1904

Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

A 50-minute lesson on the 1904 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
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1904: Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural conditions in 1900-1904 America that would produce a decisive Progressive Republican victory in 1904. For each, identify the specific 1901-1904 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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. Roosevelt's 196-EV margin and 2,545,514 popular-vote margin were the largest presidential margins since Lincoln's 1864 victory. Roosevelt won 56.4% of the popular vote - the highest percentage 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 Railway, Northern Pacific Railway, and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. The March 14, 1904 Supreme Court ruling (5-4) against Northern Securities established federal authority under the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act to break up monopolies. (2) The October 1902 anthracite coal strike mediation; Roosevelt brought management (the railroad-controlled coal operators led by George Baer) and labor (the United Mine Workers led by John Mitchell) to the White House. Roosevelt threatened to nationalize the mines using federal troops if they failed to agree. Both sides accepted arbitration; miners received 10% wage increases and 9-hour workdays. (3) The 1903 Panama Revolt - Roosevelt supported Panamanian independence from Colombia after Colombia rejected the U.S. terms for the canal; the November 1903 revolt produced Panama; the November 18, 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty granted the U.S. a 10-mile-wide Canal Zone. (4) The June 1902 Reclamation Act creating the Bureau of Reclamation for Western irrigation. (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. Fairbanks balanced the ticket geographically (Indiana vs Roosevelt's New York) and ideologically (conservative vs Progressive). 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 on the first ballot. 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 (1871-83) - was the vice presidential candidate. Davis was 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; many Bryan supporters either stayed home or voted Socialist (Debs).

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. Debs would receive 6% of the popular vote in 1912 (the Socialist Party's peak) and 913,693 votes in 1920 - the latter from a federal prison cell (he had been imprisoned for opposing the World War I draft).

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 15, 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.

The campaign's closing argument was a corruption accusation. Parker accused George Cortelyou of "blackmailing" corporations into Republican campaign contributions. Roosevelt issued a public denial that effectively neutralized the charge. The accusation reflected the genuine pattern of corporate contributions to Republican campaigns (a pattern that would lead to the 1907 Tillman Act prohibiting corporate political contributions to federal candidates) but did not connect with ordinary voter

concerns.

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%); Corregan (Socialist Labor) 33,143 (0.2%). 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 three 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. Major achievements: (1) The June 1906 Hepburn Act - strengthening the Interstate Commerce Commission's authority to set maximum railroad rates. (2) The June 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act - prohibiting interstate commerce in misbranded or adulterated foods, drugs, medicines, and liquors. Spurred by Upton Sinclair's February 1906 novel "The Jungle" exposing meatpacking conditions. (3) The June 1906 Meat Inspection Act - federal inspection of all interstate meat. (4) The June 1906 Antiquities Act - enabling presidential designation of national monuments. (5) The December 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. (6) The September 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth - Roosevelt mediated the end of the Russo-Japanese War; received the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize (first U.S. president to receive it). (7) The 1907 Panic management - working with J.P. Morgan to stabilize banks during the October 1907 panic. (8) The 1907 Tillman Act - prohibiting corporate political contributions to federal candidates.

The 1904 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it confirmed Roosevelt's personal political mandate for Progressive reform. The 56.4% popular vote and 196-EV margin gave Roosevelt unambiguous public support for his Square Deal agenda. Second, it demonstrated that conservative Democratic strategy could not

		break the Republican alignment. Parker's 37.6% was the worst Democratic percentage 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	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

Square Deal

Theodore Roosevelt's 1901-09 progressive policy agenda. Four pillars: trust-busting, federal regulation, conservation, labor protection. Roosevelt: "We have got to protect the wage-worker from being crushed out by the big corporation, on the one hand; we have got to protect the small businessman, on the other hand."

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 with 37.6% popular vote - worst Democratic percentage since Reconstruction.

Eugene V. Debs

American socialist labor leader. Founded the American Socialist Party 1901. Ran for president 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 Northern Securities Company. The March 1904 Supreme Court ruling established federal authority to break up monopolies under the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act.

Anthracite coal strike (1902)

The May-October 1902 coal miners' strike in Pennsylvania anthracite fields. Roosevelt brought management and labor to the White House and threatened to nationalize the mines. Both sides accepted arbitration. First time a U.S. president intervened in a labor dispute as a neutral arbiter rather than as strikebreaker.

First Annual Message to Congress

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, DECEMBER 3, 1901

Roosevelt delivered this annual message to Congress on December 3, 1901 - just three months after assuming the presidency on September 14, 1901 following McKinley's assassination. The address was Roosevelt's first opportunity to articulate his policy vision. It explicitly addressed the "trust question" that would define his Square Deal agenda. The "great corporations" passage establishes the framework that would produce the Northern Securities case (1902), Standard Oil case (1906), and the Square Deal's broader regulation of corporate behavior. Roosevelt was deliberately distinguishing his approach from the Hanna-McKinley industrial-financial orthodoxy: regulation rather than abolition; federal supervision rather than free-market acceptance.

> *"There is a widespread conviction in the minds of the American people that the great corporations known as trusts are in certain of their features and tendencies hurtful to the general welfare. This springs from no spirit of envy or uncharitableness, nor lack of pride in the great industrial achievements that have placed this country at the head of the nations struggling for commercial supremacy. It is based upon sincere conviction that combination and concentration should be, not prohibited, but supervised and within reasonable limits controlled; and in my judgment this conviction is right. Combination of capital like combination of labor is a necessary element in our present industrial system. It is not possible completely to prevent it; and if it were possible, such complete prevention would do no good. If our political institutions were perfect, they would absolutely prevent the political success of the great corporation in any form. They are not perfect, and the great corporations have been able to make themselves felt as a power in politics."*

Roosevelt, "First Annual Message to Congress" (Washington, DC, December 3, 1901). Public domain.

The 1904 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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 receive in 1904?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Democrats nominate Alton B. Parker in 1904 and why did the strategy fail?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Roosevelt says in his 1901 message that combinations of capital "should be, not prohibited, but supervised and within reasonable limits controlled." What political position does this articulate?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Roosevelt's Election Night 1904 promise and what were its consequences?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1904 election map, identify Roosevelt's 32 states and Parker's 13 states. What structural alignment does the map reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

336. Roosevelt 336; Parker 140.

Roosevelt's 196-EV margin was the largest since Lincoln 1864.

QUESTION 2

402,810. Debs (Socialist) won 402,810 popular votes - more than 4x his 1900 total.

AP students should know the Debs vote.

QUESTION 3

Democrats nominated 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. (2) Parker was a conservative gold-standard Democrat - the opposite of Bryan - who could potentially appeal to eastern moderate voters. (3) Parker was a respected New York judge - the kind of "dignified Bourbon" candidate 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 (Debs). (c) Eastern moderate voters who had been skeptical of Bryan preferred Roosevelt's reform Republicanism over Parker's conservative Democratic alternative. Result: Parker won 37.6% - the worst Democratic percentage since Reconstruction.

AP students should be able to articulate the failure mechanism.

QUESTION 4

Roosevelt's "supervised and within reasonable limits controlled" position articulates the Progressive regulatory framework. Core elements: (1) Combinations of capital (trusts, monopolies) are a "necessary element" of modern industrial capitalism - they cannot be eliminated. (2) The government should not attempt to "prohibit" combinations but should "supervise" and "control" them. (3) Supervision should be through federal regulatory agencies rather than market competition or judicial breakup. (4) The political institutions should "absolutely prevent the political success of the great corporation" - meaning corporations should not control politics. The framework distinguished Roosevelt from three alternatives: (a) The Hanna-McKinley laissez-faire framework that accepted corporate dominance. (b) The Bryan populist framework that wanted to break up trusts entirely. (c) The Debs socialist framework that wanted public ownership of corporations. Roosevelt's position was structural moderation: accept industrial scale, regulate corporate behavior, preserve political democracy from corporate control. This framework would be operationalized through the 1906 Hepburn Act, Pure Food and Drug Act, and Meat Inspection Act.

AP students should be able to articulate the Progressive regulatory framework.

QUESTION 5

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. Consequences: (1) 1908: Roosevelt selected William Howard Taft as his successor; Taft won November 1908 (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). (3) 1912: Roosevelt sought to recover the Republican nomination from Taft. He lost the convention; 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. 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.

QUESTION 6

Roosevelt states: 32 states - all 21 Northern states (every state from Maine to Pennsylvania including the Old Northwest); all Mountain West and Plains (Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Washington); plus 3 Border States (Maryland, Missouri, Delaware - Maryland in particular flipped from Bryan 1900). Parker states: 13 states - the 11 former Confederate states plus Kentucky and Arkansas. The structural alignment: the 1896-1932 Republican-dominant alignment had reached its maximum strength. Republicans held everything outside the Solid South + 2 Border States. The 13-state Democratic coalition was structurally tied to post-Reconstruction racial reaction in the former Confederacy + the rural agrarian Border States. The 1904 map would not be replicated until 1972 (Nixon's 49-state landslide against McGovern) and 1984 (Reagan's 49-state landslide against Mondale) - both of which similarly reflected Democratic coalition collapse.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.