

Defining Progressivism  
U.S. History

**Definitions**

**progressivism** (*noun*)

1. the political orientation of those who favor progress toward better conditions in government and society (<http://define.ansme.com/words/p/progressivism.html>)

**progressive** (*noun*)

1. a person believing in moderate political change and social improvement through political action (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

**Assignment**

Using these general definitions, decide whether the following people, ideas or laws fit the definition of Progressive:

1. Jane Addams

Jane Addams was "anxious to improve the lot of the urban poor, and to assist women and children workers. She started Hull House, one of the first settlement houses in the United States. She appreciate immigrant culture, and offered Italian and German culture evenings at Hull House to "help the foreign-born conserve and keep whatever of value their past life contained and to bring them into contact with a better class of Americans." She helped found the N.A.A.C.P. and was a strong advocate for women's suffrage.

Was Jane Addams "progressive"? (circle one)                      YES                      NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

2. William Jennings Bryan

William Jennings Bryan believed in infallibility of the Bible, and as such defended the state of Tennessee's law which banned the teaching of evolution in schools. Another important cause of Bryan's was prohibition. "In crusading against alcohol, Bryan and many of his fellow prohibitionists considered themselves as Progressives engaged in a reform that would eventually engulf the entire world. Bryan thought that prohibition was just a continuation of the struggle against the selfish interests that put private profit above human welfare and fed upon the helplessness of the masses."

Was William Jennings Bryan "progressive"? (circle one)                      YES                      NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

3. Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt took the view that the President of the United States, as a "steward of the people", should take whatever action necessary for the public good unless expressly forbidden by law or the Constitution. One of his most famous quotes is "I believe in corporations. They are indispensable instruments of our modern civilization; but I believe that they should be so supervised and so regulated that they shall act for the interest of the community as a whole."

Some of Theodore Roosevelt's most effective achievements were in conservation. He added enormously to the national forests in the West, reserved lands for public use, and fostered great irrigation projects.

Was Theodore Roosevelt "progressive"? (circle one)                      YES                      NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

4. Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Born a slave, Ida B. Wells-Barnett later became a schoolteacher and after the savage lynching of three of her friends devoted her life to anti-lynching campaigns. She organized a boycott of the Memphis trolley system and later championed an exodus out of Memphis which resulted in several thousand African-Americans leaving. She lectured throughout the North and in Great Britain, and later was one of the founding members of the N.A.A.C.P.

Was Ida B. Wells-Barnett "progressive"? (circle one)                      YES                      NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

5. Eugenics

Eugenics was, quite literally, an effort to breed better human beings – by encouraging the reproduction of people with "good" genes and discouraging those with "bad" genes. Eugenicists effectively lobbied for social legislation to keep racial and ethnic groups separate, to restrict immigration from southern and eastern Europe, and to sterilize people considered "genetically unfit."

Is Eugenics "progressive"? (circle one)

YES

NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

6. Louis Brandeis

Louis Brandeis showed a strong sympathy for the trade union movement and women's rights. This included him working without fees to fight for causes he believed in such as the minimum wage and anti-trust legislation. As a supporter of trade union rights, Brandeis argued that the retailer should make sure that "the goods which he sold were manufactured under conditions which were fair to the workers - fair as to wages, hours of work, and sanitary conditions." He went on to claim that if the business community considered moral issues when producing and selling goods then 'big business' will then mean "business big not in bulk or power but great in service and grand in manner. Big business will then mean professionalized business, as distinguished from the occupation of petty trafficking or more moneymaking." Brandeis was also a strong advocate of individual rights and freedom of speech.

Was Louis Brandeis "progressive"? (circle one)

YES

NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

7. Robert LaFollette

Robert LaFollette supported a program of tax reform (higher corporate taxes) to help pay off state debts and fund education, corporation regulation (railroads) and an extension of political democracy (direct primary). As a U.S. Senator, La Follette argued that his main role was to "protect the people" from the "selfish interests". He claimed that the nation's economy was dominated by fewer than 100 industrialists. He went on to argue that these men then used this power to control the political process. La Follette supported the growth of trade unions as he saw them as a check on the power of large corporations.

Was Robert LaFollette "progressive"? (circle one)

YES

NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

8. Comstock Law, 1873

The law was named after its chief proponent, the anti-obscenity crusader Anthony Comstock. The enforcement of the Act was in its early days often conducted by Comstock himself or through his New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The Comstock Act is (it is still in effect although in a modified form) a United States federal law that made it illegal to send any "obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious" materials through the mail, including contraceptive devices and information. In addition to banning contraceptives, this act also banned the distribution of information on abortion for educational purposes.

Was the Comstock Law "progressive"? (circle one)                      YES                      NO

Defend your opinion:

---

---

---