

conservative interregnum, 1920–32

as support for business. Calvin Coolidge summed up the dominant ethos in the White House with his statement, “The business of America is business.”

Despite the support for business fostered in the halls of the White House and a broad segment of Congress, the 1920s did not simply represent a discontinuous period sandwiched between two eras of reform (the Progressive Era and the New Deal). Indeed, the decade opened with major victories for two important reform movements. With the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women’s rights advocates had won their long battle for suffrage. The national electorate expanded dramatically with female citizens no longer excluded from the right to vote on the basis of gender. In the wake of woman suffrage, advocates for women’s equality struggled to define their movement. Alice Paul and the National Women’s Party battled for the passage of an equal rights amendment, while other activists pressed on for protective legislation, winning a victory in 1921 when Congress passed a bill providing funds for prenatal and child health care. A second reform movement, that of temperance, triumphed with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, outlawing the sale, manufacture, and transportation of liquor, to take effect in January 1920. The radical experiment with national Prohibition, the law of the land until 1933, helped to lay the groundwork for the expansion of the federal government that took place during the New Deal. In addition, Hoover’s conservative variant of progressivism included an important role for the federal government in providing knowledge, expertise, and information to business to shore up economic growth. Indeed, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first New Deal had much in common with Hoover’s effort to utilize the state in cooperation with business to mitigate the severe economic crisis that shook the nation during the Great Depression.

After the upheavals of the “Great War,” the tumultuous global ramifications of the Russian Revolution, and the defeat of Woodrow Wilson’s postwar internationalism, Warren Harding’s calls for a “return to normalcy” resonated with many voters. In November 1920, Harding won a lopsided victory over Democrat James M. Cox of Ohio, and the Republicans solidified the hold on Congress that they had won in 1918. Harding came to the presidency with a long record of public service but an undistinguished record as a senator. The policies of his administration, however, as well as those of the Supreme Court, demonstrated a strong orientation toward the business community. With the federal government’s

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The years between World War I and the New Deal are popularly known as the Roaring Twenties because of the era’s tumultuous social and cultural experimentation and spectacular economic growth. The cultural upheaval—from the Harlem Renaissance to jazz, and from flappers to speakeasies—stands in contrast to the period’s conservative politics. The decade witnessed a muting of the Progressive Era voices that had sought to end the abuses of unregulated capitalism through industrial regulation and reform. Presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover emphasized a limited role for the regulatory power of the federal government and the importance of efficiency, individualism, as well

pro-business orientation, emboldened industrialists undertook a successful counterattack against the gains labor had made during World War I. The great labor strikes that rocked the nation in 1919 had ended in defeat. By 1923, union membership fell to 3.6 million from more than 5 million at the end of the war.

Falling union membership mirrored developments in political participation more broadly. Voter turnout rates were low throughout the decade, averaging around 46 percent. Progressive innovations such as nonpartisan elections undercut party organization and weakened party identification. The nonvoters tended to be the poor, and new voters such as women, African Americans, and naturalized immigrants. Only in 1928 did participation rise to 56 percent as the volatile issues of religion, ethnicity, and Prohibition mobilized the electorate.

With Harding's death on August 2, 1923, Vice President Calvin Coolidge succeeded to the presidency. His reserved New England demeanor marked a sharp break from Harding's outgoing midwestern charm, but their different personalities belied a common approach toward government. As Harding before him, Coolidge emphasized efficiency, limited government, and strong praise for capital. Coolidge summed up this ethos when he remarked, "The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there." These notions seemed to resonate with large numbers of Americans in a period of economic expansion and growing affluence. While the decade had opened in recession, from 1922 to 1929, national income increased more than 40 percent, from \$60.7 billion to \$87.2 billion. Automobiles, construction, and new industries like radio fueled an economic boom. The number of passenger cars in the United States jumped from fewer than 7 million in 1919 to about 23 million in 1929. Radio, getting its start in 1920, was a household item for 12 million Americans by 1929. The availability of new products, installment buying, and an increasingly national advertising industry fueled a mass consumption economy just as increased leisure, radios, and movies generated a mass culture.

Economic growth and mass consumption went hand in hand, however, with the increasing maldistribution of wealth and purchasing power. Indeed, about one-third of families earned less than the minimum income estimated for a "decent standard of living." Those Americans working in what were then known as the "sick industries," such as textile and coal, along with the nation's farmers, failed to benefit from the economic

gains of the period. Progressive reformers continued to criticize the consolidation of private capital and the inequalities of income. Eugene Debs, sentenced to ten years in prison under the Seditious Act of 1918, ran as Socialist Party candidate for president in 1920 (from federal prison) and won close to a million votes. In 1924, Robert F. La Follette, a senator from Wisconsin, led the third-party Progressive ticket, mobilizing reformers and labor leaders as well as disgruntled farmers. The Progressive Party called for the nationalization of railroads, the public ownership of utilities, and the right of Congress to overrule Supreme Court decisions. La Follette won 5 million popular votes but carried only his home state of Wisconsin.

While progressives and radicals chipped away at the sanctified praise of business voiced by three Republican administrations, their criticisms were shadowed by far more powerful reactions against the tide of urbanization, secularization, and modernism. Protestant fundamentalist crusades against the teachings of Darwinism and modernism in the churches culminated in the *State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* trial (better known as the "Scopes Monkey Trial") in 1925. Riding a tide of backlash against urban concentrations of immigrants, Catholics, and Jews as well as militant Prohibitionist anger with the unending flow of illegal drink, the Ku Klux Klan mushroomed throughout the nation, becoming a significant force in politics in such states as Indiana, Ohio, and Colorado.

During its heyday in the mid-1920s, between 3 to 5 million people joined the ranks of the hooded Klan, making it one of the largest and most influential grassroots social movements in twentieth-century America. Systematically targeting African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and foreigners as threats to Americanism, the Klan drew from a broad group of white Protestant men and women throughout the Midwest, West, and South through its promises to stave off a drift away from the values of small-town Protestant America. The Klan sold itself as an organization devoted to "law and order" by promising to rid America of liquor. Prohibition intersected closely with the Klan's larger nativist, anti-Catholic agenda since many ethnic Catholic immigrants blatantly flouted the law. By organizing drives to "clean up" communities and put bootleggers out of business, the Klan became a popular means of acting on militant temperance sentiments.

Prohibition was a radical experiment and, not surprisingly, it sharpened key cultural divides of the era. The Eighteenth Amendment became effective on January 17,

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Clarence Darrow represented the defendant in the Scopes evolution trial, Dayton, Tennessee, July 1925. (Library of Congress)



1920, after ratification of all but two states (Connecticut and Rhode Island). Outlawing the sale, manufacture, and transport of alcohol, it was, one contemporary observed, “one of the most extensive and sweeping efforts to change the social habits of an entire nation in recorded history.” It was an astonishing social innovation that brought with it the greatest expansion of federal authority since Reconstruction. While the Republican and Democratic parties had avoided taking official positions on the subject, during the 1920s, national Prohibition became a significant bone of contention, particularly for the Democratic Party, solidifying divisions between the Democratic Party’s rural, “dry,” Protestant wing and its urban, Catholic “wet” wing. The party’s two wings fought over nativism, the Klan, and Prohibition at its 1924 Convention. And by 1928, the party’s urban wet wing demonstrated its newfound strength when Alfred E. Smith became the Democratic presidential nominee.

For many of the nation’s immigrants, Prohibition was an affront to personal liberty, particularly since their communities were the special targets of law enforcement efforts to dry up the flow of bootleg liquor. As a result, it ignited a growing politicization of ethnic immigrant workers. While Prohibition made immigrant, urban, and

ethnic workers aware of the dangers of state power, it had the far greater effect of leading many of these workers into the national Democratic Party. Catholic immigrant and New York governor Al Smith carried the country’s 12 largest cities, all rich in immigrants, and all of which had voted Republican in 1924. The Smith campaign forged an alignment of urban ethnic workers with the Democratic Party that was solidified during the New Deal. In their turn, the nation’s rural Protestant and dry Democrats dreaded the specter of a Catholic and wet urbanite in the White House. Their disdain for Smith led many to abandon their allegiance to the Democratic Party to vote for Hoover. As a result, Hoover won in a landslide, receiving 58 percent of the popular vote and 447 electoral votes to Smith’s 87. Hoover cut heavily into the normally Democratic South, taking the upper tier of the old confederacy, as well as Florida.

The third straight Republican to dominate the era’s national politics, Hoover had won the support of many progressive reformers, including settlement house leader and international peace advocate Jane Addams. Hoover championed a conservative variant of progressivism that flourished in the 1920s. While he refused to countenance public authority to regulate business, he hoped to manage

social change through informed, albeit limited, state action. He championed the tools of social scientific expertise, knowledge, and information in order to sustain a sound economy. His desire to organize national policies on a sound basis of knowledge resulted in a major study called *Recent Social Trends*, a 1,500-page survey that provided rich data about all aspects of American life. As this social scientific endeavor suggests, Hoover drew from a broad font of progressive ideas but remained firm in his commitment to what he called “American Individualism.”

Hoover’s strong belief in limited government regulation went hand in hand with his embrace of federal authority to shore up Prohibition enforcement. To make clear that the federal government would not tolerate the widespread violations apparent almost everywhere, Hoover signed the Jones Act in 1929, a measure strongly backed by the Anti-Saloon League. The act raised a first offense against the 1929 Volstead Act to the status of a felony and raised maximum penalties for first offenses from six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine to five years and a \$10,000 fine.

An outpouring of protest undermined support for the Eighteenth Amendment. William Randolph Hearst, once a strong backer of national Prohibition, now declared that the Jones Law was “the most menacing piece of repressive legislation that has stained the statute books of this republic since the Alien and Sedition laws.” As the reaction to the Jones Act suggests, the “noble experiment” sounded a cautionary note about using the power of the state to regulate individual behavior.

But Prohibition’s repeal did not signify a broad rejection of federal government regulation. Rather, the great debate over the merits of Prohibition throughout the decade helped lay the ground for a greater legitimacy of state authority: The debate did not challenge the government’s right to regulate as much as it raised important questions over what its boundaries should be. Prohibition helped draw a thicker line between the legitimate arena of public government regulation and private behavior.

In the face of the increasingly dire economic circumstances at the end of the decade, the nation’s preoccupation with moral regulation appeared increasingly frivolous. The stock market, symbol of national prosperity, crashed on October 29, 1929. By mid-November, stock prices had plunged 40 percent. The crash intensified a downward spiral of the economy brought about by multiple causes: structural weaknesses in the economy, unequal distribution of income, and the imbalanced

international economic system that had emerged from World War I.

Hoover put his conservative progressivism to the test during the downturn, and it proved inadequate for the scope of the crisis. He called on business to cooperate by ending cutthroat competition and the downward spiral of prices and wages. He proposed plans for public works to infuse money into the economy. And in 1932, he established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to provide emergency loans to ailing banks, building and loan societies, and railroads. Hoover’s embrace of government action was tethered, however, to his strong belief in voluntarism and, as a result, provided too little too late. His efforts, moreover, were directed for the most part toward business. While he did support federal spending to shore up state and local relief efforts, the sums were not enough. In 1932 a bitter and recalcitrant Hoover was trounced by the gregarious Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose declaration that the American people had “nothing to fear but fear itself” ushered in a new relationship of citizen to state and a new period of economic reform.

One of Roosevelt’s first acts in office was to sign the Beer and Wine Revenue Act, anticipating the repeal of national Prohibition and effectively ending the radical experiment. The experience of national Prohibition had highlighted the real danger posed to personal liberty by the linkage of “morality” and politics. By the 1930s, the federal government’s effort to dry up the nation and alter personal habits appeared increasingly absurd. Facing a grave economic crisis, the nation’s chastised liberals now concerned themselves with using the state to regulate capitalism and provide a minimal security net for Americans against the vagaries of the marketplace. During the New Deal, state regulation focused on economic life, replacing an earlier era of regulation of public “moral” behavior that had marked the Roaring Twenties.

See also Americanism; conservatism; consumers and politics; New Deal Era, 1932–52; Prohibition and temperance.

FURTHER READING

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