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🇺🇸 The original progressives

Steve Bakke 🇺🇸 August 14, 2022



Left, liberal, progressive – many use the terms interchangeably. Some think the recent popularity of identifying as “progressive” was chosen as a “brand” cleansing strategy, resulting from conservatives trying to associate the “liberal” and “left” references with radical policies.

We sometimes forget there was an earlier “progressive era” that was active from the 1890s to the 1920s. Although not a card-carrying progressive, Franklin Roosevelt, president from 1933 until 1945, gave credit to the earlier progressive movement for inspiring many of his “New Deal” domestic policies.

In the 1912 presidential election, after being defeated by incumbent William Howard Taft for the republican presidential nomination, Teddy Roosevelt formed the Progressive Party. This new party was popularly referred to as the “Bull Moose Party.”

According to Roosevelt, his former running mate Taft, wasn’t progressive enough, so Teddy ran for President independently. Progressive Roosevelt and Republican Taft lost to the progressive Democrat candidate Woodrow Wilson. Three self-identified progressive candidates competed in one election. It’s no wonder progressive philosophy and issues ended up profoundly influencing modern politics and governance.

Woodrow Wilson’s progressivism was a reform movement made up largely of leading intellectuals and social reformers reacting to the economic, cultural, and political disruption of the 19th century Industrial Revolution. This article is a brief peek into the era when many modern progressive ideas were born. I’ll focus primarily on these early progressives’ dedicated rejection of America’s Constitution and its founding principles.

These progressives' significant knowledge of our Constitution and its goals of limited federal government power and natural rights led them to believe the U.S. must move beyond the Founders original ideas and principles.

Frank Goodnow, president of Johns Hopkins University, and a leading progressive, took exception to the concept of "inalienable rights endowed by the creator" in a 1916 speech. Quoting: "The rights which [man] possesses are, it is believed, conferred upon him, not by his Creator, but rather by the society to which he belongs." That's quite a contrast with the Founders' assertion.

A young Woodrow Wilson wrote in 1887 that the federal government's ability to act should be largely unrestricted. Quoting: ".....all idea of a limitation of public authority by individual right be put out of view, and that the state consider itself bound to stop only at what is unwise or futile....." Our Founders' vision of natural rights assured limitations to the Federal government. Wilson's comments reflected the progressives' rejection of that concept.

Wilson, as a presidential candidate in 1912, declared: "I am.....forced to be a progressive.....because we have not kept up with our changes of conditions....." Simply stated, he felt our Constitution was outdated and should be discarded in favor of an "organic" document, constantly evolving like Darwin's theories, rather than mechanical and predictable like "Newton's description of the mechanics of the heavens." While our Founders made it difficult to change the Constitution, progressives wanted a "living, breathing" document.

The idea of "checks and balances" was also rejected by Wilson. He believed it hindered progress and should be removed. He seemed confident that humans and institutions would automatically support the greater good by their actions. That theory directly conflicts with our Founders' concern with the flaws of human nature.

Teddy Roosevelt, originally a republican, wanted broad governmental influence on all of society. In a 1910 speech he expressed his vision of a powerful government. Quoting: ".....we must have government supervision of the capitalization, not only of public-service corporations, including, particularly, railways, but of all corporations doing an interstate business.....every man holds his property subject to the general right of the community to regulate its use to whatever degree the public welfare may require it."

While modern progressivism certainly isn't identical to the earlier movement, fingerprints of Roosevelt and Wilson are commonly found on current politics and government. Many modern era progressives struggle with numerous aspects of the Founders' vision of a representative democratic government and the imposition of checks and balances. The electoral college is one example. And the direct election of U.S. senators (Seventeenth Amendment) is an example of a progressive reform.

Finally, I believe the "modern administrative state" deserves consideration for being "the most impactful reflection of early progressive thought." I'll save that huge topic for another day.