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Introduction

The Varieties of Colorado Progressivism

Soon after cofounding a new independent voters group in 1905, Denver attorney Edward Costigan appeared before the South Broadway Christian Church to appeal for support. Although the church was not yet fifteen years old, its Romanesque facade suggested centuries of tradition. Standing at the altar in front of vaulted organ pipes, the Republican attorney condemned the “evil forces” corrupting local politics. As a young Republican activist, Costigan bridled at the violations of law and decency he had witnessed in his brief political career. He lost election to the state Senate a few years earlier when Democrats padded the registration rolls with unqualified voters. Democratic ward heelers had even ejected Costigan from his post as a watcher of registration clerks while the police turned a blind eye.

In light of such brazen abuse by party operatives, the attorney insisted that the church needed to “assert a positive, an affirmative, a practical and a vigilant resistance.” He solicited “the sanction and baptism of the church” on his nonpartisan voters’ group. With city and state representatives little more than “creatures of certain private and selfish interests” answering ultimately to party bosses and corporate donors, the Voters’ League demanded “honest men

in public office" and "honest and untrammelled legislation in the interests of the public." The league would back candidates from either party who demonstrated independence and integrity. The audience at the South Broadway Christian Church likely shared Costigan's faith in the power of moral zeal and public exposure of political corruption. Located roughly a mile south of the more affluent Capitol Hill neighborhood, the stone church hosted Protestant congregants who did not have the financial resources of the city's elites. Yet Costigan optimistically concluded that with the help of zealous congregations, "decent government" would triumph.¹ His new voters' group helped launch a movement of religiously inspired reformers. These churchgoers would back Costigan when he later campaigned as the Progressive Party candidate for governor.

Soon after Costigan's speech, Denver labor leader H. B. Waters similarly demanded political change. Invoking the Populist tradition, Waters asked, "[S]hall the people rule or be ruled? Shall they own the government or be owned by it?" The labor leader insisted that the tools of direct democracy, the initiative and referendum, would at last enable working people to challenge corporate and party corruption of the political process. With these changes in government, "the power of bribery will be infinitely diluted. . . . The lobby will die; rings and bosses will lose their power."² Waters appealed directly to the working class, sharing the urgency of Costigan.

Workers too felt outrage over recent political events. Union campaigns had persuaded state legislators to grant mine workers an eight-hour day in 1899. Yet before the new law could take effect, the Colorado Supreme Court overturned it as an unconstitutional intrusion of lawmaking power. A few years later, mine workers in Cripple Creek confronted private guards and state police in pitched battles over working conditions. The deaths of thirty workers in 1903 offered a painful reminder of the chaos and inequities of economic life in Colorado. Waters believed that the tools of Progressive reform were the remedy workers needed to achieve a measure of justice and influence in government.

A comparable faith in the power of direct legislation animated activist women in Colorado during these years. Advocating these reforms in Denver, women faced "partisan treachery," "insolent and tyrannous" political bosses, and "all the powers that plunder," in the words of a sympathetic observer. Women's club leaders especially urged members to approve the initiative and referendum to counter political corruption. These tools would also enable reforming women to secure a city-owned water utility, ending the manipulations and inefficiency of a privately owned firm. Upon achieving these political changes, organized clubwomen leveled a "disconcerting blow to the . . . bosses" of both parties.³ By 1912 an influential cohort of women's club leaders championed similar reforms at the statehouse.

These Colorado Progressives appeared to share common enemies. The party boss and the corporate lobbyist undermined honest and responsive government. As political outsiders, these reformers advanced similar solutions: direct primary elections, the initiative, and nonpartisan campaigns. All claimed to speak for the public in defense of the common good against the selfish interests of party and corporate leaders. Their political crusades, in fact, renegotiated what was public and private in social and economic realms.

A final group of Colorado Progressives invoked the public in similar terms, but with different implications. By 1915, self-proclaimed mediation experts emerged who sought to protect the consuming public from the self-interested negotiations of corporate employers and organized labor. Strikes and labor unrest interrupted economic activity in ways that state investigations could prevent, they claimed. Consumers were “the real party in interest in all disputes between employer and employe[e],” insisted one administrative Progressive in the state. They “suffer all the hardships and pay all the bills.”⁴ These mediation reformers, however, did not organize a movement, nor did they challenge party control over politics. Still, they proposed another Progressive opposition between the people and special interests.

These Progressive groups in Colorado relied on a common language to defend the public against special interests. Their memberships overlapped in many instances. Clubwomen and union workers attended Protestant churches. Some unionists served as mediation experts. But the leadership of each group tended to remain distinct, hoping to mobilize the public along lines of religion, class, sex, or faith in scientific investigation. They determined to root out selfish political action with public exposure.

These leaders differed in their relative influence on the political landscape of Colorado and interacted in uniquely revealing ways. Reformers and journalists relying on the language of Protestant morality successfully reshaped the framework for political debate and motivated a core of activists to advance their version of Progressivism in the state. Costigan was one of many leaders advocating “Christian citizenship.” This meant nonpartisan, morally informed voting that challenged party machines and corporate corruption of politics. Its advocates insisted that prohibition and an end to prostitution and public gambling were political goals that would eliminate the rule of the party boss. Nonpartisan office holders could then defy corporate lobbyists, curb patronage-ridden government, lower taxes, and advance efficiency and economy. As one leader of Denver’s Ministerial Alliance preached, “We Christians must be interested, not only in so-called moral questions, but in the whole great problem of democratic government.” Another insisted that “corporations have no business in politics! They are always a corrupting element.” In 1912 this minister urged his congregants to support a Progressive candidate

for office and thus to “vote as you pray.” Progressivism assumed the urgency of the gospel for such civic leaders.⁵

Religiously motivated political reform, however, did little to temper the dramatic confrontations between workers and corporate leaders in this rapidly industrializing western state. In communities such as Cripple Creek and Huerfano County, as well as on the tramway lines of Denver, workers challenged their bosses for control over their economic and political lives. Workplace disputes easily became violent clashes. Local and state police often proved unable to protect life and preserve order. The “class problem,” which so engaged nationally recognized reformers such as Jane Addams, Paul Kellogg, and John Commons, proved particularly intense and intractable in this Rocky Mountain region.

Drawing on Colorado’s Populist tradition, labor reformers advocated a more class-conscious vision of Progressivism than the religious activists. Colorado Populism began in the 1890s as a movement of farmers and workers but became increasingly non-agrarian in its focus. The election of Populist governor Davis Waite in 1892 gave workers a brief glimpse of the promise of a sympathetic government. Waite unsuccessfully confronted the depression of 1893 and the plummeting price of silver. Yet his administration defended the right of industrial workers to organize and strike for improved working conditions. With Waite’s support, the demand for the eight-hour day for mine workers emerged as a key legacy of Colorado Populists.⁶ Industrial laborers backed the Populists in hopes of securing economic legislation to counter and curb the power of mine owners.

Party ties to corporate monopolies, especially within the state legislature, led unionists to champion reforms to restore lost economic and political independence. In 1896, Pueblo unionists called workers together to create the Colorado State Federation of Labor (CSFL) to focus their political activism. The platform demanded the liberation of the General Assembly from “the grip of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and other companies who had a stranglehold on . . . the majority of legislators.”⁷ Monopoly power remained the chief enemy of working-class citizenship. Court injunctions and limits on striking further weakened the economic power of workers. Labor progressives consistently struggled to define the “public interest” in terms that included a living wage for workers.

Unlike Protestant Progressives, labor activists only enjoyed a few key moments of political success. These moments particularly reveal the importance of coalitions and allies within state bureaucracy. Working with women activists around 1910, labor Progressives persuaded legislators to approve the initiative, referendum, and government protections for workers. In 1912 this coalition of labor and women activists used the initiative process to enact new protections for male and female workers as well as mothers and children. World

War I provided a favorable context for the State Bureau of Labor Statistics to improve enforcement of labor law. Repeated waves of violent strikes in the state, however, undermined broad support for labor Progressivism. Even after the massacre at Ludlow in 1914, most Colorado voters demonstrated greater enthusiasm for prohibition than efforts to restrain the “barony of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company,” whose officials dominated the hinterlands of the state.⁸ The labor-women’s coalition fractured over moral reform.

Clearly, male industrial workers were not the sole concern of Progressive reformers. They also focused their attention on the problems of children and working-class women. Between 1902 and 1914, a number of activist women mobilized the female public to protect wage-earning women and children. They, like Protestant ministers, wanted to rid cities of prostitution and gambling. Women’s club leaders joined labor activists in condemning the abusive power that business owners wielded over workers. Again, these problems were linked to party machines.

Women’s club leaders appealed to their members in different terms than did labor or Protestant Progressives. The state’s first female state senator, Denver clubwoman Helen Ring Robinson, insisted that women should be elected to office because they represented “the maternal in politics.”⁹ Motherhood suggested both a condition of vulnerability and the potential for improving a broad range of conditions outside the home. Like Chicago women in these years, Denver’s women’s club activists incorporated notions of maternalism, motherhood, and municipal housekeeping into a vision of a better society. This included social welfare, economic justice, and government responsiveness to citizens.¹⁰ Although some female activists called for political changes that were not strictly maternalist, most achieved their greatest successes and forged the broadest coalitions when appealing to women as mothers.

Because Colorado’s cities lacked the extensive settlement house network so important for women’s politics in cities like New York and Chicago, women’s clubs in Colorado offered the main sites for mobilizing a feminine public in support of Progressive reform. Enfranchised since 1893, Colorado women participated in politics more directly than their sisters in most other states. Women’s club leaders made consistent efforts to rally members along feminine rather than party lines. They made journalistic appeals to the “organized women of the state” and launched educational and civic campaigns to focus the political influence of both middle- and working-class women independent of party affiliation. Although parties did offer alternatives to clubs for some activist women, most celebrated nonpartisanship.¹¹ Women Progressives, both within and outside the parties, secured their major legislative victories in coalitions and with key institutional allies like Denver’s juvenile court, the state Board of Charities and Corrections, and the Child Welfare Bureau.

Ultimately women and labor Progressives had less impact on the class problem in Colorado than did administrative Progressives. This latter group insisted that industrial warfare could be scientifically investigated and impartially mediated. Labor peace could prevail, they insisted, without government reforms to alter the balance of power between worker and corporation. Organized labor, in the eyes of state industrial commissioners, appeared an equal competitor with capital, issuing demands based on its own selfish interests. In their view, the public interest meant an uninterrupted supply of consumer goods, even at the expense of a living wage for workers.

For all of these Progressive groups in Colorado the struggle between the people and corrupting special interests was consistently gendered. The contest to represent the public at the state and local levels often involved struggles over the political meaning of manhood and womanhood. Through political cartoons, newspaper photographs, and visual metaphors, Colorado reformers and their partisan opponents sought to represent the public as if it had inescapable implications for male and female citizenship. Protestant reformers insisted that their nonpartisan, Progressive public undergo a renegotiation of masculinity. Confronting the traditional links among party loyalty, civic activism, and male voting, religious reformers sought to replace the centrality of party organizations with nonpartisan associations of morally virtuous male citizenry.

In contrast, union visions of restrained manhood rested on Populist ideals of economic independence and alliances with sympathetic party leaders. Nonpartisanship was less important to working-class men than it was to Protestant activists. The labor ideal of manhood proved less persuasive in these years. Meanwhile, women Progressives in Colorado were often divided by partisanship, with Democrats, Republicans, and Progressive party leaders claiming to defend the mothers and children of the state. Although Progressive feminine citizenship always included suffrage, it suggested different ways of focusing maternal instincts. Administrative Progressives, for their part, assumed a paternalistic duty to protect a feminine consuming public. The weight of their interventions, however, fell much harder on union labor than on corporate elites. The success of religious and administrative Progressivism ultimately undermined class-based and maternalist-inspired reform in the state.

This story of Colorado reformers demands attention to more than a few prominent individuals. Attorneys like Edward Costigan and Judge Ben Lindsey frequently appear as the chief movers in accounts of Progressivism in the state. Yet it was lesser-known women's club and trade union leaders who broadened the scope of reform and who rallied their members in hopes of change.¹²

In rediscovering those voices, this book documents neglected coalitions and negotiations between social groups that are too easily overlooked in the narratives of individual lives. The history of women Progressives is incomplete without a careful consideration of labor and religiously motivated reformers. Although only a few individual leaders remained consistently active in Denver and Colorado politics between 1900 and 1930, the social groups that advocated reform largely endured.

This larger and more inclusive story also highlights the importance of religion, class, and rhetoric for understanding Progressivism in this western state. Scholars of the Progressives have stressed secular motivations (especially social anxieties), organizational imperatives, women's networks, structural limitations, and transnational exchanges of ideas.¹³ A largely separate literature on American Protestantism has reconstructed the social gospel movement and growing demands for amelioration and mediation of class conflicts and hardships resulting from industrialization, without paying sufficient attention to the politics of Progressive reform. Although many have noted that "morally ambitious Protestantism" inspired Progressives, few have fully explored the implications of this connection. Michael McGerr has insightfully noted the extent to which Progressives targeted individual behavior as much as institutions.¹⁴ In Colorado, the religious character of the earliest and most influential Progressives gave a moral cast to this style of political activism. They helped define reform more in terms of moral issues like prohibition than economic justice.

Class conflict in Colorado consistently jeopardized the Protestant ideal of social harmony and reconciliation. Religion often fails to appear in histories of Progressivism, but scholars have frequently commented on the middle-class backgrounds of most Progressives. Recently, local studies have also begun to illuminate "petit bourgeois" and working-class support for reform. Demands for public ownership and urban reform in cities like Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, and San Francisco often stemmed from working-class voters. Workers demonstrated less hostility to the party system per se, allying frequently with partisan reformers to achieve their goals.¹⁵ Colorado offers an important, if neglected, site for understanding the character of labor Progressivism, particularly in the West. Labor Progressives contested the religious character of reform and frequently allied with the Democratic Party in hopes of challenging both Protestant activists and corporate elites. The ultimate success of moral and mediation Progressives generated a suspicion of the coercive power of state interventions among Colorado workers.

If religious and class lenses shed light on the unique aspects of western Progressivism, the rhetoric of reformers reveals the ways in which politics shape social identities. Colorado Progressives typically cast their agenda in the languages of Protestantism, popular republicanism, maternalism, and

efficiency. Excessive individual power, especially when sustained by party machines or corporations, threatened corruption and waste. Drawing on these political languages, reformers hoped to frame not only the goals but even the political identities of their respective social groups. An emerging sensational press, both in Denver and on the national level, presented new opportunities for these efforts. In their muckraking exposés and reform newspapers, Progressive leaders often suggested more the appearance than the reality of grassroots mobilization. Their potent collection of oppositions—the public versus the interests, the honest citizen against the boss, the people against the corporation—did not so much reflect material realities as it did structure political debate and define opportunities for political mobilization.

Studies of politics in San Francisco and Boston in these years have similarly highlighted what James Connolly called the “political sources of group identity.”¹⁶ Although Progressive leaders shared a common style of public action, they did not mobilize the same “publics.” Reform leaders pushed for structural alternatives to political parties that promised to enhance the influence of their respective social groups. Given their unique use of languages of reform, the importance of Protestantism, and frustrated efforts to mobilize voters along class and gender lines, Colorado Progressives have much to tell us about political reform in the early twentieth-century West.

The regional context for these campaigns makes Progressivism in Colorado different than in Chicago, the Northeast, or the South. First, the interactions between Denver and hinterland communities profoundly shaped Progressive reform, as this book demonstrates. The capital city developed relatively quickly from mining camp to entrepôt, facilitating the economic growth of the entire state by 1900. Early political leaders were outspoken boosters, hoping to promote the city and state as a whole. As the site of the state house, Denver witnessed the debates and contests for state leadership firsthand. State campaigns and political party machines often shaded into local city government. Yet middle- and working-class residents of Denver experienced different economic and political conditions than those of workers in mining camps.

The overwhelming importance of extractive industries, especially mining, led to rapid industrialization and urbanization in mountain towns. Silver and gold mining often required significant investments of capital, technical expertise, and machinery. Large corporations brought these to bear on the challenges of extraction and came to dominate the economic landscape. As mining and railroad corporations emerged in Colorado, they encountered a stark and harsh landscape with “little political or social undergirding,” noted historian Anne Hyde. Mining camps exploded into “instant cities,” which were poorly planned, rootless communities. They tended to fade dramatically during the economy’s bust cycles.¹⁷ Mining workers often experienced corporate capitalism in the context of remote company towns. Their hopes for dramatic

economic and political reform were vast and often more radical than those of Denver residents. In contrast, Denverites experienced rapid urbanization without large-scale industrialization. Hinterland workers were thus much more likely to find employment in large corporate enterprises than Denver laborers. In order to capture the important interactions between Denver Progressives and those workers beyond the capital city, this book shifts its geographic focus in the chapters that follow.

Second, the varied character of the Colorado electorate is another important regional factor to consider. This electorate included white women voters with limited racial minority representation during the Progressive Era. Euroamerican women were only loosely mobilized within political parties, which remained male-dominated throughout the Progressive Era. Antiparty reforms like direct democracy received strong support from the female electorate. Mexican American and African American residents, however, struggled to maintain a political voice well into the twentieth century, often relying on minimal machine and corporate backing for token minority candidates. Additionally, party loyalties among voters remained weaker in Colorado than in eastern or southern states. Both the Democratic and Republican parties had reform factions in early twentieth-century Colorado. Female and male reformers from each gained more traction when working through nonpartisan associations than within existing parties.

Third, corporate elites in the state proved remarkably resilient and resourceful in their maintenance of party organizations and manipulation of politics. Unlike business leaders in other regions who hoped to rationalize urban politics and replace the party boss with Progressive reforms like expert commissions or city managers, Denver's elites consistently opposed "good government" and antiparty reforms.¹⁸ They preferred to control the party machines, even throwing their support behind the candidates of opposing parties in strategic elections. The managers of the industrial steelmaking and coal-mining giant, Colorado Fuel and Iron, also paid much less attention to the creation and operation of new administrative bureaucracies like the Colorado Industrial Commission than they did to their bipartisan political machines. Consequently, good-government crusades in Colorado were linked with corporate critiques more often than in Chicago, Boston, or New York.

Finally, Colorado Progressivism differs from reform projects in many other states because of its connections to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The Klan initially grew when its leaders drew on the rhetoric of Protestant Progressives and co-opted reform tools like the direct primary. Creating an aggressively masculine political machine, Klan leaders captured control of the governorship and state House in November 1924. Both the Klan and Progressive organizations drew members from the ranks of Protestant churchgoers, and both championed moral renewal and prohibition.

The Colorado Klan, however, did not back Progressive reform with much sincerity. It sought to expand Progressive state agencies, but only as a means of strengthening its own political machine. Once in power, Klan legislators launched an attack on the leaders of women's and labor agencies within the state government in order to bring them under Klan control. Klan politics particularly discredited the effort to define the interests of "the public" in terms of Protestant morality.¹⁹ Understanding Colorado Progressivism thus requires a more careful examination of state politics in the 1920s. Although many scholars mark the end of the Progressive movement with the disruptions and disappointments of World War I, Colorado reformers persevered through that conflict only to face their greatest challenge in the 1920s.

This book chronicles the negotiations of competing Progressive groups and the obstacles that constrained them through the early years of the Great Depression. It is also a story of promising alliances that were never fully realized, of zealous crusaders who resisted compromise, and of reforms that had unexpected consequences. Seen from the capital city and hinterlands, from the different perspectives of middle-class attorneys, Protestant ministers, union workers, club women, and expert administrators, Colorado Progressivism acquires the richness and complexity it deserves.