

# Progressive Era: The Roaring Twenties

By Joshua Zeitz, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.15.16

Word Count 839

Level 970L



TOP: Russell Patterson's "Where There's Smoke There's Fire," showing a fashionably dressed woman of the time, often called a flapper, was painted around 1925. Courtesy of Library of Congress. BOTTOM: Calvin Coolidge in the late 1910s. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

The 1920s separate America's past and future. Before World War I (1914-1918), the country's ways were still rooted in its previous years. But in the 1920s, America seemed to become modern.

The most well-known symbols of that time are flappers (women who acted boldly), movie palaces, radio stations, and Prohibition, which was when alcohol was against the law. With alcohol illegal, people made it and drank it in secret. Scientists shattered the boundaries of space and time, aviators made men fly, and women went to work. The country was confident and rich.

## Difficult times in America

But America also saw conflict during these same years, with the Ku Klux Klan, discrimination against immigrants, and extreme religious beliefs.

America was at a crossroads between the new ways and the old ways.

Many of the movements that made the 1920s distinct had been building for years.

It was a time of liberation for women. One example is the rise of flappers, which were young women who dressed and acted boldly for that time. The country's economic growth required more female workers. Additionally, women won the right to vote in 1920.

In many respects, Americans had never lived so well as in the 1920s. Machines and new technology made it possible for workers to work fewer hours while they earned more money.

They also had more opportunities to buy things because of new methods of production. By 1929, American families spent nearly one-quarter of their household earnings on factory-made furniture, radios, electric appliances, cars, and entertainment.

### **A time of firsts**

The 1920s was a time of firsts.

For the first time ever, more Americans lived in cities than in villages or on farms. Machines increased productivity in manufacturing, railroads, and mining. And, many new technologies emerged. By the mid-1920s, almost two-thirds of households had electricity. The electric vacuum cleaner, the electric refrigerator and freezer, and the automatic washing machine became common in middle-class homes. Cars became affordable and trustworthy.

A sign of modern times, disagreements between teenagers and their parents arose about going out on school nights, the times they must be home, their grades, spending money, and use of the car.

Film and radio also grew. In 1920, a radio station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, broadcast the presidential election results for the first-ever live news. Shortly thereafter, Americans could listen to music, live baseball games, and more on the radio.

### **Leadership in the 1920s**

Warren G. Harding was America's 29th president, serving from 1921 until he died in 1923. His time in office was full of scandal, but Harding was admired by Americans.

Harding was replaced by Calvin Coolidge who may have been the most quiet man ever to occupy the White House. In 1928, Coolidge announced unexpectedly that he did "not choose to run for president" again.

Herbert Hoover took the oath of office as the nation's 31st president in 1929, with the Great Depression beginning only months later. The country's despair profoundly affected him. However, Hoover did not initiate strong action during this time of widespread unemployment and starvation. He became one of the most disliked men in America.

### **Different viewpoints surface**

The great revolution that was sweeping through America wasn't liked by everyone and opposing views surfaced.

In 1925, a young high school science teacher in Tennessee named John Scopes violated the state's law. Tennessee law stated that evolution could not be taught in the classroom. Evolution is the scientific theory of the gradual, natural development of living things over time. This process was at odds with some religious beliefs. In Tennessee, a battle between science and fundamentalist Christianity followed, as did a trial in court. The anti-evolution law remained until the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan, which had faded away for many years, was reorganized beginning in 1915. The new Klan in addition to its attacks on black people, also included among its list of enemies Jews, Catholics, Asians, and independent women. The Klan's millions of members controlled politics in several states and helped put in place anti-immigration laws that would last for years.

### **Big gaps between the lifestyles of the rich and the poor**

Amid the great prosperity and excess of the 1920s, America's economy was weak. There were massive gaps between the rich and poor. Those living in the countryside were affected the most, as farm prices hit rock bottom while cities prospered.

Boom times relied on people buying more and more, and eventually, working people reached their limit. The very wealthy could only buy so many expensive things. And after they did, no one bought them anymore because the poor could not afford them.

The stock market collapsed in 1929. People weren't buying goods and the success of stocks — which were investments in companies — had been overestimated. This was a combination that began to wreak havoc on the American economy as the nation's first modern decade drew to an end.

*Joshua Zeitz is an author and has taught American history at Harvard University and Cambridge University.*



## Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST explains why women in the 1920s became more independent?
- (A) The most well-known symbols of that time are flappers (women who acted boldly), movie palaces, radio stations, and Prohibition, which was when alcohol was against the law.
- (B) The country's economic growth required more female workers. Additionally, women won the right to vote in 1920.
- (C) Machines and new technology made it possible for workers to work fewer hours while they earned more money.
- (D) The electric vacuum cleaner, the electric refrigerator and freezer, and the automatic washing machine became common in middle-class homes. Cars became affordable and trustworthy.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "Leadership in the 1920s" BEST supports the idea that leading America at that time was difficult?
- (A) His time in office was full of scandal, but Harding was admired by Americans.
- (B) In 1928, Coolidge announced unexpectedly that he did "not choose to run for president" again.
- (C) Herbert Hoover took the oath of office as the nation's 31st president in 1929, with the Great Depression beginning only months later.
- (D) However, Hoover did not initiate strong action during this time of widespread unemployment and starvation.
- 3 What is the connection between the article's first and final paragraphs?
- (A) Both explain how the country was affected by what happened in World War I.
- (B) Both explain the impact of the stock market collapse of the 1920s.
- (C) The first introduces the 1920s as the beginning of the modern era and the final explains how the decade ended.
- (D) The first introduces the idea that the 1920s were a time of liberation and the final predicts even greater freedoms.
- 4 How does the following sentence contribute to the article?

*America was at a crossroads between the new ways and the old ways.*

- (A) It introduces the idea that there were different kinds of people in the 1920s.
- (B) It summarizes the conflicting forces that characterized the 1920s.
- (C) It demonstrates how people expressed different points of view in the 1920s.
- (D) It illustrates specific reasons for opposing beliefs during the 1920s.