3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1904

Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

A 35-minute lesson on the 1904 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Progressive Era	ELECTORAL VOTES 476 total
WINNER Theodore Roosevelt (Republican) · 336 EV	RUNNER-UP Alton B. Parker (Democratic) · 140 EV
KEY ISSUE Trust-busting; progressive reform; Roosevelt's Square Deal	TURNOUT 65.5%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1904: Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	When a vice president succeeds to the presidency through assassination, his first election in his own right is often called "running for affirmation." Why might voters be especially willing to support an accidental president who has just finished proving himself?
15 min	Reading	The 1904 election was the 30th U.S. presidential election. It produced Theodore Roosevelt's 336-140 electoral-vote victory over Alton B. Parker - Roosevelt's first election as president in his own right (he had succeeded to the presidency after McKinley's September 1901 assassination). Roosevelt's 196-EV margin and 2,545,514 popular-vote margin were the largest presidential margins since Lincoln's 1864 victory (40 years earlier). Roosevelt won 56.4% of the popular vote - the highest percentage of any presidential candidate since Grant's 1872 re-election. Roosevelt had been president since September 14, 1901, when he took the oath at Ansley Wilcox's home in Buffalo, New York. His three-and-a-half-year first term had been remarkably active. Major achievements: (1) The March 1902 Department of Justice antitrust suit against Northern Securities Company (a holding company combining the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroads); the March 1904 Supreme Court ruling against Northern Securities established federal authority to break up monopolies. (2) The October 1902 anthracite coal strike mediation; Roosevelt brought management and labor to the White House and threatened to nationalize the mines if they failed to agree. (3) The 1903 Panama Revolt and acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone (May 1904 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty). (4) The June 1902 Reclamation Act creating the Bureau of Reclamation. (5) The 1903 Department of Commerce and Labor (including the Bureau of Corporations to investigate corporate practices). (6) Conservation expansion - 75 million acres of new national forests by 1904. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 21-23, 1904 and nominated Roosevelt by acclamation on the first ballot. Senator Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana - a conservative Republican from a key swing state - was the vice presidential candidate. The Republican platform endorsed the gold standard, the Dingley Tariff, the Panama Canal, an open-door policy in China, and continued government activism for "the people." The Democratic National Convention met in St. Louis on July 6-9, 1904. The convention faced a structural dilemma. Bryan had lost twice (1896, 1900) on a silver-populist platform. Conservative Democrats wanted to nominate a different kind of candidate to break the Republican grip on the Northeast. The convention

nominated Chief Judge Alton B. Parker of the New York Court of Appeals. Parker was 51, a conservative gold-standard Democrat - the opposite of Bryan in every way. Henry G. Davis of West Virginia - an 80-year-old wealthy coal magnate and former U.S. Senator - was the vice presidential candidate (the oldest VP nominee in U.S. history). The Democratic platform was vague on most issues; Parker telegraphed the convention after his nomination clarifying his gold-standard position. The Bryan wing of the Democratic Party was deeply unhappy.

The Socialist Party of America was emerging as a structural force. Eugene V. Debs of Indiana was the 1904 Socialist nominee. Debs had organized the 1894 Pullman Strike (broken by Cleveland's federal troops); had spent 6 months in prison for contempt of court; had founded the American Socialist Party in 1901. Debs would win 402,810 popular votes in 1904 - more than four times his 1900 total of 87,945. The Socialist vote signaled emerging political dissatisfaction with both major parties from the left.

The campaign was unusual. Roosevelt was personally restricted by tradition from active campaigning (he had not yet been elected in his own right). But Roosevelt's personality made traditional candidate restraint impossible. He gave occasional speeches, wrote letters to be read at rallies, and let his Square Deal philosophy speak through campaign surrogates. The Republican fundraising operation (now headed by George Cortelyou instead of Hanna, who had died February 1904) raised approximately $2.2 million. The Democratic campaign raised approximately $700,000 - significantly more than Bryan had raised in either 1896 or 1900, reflecting the conservative-Democrat strategy of attracting eastern donors.

Parker's campaign was structurally weak. His personality was reserved and dignified - opposed to Roosevelt's exuberance. His policies were close to Roosevelt's on most issues except trust-busting and labor regulation (where Parker was more conservative). His Democratic coalition was divided between Bryan populists (who did not turn out for Parker) and conservative Eastern Democrats (who did turn out). The campaign's closing argument was a corruption accusation: Parker accused George Cortelyou (formerly Roosevelt's Secretary of Commerce and Labor, now Republican fundraising chair) of "blackmailing" corporations into campaign contributions. Roosevelt issued a public denial that effectively neutralized the charge.

Roosevelt won 336 electoral votes to Parker's 140. Roosevelt carried 32 states; Parker carried 13 states. The popular vote: Roosevelt 7,630,557 (56.4%); Parker 5,083,880 (37.6%); Debs (Socialist) 402,810 (3.0%); Swallow (Prohibition) 259,102 (1.9%); Watson (Populist) 114,070 (0.8%). Roosevelt-Parker popular-vote margin: 2,546,677. Roosevelt's 56.4% was the highest percentage since Grant's 1872 re-election (55.6%).

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Roosevelt swept every state outside the Solid South - all of the Northeast, all of the Midwest, all of the Mountain

West, the West Coast, and several Border States (Maryland, Missouri, Delaware - Maryland in particular flipped from Bryan 1900 to Roosevelt 1904). Parker held only the 11 former Confederate states plus 2 Border States (Kentucky, Arkansas). The 1904 map demonstrated that the 1896-1932 Republican alignment had reached its maximum strength.

On Election Night, Roosevelt issued a statement that would shape U.S. politics: "I appreciate to the full the honor bestowed upon me by the American people. I am deeply sensible of the responsibility, and I shall do my utmost to give my fellow countrymen reason to think that they have not made any mistake. Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." The statement followed the unwritten two-term tradition (established by Washington; broken only by Lincoln 1864). Roosevelt was 46 years old and would have been 50 in 1908 - young enough for two more terms. The statement was politically unnecessary but reflected Roosevelt's commitment to constitutional norms.

Roosevelt's second term (1905-09) deepened the Square Deal: the Hepburn Act 1906 (strengthening ICC railroad-rate authority); the Pure Food and Drug Act 1906 (following Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle"); the Meat Inspection Act 1906; conservation expansion (the 1906 Antiquities Act enabling national monument designation); the Roosevelt Corollary (December 1904); the 1905 Russo-Japanese War mediation (Nobel Peace Prize 1906 - first U.S. president to receive it); the 1907 Panic management (working with J.P. Morgan to stabilize banks).

The 1904 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it confirmed Roosevelt's personal political mandate for Progressive reform. Second, it demonstrated that conservative Democratic strategy could not break the Republican alignment - Parker's effort to recover eastern moderates by abandoning Bryan populism produced the worst Democratic result since Reconstruction. Third, Roosevelt's Election Night promise would shape U.S. politics for the next eight years - leading directly to the 1908 Taft succession, the 1912 Republican split, and Wilson's 1912 Democratic victory.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1904 Election

The 1904 election was the 30th U.S. presidential election. It produced Theodore Roosevelt's 336-140 electoral-vote victory over Alton B. Parker - Roosevelt's first election as president in his own right (he had succeeded to the presidency after McKinley's September 1901 assassination). Roosevelt's 196-EV margin and 2,545,514 popular-vote margin were the largest presidential margins since Lincoln's 1864 victory (40 years earlier). Roosevelt won 56.4% of the popular vote - the highest percentage of any presidential candidate since Grant's 1872 re-election.

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Key words

Square Deal	Theodore Roosevelt's 1901-09 progressive policy agenda. Four pillars: trust-busting (Northern Securities 1902, Standard Oil 1906); federal regulation (Hepburn Act 1906, Pure Food and Drug Act 1906); conservation (150M acres national forests); labor protection (1902 anthracite coal strike mediation).

Speak softly and carry a big stick	Theodore Roosevelt's foreign-policy motto. Quoted from a West African proverb. Operationalized through Navy expansion, Roosevelt Corollary (1904), Panama Canal (1903), Russo-Japanese War mediation (1905).
Alton B. Parker	The 1904 Democratic presidential nominee. Chief Judge of the New York Court of Appeals. Conservative gold-standard Democrat - the opposite of Bryan. Lost decisively 336-140 EV. The Democratic strategy of nominating a conservative Eastern Democrat to break Roosevelt's alignment failed.
Eugene V. Debs	American socialist labor leader. Organized the Pullman Strike 1894 (broken by Cleveland's federal troops); founded the American Socialist Party 1901. Ran for president in 1900, 1904 (402,810 votes), 1908, 1912 (6%), 1920 (from federal prison for opposing World War I draft).
Northern Securities case	The March 1902 federal antitrust suit against the Northern Securities Company (a holding company combining the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroads). The March 1904 Supreme Court ruling against Northern Securities established federal authority under the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act to break up monopolies.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Theodore Roosevelt win in 1904?

( ) A. 292
( ) B. 321
( ) C. 336
( ) D. 349

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many popular votes did Eugene V. Debs (Socialist) receive in 1904?

( ) A. 127,000
( ) B. 256,000
( ) C. 402,810
( ) D. 514,000

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Democratic Party choose Alton B. Parker as its 1904 nominee, and why did the strategy fail?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Roosevelt's Election Night 1904 promise, and what were its consequences for 1908-12?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

336. Roosevelt 336; Parker 140. Roosevelt's 196-EV margin was the largest since Lincoln's 1864 re-election.

Roosevelt's 56.4% popular vote was the highest since Grant's 1872.

QUESTION 2

402,810. Debs (Socialist) won 402,810 popular votes in 1904 - more than four times his 1900 total of 87,945. The Socialist vote signaled emerging political dissatisfaction with both major parties from the left.

Debs's 1904 vote was the structural beginning of American socialist electoral politics.

QUESTION 3

The Democratic Party chose Alton B. Parker for three structural reasons: (1) Bryan had lost twice (1896, 1900) on a silver-populist platform; the conservative Democratic wing wanted to break the Republican grip on the Northeast by abandoning populism. (2) Parker was a conservative gold-standard Democrat - the opposite of Bryan in every way - who could potentially appeal to eastern moderate voters who had voted Republican because of Bryan's populism. (3) Parker was a respected New York judge - the kind of "dignified Bourbon" candidate that the Cleveland-era Democratic establishment had preferred. The strategy failed for three reasons: (a) Parker's personal weakness - reserved, dignified, unable to compete with Roosevelt's personality. (b) The Bryan wing of the Democratic Party did not turn out for Parker; agrarian populists stayed home or voted Socialist. (c) Eastern moderate voters who had been skeptical of Bryan did not vote Democratic in 1904 - they preferred Roosevelt's reform Republicanism over Parker's conservative Democratic alternative. Result: Parker won only 37.6% - the worst Democratic percentage since Reconstruction.

AP students should be able to articulate both the strategic rationale and the failure mechanism.

QUESTION 4

Roosevelt's Election Night statement: "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." The promise followed the unwritten two-term tradition. The consequences for 1908-12: (1) 1908: Roosevelt could not seek the Republican nomination. He selected William Howard Taft as his successor, and Taft won the November 1908 election (321-162 EV over Bryan). (2) 1909-12: Taft's presidency proved more conservative than Roosevelt had expected. Taft fired key Roosevelt Progressive appointees, supported the conservative Payne-Aldrich Tariff (August 1909), and aligned with conservative Republican establishment. (3) 1912: Roosevelt sought to recover the Republican nomination from Taft. He lost the convention; he bolted to form the Progressive Party ("Bull Moose Party"). The Roosevelt-Taft split produced Woodrow Wilson's Democratic victory (435-88 EV) - the only major Democratic break in 1896-1932 Republican dominance. Roosevelt could not have anticipated specifics in 1904 but he might have anticipated that withdrawal from active leadership for four years would erode Progressive Republican momentum. The structural lesson: voluntary withdrawal from political leadership often produces unintended consequences when conservative successors fail to maintain progressive momentum.

AP students should be able to articulate the consequences.