

Bill of Rights in Action



SPRING 2016

Volume 31 N° 3

THE ELECTION OF 1912



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The four candidates in the 1912 election, from L to R: William H. Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, Eugene V. Debs, and Woodrow Wilson.

The 1912 presidential election was a race between four leaders who each found it necessary to distinguish their own brand of progressive reform. The election and its outcome had far reaching social, economic, and political consequences for the nation.

Rapid industrialization in the 19th century led to a variety of American economic and social problems. Among them were child labor; urban poverty; bribery and political corruption; unsafe factories and industries; and jobs with low wages and long hours.

Beginning as a social movement, progressivism was an ideology (set of beliefs) aimed at addressing industrialism's problems. It focused on protecting the people from excessive power of private corporations. Progressives emphasized a strong role for government to remedy social and economic ills by exposing corruption and regulating big business.

Not surprisingly, the 1912 presidential election became a contest over progressive principles. Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Eugene Debs campaigned to convince the electorate that their vision for change would lead America into a new age of progress and prosperity.

Roosevelt, Taft, and the Republican Party

Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) committed himself early in life to public service and progressive reforms. After attending Harvard University and a year at Columbia Law School, Roosevelt was elected to the New York State Assembly. He subsequently served in a number of official posts, including the United States Civil Service Commission, president of the board of New York City Police Commissioners, and assistant secretary of the

POLITICAL CONFLICT

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* looks at well-known conflicts in politics. The first article examines the sometimes raucous election of 1912. The second article looks at the effects of a 19th century rivalry between two powerful British politicians. The third article explores the controversy that erupted from Edward Snowden's revelations about government surveillance.

U.S. History: The Election of 1912

World History: The Great Rivalry: Disraeli vs. Gladstone

Government: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and Mass Surveillance

Guest writer Pam Jenning wrote "The Election of 1912." Longtime contributor Carlton Martz wrote about Disraeli and Gladstone and about mass surveillance.

Navy in 1897. He organized the “Rough Riders” and fought in the Spanish American War in 1898. He was elected as governor of New York that same year.

Republican presidential candidate William McKinley chose Roosevelt as his vice president in 1900. After McKinley’s assassination by an anarchist’s gunshot in 1901, Roosevelt succeeded him. At age 42, he was the youngest president in American history. During his two terms in office from 1901 to 1909, he championed progressive policies, such as anti-monopoly legislation (to protect small businesses). He met the great naturalist John Muir in Yosemite and helped establish the National Park Service. He greatly expanded the country’s role in world politics and significantly increased the power of the presidency.

William Howard Taft (1857–1930) and Roosevelt were friends and shared progressive ideas. In his career, Taft had preferred to serve his country as a jurist, or judge. (In 1921, he would become chief justice of the Supreme Court.) Son of a prominent judge, Taft graduated from Yale University, practiced law in his hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, and received a number of judicial appointments.

As president, Roosevelt made Taft his secretary of war and even promoted him as his chosen successor to the White House in the election of 1908. Taft became the 27th president, pledging to maintain Roosevelt’s progressive legacy.

Once in the White House, however, Taft disappointed his old friend and mentor, siding with the conservatives in his party on key decisions. Progressive Republicans distrusted tariffs, or taxes on imports, as a hindrance to trade. But Taft signed into law a bill that barely lowered tariffs, and he also dismissed a conservationist as head of the Bureau of Forestry, both decisions that upset Roosevelt.

Even though Taft was more conservative than Roosevelt, his administration did have progressive highlights. Taft’s administration filed 80 antitrust (anti-monopoly) lawsuits against corporations. Taft also supported amendments for a federal income tax and for popular election of senators (who were chosen at that time by state legislatures and not voters).

Frustrated by what he perceived as Taft’s half-hearted attempts to continue progressive policies, Roosevelt decided to enter the 1912 presidential race. He believed he could better unite the Republican Party.



What do you think this cartoon from May 1912 was saying about the election?

Roosevelt was also known for his outsized ego, and many historians believe his regrets over not running for another term in 1908 motivated him to run in 1912.

The Great Split

In 1912, Roosevelt arrived at the Republican convention in Chicago ready to challenge incumbent president Taft. He had more delegates from primary elections than Taft, but not nearly enough for the required majority. Taft and the Republican National Committee (RNC), however, were deeply concerned that Roosevelt’s progressivism was too radical. Many also worried about Roosevelt’s overbearing leadership style.

The RNC and the convention chairman Elihu Root awarded contested delegates to Taft, giving Taft the required majority for the nomination. The convention became a shouting match, full of rancor. Roosevelt supporters shouted “Liar!” at Root. But Taft won the nomination on the first ballot.

Roosevelt and his supporters left the convention in protest and formed the new Progressive Party,

which promptly nominated Roosevelt as its candidate. After Roosevelt told reporters “I feel like a bull moose,” the new party was nicknamed the “Bull Moose Party.” The split in the Republican Party was now beyond mending.

The Progressive Party platform reflected the principles of what Roosevelt called the “New Nationalism.” The platform included an array of reforms, such as the creation of a minimum wage, protection of immigrants, a workers’ compensation act (for on-the-job injuries), government pensions for retirees, a national health service, support for women’s suffrage, an eight-hour workday, a social security system (for retirement), and laws against child labor. It also called for a tariff commission to reduce “unjust or excessive” tariffs. The platform made conservation of natural resources a prominent feature.

Like the New Nationalism, Taft’s Republican platform still supported a protective tariff, arguing that tariffs could be adjusted in certain circumstances, helped develop the country’s resources, diversified industry, and shielded workers against unfair competition. Unlike the New Nationalism, restrictions on immigration were a prominent Republican concern. Conservation of “national resources,” however, was somewhat less prominent.

The Republican platform also displayed caution about corporations’ undue power. Taft and the Republicans advocated for the establishment of a federal trade commission to both relieve the burden on the courts and to speed the administration of regulations. They also advocated legislation to prohibit corporate campaign contributions and to support making certain antitrust actions into criminal offenses.

Wilson and the Democrats

Like Roosevelt and Taft, Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) was born in the decade before the Civil War. He graduated from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), earned a law degree from the University of Virginia, and received his doctorate degree from Johns Hopkins University. He began his working career as a political science professor at various institutions, later becoming president of Princeton from 1902 to 1910.

Noting Wilson’s growing national profile, conservative Democrats encouraged him to run for New Jersey governor. During the campaign, Wilson embraced a progressive platform, separating himself from his conservative backers. He became a leader of the progressive movement both as governor and in his 1912 campaign

for president. Wilson secured the Democratic nomination at the party’s convention in Baltimore, but only after 46 ballots.

Wilson believed that government had a duty to restore competition when big business threatened to overwhelm small business. He wanted to attack what he called the “Triple Wall of Privilege,” or tariffs that protected large industries; banks that tightened currency and limited loans; and trusts (monopolies) that controlled industries and fixed prices. Wilson’s platform, “The New Freedom,” proposed tariff reductions, stronger antitrust laws, banking and currency reform, a federal income tax, the direct election of senators in states, and limits on corporate campaign donations.

While both Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s 1912 platforms shared many progressive principles, they had key differences around trusts and tariffs. Roosevelt argued that some trusts were benign while others were harmful. In his view, trusts could be regulated. Wilson, however, saw all trusts as harmful to the public good. Regulation of trusts, according to Wilson, would ultimately fail as big business would use its power to get around government control. In Roosevelt’s view, too, tariffs protected wages, while Wilson saw them as just another special interest program for powerful corporations.

Debs and the Socialists

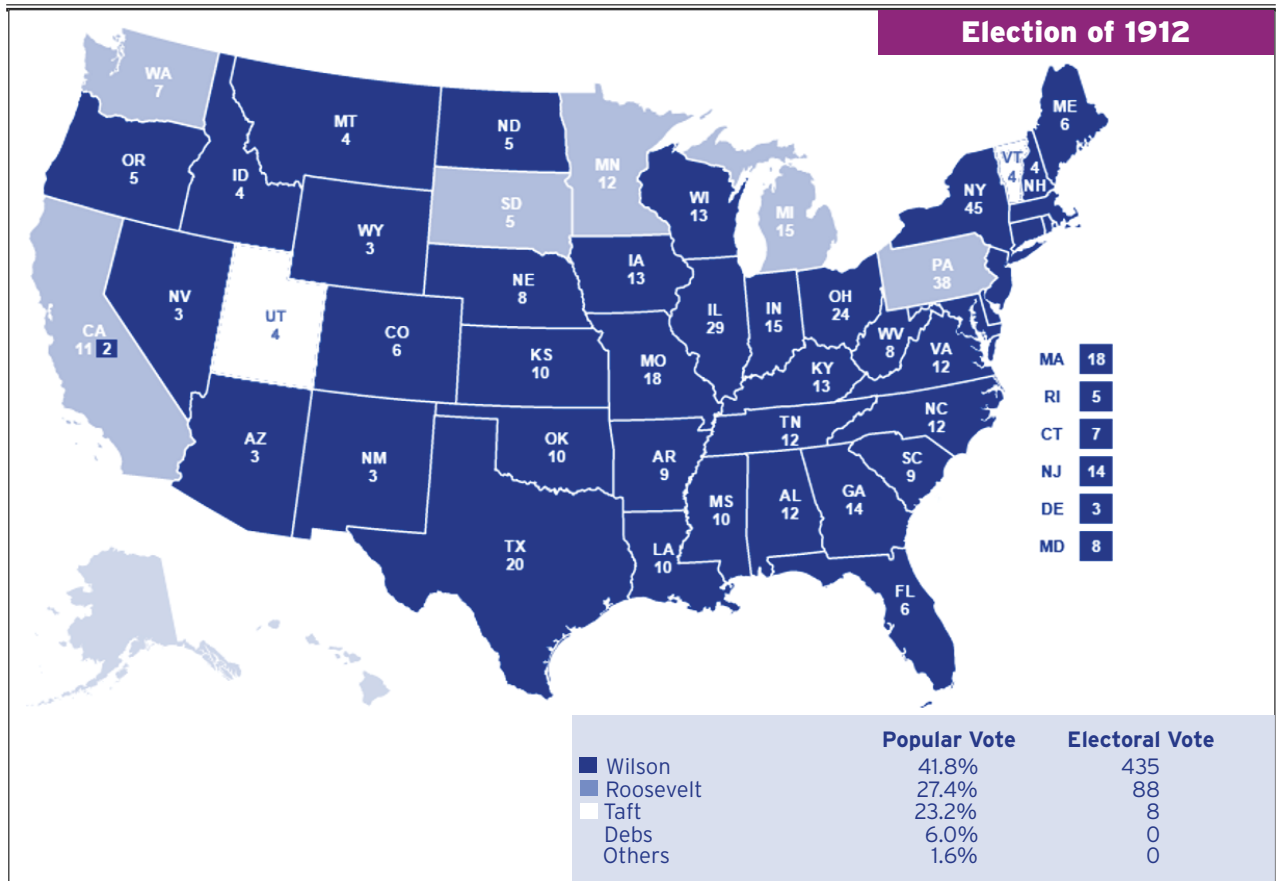
After dropping out of school at 14, Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926) began a series of railroad jobs in his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana. This experience led him to become a labor leader and to successfully run for elected offices as a Democrat, such as city clerk in 1878 and state assemblyman in 1885. In 1893, he was a founder of the American Railway Union.

The 1894 Pullman Strike in Chicago turned Debs into a radical. During the strike, federal troops occupied the city, and labor activists were jailed. These actions convinced Debs that trade unions lacked the power to curb the excesses of capitalism (an economy controlled by private rather than public interests).

By 1896, he saw socialism as the alternative to capitalism. In his view, socialism would give more power to the individual and protect workers from exploitation. Socialists stressed that capitalism was not only incompetent but corrupt, oppressing workers and separating society into antagonistic classes. The capitalist class, they argued, controlled the government.

In 1900, Debs ran for president of the United States for the first time on the Social Democratic Party (SDP) ticket. He would run four more times during his life. (In ▶

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This map shows the electoral votes and winner for each state in the general election of 1912. What do you think would have happened if Roosevelt had not run on the Bull Moose ticket?

1920, he ran while serving a federal prison sentence for publicly opposing the draft in World War I.)

By 1912, the SDP had become the Socialist Party, and its platform called for a radical reorganization of American social and economic institutions. The platform called for collective (public) ownership and “democratic management” of land, railroads, telegraph and telephone systems, and the banking and currency system. It called for public ownership of natural resources and large-scale industries, like mining.

Similar to the Republican and Progressive platforms but more profound in scope, the Socialist platform emphasized that workers, as a class, needed protection. The platform included the eight-hour workday, restrictions on child labor, a minimum wage, old-age pensions, unemployment and health insurance, and a graduated income tax. More radically, the platform sought to abolish the Senate, the president’s veto power, federal courts, and the Supreme Court’s power to decide the constitutionality of legislation.

The Race

Although the 1912 campaign showcased four dynamic individuals, the election was mainly between

Roosevelt and Wilson. Wilson had a secure foundation with his Democratic base and used his New Freedom platform to win over Progressive Party voters. Roosevelt travelled 10,000 miles to 34 states, particularly to the dozen states with direct primary elections.

Roosevelt spoke for 90 minutes in Milwaukee even after a would-be assassin shot him in the chest. The bullet apparently was slowed down by the steel eyeglasses case and folded-up 50-page copy of the speech in Roosevelt’s coat pocket.

Even though Taft was the incumbent in a majority party that had dominated since the 1890s, he made very few campaign appearances. Like Roosevelt, Debs’ campaign strength revolved around his forceful and eloquent speaking ability. Debs depended on the support of labor unions and collected campaign contributions from the large crowds at his rallies, which often outnumbered those of other candidates.

When the votes were counted, Woodrow Wilson became the first Democrat to win the White House since Grover Cleveland left it in 1897. Despite Roosevelt’s energy and popularity with progressives, he and Taft split the Republican vote (27.4 percent and 23.2 percent, respectively). The split enabled Wilson to win without

a majority of total votes (41.8 percent). Debs, with almost a million votes (6 percent), proved to be one of the most successful third party candidates in U.S. history.

Legacy of the 1912 Election

Wilson's presidency, which incorporated many of Debs' and Roosevelt's proposals, introduced a number of sweeping changes that had long lasting effects. He signed into law the Federal Reserve Act that reformed the banking system, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act that broke up monopolies in business, and a bill to lower tariffs. The new Federal Trade Commission regulated unfair labor practices. Wilson's administration also established the first graduated income tax and the popular election of U.S. senators through the 16th and 17th amendments to the Constitution.

The progressivism of Debs, Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson also led the way for the broad reforms of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Theodore Roosevelt's success with primary voters developed over the next 60 years into the modern state primary system where party delegates are chosen by voters instead of by party

officials. Significantly, for the rest of the 20th century and beyond, the Republican Party's struggle between reform and reaction has underscored the nation's ongoing conflict between progressive idealism and conservative principles.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. At the Republican Party national convention in 1912, Taft called Roosevelt "the greatest menace to our institutions that we have had in a long time." Roosevelt, in turn, called Taft part of "the forces of reaction and of political crookedness." What information in the article shows you why they would show such hostility toward each other?
2. In what ways did all four candidates share progressive ideas?
3. Compare Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Wilson's New Freedom. Then, compare the Socialist Party platform to both of them. What were the key differences between the progressivism of Debs and that of Roosevelt and Wilson?

ACTIVITY: Progressives Debate!

Imagine it is 1912. The presidential candidates will debate the following main question:

Which candidate is the most capable of advancing progressive ideas in the United States?

Choose three students who will moderate the debate. They will use the article to prepare at least two questions *each* to ask the candidates (at least six additional questions total in addition to the main question above). The additional questions may be about any subject in the article and can be addressed to any or all of the candidates.

Divide the remaining students into four role-play groups, each representing one of the four candidates: Taft, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Debs. In their groups, they will discuss and prepare their answer to the main question above. To do so, they should thoroughly prepare their assigned candidate's position on tax policy (including tariffs), antitrust, conservation, workers' protections, the Senate, and any other relevant topics.

Each role-play group should then choose one member who will participate in the debate as a "fishbowl" activity (at the front of the classroom). One student from any of the groups will then switch to be the timekeeper for the debate.

Each candidate should be given at least one minute to answer each question asked of him or her.

Conduct the debate by first having the moderators ask each candidate the main question. Then, moderators ask their additional questions.

When all questions have been asked, moderators should briefly discuss and decide which candidate they think won the debate. They should report their answer and reasons to the class.

Debrief the debate. What stood out? Did any candidate persuade students to change their minds? Why?

Every student will then write their own answer to the main question in at least one well-developed paragraph.

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