**The Election of 1912 and the Soul of Progressivism**

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Teddy Roosevelt opened his speech at the Milwaukee Auditorium on October 14, 1912 by asking for complete silence. He then told the crowd, “I don’t know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Roosevelt unbuttoned his vest and held up his 50-page speech, now with two bullet holes piercing each page. Unfazed, with blood seeping into his white shirt, he proclaimed, “It takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose” and gave his 90-minute speech to a stunned audience.[[2]](#footnote-2) The entire election of 1912 was an uphill battle for Roosevelt. He had been spurned at the Republican National Convention when he tried to overtake his previously chosen successor William Taft for the nomination. Determined to protect his legacy, Roosevelt started the Progressive Party—often called the Bull Moose Party—which embodied his reforms and beliefs. His split fractured the Republican base and ushered into office Woodrow Wilson, the first Democrat to hold the presidency since 1897 and a progressive himself. The loss of the election of 1912 would prove to be a fatal blow to the Bull Moose Party, but not to the progressive spirit.

Progressivism was a national trend in the early 20th century that had popular appeal among reformers like Roosevelt and Wilson, who used it to describe their solutions to industrial America’s problems. Of the four major candidates that ran for president in 1912, three at some point held the office and all preached progressive reforms to some degree. In particular, the debate between Roosevelt and Wilson on the future of American capitalism elevated progressivism as a political force and focused national politics around it. Together they educated Americans on the need for a progressive approach to the problems of their day. The election of 1912 marked both an important transfer in leadership of progressivism and progressivism’s peak in American politic**s.**

Progressivism was a broad label that was used to describe a diverse set of policies and reforms. The Progressive Era, which historians generally place between the end of the depression of the 1890s and the Roaring 20s, was a period characterized by social [activism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activism) and political [reform](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform) across the United States.[[3]](#footnote-3) As the name implies, progressives genuinely believed in the ability for human society to “progress” towards better conditions. Progressives analyzed social, cultural, and political institutions and offered bold solutions, usually designed around government intervention. The movement was largely a white, middle-class affair which frequently saw issues of race and civil rights cast aside to the dismay of black activists. Throughout the era, no one leader completely dominated progressivism, but there were several important spokespeople. Most progressive politicians originally belonged to the group of insurgent Republicans who bucked the conservative wing of their party. Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette led the attack in Congress against the Republican establishment and fought for progressive reforms.[[4]](#footnote-4) Until the formation of the Progressive Party, progressivism was more a desire for an enhanced role for government than a political platform. Even after a party laid claim to the progressive brand, progressivism was still fluid and encompassed a multitude of political-economic ideas.

The issue of the growing corporate economy, or trusts, dominated progressivism. At the turn of the 20th century, America was experiencing drastic shifts in its economy. Now linked together by railroad and telegraph, the national economy had reached new heights of industrialization and growth. American capitalism was restructuring into corporations as business giants used their economic dominance to concentrate their power further. Brett Flehinger, a history professor at Harvard University and author of *The 1912 Election and the Power of Progressivism*, argues that “Progressivism was the attempt to use government and new private quasi-governmental institutions to help America's political and social system adjust to a series of economic changes”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Progressivism was in many ways a form of protest against big business and its abuses to consumers. Voters wanted to rein in the corporations that preyed on them and the politicians that granted the special privileges that made these abuses possible. Thus, progressivism had two main thrusts: to use government to regulate trusts and control government more effectively through direct democracy. While not elected president by the voters for his first term, Teddy Roosevelt would prove to be a champion of progressivism.

When President William McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Roosevelt ascended to the presidency and became a progressive icon. While he was not the most progressive politician, Roosevelt was progressivism’s most articulate and admired public figure at the time. His domestic program, the Square Deal, had three main goals: conservation of natural resources, control of corporations, and consumer protection. During his time in office Roosevelt revitalized the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, strengthened the Interstate Commerce Act, promoted conservation, and signed the Pure Food and Drug Act as well as the Meat Inspection Act.[[6]](#footnote-6) He proposed many more programs during his second term, but could not rally Congress behind them, such as a federal income tax and campaign finance reform. As Professor Francis L. Broderick asserts in *Progressivism at Risk: Electing a President in 1912,* “Roosevelt maneuvered within the conservative-progressive division in his own party to push his program of moderate reform.”[[7]](#footnote-7) His concessions often frustrated progressives, especially La Follette, but Roosevelt’s reforms and dynamism won him the admiration of progressives nationwide. After his election in 1904, Roosevelt announced his decision to not run for office again, respecting the anti-third term principle of American presidents. To replace him, Roosevelt handpicked his Secretary of War William Taft and helped him win the office in 1908.

Taft did not protect the Roosevelt legacy to the extent Teddy desired and was significantly more conservative. Rather than push the boundaries of the constitution like Roosevelt, Taft believed in following constitutional precedents. Conservation fell to the wayside, and an internal Republican battle over tariff reform further damaged his reputation among progressives. To his credit, Taft oversaw almost double the lawsuits against trusts compared to Roosevelt. Believing that as president he needed to maintain party unity, he worked closely with the Republican establishment. He was also a poor politician, lacking the exciting energy of Roosevelt and often managing to disappoint both progressives and conservatives. Since Roosevelt had left office, the progressive movement had only grown stronger across the county. Taft’s actions created bitter resentment among the insurgents, who felt that Taft was rolling back progressivism. When Roosevelt returned from a year-long African safari in 1910, he remarked, “The Republican Party consists of leadership which has no following.”[[8]](#footnote-8) He sought to reassert himself over the Republican party by undertaking a speaking tour across the western United States, where his support was strongest. As the Republicans splintered, the Democrats saw their opportunity to escape the political wilderness and practice their own progressivism.

As the nation approached 1912, Woodrow Wilson proved to be the perfect candidate for the Democrats. In 1910, Democrats had retaken the House of Representatives, controlling a branch of Congress for the first time since the election of 1894.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many Democrats began to posture themselves within the party as the best candidate to regain control of the executive branch. Originally a southern conservative, Wilson had started out as a student of politics rather than a politician. He received his Ph.D. in political science from John Hopkins University and was hired by Princeton in 1890 as a professor of jurisprudence and politics. From 1902 to 1910, Wilson served as president of Princeton, where he developed a national reputation for his educational reforms.[[10]](#footnote-10) Wilson grew tired of his position at Princeton and decided to run for the governorship of New Jersey in 1910. During his time in academia he grew to support the progressive movement. Historian David Sarasohn makes the case in his book *The Party of Reform: Democrats in the Progressive Era* that “Wilson demonstrates the progressivism of his party, not from the steadfastness of his progressive principles, but rather from their sudden appearance.”[[11]](#footnote-11) For any Democrat to have a shot at the nomination for president they would need progressive credentials, which Wilson was eager to acquire. After winning the governorship, he rapidly instituted a series of progressive reforms, including mandatory primaries, workers’ compensation, and anti-corrupt practice measures.[[12]](#footnote-12) Progressives took note of the political outsider who stormed the state government and passed several progressive reforms in a few short months. A Democratic victory became all but completely certain after the party conventions.

Brewing tension between Roosevelt and Taft boiled over at the Republican National Convention in June of 1912, with Roosevelt bolting and creating the Progressive Party. Professor Lewis Gould notes in his book *Four Hats in the Ring* that “As the summer of 1911 drew to a close, the political scene in the United States was more fluid than it ever had been in any presidential election since 1896.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The assumption of Democratic victory pushed Republicans to consider not renominating Taft, an anomaly for a sitting president. 1912 was the first year of Republican primaries, of which Roosevelt won 9 out of 12 contests. However, the other 38 states still selected delegates by state conventions.[[14]](#footnote-14) Most states that were predicted to vote Republican in the general election fell to Roosevelt, but Taft dominated overall, effectively using patronage and other political tools to keep the South.[[15]](#footnote-15) Roosevelt perceived the loss as a great injustice and the growing rift within the party finally resulted in a complete break. From the struggle emerged the birth of the Progressive Party, quickly dubbed the Bull Moose Party by Roosevelt’s admirers. At a separate convention in August, Roosevelt was immediately nominated. Any hope for their victory hinged on the Democrats having an equally disastrous falling out or the nomination of a conservative.

For all the divisions Democrats faced, they emerged from their convention with a progressive candidate capable of robbing the Progressive Party of support. Despite Wilson’s newfound fame, the party favorite for the nomination was Speaker of the House Champ Clark. Clark was not as effective at campaigning as Wilson but enjoyed a long career and a vast network of supporters. Both candidates did comparably well in primaries, but due to state conventions Clark entered the convention with more pledged delegates. Luckily for Wilson, Clark lacked the two-thirds majority necessary to secure the presidential nomination. Political cartoonist John McCutcheon captured the spectacle in “The Time, the Place, and the Girl,” which showed Opportunity at the door of the Democrats, ready to bestow “Victory to Some Real Progressive.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Over the course of the dramatic week-long convention Wilson managed to syphon enough votes away from other contenders to overtake Clark with the help of perennial candidate for president William Jennings Bryan. The race for president quickly focused on the conflict between Roosevelt and Wilson’s ideas of progressivism.

Roosevelt’s political doctrine had evolved into a radically progressive platform, which came to be called New Nationalism. On the issue of trusts, Roosevelt saw big business as a force that could be harnessed for the benefit of society. In his “Charter of Democracy” speech to the Ohio Constitutional Convention, Roosevelt made clear that “I do not believe in making mere size of and by itself criminal. The mere fact of size, however, does unquestionably carry the potentiality of such grave wrong-doing that there should be by law provision made for the strict supervision and regulation of these great industrial concerns doing an interstate business.”[[17]](#footnote-17) To regulate interstate commerce on such a large scale, Roosevelt envisioned replacing the Sherman Act with a more robust regulatory law. By giving government more control, politicians could then decide which trusts were acting for the benefit of society and which were causing harm. Increased powers of government were matched with increased power for the voters.

Largely because Roosevelt saw himself as the victim of undemocratic politics, he advocated for direct democracy. He gave his unequivocal support in his “Confession of Faith” speech when he accepted the nomination from the Progressive Party, stating “We should provide by national law for presidential primaries. We should provide for the election of United States senators by popular vote. We should provide for the short ballot.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Roosevelt was sure he would have won the Republican nomination if this system was in place in 1912. Beyond elections, he also supported the initiative and referendum processes. More controversially he also promoted judicial recall, or the ability to overturn judicial decisions through popular vote. In the “Charter of Democracy” speech, he argued that “If any considerable number of the people feel that the decision is in defiance of justice, they should be given the right by petition to bring before the voters … the question whether or not the judges’ interpretation of the Constitution is to be sustained.” Women had a powerful voice in the Progressive Party, which advocated for women’s suffrage and included them in party activities. Jane Addams, a cofounder of Hull House and social justice advocate, seconded Roosevelt’s nomination at the Progressive Convention. Black people did not enjoy the same level of support. Southern black progressives were barred from the Progressive Convention to avoid upsetting southern delegations. Wilson was not far behind and cobbled together his progressive principles soon after entering the race.

Wilson’s political platform had key differences from Roosevelt’s, which he dubbed New Freedom. At first Wilson based his campaign on attacking Roosevelt rather than offering his own solutions, but during the campaign he crafted his own agenda. Louis Brandeis, a future Supreme Court justice, heavily influenced Wilson during the campaign and helped him refine his ideas about the economy. In a campaign speech in Pueblo, Colorado, Wilson argued that “Neither branch of the Republican party proposes to set private monopoly aside, and unless we can set private monopoly aside, the enterprise of carrying the government back to the people is impossible. The Democratic platform says that private monopoly is in every case indefensible and intolerable, and I subscribe literally to that statement.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In Wilson’s view large business organizations were inherently unnatural and socially destructive. Wilson wanted to limit the size corporations could achieve by adding a new provision onto the Sherman Act.

Wilson was primarily concerned with economic reform and only offered reluctant support to direct democracy. Tariff reform was one of his highest priorities, a common goal among Democrats who sought reductions. Unlike western progressives, who were very concerned about direct democracy, eastern progressives like Wilson tended to focus on social reforms. According to Wilson, the nation’s economic problems were at the root of society’s ills. He did offer support for the initiative and referendum as exemplified in his campaign speech at Sioux City, where he stated that because government does not always represent the people, “we have got to have a key to the door of our own house.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Contrary to Roosevelt, he was strongly against women’s suffrage and saw judicial recall as too extreme. Beyond Wilson and Roosevelt, the Republicans and Socialists also campaigned to the American people.

Taft contributed to the national debate over progressivism by offering a conservative alternative. Taft was aware that he would most likely not be reelected but campaigned to protect the conservatism of the Republican party. With full knowledge that Roosevelt carried the popular support among Republicans, he took solace in the fact that “whatever happens we shall have preserved the party organization as a nucleus for conservative action in 1916.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Still, Taft can be considered as a progressive conservative. On the Sherman Act, Taft told an audience in 1912 that “I think that we must retain the law, my friends. I don’t think we can permit the gathering together of these great industrial combinations that are illegal, merely by a desire to secure a reduction in the cost of production.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Taft was appalled at most of the democratic reforms progressives proposed. He saw judicial recall as incredibly dangerous, especially to constitutional guarantees made during Reconstruction, and distrusted the wisdom of voters. Throughout the campaign he accused Roosevelt of demagoguery for his pursuit of a third term.

On the other end of the spectrum, socialism gained attention and the Socialists received their highest percentage of the popular vote in 1912. As Americans grew concerned about economic concentration and wanted increased government control, Socialist ideas entered the mainstream. Socialist candidate for president Eugene V. Debs was the most well-known member of the Socialist Party and an intellectual cousin of the progressives. His assertion that “the capitalists, while comparatively few, owned the nation and controlled the government” mirrored progressive beliefs of corporate control.[[23]](#footnote-23) Because of the similarities between the Socialist and Progressive Parties, Debs accused Roosevelt of stealing many of their ideas and perverting them.[[24]](#footnote-24) Still, the Socialist Party came in last place on election day.

Wilson’s victory on November 5, 1912 should be seen as the acceptance of Wilson as the national leader of progressivism and a ratification of progressive reform. Wilson received 42 percent of the popular vote and 458 votes (or 82 percent) in the electoral college, a landslide victory. Roosevelt came in second with 27 percent of the popular vote and 88 electoral college votes. Taft only received 23 percent of the popular vote and 8 electoral college votes, becoming the only Republican in history to finish third. Debs received an all-time high of 6 percent of the popular vote.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, voters for both Wilson and Roosevelt chose progressivism over conservatism or socialism; together they amassed 69% of the popular vote. This impressive tally shows the extent of progressivism in America at the beginning of Wilson’s first term. The Progressive Era had reached its apex.

The election of 1912 was a moment of national education for progressive reform. According to Lewis Gould, Wilson’s election signified the “emergence of modern politics” in America.[[26]](#footnote-26) New technologies were now being utilized for political purposes. Newspapers offered extensive coverage of the campaigns, audio recordings of speeches were made, and movies were produced about the candidates. Paired with the advent of primaries, candidates now needed to stump more than before. Unlike older campaigns that showcased parades or showmanship, the spotlight was on the intellectual debate on progressivism. The *National Monthly* wrote in September of 1912 that “The Democracy has made bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh the legitimate progressivism of the country.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Roosevelt and Wilson had remarkably similar principles at the heart of their platforms. Both agreed on the general progressive message of reining in trusts and protecting democracy from special interests. Their main differences lied in execution, which allowed for an incredibly nuanced debate. Progressives were forced to decide what method would be best for fixing their country. Gould found that “The Progressives and Roosevelt had put at the center of the public agenda a group of ideas that would concern American politics throughout the rest of the 20th century.” Wilson would advance the progressive agenda during this first term in office and lay the groundwork for future reforms.

Congress, under Wilson’s urging and supervision, passed a series of progressive laws. Democrats were in control of both branches of Congress as well as the presidency, providing the chance to prove their commitment to progressivism. True to his campaign promise, he called Congress into special session on his inauguration day to settle the tariff issue. La Follette threw his support behind Wilson’s plan, helping push through the Underwood tariff that reduced duties on average by 20 percent.[[28]](#footnote-28) By Wilson’s recommendation, Congress also established the Federal Trade Commission as a corporate regulatory body and the Clayton Anti-Trust Act to rein in big business. Furthermore, Congress passed a series of economic measures such as reforming the tax structure and banking system. However, Wilson’s reforms did not reflect the fulfillment of his New Freedom platform, but rather the broader aims of progressivism.

Wilson ultimately combined ideas from Roosevelt’s New Nationalism and his own New Freedom into enacted reforms. While the Clayton Act strongly resembled Wilson’s New Freedom promises to build on the Sherman Act, the Federal Trade Commission reflected Roosevelt’s New Nationalism idea of creating a regulatory commission. Under Wilson, Congress also passed a series of social reforms such as a worker’s compensation law, a ban on child labor, and other labor laws. These measures reflected core progressive aims. Brett Flehinger found that “What emerged in the process [of governing] was neither New Freedom nor New Nationalism, but Progressivism.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The shift of power and progressivism to the Democratic party created a lasting shift in American politics.

Wilson’s progressive legislative agenda was the precursor to future Democratic reform packages such as the New Deal and Great Society. The old Democratic alliance had focused on the South and urban political machines. Roosevelt’s creation of the Progressive Party changed the game, opening the opportunity for Democrats to court progressives more effectively. When Roosevelt rejoined and reconciled with the Republican Party in 1916, the Progressive party fell apart. New demographics such as former Progressive Party members, organized labor, and liberal intellectuals began to join the party. Sarasohn suggests that Wilson helped form a “proto-New Deal coalition” that reshaped party attitudes and prepared it for the next call for reforms.[[30]](#footnote-30) As the Republican party embraced conservatism, the Democrats kept a hold of the progressive movement until it faded in the 1920s. During the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt used Wilson as a touchstone for many of his New Deal programs which focused on government intervention in the economy. The spirit of progressivism rose again in the 1960s to help inspire President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society reforms that tried to fix society’s ills. Even today, Democrats frequently try to label themselves as progressives as an appeal to voters. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Democrat Hillary Clinton argued in an op-ed that “It’s time to take a page from Teddy Roosevelt’s book and get our economy working for Americans again.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Teddy Roosevelt’s speech likely saved his life during the assassination attempt in 1912. After revealing where the bullet hit and the voluminous, damaged document he remarked, “It probably saved me from it going into my heart.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Roosevelt’s New Nationalism not only saved him but helped saved progressivism itself. Without his third party candidacy, the Republican Party would have remained largely intact and Wilson would not have felt the urge to convert to progressivism so completely. Certainly, no great debate of progressive ideas would have taken place, nor any realignment among the parties. The election of 1912 marked the height of the progressive movement and clarified the progressive agenda. Wilson and Roosevelt were forced into providing concrete solutions to America’s economic and social problems. Democratic victory resulted in the torch of progressivism being passed to Wilson, who lit the path for future reformers. The fight between Roosevelt and Wilson created an enduring progressive platform that came to define the movement. While the Bull Moose Party died, progressivism lived on.

NOTES

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