Chapter 19: The Politics of Industrial Society, 1870-1892

Overview
There were two distinct political styles in late nineteenth century America: one partisan the other voluntary. The partisan category included those men in either the Republican or Democratic Parties. The voluntarism category was made up of a variety of women’s organizations, labor unions, and farmer’s groups. By the turn of the century Americans had become comfortable with the notion that government should actively regulate the currency and protect American commerce and workers from foreign competition. They hesitantly accepted that government should also regulate interstate commerce and restrain the powers of monopolies. These issues and civil service reform dominated party politics. There are two standard themes in the political history of the late nineteenth century. One theme derides the era for its corruption and favoritism. The other heralds the era of limited government and unregulated markets. Both characterizations are accurate to an extent. The industrialization of the economy as well as the changes that it brought with it caused many Americans to look for alternate explanations for and solutions to Americans’ problems. The more radical proposals, such as socialism, were not very popular because the discontented tended to look for more traditional solutions.

Key Topics The information in chapter 19 introduces your students to the following key topics:
♣ The weakness of the presidency after the Civil War.
♣ The limited expansion of the central government.
♣ Middle-class critiques of industrial society.
♣ Protest organizations among workers and farmers.
♣ The conservative response to popular politics.

Chapter Outline with review questions
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Two Political Styles
The Triumph of Party Politics
Masculine Partisanship and Feminine Voluntarism
The Critics of Popular Politics
Economic Issues Dominate National Politics
Weak Presidents Oversee a Strong Federal Government
Government Activism and Its Limits
Greenbacks and Greenbackers
Foreign Policy and Commercial Expansion
Growth of the Central Government
States Regulate, Municipalities Reform
Middle Class Radicalism
Henry George and the Limits of Producer Ideology
Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Clubs
The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union
Discontent Among Workers
The Knights of Labor and the Haymarket Disaster
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Annotated chapter outline

The Crusade Against Alcohol

The movement to suppress alcohol was reborn in 1873-1874 as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. By 1890 it had 150,000 adult members and another 50,000 members in its young women’s auxiliary. It was the largest women’s protest movement in American history up to that time. The WCTU’s leader, Francis Willard was well educated, articulate, and passionate about abolishing alcohol as well as women’s suffrage, workers’ rights, and what she called “Christian socialism.” Its membership was predominantly Protestant, white, and middle class. As the movement grew more radical it grew more popular in part because it was using its power and broad-based support to alleviate the problems of a new industrial society.

Who was Frances Willard and what was significant about her political career?

Two Political Styles:

There were two distinct political styles in late nineteenth century America: one partisan the other voluntary. The partisan category included those men in either the Republican or Democratic Parties. The voluntarism category was made up of a variety of women’s organizations, labor unions, and farmer’s groups. Critics of both styles were small but vocal and increasingly influential. At no other time than the late 1880s and 1890s did American voters ally themselves so tightly to the two major parties or vote in such record high numbers.

- Party politics reflected a popular notion that men were responsible for the public aspects of life, like politics, and women were responsible for the private aspects of life, the home and family. This division was used by many women’s reform groups to justify their concerns for certain issues. Instead of working through either political party, they used volunteer organizations to press their issues to the front of the political debate.
- A small but effective group of critics of the political scene, worried about the growth of working class voters, made their presence known. For the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the next anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment influenced the American political debate. Voters saw the ballot box and American government as effective devices for dealing with problems of a society that was rapidly becoming more urban and industrialized.

Economic Issues Dominate National Politics:

By the turn of the century Americans had become comfortable with the notion that government should actively regulate the currency and protect American commerce and workers from foreign competition. They hesitantly accepted that government should also regulate interstate commerce and restrain the powers of monopolies. These issues and civil service reform dominated party politics.

- From 1876 to 1896 the nation was presided over by a series of weak presidents. Elected by razor-thin margins, no single president enjoyed a full term during which his party controlled both houses of Congress and no president was reelected to two consecutive terms until 1900. Tariffs, monetary policy, and civil service reform were the dominant issues.
- Notable legislation was: the Pendleton Civil Service Act (1883), the Interstate Commerce Act (1887), and the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890.

Why were Gilded Age presidents so weak?

Government Activism and its Limits:

There are two standard themes in the political history of the late nineteenth century. One theme derides the era for its corruption and favoritism. The other heralds the era of limited government and unregulated markets. Both characterizations are accurate to an extent. Government in the late nineteenth century was changing. It was in the process of becoming more centralized and becoming more regulatory. The process was slow and it produced controversy. The conflict that illustrates not only the processual change but the conflict is regulation of the currency.

- The basic question has two parts: how should the government produce money and how much should it produce? In the late nineteenth century the two factions were called “resumptionists” and “greenbackers.” The resumptionists wanted the government to resume or return to the gold standard by making paper greenbacks convertible for gold or silver (specie). Prosperity brought an end to the controversy in the 1880s but depression in the 1890s revived it.
- Capitalist development changed American foreign policy in the late nineteenth century. The United States purchased Alaska in 1867 but commercial expansion was focused south rather than north. Latin America, the Pacific, and Asia all became key areas for American commercial exports. The executive branch was also strengthened as the president took control of America’s foreign policy from the Congress.
A permanent government bureaucracy grew following the Civil War. New departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, were created, others were expanded. The number of civilian employees of the federal government also grew. By the last decade of the century most government jobs were civil service jobs. Despite its growth, the national government’s bureaucracy was just becoming modernized.

State and local governments also changed at the end of the nineteenth century. State legislators lowered taxes and balanced budgets but they also established a host of regulatory bodies to govern municipal growth and deal with issues related to industrialization. Municipal governments, though, directly affected Americans’ daily lives. Elected officials were replaced by professional educated city employees who attacked urban problems providing citizens with a variety of public services.

In what ways did the federal government become more active after the Civil War?

Middle Class Radicalism: The industrialization of the economy as well as the changes that it brought with it caused many Americans to look for alternate explanations for and solutions to Americans’ problems. The more radical proposals, such as socialism, were not very popular with the discontented who feared the working class would overthrow private property owners. Instead the discontented looked for more traditional solutions.

Well-educated, American-born, and middle class, Henry George was typical of the discontented. He was concerned about the increasing number of poor Americans. George believed that the ownership of land, once common, created a society of independent working people. These were the producers — people who created wealth. The ownership of most of the nation’s land was now owned by a small number of wealthy Americans. Producers were now forced to work for the landowners who George called predators. They made their wealth off of the work of others. George argued for a single tax on rents which he believed was an unnatural transfer of wealth from the producer class to the predator (landlords) class. The tax, especially a high tax, would discourage the accumulation of land by the land owning class.

Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel, Looking Back, showed readers how much better society would be if Americans would abandon “excessive individualism” and “great aggregations of capital.” Labor and capitalism would once again exist in harmony. Bellamy’s utopian world appealed to many Americans, who, like Bellamy, feared militant workers.

By the turn of the century, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union used its power and prestige to influence state, county, and local governments to regulate or restrict the manufacture and sale of alcohol and it expanded its concerns to include women’s suffrage and a whole host of issues directly related to the political economy. The WCTU was a narrowly middle-class reform movement. Its leadership and local membership was predominantly Protestant and few working immigrant women sought membership in the union.

What was “producer ideology” and how did it influence American politics in the late nineteenth century?

Discontent Among Workers: Radicalized workers agreed with the reformers that problems were not being addressed. Employees and employers were increasingly at odds. Labor radicals even questioned the premises of producers ideology, that American democracy was secured by a unique harmony between capital and labor. Advocates of the producers ideology continued to search for a political solution to the labor problem.

By 1880, 40 percent of industrial workers lived at or below the poverty line. Seasonal unemployment, a normal part of a wage earner’s life, accounted for their condition as well as the fact that wage increases during the 1880’s and 1890’s did not affect these worker’s pay. The Knights of Labor, founded in 1869, was the most important labor organization to emerge in the 1870’s. In 1885, membership skyrocketed to over 700,000. But the growth of membership posed problems: self-employed producers preferred to use consumer boycotts to illicit change while wage workers used the labor strike.

The Haymarket Strike in Chicago in May 1886, was one of the most successful labor walkouts in American history. In Chicago, 80,000 workers struck for an eight-hour workday. On the fourth day of the strike, violence erupted when an anarchist tossed a bomb at a line of policeman. The anarchists’ violent rhetoric inflamed the situation as strikers and policemen battled one another.

American farmers, especially in the west and south, were also in a desperate state because of industrialism and the globalization of the economy. Unlike their ancestors, American farmers at the turn of the century demanded the government do something. The farmers wanted the government to manage currency inflation, railroad rate discrimination, tariff reform, as well as a host of other reforms. The farmers coalitions, such as the Grange and the Farmers’ Alliance, were not very long-lived movements nor were
they very successful but they did pave the way for another alliance of farmers, the Populists, and they did introduce some very progressive ideas such as the direct election of senators.

- The People’s Party, or the Populists, called for an alliance of all working people and the restoration of harmony between small property owners and wage earners, a graduated income tax, direct government ownership of the railroad and telegraph industries, and the redistribution of all lands owned by the railroads. The Populists had some success at the ballot box. Their greatest challenge was maintaining the alliance of working people and small business owners. The Populist platform represented the concerns of the agrarian west and south, not those of industrial workers.

In what way was the Haymarket riot a turning point in the history of organized labor?

**Feature: Anarchists on Trial:** Ten anarchists in Chicago were arrested after the Haymarket riot and indicted on 69 different counts. Eight of the ten were tried in Chicago just two months after the riot. The trial has been typified as one of the worst miscarriages of justice in part because of jurors whose minds were made up before the trial, a judge who gave the prosecution a great deal of freedom, and a public that was frightened of the defendants and their beliefs. In the end, four of the convicted were hung.

**Conclusion:** The social and political problems created by the industrialization of the nation at the turn of the century were of concern to those in and out of government. Both political parties were so evenly matched at the ballot box that neither proposed any striking solutions. As a result, private citizens attempted to influence government officials and to solve the problems themselves. By the end of the century, a more modern government had evolved, one more capable of dealing with Americans’ problems.

What was “partisan politics” and how did conservatives respond to it in the late nineteenth century?

**Making links to other ideas** Using the maps and websites, in addition to your prepared lectures and other assignments, can give you more resources to enable your students to see that history is much more than memorizing names and dates. You will find that the websites are even more comprehensive and adaptable than described and because they have been collected here in one volume you have a world of information no further away than the click of your mouse. If you are new to the web’s opportunities, you will be pleasantly surprised at the breadth and depth of the information available in these sites.

Map 01. In the election between Harrison, Cleveland, and the other minor parties, contrast the locations, populations, and economies of those states that supported Harrison and those that supported Cleveland.

Map 02. With the acquisition of colonies in the Pacific Ocean, what would the nation need to support in order to protect its possessions? Why would other nations want these possessions?

Chronology: Identify the social reform aspects listed in the chronology and the legislative reforms. Correlate them to the president in office and his attitude about reform.

**Web connections and resources** Consider using these websites to supplement your students’ reading and analytical skills. The sites were chosen because of their relevance to the material in the chapter -- not just to mirror it but to provide additional materials and perspectives. Questions from the student study guide have been included so that you can use or amend them to your own needs. Your students may find it insightful for you to guide them through the site as you help them develop research strategies.

“Politics of Industrial Capitalism” www.prenhall/boydston/homesteadstrike

Skilled workers in the steel industry, as in the rest of the economy, exercised a good deal of control over working conditions. Capitalists like Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick wanted to exploit new mechanical advances to assert management's right to control production. The Homestead Strike was a great battle in this struggle. Carnegie and Frick won but not before immigrant radical Alexander Berkman almost succeeded in assassinating Frick. How did the various parties to the strike see the issues?

1. Compare the views of the different principals.
2. Do they agree on any one issue? Why or why not?
This site provides extensive information about the Populist Party, including explanations about dueling Populist factions, the party’s platform and primary news accounts.
1. What were the Populists in favor of that neither Republicans nor Democrats addressed?
2. The Populists may not have succeeded in getting a viable presidential nominee but does that mean that the Populists were completely unsuccessful in drawing attention to the plight of farmers and working people?

This site provides access to the full text of Edward Bellamy’s famed 1888 utopian novel Looking Backward.
1. Edward Bellamy’s book has been translated into more than twenty languages. What accounts for its continued popularity more than 120 years after it was first published?
2. What examples does Bellamy give to illustrate his belief that capitalism was unfair and unjust to rich and poor alike?

Produced by the Chicago Historical Society, this site details the events leading up to the Haymarket riot, including the radicalization of many American workers and class tensions in America. The site includes both essays and primary source material.
1. Examine the background issues that contributed to the Haymarket riot. What were they? Why did the workers believe rioting was their only recourse?

Analytical reading
Your students may need more experience analyzing a short reading passage so that he or she can determine its component parts. They may need help identifying primary and supporting information as well as the author’s analysis. The analytical reading passages and the questions from the student study guide have been duplicated in the instructor’s manual for your use. Your students may need direction and encouragement in using them.

Women rarely entered public life as individuals or as party spokesmen. Instead, they pursued politics as representatives of voluntary associations that were dedicated to a host of specific reforms. Some fought for Sabbatarian laws that would prohibit working and drinking alcohol on the Sabbath. Other voluntary associations brought women into the struggles against slavery, prostitution, and poverty. Most women entered the public arena under the auspices of organizations such as the Female Moral Reform Society, the National American Woman Suffrage Association and, most importantly, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Because it grew out of voluntary associations rather than political parties, this style of political activity has come to be known as “voluntarism.”

The vast majority of those who joined voluntary associations came from the educated middle class. Although they were often quite radical in their politics, voluntary associations inevitably reflected the class biases of their members. By upholding the home as the special preserve of feminine authority, for example, reformers ignored the fact that working class families depended heavily on the labor of wives and children. The domestic ideal was something few working-class women could reproduce in their own lives. As a result, working women did not join voluntary associations in large numbers.
1. The stereotype held that women were destined by nature to stay at home as the protectors of “family virtue” rather than in traditional political endeavors. How was “voluntarism” seen as an appropriate expression for women?
2. Why were working women so infrequently members or participants in these women’s political groups? Was that a problem for either working women or for the activists?
Writing  The questions or writing prompts from the student study guide have been duplicated here for your use. These writing topics make good lecture topics especially if you help your students see the development of the idea in lecture format before they refine the idea in their writing assignments.

1. Discuss the term “Gilded Age” as a metaphor for this period.
2. If the president of the United States during the Gilded Age were weak, where, then, were the leaders of America? Why did they not choose politics as an option for exerting their leadership?
3. Compare and contrast Edward Bellamy’s solutions with those suggested by Henry George.
4. Describe the areas of interest and responsibility in the men’s sphere and the women’s sphere.
5. What does the growth and expansion of the federal government tell about the nature of the government’s responsibilities during this period?
6. The reactions of authorities to the Haymarket Riot and subsequent trial illustrate the level of fear some Americans felt for the contemporary political and social changes. What were Americans so afraid of? Why were they so fearful?
7. What does the creation of the Populist Party say about the way voters viewed the traditional parties? What issues did the Populists address that neither the Republicans nor Democrats addressed? (If you have not, please see the web site mentioned above.)

Lecture Strategies  Ultimately the lecture is where you impart, or profess, your knowledge for the benefit of your students. These strategies were designed around the textbook and if your classroom strategy is to use the organization of the text to organize your course content, these lecture ideas may prove helpful. However, if you lecture around themes please see the section entitled “Thematic Lecture Topics.” You may find that you are more comfortable with and your students are more responsive to a combination of the two.

Gilded Age Politics presents some interesting topics and challenges for students. Discuss the term to “gild” your students and help them see it as a metaphor for this period. Have them consider the technological advances brought by the industrial economy but also ask them to consider the costs of those advances; the same can be done with the plight of working Americans and the “robber barons;” even American politics.

Questions about monetary policy and the divisions of greenbackers and resumptionists fueled political discourse during the Gilded Age. Help your students understand the issues and why Americans felt so passionate about them. That they turned to politics to broker the decisions tells us how much they believed in the political process. (For today’s college student this sort of political activism and interest may seem a bit foreign.)

This chapter also presents a good opportunity to discuss leadership (or its absence) in the three branches of government. If leaders were not in Washington, D. C., ask your students to explain where America’s leaders were during this time.

Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and Frances Willard present good characters for examining alternative solutions to the nation’s social and political problems.

Geographic expansion, which in turn causes growth in the nation’s bureaucracy and military, is also important, especially as you introduce the next chapter with its global expansion and conflict.