Follow the Money

How public concern about corruption shaped state and national reform

SS24.US1.16a "Analyze how the growing awareness of economic and political corruption during the Gilded Age led to reform efforts on both state and national levels."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline evidence of economic or political corruption, circle each reform, and number the problem and reform it connects to with the same number. Use your marks to trace how public awareness led to action.

From Complaints to Laws

(1) In the late 1800s, a Wisconsin farmer shipping grain depended on railroad companies to reach distant buyers. Railroads sometimes charged small shippers more than large customers for similar service. Meanwhile, some business leaders sought influence over lawmakers through campaign contributions and political favors. Newspapers reported these practices, giving readers a clearer view of who benefited and who paid. As complaints spread, reformers argued that unfair prices were not just a private dispute between a farmer and a railroad. Government rules could affect whether families and small businesses had a fair chance to compete.

(2) Wisconsin reformers also challenged the way candidates gained power. Party leaders often chose nominees at conventions, leaving ordinary voters little say over which names appeared on the ballot. Governor Robert La Follette and his supporters argued that this system gave party insiders and wealthy interests too much influence. In 1903, the Wisconsin legislature enacted a direct primary law, allowing voters to choose party nominees. Wisconsin later created a railroad commission in 1905 to regulate rates within the state. These reforms targeted two connected concerns: who controlled state government and whether that government would check powerful businesses.

(3) National reformers faced problems that crossed state lines. The Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 required railroad rates for interstate travel and shipping to be reasonable and created a federal commission to oversee the law. Its early enforcement was limited, but the law established a national role in regulating railroads. Political corruption also drew federal action. Under the spoils system, winning parties had handed out government jobs to supporters. After public anger over this practice grew, the Pendleton Act of 1883 required competitive exams for some federal jobs. State and national laws addressed different parts of the problem.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did reports about railroad prices help turn a business complaint into a call for reform?

2. What concern about political influence did Wisconsin's direct primary law address, and how did the law change the process?

3. How did public anger over the spoils system lead to a national reform?

4. Why did railroad reform require national action as well as regulation within Wisconsin?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write an 80 to 100 word newspaper editorial set in 1905. Invent a way residents could make a corruption problem visible, then argue for one state reform and one national reform from the passage, explaining what each would change.

ANSWER KEY

Follow the Money

GRADE 10 · SS24.US1.16a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline evidence of economic or political corruption, circle each reform, and number the problem and reform it connects to with the same number. Use your marks to trace how public awareness led to action. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did reports about railroad prices help turn a business complaint into a call for reform?	**Newspaper reports showed readers how unequal rates hurt small shippers. Reformers argued that government rules could make competition fairer.**
2	What concern about political influence did Wisconsin's direct primary law address, and how did the law change the process?	**Party insiders and wealthy interests had too much influence over nominees. The law let voters choose party nominees instead.**
3	How did public anger over the spoils system lead to a national reform?	**Public anger over jobs awarded to party supporters helped lead to the Pendleton Act, which required competitive exams for some federal jobs.**
4	Why did railroad reform require national action as well as regulation within Wisconsin?	**Wisconsin's commission regulated rates within the state, while railroads also carried goods across state lines. The Interstate Commerce Act addressed interstate rates.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Our town should post a public list comparing what small farmers and large shippers pay to send grain the same distance. Neighbors could bring their bills to a meeting and check the list together. If the rates are unequal, Wisconsin's new railroad commission should investigate rates within our state. But a shipment does not stop being unfair when it crosses a border. The federal commission created by the Interstate Commerce Act should examine interstate rates. Making the charges visible would help residents demand that both governments use their powers.

Accept any plausible, original method of exposing a problem in the passage. The editorial should accurately connect one named state reform and one named national reform to changes each could make.