

## **Progressivism** <sup>[1]</sup>

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Progressivism, like its ideological counterpoise, [conservatism](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, has taken different forms in North Carolina. Progressivism generally refers to a political philosophy that promotes measures leading to the state's educational, economic, or social development. Although the term has come to be associated with aspects of social liberalism, from the earliest years of statehood leaders of all political parties have encouraged business, educational, transportation, and other initiatives to help the citizenry move forward. In numerous instances, however, to be forward looking on one issue did not guarantee a similar approach to others.

The modern understanding of progressivism evolved during the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century and was subsequently embodied in the presidential administrations of [Theodore Roosevelt](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, [Woodrow Wilson](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, and [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) <sup>[5]</sup>. True progressivism in North Carolina began with the election of [Democratic](#) <sup>[6]</sup> governor [Charles B. Aycock](#) <sup>[7]</sup> in 1900. Aycock's emphasis on public support for education was forward looking indeed, whereas his view on equal access to education for African Americans was decidedly the opposite. Nevertheless, the achievements of his administration and those of the next generation of Democratic leaders could be considered monumental and essential to the state's development throughout the century.

One far-reaching result of North Carolina's progressive thinking was the growth of the [public health](#) <sup>[8]</sup> movement. Between 1909 and 1915 the work of the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission for the Elimination of [Hookworm](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, in cooperation with the North Carolina State Board of Health, led to the widespread treatment of the parasitic infestation, improved the health of citizens by increasing their knowledge of modern medicine, and paved the way for later public health initiatives. North Carolina, still predominately rural, had much to gain by improved sanitary practices. Under the guidance of public health director Watson S. Rankin, the state's public health system emerged as one of the best in the nation. Primarily because of the efforts of Democratic governor [Cameron Morrison](#) <sup>[10]</sup> in the 1920s, North Carolina also became known as the [Good Roads State](#) <sup>[11]</sup>.

North Carolina's Democratic leaders, operating in what was basically a one-party system until the 1970s, retained wholly nonprogressive stances toward several issues. As a result of their opposition to the [women suffrage](#) <sup>[12]</sup> movement, North Carolina was one of a handful of states that failed to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Political leaders also revealed their basic conservatism by their lukewarm acceptance of numerous New Deal programs of the 1930s, although many farming and working-class citizens welcomed the support. The Progressive Party was formed in North Carolina in 1948, but its candidacy of Henry Wallace was short-lived.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, North Carolina progressivism took a new shape while retaining familiar elements. Moving decidedly left, progressives took the lead in issues of racial equality, demanding that the state live up to the tenets and legal requirements of the federal civil rights laws of the 1950s and 1960s. As the national Democratic Party embraced an array of liberal causes during the 1960s and 1970s, the modern-day definition of North Carolina progressivism came to include everything from abortion rights to environmentalism.

Yet room remained for "old-fashioned," pro-business attitudes among North Carolina progressives. Governors and other state leaders of both major political parties have promoted the state's tremendous economic growth, the expansion of its community college and university systems, the upgrading and modernization of its public schools, and other achievements. While distinct differences between conservatives and progressives continue to exist on a variety of issues, perhaps an equal number of similarities lead to the perpetual "gray area" that has typified North Carolina politics from its beginnings.

### **References:**

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William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* <sup>[13]</sup> (1992).

Paul Luebke, *Tar Heel Politics 2000* (1998).

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### **Additional Resources:**

"The Progressive Era." ANCHOR. <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/progressive-era> <sup>[14]</sup>

**Subjects:**

Political movements and parties [15]

**Authors:**

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