

1912

Progressivism's High Tide

Theodore Roosevelt's decision to challenge Republican incumbent William Taft electrified disaffected voters—and sealed Democrat Woodrow Wilson's victory

BY JAMES CHACE

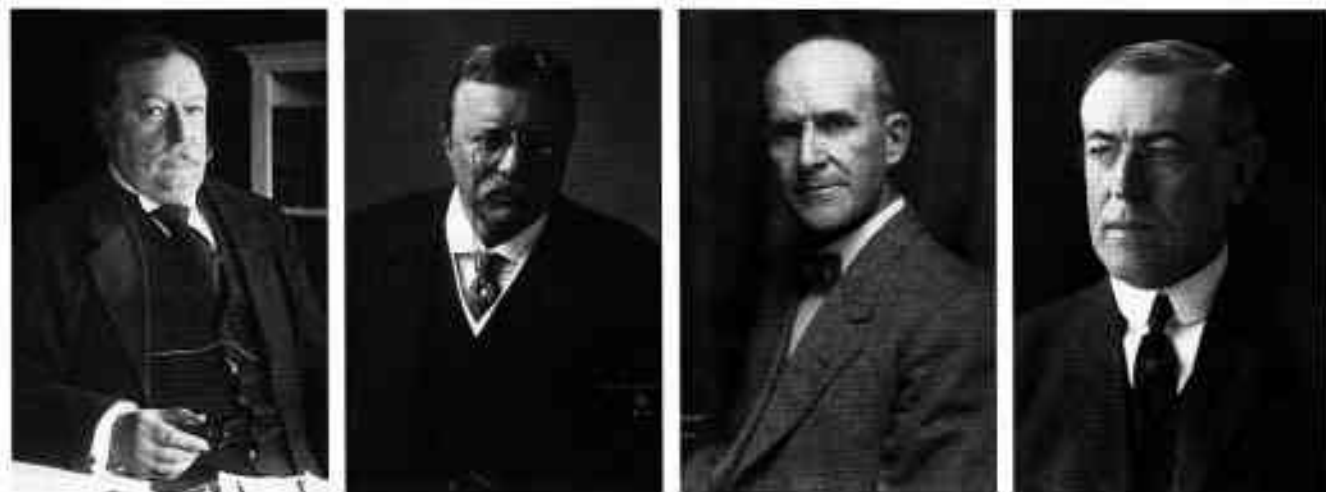
AGAINST A BACKDROP of massive change, the election of 1912 marked a defining moment in American history. The outcome of its fervid, four-way presidential contest not only set a new course for America at home and abroad but recast the terms of political debate for decades to come.

Running for the presidency were a reluctant incumbent, Republican William Howard Taft; Democrat Woodrow Wilson, the governor of New Jersey; the popular former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt, the candidate of the Progressives, nicknamed the Bull Moose Party; and the great standard-bearer for economic justice, Socialist Eugene V. Debs. Wilson won with 6,293,152 votes. Roosevelt came in second with 4,119,207 votes, then Taft with 3,486,333 votes. Debs won 900,369 votes, 6 percent of the total and more than double what he polled in 1908.

Debs' remarkable showing—the largest share of the popular vote ever won by a Socialist—was one sign of the reformist spirit sweeping the land. With the recent influx of new immigrants, condemned to work in squalid sweatshops and live in rat-infested tenements, journalists, social workers, ministers and middle-class Americans were outraged at corruption and bossism in the nation's cities. Both Roosevelt and Wilson recognized that they could not afford to be seen as holding back the tide of reform.

Most important was how to curb the excesses of big business, symbolized by the great trusts that had accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism. Roosevelt called for a "New Nationalism," in which government would regulate big business. Under Wilson's "New Freedom," government's task was to break up the trusts and restore competition to a world dominated by technology and mass markets. For Debs, America needed federal control of basic industries and a broad-based trade unionism. Taft called for better enforce-

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From left: Republican incumbent William Howard Taft saw "a great public duty" in beating Progressive Teddy Roosevelt, ex-president and ex-friend; Socialist Eugene Debs won almost a million popular votes, while Democrat Wilson won more than six million.



ment of existing laws to restrain industry's excesses. Indeed, all four men struggled to balance 19th-century democratic values with emerging 20th-century institutions. For Roosevelt and Wilson, this meant exercising executive power. Between them they created the modern presidency.

Theodore Roosevelt had served two terms in the White House when he surrendered his presidency to his close friend William Howard Taft, following Roosevelt's 1904 campaign promise not to seek a third term. Although Taft had faithfully served Roosevelt as secretary of war and governor general of the Philippines, he had never sought the presidency and would have much preferred a seat on the Supreme Court, which Roosevelt twice offered to him. His wife, however, urged him to turn down the offers in order to eventually run for president. Believing that Taft would carry on his policies, Roosevelt anointed him as his successor.

Taft tried, but he was a poor politician and too often gave in to the most reactionary members of his party. Roosevelt, angry at Taft's seeming betrayal, challenged him for the nomination of the Republican Party. Although he won more state primaries than Taft, 72 of his delegates were disqualified by Elihu Root, the choice of the Taft camp for chairman of the Republican convention. Afterward, Root told a friend, "I care more for one button on Theodore Roosevelt's waistcoat than for Taft's whole body," but he was determined to preserve the conservative heart of the Republican Party. Taft was nominated.

In response, Roosevelt accepted the nomination of the Progressive Party, a new party cobbled together from progressive Republicans and others who shared their beliefs. The delegates to the Progressive convention largely consisted of social workers, schoolteachers and young businessmen, including an unprecedented number of immigrants, Jews and Catholics. It was also the first convention by a major political party with female delegates, among them the famous social reformer Jane Addams, who seconded Roosevelt's nomination. In Roosevelt's keynote address, he appealed to the religious fervor of the delegates by declaring: "We stand at Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord."

Wilson's anti-bossism hurt him at the Democratic convention. At one point he was preparing to withdraw his name from consideration, believing that he could not overcome the lead of Missouri's James Beauchamp "Champ" Clark, who headed the Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Ironically, machine politicians from neighboring Illinois and Indiana finally made Wilson the nominee.

Whistle-stopping across the states, the candidates

Harper's Weekly chided Roosevelt for his corporate donors (top left); Taft campaigned reluctantly, while Debs' fiery oratory rallied Socialists; Progressives sang at their Chicago convention (left): "Follow! Follow! We will follow Roosevelt!"

LANDMARKS 1865-1919

fought over how to run the country in the age of industrial capitalism. Roosevelt believed that the problems of the nation—nasty factory working conditions, denial of women's suffrage, poor public health and the depredations by the trusts—demanded social justice. This required, he said, “an extension of government control” on a national scale. Wilson thought the states could better deal with these matters. Each candidate's positions touched the core of their beliefs. Wilson distrusted the corporate behemoths that he believed had destroyed the Jeffersonian America of small business and community life. He thought he could rid the country of that evil by restoring full competition. Roosevelt saw the ills visited upon the working class in the industrialized America that Alexander Hamilton had predicted; yet he knew that industrial capitalism could be only moderated, not eradicated.

Both Roosevelt and Wilson wanted the United States to play a major global role. Roosevelt, however, believed that the nation should work with other great powers to preserve the peace, and be willing to use military force if necessary. Wilson espoused a messianic internationalism that called on the United States to lead through a global organization (the League of Nations) that stressed arbitration, arms reduction and the pressure of world public opinion and, only as a last resort, the military enforcement of collective security.

For his part, Taft did little campaigning. He thought that Wilson would probably win. But he believed that he was right to keep a radical Roosevelt from leading the Republican Party. Had the charismatic Roosevelt received the Republican nomination, the GOP would likely have become a party of domestic reform and tough-minded internationalism. In that respect, Roosevelt represents the road not taken by American conservatism.

After his election as president, Wilson enacted many of the reforms Roosevelt had advocated. Encouraged by a Democratic Congress, Wilson reduced tariffs, established the Federal Trade Commission, supported the popular election of U.S. senators and achieved the passage of a graduated federal income tax, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the Federal Reserve Act, which would monitor the nation's money supply and smooth out dangerous fluctuations.

The competing approaches advocated by Roosevelt and Wilson—regulation or competition—still represent the two main schools of thought on how the government can best promote the welfare of the American people. The Taft-Roosevelt argument over the role of the executive—limited in Taft's approach, expansive in the view of Roosevelt and Wilson—still marks a quarrel between the two mainstream parties. And the debate over the role of the United States in the world continues to center on the preference between using military force or international law to maintain order. Above all, the contest between Roosevelt, Wilson, Taft and Debs recalls the great days of Jefferson and Hamilton, when leaders did not shy away from tackling the central question of America's exceptional destiny.

1867: The Naval Appropriations bill bans government employees from soliciting donations from naval yard workers—the first of many federal attempts to regulate campaign finance.

1870: Ratification of the 15th Amendment guarantees every male citizen's right to vote regardless of race, color or past servitude. But many states keep blacks from voting through various means.

1877: After a bitterly disputed election, a Congressionally appointed electoral commission chooses Republican Rutherford B. Hayes over Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, who had won nearly 270,000 more votes.



1892: Democrat Grover Cleveland becomes the only presidential candidate to have been elected (1884), defeated (1888), and then re-elected.

1905: Prodded by Progressive leader Governor Robert La Follette, Wisconsin passes the first comprehensive law creating a state presidential primary.

1900



1912: The Progressive Party candidate, ex-president Theodore Roosevelt, loses to Woodrow Wilson, but wins 88 electoral votes and almost 28 percent of the popular vote—the best showing of any third-party candidate.

