

Since the presidency of George Washington, American politics have revolved around two main political parties, and since the middle of the 19th century, those two parties have been the Democrats and the Republicans. The underlying philosophies of the Democrats and the Republicans, as they exist today, emerged in the early 20th century and especially around the time of the 1912 presidential election, when the Democrat Woodrow Wilson would be elected to his first term in office. At this time, the Democrats were becoming a more “liberal” party and the Republicans were becoming essentially a “conservative” party. A “liberal” perspective holds that, in addition to protecting basic liberties, the government has a large and decisive role to play in promoting economic equality by taking actions that help the less fortunate; by contrast, a “conservative” perspective holds that government’s role should be mostly limited to protecting freedom and that the key to general prosperity is to keep the government sidelined and out of the economy as much as possible. Given their divergent views on the role of government, liberals support larger government with higher taxes, while conservatives favor smaller government with lower taxes.

Two major political figures from the early 20th century who expressed these conflicting views of government were Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge. Today Roosevelt would be termed a “liberal,” but back then he identified himself as a “progressive”—a term still preferred by many liberals today. While a Republican president from 1901 to 1909 and as the Progressive Party’s nominee for president in 1912, Theodore Roosevelt had become increasingly liberal or progressive over time. The Republican Calvin Coolidge, on the other hand, whose political career spanned thirty years, had become increasingly conservative over time, which was clearly his philosophy when he was president from 1923 to 1929. The following two excerpts, one from Roosevelt at the height of his progressivism (or liberalism) and the other from Coolidge at the height of his conservatism, provide an interesting contrast but also reveal significant common ground.

Theodore Roosevelt: A Progressive

(A Confession of Faith, a speech given by Theodore Roosevelt at the Progressive Party Convention in Chicago, Illinois, on August 6, 1912.)

To you, men and women who have come here to this great city of this great State formally to launch a new party, a party of the people of the whole Union, the National Progressive Party, I extend my hearty greeting. You are taking a bold and a greatly needed step for the service of our beloved country. The old parties are husks, with no real soul within either, divided on artificial lines, boss-ridden and privilege-controlled, each a jumble of incongruous elements, and neither daring to speak out wisely and fearlessly what should be said on the vital issues of the day. This new movement is a movement of truth, sincerity, and wisdom, a movement which proposes to put at the service of all our people the collective power of the people, through their Governmental agencies, alike in the nation and in the several States...

In the last twenty years an increasing percentage of our people have come to depend on industry for their livelihood, so that today the wageworkers in industry rank in importance side by side with the tillers of the soil. As a people we cannot afford to let any group of

citizens or any individual citizen live or labor under conditions which are injurious to the common welfare. Industry, therefore, must submit to such public regulation as will make it a means of life and health, not death or inefficiency. We must protect the crushable elements at the base of our present industrial structure.

...The public needs have been well summarized as follows:

1. We hold that the public has a right to complete knowledge of the facts of work.
2. On the basis of these facts and with the recent discoveries of physicians and neurologists, engineers and economists, the public can formulate minimum occupational standards below which, demonstrably, work can be prosecuted only at a human deficit.
3. In the third place, we hold that all industrial conditions which fall below such standards should come within the scope of governmental action and control in the same way that subnormal sanitary conditions are subject to public regulation and for the same reason—because they threaten the general welfare.

To the first end, we hold that the constituted authorities should be empowered to require all employers to file with them for public purposes such wage scales and other data as the public element in industry demands. ...All deaths, injuries, and diseases due to industrial operation should be reported to public authorities.

To the second end, we hold that minimum wage commissions should be established in the Nation and in each State to inquire into wages paid in various industries and to determine the standard which the public ought to sanction as a minimum. ...we call for the standardization of mine and factory inspection by interstate agreement or by the establishment of a Federal standard. We stand for the passage of legislation in the Nation and in all States providing standards of compensation for industrial accidents and death, and for diseases clearly due to the nature of conditions of industry...

In the third place, certain industrial conditions fall clearly below the levels which the public today sanction.

We stand for a living wage. Wages are subnormal if they fail to provide a living for those who devote their time and energy to industrial occupations. The monetary equivalent of a living wage varies according to local conditions, but must include enough to secure the elements of a normal standard of living—a standard high enough to make morality possible, to provide for education and recreation, to care for immature members of the family, to maintain the family during periods of sickness, and to permit of reasonable saving for old age.

Hours are excessive if they fail to afford the worker sufficient time to recuperate and return to his work thoroughly refreshed. We hold that the night labor of women and children is abnormal and should be prohibited; we hold that the employment of women over forty-eight hours per week is abnormal and should be prohibited. We hold that the seven day working week is abnormal, and we hold that one day of rest in seven should be provided in

law. We hold that the continuous industries, operating twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, are abnormal, and where, because of public necessity or of technical reasons (such as molten metal), the twenty-four hours must be divided into two shifts of twelve hours or three shifts of eight, they should by law be divided into three of eight.

Safety conditions are abnormal when, through unguarded machinery, poisons, electrical voltage, or otherwise, the workers are subjected to unnecessary hazards of life and limb; and all such occupations should come under governmental regulation and control.

...The premature employment of children is abnormal and should be prohibited; so also the employment of women in manufacturing, commerce, or other trades where work compels standing constantly; and also any employment of women in such trades for a period of at least eight weeks at time of childbirth.

...It is abnormal for any industry to throw back upon the community the human wreckage due to its wear and tear, and the hazards of sickness, accident, invalidism, involuntary unemployment, and old age should be provided for through insurance. This should be made a charge in whole or in part upon the industries, the employer, the employee, and perhaps the people at large, to contribute severally in some degree...

Workingwomen have the same need to combine for protection that workingmen have; the ballot is as necessary for one class as for the other; we do not believe that with the two sexes there is identity of function; but we do believe that there should be equality of right; and therefore we favor woman suffrage.

...The present conditions of business cannot be accepted as satisfactory. There are too many who do not prosper enough, and of the few who prosper greatly there are certainly some whose prosperity does not mean well for the country. Rational Progressives, no matter how radical, are well aware that nothing the Government can do will make some men prosper, and we heartily approve the prosperity, no matter how great, of any man, if it comes as an incident to rendering service to the community; but we wish to shape conditions so that a greater number of the small men who are decent, industrious and energetic shall be able to succeed, and so that the big man who is dishonest shall not be allowed to succeed at all.

Our aim is to control business, not to strangle it—and, above all, not to continue a policy of make-believe strangle toward big concerns that do evil, and constant menace toward both big and little concerns that do well. Our aim is to promote prosperity, and then to see to its proper division. We do not believe that any good comes to any one by a policy which means destruction of prosperity; for in such cases it is not possible to divide it because of the very obvious fact that there is nothing to divide. We wish to control big business so as to secure among other things good wages for the wageworkers and reasonable prices for the consumers. Wherever in any business the prosperity of the businessman is obtained by lowering the wages of his workmen and charging an excessive price to the consumers we wish to interfere and stop such practices. We will not submit to that kind of prosperity any more than we will submit to prosperity obtained by swindling investors or getting unfair

advantages over business rivals. But it is obvious that unless the business is prosperous the wageworkers employed therein will be badly paid and the consumers badly served. Therefore not merely as a matter of justice to the businessman, but from the standpoint of the self-interest of the wageworker and the consumer we desire that business shall prosper; but it should be so supervised as to make prosperity also take the shape of good wages to the wageworker and reasonable prices to the consumer, while investors and business rivals are insured just treatment, and the farmer, the man who tills the soil, is protected as seriously as the wageworker himself.

Unfortunately, those dealing with the subject have tended to divide into two camps, each as unwise as the other. One camp has fixed its eyes only on the need of prosperity, loudly announcing that our attention must be confined to securing it in bulk, and that the division must be left to take care of itself. This is merely the plan, already tested and found wanting, of giving prosperity to the big men on top, and trusting to their mercy to let something leak through to the mass of their countrymen below—which, in effect, means that there shall be no attempt to regulate the ferocious scramble in which greed and cunning reap the largest rewards.

The other set has fixed its eyes purely on the injustices of distribution, omitting all consideration of the need of having something to distribute, and advocates action which, it is true, would abolish most of the inequalities of the distribution of prosperity, but only by the unfortunately simple process of abolishing the prosperity itself. This means merely that conditions are to be evened, not up, but down, so that all shall stand on a common level, where nobody has any prosperity at all. The task of the wise radical must be to refuse to be misled by either set of false advisers; he must both favor and promote the agencies that make for prosperity, and at the same time see to it that these agencies are so used as to be primarily of service to the average man.

...We favor cooperation in business, and ask only that it be carried on in a spirit of honesty and fairness. We are against crooked business, big or little. We are in favor of honest business, big or little. We propose to penalize conduct and not size. But all very big business, even though honestly conducted, is fraught with such potentiality of menace that there should be thoroughgoing governmental control over it, so that its efficiency in promoting prosperity at home and increasing the power of the Nation in international commerce may be maintained, and at the same time fair play insured to the wageworkers, the small business competitors, the investors, and the general public. Wherever it practicable we propose to preserve competition; but where under modern conditions competition has been eliminated and cannot be successfully restored, then the Government must step in and itself supply the needed control on behalf of the people as a whole.

...I believe in a larger use of the governmental power to help remedy industrial wrongs, because it has been borne in on me by actual experience that without the exercise of such power many of the wrongs will go un-remedied...