

What precipitated the rise of social safety nets in the United States?

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In the United States we received changes in the social safety net over the past century with the big changes coming in the form of social security and medicaid/medicare as well as other programs. The "Great Society" under the Johnson administration in the 1960's was the last big program change/introduction. Yet in early American society there was a lot of basis on self-sufficiency that often is touted as coming from the Protestant roots of many who came here. Somewhere along the way that self-sufficiency changed to where the government needed to step in and offer aid to many, including the poor, citizens of this country. In looking at our history we went in just over a hundred years from self-sufficiency and an expanding country to bread/soup lines in the Great Depression.

What precipitated this change? Was it industrialization? Social forces that changed in the late 19thC due to immigration? Were the uneven economic cycles of the 19thC a cause? I'm looking for historical root causes that would have allowed for a change in social norms to where it was ok for people to accept help from the government, rather than expect it to stay out of their way.

united-states social-history society

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asked May 14 '12 at 12



MichaelF
3,60211031

"Yet in early American society there was a lot of basis on self-sufficiency that often is touted as coming from the Protestant roots of many who came here." -- community welfare was an important part of Protestant ethics in many countries as well. Think about Sweden or Switzerland. – [quant_dev May 14 '12 at 12:45](#)

@quant_dev Really? I hadn't really studied about that, most of the readings I have done on Protestantism in America was all about self-sufficiency. I'll have to look this up later on. Thanks!
– [MichaelF May 14 '12 at 19:26](#)

I'd say the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) is the most recent big program change/introduction. – [jfrankcarr May 15 '12 at 1:52](#)

@jfrankcarr While true, I am looking for the origins of the change in thought within America in the last century. – [MichaelF May 15 '12 at 13:10](#)

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2 Answers

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This legendary self-sufficiency isn't quite as it seems. From Colonial days, almshouses (aka poor houses) and orphanages were around to look after those with no family although this tended to be uneven in application and quality of care. While many of these were affiliated with a church, some were operated by state and local governments.

People also received a lot of charitable help from friends and neighbors during rough times. Since people were generally less mobile until the 20th century, they tended to form stronger communities, often centered around a church. Even with urbanization, church groups remained an important part of charity from the various Catholic relief agencies to the Salvation Army.

The transition away from religious and other community based organizations toward direct government involvement in providing assistance really began in the late 1800's Progressive movement. Reformers, such as Jane Addams and Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, wanted to see more government involvement in the care of the poor, indigent and immigrants. They and their recommendations gained support of Progressive candidates such as Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Robert La Follette, Sr.

Some programs got enacted at the Federal level, like the Sheppard–Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act in 1921. However, most programs remained at the state/local until FDR and the Great Depression.

So, to get back around to your question, the change came primarily from early Progressives who, depending on your point of view, wanted to help the poor and immigrants or who wanted to exploit them to gain political power through buying their votes.

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edited May 15 '12 at 10:42

answered May 15 '12 at 1:51



jfrankcarr
3,264413

Ah...and I always thought of Addams House as sort of a outlier and not really representative of the social changes at large. I should probably reevaluate that, but I see what you mean about the Progressives, sort of like the Temperance movement I suppose, be around long enough and you make significant change. – [MichaelF](#) May 15 '12 at 13:15

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If you look back through history, the root cause of major social reforms in the United States was the [Great Depression of 1929](#). Prior to that, most Americans were self-sufficient and fiercely proud. The Great Depression changed all of that practically overnight.

There were a number of other factors that were already beginning to develop, most notably the failure of a number of businesses just prior to the stock market collapse in 1929. However, the actual collapse set into motion a domino effect that would be felt throughout the entire world. Several banks failed, resulting in millions of people losing their entire life's savings. Many factories closed, resulting in lost jobs, and a number of farms went into foreclosure, resulting in a decrease in the production of food. Local governments started facing collapses because they couldn't raise any tax revenue to keep their own programs going due to the fact that so many people no longer had any money.

To make matters worse, the government voted to hike tariffs, resulting in other countries responding by raising their own tariffs. Suddenly nobody wanted to buy American goods, and Americans couldn't afford to buy foreign goods. This ended up resulting in a world-wide depression. In 1930, over 4 million people were out of jobs, and by 1931, that number had doubled. As if this wasn't bad enough, the Midwest experienced a devastating drought about the same time, resulting in even more farms failing and a number of people being forced to migrate to other states looking for work, placing an even greater burden on those local government.

When FDR was elected, he initiated a number of government programs focused on relief, recovery, and reform. Since Congress was controlled by the Democrats, he had no resistance in enacting his programs. New welfare programs were created, Social Security was introduced, and a number of job programs were initiated. All of these things combined helped to poised the United States for a major recovery, which happened to coincide nicely with the outbreak of World War II. The United States was just beginning to redevelop a strong workforce, and they had a number of countries suddenly wanting to buy their goods.

After or during World War II, many of these programs were dissolved, but many others ended up growing into the social welfare programs we have in such great abundance today. Sadly, the job creation programs began to disappear, but the "handout" programs remained. Over time, they have become so ingrained in our country, it would

probably be next to impossible for any form of government to ever eliminate it. As a result, the need or desire to be as self-sufficient as their ancestors has bgan to dissipate with subsequent generations.

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answered May 14 '12
15:45



Steven Drennon♦
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Very complete, thanks! – MichaelF May 14 '12 at 19:27

This is largely true, although I would note that the Great Depression merely accelerated the trend towards more integration between the citizen and the government. As technology advances there is a natural trend towards specialization and thus individuals are less capable of the same level of "self-sufficiency" as say an American circa 1776 (while capable as a society of producing far more goods, knowledge, and services in higher quality). Given that modern capitalism tends not to acknowledge this, there is often a need for critical support of those who are considered surplus workers. – BrotherJack May 14 '12 at 20:27

@BrotherJack This was my thinking, that something happened to get us from the "person who did all" in colonial days to the bread lines of the Great Depression. Some interesting food for thought here – MichaelF May 15 '12 at 13:13

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