Progressivism represents a radical departure from the Founders’ understanding of the purpose and ends of government. Comparing and contrasting the arguments of the Founders and of the Progressives regarding six key principles of government—the meaning of freedom; the purpose of government arising from the meaning of freedom; the elements of domestic policy; the extent of foreign policy; the centrality of the consent of the governed; and the size and scope of government—shows decisively that Progressivism is not a logical outcome of the Founders’ principles, but rather a conscious rejection of them.

Lecture Summary

The answers to the following six questions illustrates the primary differences between the Founders and the Progressives.

1. **What is freedom?** The Founders argued that adult human beings possess the right to be free from being ruled by others by the very fact of being born human. Additionally, the Founders argued that nature gives no human being a right to rule over, or to enslave, another human being. The Progressives argued that freedom is a product of human making, and not a natural right. The Progressives taught that there are two levels of freedom—negative freedom (freedom from subjection to the will of others), and positive freedom (or effective freedom, which requires both the forming of the individual in the ethical ideal as defined by government experts and also providing that individual with access to all the resources he needs to that end.)

2. **What is the purpose of government?** The Founders argued that government exists to protect man’s natural rights. If it fails to do this, it is unjust. The Progressives, having rejected natural rights, believe that government exists to create rights and to ensure that human beings are made equal.
3. **What constitutes good domestic policy?** The Founders conceived of domestic policy as those things required for the protection of natural rights in the context of relations among fellow citizens. This list includes the criminal law, the civil law, the protection of the family, and the promotion of minimal citizen morality through government support of education and religion. Most of this fell within the power of the state and local governments. The Progressives countered that domestic policy should focus on equality and income redistribution, along with proper formation in the morality preached by Progressivism, because natural rights are nonexistent and true freedom requires “creating” people’s characters and giving them the necessary resources. They tasked federal and state government bureaucracies, rather than local governments, with achieving this end.

4. **What constitutes good foreign policy?** The Founders believed that foreign policy serves the same purpose as domestic policy: the protection of the citizens’ natural rights. A strong national defense and the protection of borders are necessary to achieve this end; imperialism is not. The Progressives, on the other hand, saw foreign policy as a tool for spreading democracy and for improving the lives of “inferior” races through imperialism.

5. **How important is the consent of the governed?** Consent of the governed, as the Declaration states, is the only just means by which government derives its power and authority. It can never be discarded or ignored without becoming unjust and tyrannical. The Progressives rejected this argument. Without rejecting consent altogether, Progressives wanted to separate the institutions of government as far from the people as possible. They favored removing political power from local communities and centering it in state and federal bureaucracies staffed by “experts.”

6. **Should government be limited or unlimited?** The Founders believed in a government limited by its primary mission of protecting the natural rights of the people. Government was supposed to be powerful in regard to providing a strong national defense and to protecting individual rights by effective law enforcement and free markets. Beyond that, government was expected to leave people alone and set up self-governing private associations (families, churches, businesses, and clubs) to take care of the daily affairs of life. The Progressives completely abandoned limited government. The private sphere was no longer to be treated as private. An unrestricted government, they claimed, could effectively solve all social and economic problems, both for private institutions and individuals.

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**Key Passages from the Readings**

**The Declaration of Independence**

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life,
Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, pages 5-6

Virginia Declaration of Rights — George Mason

“That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 115

“That all power is vested in, and consequently derived from, the People; that magistrates are their trustees and servants, and at all times amenable to them.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 115

“That no free Government, or the blessing of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 117

“That Religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and, therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity, towards each other.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 117

Liberalism and Social Action — John Dewey

“But the majority who call themselves liberals today are committed to the principle that organized society must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, pages 624-625

“The earlier liberals lacked historic sense and interest.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 626

“But disregard of history took its revenge. It blinded the eyes of liberals to the fact that their own special interpretations of liberty, individuality and intelligence were themselves historically conditioned, and were relevant only to their own time.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 626

“They put forward their ideas as immutable truths good at all times and places; they had
no idea of historic relativity, either in general or in its application to themselves.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 626

“They would have recognized that effective liberty is a function of the social conditions existing at any time.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 627

“Organized social planning, put into effect for the creation of an order in which industry and finance are socially directed in behalf of institutions that provide the material basis for the cultural liberation and growth of individuals, is now the sole method of social action by which liberalism can realize its professed aims. Such planning demands in turn a new conception and logic of freed intelligence as a social force.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, pages 627-628

SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY  Woodrow Wilson

“State socialism’ is willing to act through state authority as it is at present organized. It proposes that all idea of a limitation of public authority by individual rights be put out of view, and that the State consider itself bound to stop only at what is unwise or futile in its universal superintendence alike of individual and of public interests.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 646

“The thesis of the state socialist is, that no line can be drawn between private and public affairs which the State may not cross at will; that omnipotence of legislation is the first postulate of all just political theory.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 646

“Men as communities are supreme over men as individuals. Limits of wisdom and convenience to the public control there may be: limits of principle there are, upon strict analysis, none.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 646

“The difference between democracy and socialism is not an essential difference, but only a practical difference—is a difference of organization and policy, not a difference of primary motive.”
—The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 647

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between “positive” and “negative” freedom, according to John Dewey? (Note: the Founders did not ascribe to this distinction).

2. Progressive theorist John Dewey argued that freedom is “relative” to a particular time and place. What does this mean?

3. How did the Progressives conceive of foreign policy? How does this understanding differ from the Founders’ understanding?

4. What is the difference between socialism and democracy, according to Woodrow Wilson?
Discussion Questions

1. The Founders’ understanding of all six questions, listed above, relies upon the existence of natural rights. Why are natural rights so important to the Founders’ constitutional thought?

2. Both the Founders and the Progressives believed in some measure of “equality.” How do their respective understandings of equality differ?

3. Why is national defense the most important of the federal government’s duties?

4. Should government have a role to play in promoting virtue among its citizens, either through education or religion?