Chapter 20
Politics and Government, 1877—1900

Chapter Summary

Chapter 20 provides a survey of American political development during the late nineteenth century. Topics covered in this chapter include the style of nineteenth-century American political campaigns and elections, the quality of leadership in the American federal government, the major political issues of the late nineteenth century, and the rise and fall of the Populist Party.

I. The Structure and Style of Politics
   A. Campaigns and Elections
   B. Partisan Politics
      1. Party loyalty
      2. Party identities
      3. Third parties
   C. Associational Politics
      1. Women as activists

II. The Limits of Government
   A. The Weak Presidency
   B. The Inefficient Congress
   C. The Federal Bureaucracy and the Spoils System
   D. Inconsistent State Government

III. Public Policies and National Elections
   A. Civil Service Reform
   B. The Political Life of the Tariff
   C. The Beginnings of Federal Regulation
   D. The Money Question
      1. The silver issue

IV. The Crisis of the 1890s
   A. Farmers Protest Inequities
      1. Credit inequities
      2. Freight rates and tariffs
      3. Farmers organize
   B. The People’s Party
      1. National action
   C. The Challenge of the Depression
      1. Appeals for federal action
      2. Protecting big business
   D. The Battle of the Standards and the Election of 1896
      1. McKinley and the Republicans
      2. Bryan and the Silverites
      3. Money and oratory
V. Conclusion

Learning Objectives

After a careful examination of Chapter 20, students should be able to do the following:

1. Discuss the style of political campaigning popular in the United States during the late nineteenth century. Describe election practices common in the United States during the late nineteenth century.

2. Explain the relative control the Democratic and Republican parties had in the federal government during the late nineteenth century.

3. Compare and contrast the characteristics of supporters of the Democratic and Republican parties at the turn of the century. Outline the policies and issues associated with each of the major parties.

4. List some of the major associations that became politically active at the turn of the century. Describe their agendas and how they attempted to use the political system to advance reform.

5. Describe the importance of prohibition to the political development of American women.

6. List the factors that limited the efficiency and effectiveness of Congress during the late nineteenth century.

7. Define the term spoils system and explain its strengths and weaknesses as a means of selecting officials for the federal bureaucracy.

8. Outline the provisions of the Pendleton Civil Service Act and explain its impact on the quality of government employees hired at the turn of the century.

9. Explain the protective tariff as an issue reflecting regional as well as agrarian-industrial divisions at the turn of the century.

10. Define the term laissez faire and explain how the Interstate Commerce Act and the Sherman Antitrust Act signaled the beginning of federal movement away from this policy.

11. Distinguish between the sound money policy and the inflationary monetary policy being debated at the turn of the century. Explain why bankers and business men supported the sound money policy and why farmers and miners supported the inflationary monetary policy.

12. Outline the provisions of the Bland-Allison Act and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and explain their impact on the money and credit issues of the late nineteenth century.

13. List the economic issues that sparked a crisis among farmers in the late nineteenth century.

14. Discuss efforts made by the Farmers Alliance to remedy the ills facing farmers. Comment on the success of these efforts.

15. Discuss the political success of the Populist Party on the state and local level during the early 1890s. Comment on the regional variations of support for the Populists.
16. Discuss the historical significance of the Omaha Platform.

17. Discuss the impact of the 1893 depression on American reform movements and on traditional American ideas regarding laissez faire.

18. Identify Jacob Coxey and comment on the impact of the people’s march on Washington, D.C.

19. Discuss the role of the Supreme Court in defining laissez faire policy and how that role impacted reform efforts.

20. Discuss the importance of the gold and silver standards as issues in the presidential election of 1896.

21. Identify Mark Hanna and explain his role in the presidential election of 1896.

22. Discuss William Jennings Bryan’s dilemma in the election of 1896. Define the term *fusion* and explain its pertinence to the election of 1896.

**Topics for Classroom Lecture**

1. Present a comparison and contrast of the Democratic and Republican parties at the turn of the century. Include some of the following issues:
   a. Who composed the membership of each party? Look at the regional, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and religious characteristics of each party’s membership.
   b. Consider areas of political policy such as fiscal policy, social reform, sympathy toward business and agriculture, immigration, prohibition, civil service reform, and tariffs.
   c. Allow students to compare and contrast the characteristics of the Democratic and Republican parties at the turn of the century to the modern-day parties. Would modern-day Republicans feel comfortable in the nineteenth-century party? Would modern-day Democrats feel comfortable in the nineteenth-century party? Where have the major changes occurred in each party’s membership and policies? Can students predict when in the twentieth century these changes will occur?

2. Discuss the importance of the issue of prohibition at the turn of the century. Consider some of the following issues:
   a. If you have not addressed it in earlier chapters, provide a moral and political context for this reform issue. How does prohibition connect to evangelical Protestantism, to nativism, to modern industrialism, and to feminism?
   b. Provide an overview of turn of the century parties and organizations dedicated to prohibition. Focus particularly on the Prohibition Party and the WCTU.
   c. Make a connection between prohibition and the politicization of the modern American woman. Have students comment on the fact that this movement will not only achieve federal prohibition of the production and distribution of alcohol, but it will achieve that prohibition through a constitutional amendment. Is there any connection between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments?

**Topics for Class Discussion and Essays**

1. Discuss the Populist movement as the first major modern American reform movement. Some issues to consider include the following:
a. Have students define the word *reform*. What does it mean and how does it apply to the Populist movement?

b. Analyze the Omaha Platform. Does it reflect a conservative or liberal agenda? What components of the agenda eventually became American law?

c. Was the Populist movement successful or was it a failure? Help students to anticipate the Progressive movement by predicting who will be successful in realizing much of the Populist agenda. Why will Progressives be successful when Populists were not?

d. Was the Populist movement conservative or liberal? In what ways did Populists seek change? Was there a conservative element in the movement? Were the Populists in any way motivated by a desire to prevent change or to conserve some aspects of American cultural, social, and economic tradition?

2. Have the class look at the issue of laissez faire in American history. In Chapter 20, students considered the nature of capitalism and how it was changing at the turn of the century. Why did many Americans, by 1900, demand a retreat from laissez faire? Were they interested in abandoning capitalism or retaining it? How did the federal government respond to the demand to move away from laissez faire? How did business respond? Why did Americans turn to the government for help against business, railroads, and the banking system? Why did they not solve their problems without government involvement?

**Topics for Class Projects and Term Papers**

1. Research the children’s author L. Frank Baum and prepare a paper or presentation on his Oz series. Baum was a zealous Populist who used children’s literature as a medium for communicating his political agenda. Look at the characters, symbols, and themes of the *Wizard of Oz* and explain how they are representative of components of the Populist agenda. Also, some attention can be given to the idea of using children’s literature as a means of education or even indoctrination. Can students think of other children’s books that do more than entertain?

2. Choose one of the political figures associated with the Populist movement, such as Mary Lease or Sockless Jerry Simpson, and examine his or her political agenda and style. Why has the Populist movement sometimes been connected to the lunatic fringe?

3. Have students examine Bill Gates’s dilemma with the federal government. What charges did the government bring against Gates and why? Do the students agree with the charges? Should Microsoft be split in the interest of preserving competition in the marketplace? Have them examine different points of view regarding the case. Why do some people support Gates and his success? Why do others see him as a spoiler? Why might Americans today feel differently from nineteenth-century Americans about Gates’s success? Was there a link between Gates’s success and, at least, some of the prosperity some Americans enjoyed during the market boom of the nineties?

**Resources for Lectures and Research Projects**

Audio-Visual Resources

This series examines American political, social, and cultural history at the turn of the century.

This is the film adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s Populist-inspired children’s novel.