



A policeman stands alongside a wrecked car and cases of moonshine liquor in 1922.

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Female activists, particularly the hundreds of thousands of middle-class women who swelled the ranks of the **Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)**, had long been in the vanguard of the moral campaign against intoxicating drink. Grounding their opposition to alcohol in their roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers, female prohibitionists leaned into Victorian-era gender norms that permitted women to assert influence as moral arbiters in their communities. Like temperance, prohibition was strongly influenced by Protestant values and thus took root in parts of the South and Midwest, where the majority of the population belonged to Baptist or Methodist congregations and where the number of Catholic or Jewish immigrants remained small. By 1915, hundreds of "dry" counties had spread across eighteen states as local municipalities adopted their own prohibition bans.⁶⁷

Emboldened by these successes and bolstered by the Progressive-era's faith in government intervention, reformers pushed for a nationwide ban. World War I, which had whipped up popular xenophobia, lent prohibitionists a patriotic sheen as they attacked German-American beer halls and breweries and painted immigrant communities as moral cesspools. Congress passed a temporary wartime prohibition law in 1918, but faced stiffer resistance when Minnesota Congressman Andrew Volstead introduced the National Prohibition Act to make wartime prohibition permanent. President Wilson vetoed the bill, ostensibly because the end of the war had rendered the emergency rationale for the bill moot. "In all matters having to do with the personal

habit and customs of large numbers of our people, we must be certain that the established processes of legal change are followed," Wilson wrote in his veto message, sounding a note of caution.⁶⁸ Foreshadowing divisions that would stalk the party for the next decade, many dry Democrats crossed the aisle to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority to override a presidential veto.

As discussed in more detail in Section III, the Eighteenth Amendment had delivered prohibitionists a hollow victory. Despite its immediate impact—some experts estimate that alcohol consumption dropped between thirty and sixty percent—it proved far easier to ban alcohol on paper than in practice.⁶⁹ Americans of all social classes continued to drink, especially the substantial majority who lived in the nation's big cities. By 1927, there were 66 million urban dwellers in the United States compared to 52 million who lived in rural areas.⁷⁰ To satisfy the nation's thirst for alcohol, people turned to homemade-liquor distilled in bathtubs, exploited loopholes that provided medical and religious exemptions to the Volstead Act, or surreptitiously visited the numerous speakeasies that offered contraband alcohol smuggled from Canada or the Caribbean at a premium. This illicit trade brought millions to criminal syndicates run by violent gangsters. The popular image of the Roaring Twenties, immortalized in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, remains one of glamorous gin-soaked parties and champagne toasts.

Enforcement taxed the capacity of federal agents who waged an uphill battle, all the while hindered by low numbers, poor pay, hostile public opinion, and corruption within their own ranks. By 1930, over one-third of the nation's twelve thousand federal inmates were incarcerated for Prohibition-related offenses, and courts struggled to keep up with the overflowing docket.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Prohibition brought the government directly into the daily lives of citizens in an unprecedented manner. This expansion of federal power alarmed Americans across the political spectrum.

While Prohibition remained the law of the land for the whole decade, political battles over the issue did not recede after the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment. A candidate's stance on Prohibition continued to matter to voters on both sides of the debate, and the issue influenced hundreds of races at both the local and national levels until repeal triumphed with the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment. By 1927, thirty states had effectively