The fight for civic rights in America in the Progressive Era

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A Thesis
Entitled

“The Fight for Civic Rights in America in The Progressive Era”

By
Michael J. Welker

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Liberal Studies.

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The University of Toledo
December 2010
An Abstract of

“The Fight for Civic Rights in America in The Progressive Era”

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Civic and Citizenship are terms that can and need to be defined to understand their
evolution and meaning for Americans today. In particular, this is necessary for
understanding the rights and duties that come from being a member in society. We can
take this as our response to our membership in American society. The initial vision of
what rights and duties the common citizen were allocated was a paternalistic, “limit the
harm they can do” in spite of themselves approach. This was largely based on the
influence of classical western attitudes, economic self interests and Revolutionary War
era popular democracies. The white male elites of the Constitutional Convention
allocated to the common people the rights to simply be passive and support their selected
local elites. While there were some marginal changes to these civic rights for the lower
classes through the late 1700s and the 1800s, it was not until the excesses of the Gilded
Age (1870s-1890s) that major changes would be made to these rights and role. The
Progressive Era of the late 1890s through 1920 saw a mass movement towards reform
that was wildly uneven, contradictory, uncoordinated and thoroughly racist. While many
concessions were made to the Progressive reformers, there were distinct limits and
reactionary repression on more radical Anarchists and Socialists. Yet in spite of the unevenness and limitations, the common white American citizen undeniably emerged from the era with significant gains in new abilities to influence the decisions that influenced their lives. Today, there are new forms of disenfranchisement and much apathy and justified cynicism towards our civic affairs. But there are many examples and models of what can and must be done to hold onto and revitalize these hard won powers.
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Chapter 1

Definitions of Citizenship

As with many things in our post modern discussions, it is useful to clarify the terminology as a useful starting point. Civic is defined as —of or relating to a citizen, a city, citizenship, or community affairs” ("civic." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.) For the purposes of this exploration, I will be focusing on the rights of citizenship and community affairs aspect and its incumbent duties. The Merriam Webster definition of citizenship identifies first as —the status of being a citizen” ("citizenship." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary), in terms of community/political framework who or who is NOT considered a part of the body politic. The historical tug of war power struggle for being —in” that group or not is another element of emphasis I will be addressing throughout. But it is the latter part of the second definition of citizenship that captures the heart of the matter: —the quality of an individual's response to membership in a community” ("citizenship." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). For once our predecessors have fought, bled, killed and suffered for attaining access to part of the political body, what are the incumbent obligations for your response to that sometimes fleeting membership? I will be narrowing the focus further to discuss this in the historical sense for the modern American.
This “Citizenship” is of course bound up in American context with the idea of a democracy, which was probably coined by the ancient Athenians, from the Greek *demokratia* where *demos* is the people and *kratos*, which is to rule (Dahl, p. 11).

Cornel West further develops this idea, saying that “democracy is also about giving each person a dignified voice in the decision-making processes in those institutions that guide and regulate their lives.” (p. 10). With this sense of citizenship in a democratic society, every person is empowered by the right to have a say in shaping the direction of that society. This in turn, gives everybody a stake in the success of the society which makes for a more engaged citizenry. This in turn creates a society that has a more solid basis for stability rather than a society dominated by the whims of a small and isolated ruling elite. Furthermore, a more active citizenry is a strong bulwark against the erosion of rights and freedoms ceded to the citizenry.
Chapter 2

Conception of Citizenship at founding

The wealthy Revolutionary elite men that wrote and ratified the Constitution not only wanted safeguards against capricious and arbitrary tyranny of monarchy, but despite the revolutionary rhetoric, they also wanted and built in safeguards against the rule of the common citizen. The Revolutionary leaders, after eight years of war and dysfunctional government, allocated a limited role for a select segment of the population, namely white, male, land owning men, which was an apt summary of the powerful ruling class of the Founders themselves. Yet this was labeled a radical and populist new form of government, even though for the majority of the population, -- e.g., lower class, non-land owning, slaves, -- this was simply a ruling group of elites defining and fencing off its exclusive province as the controls of government. This clear intent came in large part from the patronizing classical biases towards the commoner and the need to control them.

The classical Western intellectual tradition that the founders drew from came with an embedded bias to contain the common people within the controls and boundaries of the enlightened wise and noble elite leaders (remarkably similar in spirit to the Progressive Era ideals as we will discuss later). As Cornel West eloquently summarizes this classical attitude

For most of history, ordinary people have been viewed as ‘weeds and rain drops’, as part of a mob, a rabble, all of which are ways of constituting them as an undifferentiated mob. Even the Greeks, despite their glorious yet truncated democratic experiment, would only apply the tragic to the elite. Ordinary people
were limited to the idyllic and the comic, the assumption being that their lives were less complex and one-dimensional. (p. 8).

As such, the common citizen could be easily controlled by demagogues and other renegade elites. The boogeyman for this theorem was Athenian Democracy, which was presumed to be the ultimate fate of “mob rule” with real power given to the people. Indeed the power struggles were reflected in the employment of the term democracy itself from its beginnings in Athens. Athenian aristocratic critics used it — as a kind of epithet, to show their disdain for the common people who had wrested away the aristocrats‘ previous control over government.” (Dahl, p. 12) Indeed, the Athenian democracy gave an extraordinary amount of power to its adult white male citizen populations, such that by some estimates, —.an ordinary citizen stood a fair chance of being chosen by lot in his (emphasis added) lifetime to serve as the most important presiding officer in the government.” (Dahl, p. 12) But it was the ultimate decline and fall of the Athenian democracy, not the merits or innovations of white male direct participatory democracy that the Western intellectual elites seized on then promoted as axiomatic propaganda, starting with Aristotle:

Since at least the time of Aristotle, theorists had categorized forms of government into three ideal types: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy... Aristotle and others believed that each of these rulers when alone entrusted with political power tended to run amok and to become perverted... democracy became anarchy. Only by mixing each of these types together in the same constitution, only by balancing the tendencies of each of them, could order be maintained and the perfections of each type of simple government be achieved. The result would be a governmental system in equilibrium—the very kind of static model that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment admired. (Wood, p. 3)

Taking this sentiment at face value, the effective result was that 2/3 of America’s new government -- and thus a firewall like majority —of the elite (President and Judiciary) to
counter balance the people's chamber of the House, which then still had the oligarchic Senate to further restrain and limit the effectiveness of the "common" people's power. This arrangement of course continued even after the electorate began to be begrudgingly expanded to include white male citizens of low means and non-elite lineage, starting in the 1820s. As Hofstadter puts it of that Jacksonian era, "the people, the property less masses, were beginning, at first quietly and almost unobtrusively, to enter politics.” (Hofstadter, American Political Tradition p. 65)

This classical inspired distrust of the people and genuine citizen empowerment was high on the agenda of the Constitutional Convention of the 1787. This was in part due to an unintended consequence of the elites' Revolutionary rhetoric, which was that broader, more democratic governments had actually been created in some areas to fill the power void. Thomas Jefferson, envisioned that American citizens could be rehabilitated to be Virgilian farmers, that would find virtue through agrarian occupations and yet be students of classical thought and literature as evident in this description: "... a nation of farmers... independent, informed, unexcitable and incorruptible... educated... and blessed with free institutions.” (Hofstadter, American Political Tradition p. 40-41) Here again, this was part of the definition of the planter elite because, crucially, access to this knowledge was bound up in having access to education, which was not available to the common folk, but only to the elite. In part, the failure of this unrealistic vision for the working classes contributed to the low regard in which people's rule was held by the Convention delegates:

Americans of 1787 were not the republican enthusiasts they had been in 1776. In a decade's time many of them had had their earlier dreams and illusions about
republicanism considerably dampened. Experience with popular government, especially in the state legislatures, had cast doubt on the American people's capacity for virtue and disinterestedness. By 1787 many leaders, therefore, were ready for what James Madison called a "systematic change" of government… (Wood, p. 3)

So at this key moment in our U.S. history, the ruling elite's predispositions to not relinquish power were very keenly sharpened, not just by far off Athenian Democracy, but by clear and present circumstances. The resulting American government then, mythologizing aside, was one that by intent, did not build on the common citizen's potential to contribute and actively become involved in the betterment of the political and social order. Instead, it was oriented to limit the harm the commoners could do (to protect them paternalistically from themselves) and thus effectively justify the real and extensive limits placed on access to power. Burstein captures this point eloquently, saying:

The Founding Fathers' concerns were … the dangers posed by a citizenry that was not virtuous… and a fearful analysis of the inevitable decline of even the best constitution from monarchy through oligarchy and democracy to tyranny… The tone of pride in their achievement is unmistakable in Madison's condescending assertion in Federalist 63 of the superiority of the Constitution with its Senate to the failed democracy of Athens: What bitter anguish would not the people of Athens have often escaped if their government had contained so provident a safeguard (a Senate) against the tyranny of their own passions? (Burstein)

Hofstadter goes further and says that "the liberty with which they [Constitutional Convention Delegates] were most concerned was menaced by democracy…" and that what the authors of the constitution wanted most in their new government was protection —..from attacks on the creditor class or on property, from popular insurrection… The Convention was a fraternity of types of absentee ownership.” (Hofstadter, American Political Tradition p. 14- 15). Even with a more charitable analysis of the Constitutional delegates’ motivations and good intentions, it is undeniable how paltry of an inheritance
they provided to the people. The results of the Constitutional convention and the ratification debates were a narrow and fenced off conception of citizen’s duties and rights which Schudson summarizes:

That was the whole of the citizen’s job – watchfulness to defeat ambition. Citizens were decidedly not to undertake their own evaluation of issues before the legislature. That was the job of representatives… Representatives would have enough in common with the people they represented to keep their ‘interests’ in mind… elected representatives – not parties, not interest groups, not newspapers, not citizens in the streets (emphasis added)– were to make policy. (Cigler Loomis, p. 156)

Since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the sweep of American history can then be viewed as the struggle for even the humblest members of the disenfranchised, property less mob of American citizens to expand their practical ability to influence and participate in the decisions of the institutions that regulate our society and lives. Due to the original hand the Constitution dealt the common folk, it has been an inherent duty to fight the ruling elite and forces of privilege and make these elites cede further rights to the people. Linebaugh summarizes this up, responding to Madison’s comments and distilling the reality of our foundational document: “If, as he explained, the U.S. Constitution was founded for the propertied, we must infer that the constitution of the unpropertied was left to a later time.” (Linebaugh, p. 243)

One particular era that was a key chapter in the struggle for the common man’s access to fully participating in American democracy was the Progressive Era of the early 1900s.
The Progressive Era from approximately 1890-1920, was a turbulent era in American history with large unrest and a loose movement that began at the grassroots and rose to the halls of power. The post Civil War Reconstruction era, otherwise known as the Gilded Age, was the ultimate culmination of unregulated free market industrialization built on the backs and the brawn of the poor, immigrants and other disenfranchised groups. Whatever small advancement for ceding more civic power to the common folk had been made from the foundation of the country to the beginnings of Industrialization were vastly undercut by these material inequalities of the Gilded Age. As Linebaugh puts it: "…political and legal rights can exist only on an economic foundation. To be free citizens we must also be equal producers and consumers." (Linebaugh, p. 6) The Gilded Age’s rampant corruption, monopolies and all manner of recklessness with workers’ welfare and public safety in the name of trying to pad the bottom line for the rich industrial barons had firmly entrenched vast economic and power inequalities in the among the citizenry. Further, the wild inequalities of the freshly industrialized society pushed Americans of conscience to the breaking point. As Bellah characterizes it:
In the late nineteenth century capitalist development was in full swing, but it was a development so grossly exploitative, so unequal in its rewards, so patently unfair, that it stimulated the massive opposition of labor unions and socialist parties, which challenged the control of the capitalist class through much of the twentieth century. (p. 13).

Christian succinctly puts it: “Americans at the turn of the 20th century experienced a moral, political and economic crisis.” (p. 55). Theodore Roosevelt, ever a man tuned to the political times around him, articulated the challenge to his era in his 1905 Inaugural address, saying:

…the extraordinary industrial development of the last half century are felt in every fiber of our social and political being... The conditions which have told for our marvelous material well-being, which have developed to a very high degree our energy, self-reliance, and individual initiative, have also brought the care and anxiety inseparable from the accumulation of great wealth in industrial centers. (Roosevelt, Inaugural Address)

Yet seen in the long view, this was not a challenge that had sprung solely out of the excesses of the 1890s. It was a continuation of the struggle present at the creation of the country. Harkening back to Thomas Paine’s “Agrarian Justice” in 1797, Linebaugh extracts that very analysis from Paine’s essay: “This is a decisive insight: poverty is created for political purposes.” (Paine, p. xxxii) The Gilded Age made this inter-related economic and political disenfranchisement so glaring as to create a popular pushback against this state of affairs by a broad spectrum of American society. This, in a nutshell, was the Progressive movement. This movement was a very notable chapter in a long and ongoing struggle for extracting political concessions from the powerful ruling classes, for the poor and working class average Americans. Many Progressive writers were conscious of this and framed their various causes in this context. Tom Johnson, famous Progressive mayor of Cleveland, put it straight-forwardly: “The greatest movement in the world today may be characterized as the struggle of the people against Privilege.” (Johnson, p.
While the Era and this reform movement were part of a longer struggle, there were notable characteristics unique to the Progressive Era.

The makeup of the Progressive reformers reached across American society where a diverse mix of the citizenry that was actively engaged in working for one of the many sanctioned motley reform movements. A particular example is the varied composition of the crusade to alter drinking and prostitution; as McGerr states, it was made up of ministers, settlement workers, white-collar workers, and small business men played prominent roles in the campaigns to reshape adult behavior” (McGerr, p. 85) Part of the scope and reach for the appeal of the Progressive movement that animated so many citizens, was articulated by Randolph Bourne who said in 1913 of Progressivism, that “It is this union of the idealistic and the efficient… that gives the movement its hold on the disinterested and serious youth of today.” (Chambers, p. 280)

In particular, the Progressive reformers ardently believed that better efficiencies of administration of the country at the local, state and national spheres was key to leveling the playing field. Progressive writers had a religious fervor in their idealism (which was no accident as they primarily were many Progressives who saw their activism as an extension and act of their faith) that efficient administrative remedies could restore the many imbalances of our country’s inheritance. Brand Whitlock, mayor of Toledo first in 1910 and then reflecting back in 1913, offers up an example of this idea in his diagnosis and raison d’être of his Progressive mayor ship:

I have seen that our governments have abandoned the principle that all men are endowed with equal rights and have adopted the theory that some are entitled to more rights than others… it is treason against our theory of government. And it seemed to me that there was no other thing for me to do than to try… to aid and
advance that cause which seeks to do away with privilege in the land… if only we will make social and economic conditions that will give all men, instead of a few men, a chance to live, they will naturally and inevitably become good.

(p. 90-91 & 94)

This faith in efficiency is often framed not just as an ends in itself. Instead, efficiency for the Progressives typically was a leveling force to give all white citizens a “square deal” and equal opportunities. To the Progressive vision, this equality would then logically unleash the natural capacity for good in the citizenry and thus make an enlightened and ideal society. This would then not only eradicate the inequities of just the Gilded Age, but finally rout the injustices of privilege once and for all. This Progressive ideal could be found in the Chautauqua movement, which Trachtenberg describes as:

… A deliberate and conscious alternative to two extremes, the lavish and conspicuous squandering of wealth among the very rich and the squalor of the very poor. The extremes represented menace, peril to the original idea of a republic of freeholding independent property holders…insofar as it was based on education…. it offered a democratizing influence, accessible to all those willing to raise themselves to the status of American… a vision of a harmonious body politic under the rule of reason, light and sweet, cheerful emotion…

(Trachtenberg, p. 143)

Yet despite the seeming ethos of equality in these ideals, the Progressives still were products of their time and as such, they had a clear bias in limiting this vision in the main to white Americans only. As McGerr reminds us, the Progressives also supported disenfranchisement for African-Americans in the South, Native Americans in the West and immigrants all across the country.” (p. 216) This leads McGerr to further summarize that; —the Progressives‘ political strength was their ability to project the ‘people‘ against the powerful; their political weakness was their willingness to segregate the ballot box and thereby keeping so many Americans out of the battle against privilege.” (p. 216) This was one of the many contradictions inherent in the Progressive reformers. While the
Progressives agitated for, and achieved, many unprecedented modifications to the balance of power in American society, there were clear limits to how far they themselves were willing to go. Crucially, there were also limits on how much they would be given by the entrenched power brokers.

The Progressive reforms, while major sea changes from the history of the country to that point, were more palatable concessions for the political and economic elites to make than the un-orderly, more radical egalitarian reforms that Socialists and Anarchists threatened. The orderly Progressive civic rights reform victories were won within the existing mechanisms – in particular government regulation and legislation. At the same time, the radical, anti-capitalist egalitarian Socialists and Anarchists were widely discredited and sent clear messages that they would not be in any way tolerated.

Theodore Roosevelt, with his radical “trust busting” image, led the campaign to discredit Socialism and Anarchism. At the dawning of the Progressive era in 1900 in a set of essays, The Strenuous Life, he attempted to steer common folk away from the lure of Socialism:

Still less is there any patent device for remedying social evils and doing away with social inequalities. Wise legislation can help in each case, and crude, vicious, or demagogic legislation can do infinity of harm. But the betterment must come through the slow workings of the same forces which always have tended for righteousness, and always will… There is much dreadful misery in a great city, and a high-spirited, generous young man, when first brought into contact with it, has his sympathies so excited that he is very apt to become a socialist, or turn to the advocacy of any wild scheme, courting a plunge from bad to worse, exactly as do too many of the leaders of the discontent around him. His sanity and cool headedness will be thoroughly tried, and if he loses them his power for good will vanish. (Roosevelt, Strenuous Life)

Roosevelt and many Progressives, frame their egalitarian activism as an attempt to reform and stabilize the existing system by concessions and reforms, rather than working
for radical changes or scrapping the system altogether. Indeed, for those advocating too much revolution or uncontrolled reform, such as Socialists or Anarchists, the elements of privilege and order along with some Progressives, such as Roosevelt himself, were ready to offer swift reactionary violence and repression. One of the most infamous incidents of extraordinary government repression and harassment came during the Progressive Era in the form of the 1919 Palmer Raids. Linebaugh calls the 1919 Palmer Raids — one of those repressive spasms against the common people that have periodically convulsed the republic.” (p. 229) Emma Goldman, was a noted Anarchist and activist of the era, and frequent target for state harassment and vilification. Goldman was arrested and deported to Russia in the Palmer Raids. Before being deported, she had described to a jury her version of how the Progressive Wilson government voided rights and guarantees in a 1917 raid on her office, in the name of silencing her opposition to World War I conscription:

In their zeal to save the country from the trouble-makers, the Marshal and his helpers did not even consider it necessary to produce a search warrant. After all, what matters a mere scrap of paper when one is called upon to raid the offices of Anarchists! Of what consequence is the sanctity of property, the right of privacy, to officials in their dealings with Anarchists! … Would the gentlemen who came with Marshal McCarthy have dared to go into the offices of Morgan, or Rockefeller, or of any of those men without a search warrant? They never showed us the search warrant, although we asked them for it. Nevertheless, they turned our office into a battlefield, so that when they were through with it, it looked like invaded Belgium, with the only difference that the invaders were not Prussian barbarians but good American patriots bent on making New York safe for democracy. (Goldman)

Another illustrative episode of the government and moneyed interests’ Progressive Era’s forceful repression of too much radicalism can be found in the Western Federation of
Miners Strike in 1903. The commanding General of Roosevelt’s federal troops sent into Colorado City, General Sherman Bell, said he had

Military necessity which recognizes no laws either civil or social… I came to do up this damned anarchistic federation.‘ Although there was no violence of significance, Bell’s men ignored courts and public officials to arrest miners illegally. ‘To hell with the constitution,’ said one of the general’s officers, ‘we aren’t going by any constitution.‘ … company detectives secretly tried to wreck a train of nonunion miners in order to focus public anger on the WFM…. Bell’s troops refused to allow citizens to sell food or give aid to the miners’ families… the last act began in June when a bomb blew up a train of nonunion members in Cripple Creek. The Citizens’ Alliance took vigilante action, closed down the WFM headquarters and deported union members with the help of state troops. Several days later, mobs destroyed WFM cooperative stores and General Bell stranded seventy-nine more miners in other states. (McGerr, p. 139-140)

So even from the Progressive activist Presidents, there were limits and controls placed on the extent of reform and means of achieving it. Hofstadter offers a stark assessment of the effectiveness of this strategy:

…the discussions were so momentous in their character and so profound… and the material results were by comparison so marginal, so incomplete, so thoroughly blocked at all the major strategic points… despite the widespread public agitation over the matter, the men who took a conservative view of the needs of the hour never lost control. (Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, p. 252)

Certainly, the Progressive Reformers certainly did not – and likely by their composition and stances, never could —resolve all of the vast inequalities of the frantic Industrialization of the Gilded Age. Yet despite these limitations, the Progressive Reformers scored unprecedented and undeniable victories for political reform in favor for the common citizens. Certainly, the Progressives made these gains only because they were the less risky safety valve to take the pressure off of the wealthy barons of the Gilded Age rather than mass Socialist or Anarchist uprisings. Yet this does not diminish
the power that the common citizenry of the US gained to have a more effective and active role in the decisions that affected their lives
Chapter 4

Changing of Civic Rights in the Progressive Era

Despite the contradictions implied in this conflicting spirit, the Progressive movement had an ideal of uplifting all citizens and altering the political structures to favor direct citizen action, albeit ‘white only’... Amid the many diverse and contradictory goals and areas of focus of Progressive reformers, political reform was almost the sole common ground upon which differing groups could unite.” (Hays, p. 155)

Progressive political reforms were in the mold of Jefferson’s vision of an active and enlightened common citizenry. This was a clear and marked shift from the drowsy, passive role that the Founding elites had actually cast for the common citizen. The Progressives articulated in their rhetoric the intent to alter that status quo and used the terminology of the common white citizenry as a slumbering Lazarus, given up for dead, waiting to be awakened. David Graham Phillips articulated this in 1905 saying: —Our national idea is not a powerful state, famed and feared for bluster and appetite…. But manhood and womanhood, a citizenship ever wiser and stronger and more civilized – alert, enlightened, self-reliant, free.”(Chambers, p. 150). While Mayor Johnson said of the People that they are —slow to wake up, slow to recognize their own interests, slow to realize their own power, slow to invoke it....” (p. xxxv,). The realities of the Progressive
Era had radicalized many a thinker, writer and advocate that there was a great efficiency to be gained in citizens directly being empowered, with traditional middle men cut out. Hofstadter summarizes this key tenet of the Progressives aspiration: ‘…they believed that, just as the sinner can be cleansed and saved, so the nation could be redeemed if the citizens awoke to their responsibilities.’ (Age of Reform, p. 11) thus, even though the Progressive Era did not expand power-sharing to all members of society, it is a clear watershed in the rousing and shifting of the balance of direct power to the People.

Without the Progressives, we would not have our contemporary expectations and illusions of being able to influence and have a say in the decisions that govern our lives without the Progressives. As Schudson articulates it,

Today’s dominant views about citizenship come from the Progressives’ rationalist and ardently individualist worldview. The Progressive impulse was educational – to bring science to politics … to substitute pamphlets for parades and parlors for streets. The practice of citizenship, at least in campaigning and voting, became privatized, more effortful, more cognitive and a lot less fun…. The Progressive ideal requires citizens to possess a huge fund of political information and a ceaseless attentiveness to public issues. (Cigler & Loomis, p. 157)

The Progressive Era evidenced a push for the Athenian model of direct democracy, particular the Populist movement, as its leading spokesman William Jennings Bryan flatly stated in complete opposition to the founders‘ view:

I assert that the people of the United States… have sufficient patriotism and sufficient intelligence to sit in judgment on every question which has arisen or which will arise, no matter how long our government will endure. (Hofstadter, American Political Tradition p. 247)
Based on a re-conceptualized model of citizenship, reforms enshrined in laws a shift from the Framers‘ more narrow views of democratic access, resulting in the direct democracy initiatives of Progressive reforms were able to give citizens unprecedented power.

Chambers concludes that ―..progressives enacted a number of direct-democracy measures… By means of petitions voters could introduce legislation through the initiative, repeal legislation through the referendum and call for a vote to remove an elected official through the recall process.” (p. 160). Not only could Representatives be removed from power by the citizenry‘s initiative and votes, but Representative‘s legislation could be corrected or overturned or initiated directly by the citizenry. Specifically:

It included the initiative (vote on a ballot measure proposed by a citizen), referendum (vote on a measure referred to the electorate by the legislature), recall of elected officials (vote to remove a previously elected official from office), direct primaries (selection of candidates by party-wide vote, rather than selection by party hierarchy), and the direct election of United States senators (election of senators by the electorate, as opposed to election by state legislatures, as was the case in many states before 1913). (Oregon Historical Society)

These empowering reforms were established widely first in the state of Oregon and therefore known as ‘the Oregon System‘… [and] popularized throughout the country by its Oregon champion, William S. U‘Ren. —Hays, p. 155). U‘Ren did not develop this system on his own, but was inspired and greatly influenced by the 1892 book by James W. Sullivan Direct Legislation by the Citizenship Through the Initiative and Referendum. Towards the end of that work, Sullivan crystallizes a concise distillation of the Progressive Era reformer‘s seemingly contradictory ideological zeal, radicalism and capitalist conservatism that U‘Ren and many others imbibed:
What I set out in the first chapter to do seems to me done. I essayed to show how the political ‘machine,’ its ‘ring,’ ‘boss,’ and ‘heeler,’ might be abolished, and how, consequently, the American plutocracy might be destroyed, and government simplified and contracted to the field of its natural operations. These ends achieved, a social revolution would be accomplished—a revolution without loss of a single life or destruction of a dollar’s worth of property. (Sullivan, p. 95)

The scientific method evident here provides an exact prescription for the diagnosed ill. In an earlier section of the same work, Sullivan fully brings out the approach of a logician:

The conservative citizen, contented with the existing state of things, is wont to brush aside proposed innovations in government. To do so he avails himself of a familiar stock of objections. But have they not all their answer in the facts thus far brought forth in these chapters? Will he entertain no ‘crazy theories’? Here is offered practice, proven in varied and innumerable tests to be thoroughly feasible. (Sullivan, ‘Is Complete Direct Legislation Practicable?’)

This is how the Progressive ethos of a better society through efficiency was translated into something like common ground for pushing for expanding the role of the common citizenry.

Yet for all the ideals of political power passing to the citizenry, the extent of civic reforms were opposed, attacked and limited from within and without the loose Progressive Reform circles. This approach to organizing the levels of society into a more equitable power distribution, also limited the extent to which these powers could be ceded. Amid the shifting plates of societal forces, there was not a universal uptake of the handover of such powers to the commoners, even among Progressives themselves. There remained an uneasiness and disdain among many a non-Progressive ‘conservative citizen’ that echoed airs of displaced ancient Athenian aristocrats. This is exemplified by a 1912 New York Times piece on U‘Ren’s latest proposals:

The new system is the product of W. S. U‘Ren and other reformers who for the last decade have been upsetting political conditions in Oregon, and is intended to
complete the revolution which began with the popular choice of United States Senators, has brought the initiative and may bring the single tax and other nostrums for the ills of the body politic. (–Government By Proxy Now Oregon Plan Would Present Ideas of Representative Lawmaking”)
Chapter 5

Meaning and Duties of Citizenship for Today

Since the Progressive Era, and despite setbacks and repression, the Civil Rights Movement carried forward the struggle against privilege. Today, we live in a country without state sanctioned segregation that has extended the gains of the Progressives to all genders and races. Theoretically, all American citizens have more access and power to influence our lives and communities today than at any other point in our history. Yet those victories are in danger of being squandered. Extensive work on the topic of contemporary utilization of civic rights by Robert Putnam with Feldstein reveals a trend downward in American civic life to the point of a "civic crisis". These researchers go on to diagnosis this as a dearth of involvement at several levels, saying we are:

…No longer participants, we are becoming mere observers of our collective destiny. … By virtually every measure, today’s Americans are more disconnected from one another and from the institutions of civic life than at any time since statistics have been kept. Whether as family members, neighbors, friends, or citizens, we are tuning out rather than turning out. (Betters together.org, Introduction, pgs 3-4)

Indeed, even if we take for example the act of voting, which is a limited conception of using civic rights, contemporary Americans are not utilizing their civic rights. Using Gerhard Peters American Presidency Project’s numbers, the percentage of voter turnout
of the American voting age population for presidential elections was 51.3% for the 2000 election and 55.27% for the 2004 election. (Peters) McDonald has argued that these numbers are skewed as they include persons ineligible to vote, and if we adjust these numbers to reflect that, including a preliminary projection for the 2008 election, there is no decline since 1972… Indeed the turnout rates appear to have been restored to their earlier high levels as of 2008.” (Voter Turnout) Yet that is still only 61.7% of the American voting eligible population, even with the wider net of McDonald’s figures, or 56.8% by the conventional counting. (2008 Unofficial Voter Turnout)

In part, this apathy stems in contemporary America, from the renewed, if more subtle disenfranchisement that the forces of privilege now employ. Woodrow Wilson had said of the rot set into the country in the late 1880s: “Public life in America had degenerated into a struggle of vulgar interests; Americans were abandoned, in politics as in personal relations, to moneymaking; democracy must be reclaimed from the spoilsmen.” (Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It, p. 320) Having seen the belly of the beast itself, a contemporary keeper of the Progressive flame, Senator Paul Wellstone, writing in 2003, eerily echoes Wilson’s sentiment, almost 125 years later. Wellstone warns us that rather than the battle against privilege and the moneyed interests being a fight won and a settled matter of relevance only for historians, the game is now once again rigged against the common citizenry:

We do not have true democracy because our political system does not work for the people. Instead, well-paid corps of lobbyists and moneyed interests perpetuates the status quo. These power brokers rob the people of their ability to exercise authority, at least in free and open elections in which the best ideas and the best candidates prevail…. As the influence of power brokers has risen, so has the disenchantment of voters. When the people don’t hear politicians talk about
their concerns, they drop out…. The money chase, combined with this record-low voter turnout, has a lethal effect on politics. Most politicians dare not take positions that will offend the dominant economic interests and have little to say for low- and moderate-income people. These citizens thus become even further alienated from politics, there is even lower turnout and politicians pay even less attention. It is a vicious cycle that is destroying representative democracy. Ordinary citizens know they are shut out. The road leads to… the government of the few, by the few and for the few. It’s not like the people don’t want to change this system. They do. The problem is that the majority of people are convinced that it will never change, that big money will always run politics. This sense of powerlessness corrupts. What could be accomplished is never attempted. (p. 149-155)

Micah Sifry points to the University of Michigan’s National Election Studies (NES) as a source of quantitative data to illustrate the effects of this civic alienation:

According to the NES, the percentage agreeing that “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does” rose from 31 percent in 1952 to 53 percent in 1996. That is a strong statement of disaffection. (Ciglar & Loomis, p. 146)

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1996 was speaking of the many organizations that had fallen silent on welfare reform. However, he reveals the reality of what this contemporary disaffection of the people does to our democracy, when he stated,

The lobbies are empty. There is no outcry against what we are doing…Having briefly aroused themselves, they have sunk back into apathy or resignation – or agreement with what is about to be done. We will not know if we do not hear. (Wellstone, pg 148)

This inattention was one that Thomas Jefferson had feared would bring out and perpetuates the worst in our politicians:

If once the people become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions. (Hofstadter, American Political Tradition, p. 35)

From Rod Blagojevich’s plotting to sell Obama’s Senate seat (Long & Pearson) to Ted Stevens convictions of failing to report $250,00 in gifts (“CNNPolitics.com”) and many
others, there have been many contemporary high profile examples of corruption of public officials. Ohio Citizen Action sums up the attitude and effect of this on our system of government:

Governance has focused largely on the spoils of victory, how to reward one’s friends, and how to stay in office, rather than on overarching policy debates. States with such individualistic politics are more likely to experience graft and corruption, partly because the dominant party sometimes overreaches — especially if it controls all branches of governments and has enjoyed control for a long period of time. Victorious parties and their supporters are rewarded with tangible benefits, such as jobs, contracts, and favorable public policies, while the interests of ordinary citizens may be disregarded.

Several leading modern American politicians such as John Kennedy and Barack Obama attained the presidency by trying to challenge and change this civic cynicism and apathy. Dione contends that the American political system “seemed to foster a passive citizenry”, which John Kennedy picked up on in the 1960 campaign and why he “shaped both his campaign and his administration around the ideas of sacrifice and public service” (p.50) Forty-Eight years later, Barack Obama came to power by making his 2008 campaign about addressing this civic apathy and restoring citizens’ belief in their power to effect change in their government. At a February 2008 rally, candidate Obama proudly proclaimed of his campaign that “We have given young people a reason to believe and brought folks back to the polls who want to believe again” (“Monsters and Critics”) Candidate Obama made himself a Progressive cheerleader reminding the American people of the powers that had been fought for and placed in their hands, painting himself as simply their instrument. At his inauguration on January 20, 2009, President Obama spoke of understanding part of his task to — “restore the vital trust between a people and their government.” (Obama) Yet President Obama and President Kennedy also were
quick to remind the people that we have a duty to use our hard won civic rights. As Kennedy plainly said in his Inaugural address: “In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course.” (Kennedy) Likewise, forty-eight years later, standing on the same spot, President Obama echoed this reminder:

For as much as government can do and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies… What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship. (Obama)

It is again up to each American citizen to take the tools the Progressive have procured for us to create a meaningful reform movement against the many forms of privilege’s overt and covert disenfranchisement we now face. Linebaugh goes so far as to say that in spite of the Progressives and others’ victories, overall we have lost the war: “We live in post-enclosure time: our country, our world is closed, shut up.” (Paine, p. xxxiv) To a large extent, as Wellstone decried, we can say that much in our civic system is indeed closed and locked down against the common citizen. Yet as Dahl reminds us clearly:

Democratization did not proceed on an ascending path to the present. There were ups and downs, resistance movements, civil wars, revolutions… we cannot count on historical forces to insure that democracy will always advance – or even survive… its chances depend on what we do ourselves. (p. 25)

Dionne, while acknowledging the historic and ongoing imbalance of power in spite of Progressives and others victories, finds at least one working model:

To a degree, participatory politics will always tilt toward the elites, since the better-off and better-educated will always have more time, money and resources
to devote to politics than those below them on the class ladder. The organizers of the civil rights movement and the New Left sought to remedy that bias and won some important victories…. The idea of participatory democracy is alive and well in groups such as Citizen Action, which organizes poor and working-class neighborhoods around the country… (p. 50-51)

Senator Wellstone, while also acknowledging the limitations of party politics, quotes Walter Dean Burnham as proof the peoples' rights can still prevail:

…political parties, with all their imperfections, are still the only institutions in a representative democracy in which ordinary people who don’t have the capital can aggregate and make a difference. Our campaign proved this. (p. 19)

Wellstone offers additional advice as to the key to action:

There is no substitute for face to face meetings. This is the epitome of representative democracy. And it is effective grassroots politics. (p. 47)

In summary, we the people, still have avenues open to us for effective use of our civic rights. We need to learn from the lessons that Wellstone, Dione and many others have shared and as Obama, Kennedy and other leaders have encouraged us… we need to organize to take action while we still have the tools the Progressives won for us at hand.

We need to attend meetings and town halls in our communities. If there is not a meeting or town hall for an issue we care about, we should organize one. We need to become involved with the political parties and community organizations of our choice and ensure they are responsive to the people. We need to watch what our elected representatives are up to and let them hear our voices through any or all of these avenues. From the foundation of the country through the Progressive era to today, the common people fighting for and crucially, exercising our full measure of rights and freedoms, is part of our heritage and needs to be part of our present. Otherwise, we the people will be reduced to an abject prop in a future that will be privilege’s to write as it sees fit. As Theodore Roosevelt exhorted us:

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We know that no people needs such high traits of character as that people which seeks to govern its affairs aright through the freely expressed will of the freemen who compose it. But we have faith that we shall not prove false to the memories of the men of the mighty past. They did their work, they left us the splendid heritage we now enjoy. We in our turn have an assured confidence that we shall be able to leave this heritage unwasted and enlarged to our children and our children's children. To do so we must show, not merely in great crises, but in the everyday affairs of life, the qualities of practical intelligence, of courage, of hardihood, and endurance, and above all the power of devotion to a lofty ideal….

(Inaugural Address)
References


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