweed Ring, which had stayed in power thanks to the votes of immigrants and workingmen who owed the ring their jobs.

When Democrats won the popular vote but lost the White House in what they believed was a corrupt bargain, they continued to fight to take government out of the hands of big businessmen and give it back to regular Americans. Only four months after Republican president Rutherford B. Hayes took office in March 1877, railroad workers in West Virginia sparked the nation's first general strike after the B & O cut their wages by 20%. Hayes called out federal troops to suppress the strike, convincing opponents that big business Republicans not only had stolen control of the government, but were also putting the muscle of the army behind business interests.

On the heels of the strike, voters pushed back to retake the government. As labor leader Samuel Gompers later remembered: "the railroad strike of 1877 was the tocsin that sounded a ringing message of hope to us all" (Richardson 2007, 178). The Supreme Court blessed government regulation of business in *Munn v. Illinois* (1877); the next year, Democrats in Congress passed the Posse Comitatus Act to prevent the president from using the US Army against civilians, a new Greenback Labor Party polled more than a million votes and elected fourteen congressmen, and voters gave control of the Congress to the Democrats. The Republicans eked out the 1880 presidential victory of James A. Garfield by less than 4000 votes after Garfield promised to restore the idea of universal suffrage and a government that responded to all Americans. Garfield followed through with his promises, undercutting big business Republicans in 1881 when he won a dramatic showdown with Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York to control the nation, but Garfield's subsequent assassination by a mentally ill follower of the Conkling wing of the party killed Americans' faith that the Republicans could operate for the good of everyone. In 1883, Congress passed civil service reform to try to keep government out of the hands of a corrupt political party. The following year, voters put a Democrat into the White House for the first time since 1856, electing Grover Cleveland, a reform Democrat who promised evenhanded government.

With Democrats now powerful enough to challenge Republicans for control of the White House, the struggle to define the nature of the government became white hot. Republicans fervently supported what they called a laissez faire government, which, to their way of thinking, promoted the good of everyone in America. That government inaction, though, was only rhetorical. In fact, both Republican financial policies and the tariffs to which Republicans were devoted disproportionately benefited big businessmen. While it was true that wealth was concentrated at the top of society, industrialist Andrew Carnegie explained in 1889 in *The Gospel of Wealth*, that concentration enabled the nation's leaders to exercise stewardship over the country's capital, investing it wisely for the good of all, rather than letting poorer individuals fritter it away. Republicans argued that Democrats' demands for the government to loosen the nation's money supply and lower the tariff—policies that would put more money in the pockets of working Americans—would, quite literally, destroy the nation. So Republican Party leaders did all they could to undercut their opponents and advance their own vision.

That undercutting took shape with a series of political machinations to strengthen Republicans' weakening popularity by shifting the electoral system. Republicans retook control of the government in 1888, putting Benjamin Harrison in the White House despite his loss to Cleveland by more than 100,000 votes. They promptly added six new western states to the Union to guarantee they could retain control of the Senate despite the growing Democratic majority. Then they tried—unsuccessfully—to manipulate the electorate by placing federal troops at the polls in the South and New York City, a system that would protect black Republicans in the South and cut down Democratic voting in the city on which control of the White House usually hinged. Their attempts to game the system were so egregious that even moderate Republicans finally rebelled, noting that it hardly seemed like proper American democracy when 105,000 people in the new states of Wyoming and Idaho would have four senators and two representatives while the 200,000 people in the first Congressional District of New York would have only one representative.

Insisting that workers and farmers who blamed high tariffs for their poverty were simply too lazy to work and wanted a handout, Republicans moved tariff rates higher, promising the 1890 McKinley tariff would make the economy boom. When it did not, and furious voters handed the House, Senate, and White House to the Democrats in 1892, Republicans howled that Democrats were communists or anarchists whose policies would amount to a wholesale redistribution of wealth. Anyone with money should take it out of the market immediately, they insisted, in a deliberate attempt to crash the economy and sabotage the Democrats. It worked. The economy tanked in 1893 and Republicans retook the House in 1894. Then businessmen entrenched their interests in the law. In 1895, the business-dominated Supreme Court declared the government was too weak to levy an income tax; within a month, with the *In re Debs* decision, it declared the government strong enough to issue an injunction against an individual to force him to obey the law (and, in this case, call off a railroad strike).

For their part, Democrats, backed by workers, farmers, and men on the make, argued that Republicans had perverted the government to make it serve big business. They tried to take the government back for regular American men. They turned on the Chinese workers they believed took western jobs, pressing for the passage of the Chinese Restriction Act in 1882, which kept Chinese workers out of the nation. In his 1884 campaign, Cleveland had promised to revise the tariffs downward, but once in office, could get nothing through the Republican Senate. Frustrated workers increasingly took to the streets, launching more than 23,000 strikes in the twenty years between 1880 and 1900. The Harrison administration's brazen championing of big business coincided with a horrific drought in the plains states, prompting farmers in 1890 to turn their longstanding protest of Republican governance into alliances led by people like Mary Elizabeth Lease, who told audiences: "Wall Street owns the country…. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street." She told farmers to "raise less corn and more hell" (Richardson 2007, 242). Members of the Alliance sought to make the government respond to the people again. When Republicans thumbed their noses at their opponents in 1890 by raising tariff rates, voters rebelled and Democrats took control of the government. Then, to combat the Republican-created depression, in 1894 Democrats imposed an income tax to make up for revenue lost when they lowered tariff rates slightly.

Just like Republicans, Democrats worked to manipulate the electorate so they could win control of the national government. Most dramatically, they worked to keep African Americans from voting in the South. When Republicans in 1890 pushed a Federal Elections Bill to protect black voting, southerners responded first with a dramatic increase in lynching, and then with a series of new state constitutions limiting voting by property, literacy, or even the voting status of a man's grandfather. In retaliation, Republicans pushed the Australian, or secret, ballot, regulating ballot colors and print, and requiring a man to vote in secret. While they argued that such a system would prevent employers or political bosses from pressuring men to vote a certain way, it also meant that voters had to be able to read. The electorate contracted as men of color, and poor and illiterate men, could no longer vote.

The late 1890s became a showdown between the two visions of government. The 1896 election pitted big business Republican William McKinley against Democrat and Populist William Jennings Bryan, who put the contest clearly:

> There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests upon them" *(Bryan 1896)*.

For their part, Republicans responded that Bryan and his supporters were communists and anarchists, and their rhetoric carried the day. Voters backed McKinley.

Reforming America

But the fight over the nature of the American government was not finished. If Republican policies had indeed made the nation the best on earth, men such as Theodore Roosevelt and Albert Beveridge asked, didn't that mean the nation had a responsibility to spread that system across the world? And if America was to be a beacon for other nations, shouldn't it make absolutely sure its own citizens were healthy and prosperous? From 1898 to 1920, progressive Americans sought to use the government to reform America and to launch it on an international crusade to spread American values. After an initial surge of success, voters crushed their vision in the landslide election of 1920, an election that reset America.

Progressive Republicans had begun to come together as young men during the election of 1884, when their party's championing of big business had seemed to them to cross the line into corruption. But they had not emerged as a powerful faction until the 1898 Spanish–American War. They saw throwing Spain out of Cuba as an opportunity to spread the American system overseas, to rejuvenate the American spirit, which had weakened under industrialization, and, not incidentally, to wrest power from party elders who were not making sufficient room for new blood in the party hierarchy. With the victorious conclusion of that "splendid little war," they turned their sights on America. They looked at the circumstances of urban workers, living and working in horrific conditions, and worried that they could never be properly educated or independent enough to become good citizens. Surely the government had a duty to protect the lives and opportunities of the people who made up its body politic.

While progressive Republicans' understanding of political economy as a web of harmonious interactions was very different than that of the class-conscious Democrats, the prescriptions of the two groups for improving society coincided. To silence the progressives, Republican Party leaders tried to bury the vocal Theodore Roosevelt in the vice presidency, only to have him ascend to the White House after the assassination of President McKinley. Once in power, Roosevelt found himself repeatedly thwarted by the party's Old Guard. Frustrated at every turn, he cultivated reporters who used his increasingly potent rhetoric to feed the popular interest in limiting the power of big business and returning the government to the service of Americans in general.

This progressive impulse dominated the 1912 election, in which all three major candidates— William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt—as well as Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs embraced the idea that

the government must regulate business and promote the good of all Americans. When Wilson won the White House and the Democrats control of Congress, the way was clear for a reworking of the government to make it responsive to the people. As soon as he was inaugurated, and before Congress was scheduled to meet, Wilson pushed Congress to cut the tariff and replace the funds lost with an income tax, now constitutional thanks to the Sixteenth Amendment, approved a month before Wilson took the oath of office. This shift, enacted in 1913, both actually and symbolically shifted the government away from the Republican theory that it must promote business. During these years, when progressives dominated the government, Congress weakened the power of financial leaders, regulated business activities, and began to protect workers and farmers.

But this shift in the government was not a pure reflection of the impulse toward universal suffrage that characterized the immediate post-Civil War years. Progressives achieved their triumph in large part by purging from the body politic those they deemed unworthy of government attention. African Americans, especially, suffered from lynchings, often held in public, to remove them from political influence. Japanese immigrants in the West could not vote because they were not free white persons; most Indians on reservations were not American citizens, either. More sweepingly, in the Insular Cases of 1901 to 1904, the Supreme Court had found that the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and other smaller islands, taken by the United States after the 1890 tariff required the powerful Sugar Trust to pay for the sugar they grew there, were "unincorporated territories." This meant that their lands were, as the Supreme Court put it, "foreign to the United States in a domestic sense." They were not fully American lands, but tariff laws against foreign products did not apply to them, so sugar could be imported without fees. Sugar was in, but what about the people who grew it? In 1904, in *Gonzalez v. Williams*, the Fuller Court decided that Puerto Ricans were not aliens, but they were not citizens, either. They were non-citizen nationals to whom neither immigration laws nor the perquisites of citizenship applied. They could not vote. The purging of the American electorate was important enough as a theme to warrant D.W. Griffith's attention in his 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, which was based in part on a history of Reconstruction written by a then-college professor, Woodrow Wilson.

While Americans took the suffrage from those they saw as special interests, they expanded it to the women, who appeared to support progressive ideals. In 1918, Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment and sent it off to the states for ratification. Wilson finally threw his weight behind women's suffrage in part because he felt his support slipping and hoped that women would support the progressive cause, both at home and overseas. At home, women had turned their traditional domestic roles into powerful public ones as advocates for legislation to clean up the wretched cities and improve the lives of poor Americans and immigrants. They would, Wilson calculated, support the Democrats' program. But Wilson also needed their support to carry the American mission overseas when in 1917 the nation intervened in World War I.

That war, the Progressives' war, sent more than a million American men to fight in Europe and left more than 300,000 dead or wounded. It cost Americans more than $21 billion. Fought according to progressive ideals, the war enabled the government to impose order on the economy, but it did so in part by working closely with the businessmen whose industries produced material for the soldiers. The war also confirmed the staunch Americanism of progressives; attacks on immigrants intensified, especially on German immigrants and African Americans whose movement into war industries and northern cities convinced white workers they were being coddled by the government. When hardline Republican opponents persuaded voters that Democratic government meant Wilson would sell the nation out to communism in the negotiations over the Treaty of Versailles, Americans turned against Progressive government. They did so emphatically.

The election of 1920 marked a sea change in the nation. This change bracketed the era that had begun with the dramatic election of 1860. In 1920, a majority of Americans endorsed the hardline view of a government that looked much like the antebellum government had. In the first election in which women voted in all states, voters elected Warren G. Harding with a landslide 60.3% of the popular vote. The Republicans, who promised a government that worked for business and business alone, won one of the nation's rare supermajorities: they captured more than two-thirds of the seats in the House of Representatives and took 59 Senate seats to the Democrats' 37, the largest Senate majority in history. America's active contest over the nature of government and the electorate was over—at least for the moment.

Reconstructing America

Dubbing different portions of the era from 1865 to 1920 by three different names obscures that the periods called Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era all shared the same fundamental theme. The dates and monikers assigned to the first two are especially problematic, for political carpers invented them. The 1877 date that "ended" Reconstruction justified white control of southern state governments. The idea of a Gilded Age came from cultural critics of a later era who wanted to highlight their objections to the materialism of their own age.

The political reformers of the early twentieth century did, however, often call themselves Progressives. If taken at their word that they were a political movement, it becomes easier to clarify the dates of their national power: it began with Theodore Roosevelt's rise to the presidency in 1901, and ended with Harding's election in November 1920.

In the cases of each of these traditionally separated historical eras, the people living in them focused on government and suffrage. The very men who named and dated them chose their definitions to highlight these issues, revealing that they were the absorbing questions of their eras. So why should the period from 1860 to 1920, a period during which Americans contested the nature of the government, be divided into three artificial chunks that suggest fractured historical themes? Reinterpreting this era as one of contest over the nature of the government, and thus of American citizenship and even over America itself, reveals its larger themes. Examining struggles over suffrage also offers a way to include all voices in a new American narrative. The years from 1865 to the election of 1920 amounted to the creation of a new nation, a nation that had been reconstructed after the cataclysmic Civil War.

The era during which that took place seems properly to be called Reconstruction. Under this thematic umbrella fits racial change, gender issues, immigration, economics, legal studies, studies of the American West, literature and so on, to reveal how all Americans who lived between the Civil War and the Roaring Twenties contested the construction of a new nation. That name alone, though, currently bears a limited connotation of the immediate postwar years, making its adoption for the longer period seem to misrepresent the age by ignoring the Progressives. Until historians can rework the meaning of the word reconstruction to mean the reconstruction of the government and citizenship, then, they should simply drop "The Gilded Age," and call the era from 1865 to 1920 Reconstruction and the Progressive Era.

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