1904

Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1904: Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1904 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1904 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 (40 years earlier). 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 after McKinley's death. His three-and-a-half-year first term had been remarkably active. Major Square Deal achievements: (1) The March 1902 Department of Justice antitrust suit against Northern Securities Company. 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 - first time a U.S. president intervened in a labor dispute as a neutral arbiter. (3) The 1903 Panama Revolt and November 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty granting the U.S. a 10-mile-wide Canal Zone. (4) The June 1902 Reclamation Act creating the Bureau of Reclamation. (5) The 1903 Department of Commerce and Labor (including the Bureau of Corporations). (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 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.

The Democratic National Convention met in St. Louis on July 6-9, 1904 and 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 - 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 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 would win 402,810 popular votes - more than four times his 1900 total of 87,945.

The campaign was unusual. Roosevelt was personally restricted by tradition from active campaigning. The Republican fundraising operation raised approximately $2.2 million; Democratic campaign approximately $700,000. The campaign's closing argument was a corruption accusation by Parker against Republican fundraising chair George Cortelyou; Roosevelt's public denial 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.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Roosevelt swept every state outside the Solid South. Parker held only the 11 former Confederate states plus Kentucky and Arkansas. The 1904 map demonstrated that the 1896-1932 Republican alignment had reached its maximum strength.

On Election Night, Roosevelt issued a statement: "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." The statement followed the unwritten two-term tradition. Roosevelt was 46 years old - 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. (2) The June 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act - spurred by Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" (February 1906). (3) The June 1906 Meat Inspection Act. (4) The June 1906 Antiquities Act. (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. (7) The 1907 Panic management. (8) The 1907 Tillman Act - prohibiting corporate

		political contributions to federal candidates. The 1908 succession would prove consequential. Roosevelt selected William Howard Taft as his successor. Taft won the November 1908 election (321-162 EV over Bryan in Bryan's third and final presidential run). Taft's 1909-12 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 the conservative Republican establishment. By 1910, Roosevelt was publicly criticizing Taft. By 1912, Roosevelt was attempting to recover the Republican nomination. The 1912 Republican Convention denied Roosevelt the nomination in favor of Taft. Roosevelt bolted to form the Progressive Party ("Bull Moose Party"). The Roosevelt-Taft split produced Woodrow Wilson's Democratic victory (435-88 EV over Roosevelt 88 and Taft 8 - the worst Republican result since 1856). The 1904 promise had foreclosed the simpler path of seeking 1908 renomination, which Roosevelt likely would have won easily. The 1904 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it confirmed Roosevelt's personal political mandate for Progressive reform. The 56.4% popular vote 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. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1904 election tells you about the Progressive Era that the textbook didn't?"

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.

Alton B. Parker
The 1904 Democratic presidential nominee. Conservative gold-standard New York judge. Lost 336-140 EV with 37.6% popular vote.

Northern Securities case
The March 1902 federal antitrust suit. The March 1904 Supreme Court ruling established federal authority to break up monopolies under the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act.

Hepburn Act
The June 1906 federal law strengthening the Interstate Commerce Commission's authority to set maximum railroad rates.

Speak softly and carry a big stick
Theodore Roosevelt's foreign-policy motto. Operationalized through Navy expansion, Roosevelt Corollary (1904), Panama Canal (1903), Russo-Japanese War mediation (1905).

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).

Anthracite coal strike (1902)
The May-October 1902 Pennsylvania coal miners' strike. Roosevelt brought management and labor to the White House and threatened to nationalize the mines. First time a U.S. president intervened in a labor dispute as a neutral arbiter.

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. 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.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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, and how does it differ from Bryan populism and Debs socialism?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Roosevelt's Election Night 1904 promise and what were its consequences for 1908-1912?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902 establish a new federal-government role in labor disputes?

QUESTION 7 · 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.

AP students should know the Debs vote.

QUESTION 3

Democrats nominated Parker for three structural reasons: (1) Bryan had lost twice; the conservative Democratic wing wanted to break the Republican grip on the Northeast. (2) Parker was a conservative gold-standard Democrat. (3) Parker was a respected New York judge. The strategy failed for three reasons: (a) Parker's personal weakness vs Roosevelt's personality. (b) The Bryan wing did not turn out for Parker. (c) Eastern moderates preferred Roosevelt's reform Republicanism. Result: 37.6% - worst Democratic since Reconstruction.

AP students should be able to articulate the failure.

QUESTION 4

Roosevelt's "supervised and within reasonable limits controlled" position articulates the Progressive regulatory framework. Core elements: (1) Combinations of capital are a "necessary element" of modern industrial capitalism; they cannot be eliminated. (2) The government should not "prohibit" combinations but should "supervise" and "control" them. (3) Supervision should be through federal regulatory agencies. (4) Political institutions should prevent corporate political dominance. The framework differs from Bryan populism: Bryan wanted to break up trusts; Roosevelt wanted to regulate them. The framework differs from Debs socialism: Debs wanted public ownership of corporations; Roosevelt wanted to preserve private ownership under federal regulation. 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. The framework would become the dominant U.S. approach to corporate regulation in the 20th century - distinguishing the U.S. from European democratic-socialist alternatives (which favored nationalization) and from laissez-faire alternatives (which rejected regulation).

AP students should be able to articulate the regulatory-philosophy distinction.

QUESTION 5

Roosevelt's Election Night statement: "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." 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 expected - fired key Progressive appointees, supported the Payne-Aldrich Tariff. (3) 1912: Roosevelt sought to recover the Republican nomination; lost it; 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 1904 promise had foreclosed the simpler path of seeking 1908 renomination. Roosevelt was 46 in 1904 and would have been 50 in 1908 - young enough for two more terms.

AP students should be able to articulate the consequences.

QUESTION 6

The 1902 Anthracite Coal Strike established a new federal-government role in labor disputes in three ways: (1) The federal government acted as a neutral arbiter rather than as strikebreaker. Prior federal interventions (1894 Pullman Strike) had used federal troops to break strikes on behalf of management. Roosevelt brought both management and labor to the White House in October 1902 for mediation. (2) The federal government accepted that labor had legitimate grievances that warranted government attention. Roosevelt explicitly rejected George Baer's claim (the coal operators' spokesperson) that "the rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for - not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men of property to whom God in his infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests of the country." (3) The federal government accepted authority to intervene in private commercial disputes when public welfare was at stake (the anthracite coal was the major heating fuel for Northeastern cities; the strike threatened public welfare). Roosevelt's threat to nationalize the mines using federal troops was a constitutional escalation. The structural lesson: the federal government had a legitimate role in mediating labor-capital conflicts when public welfare was at stake. The lesson would be deepened by the 1935 Wagner Act and the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act.

AP students should be able to articulate the federal-government transformation.

QUESTION 7

Roosevelt states: 32 states - all 21 Northern states; all Mountain West and Plains; plus 3 Border States (Maryland, Missouri, Delaware - Maryland flipped from Bryan). 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 49-state) and 1984 (Reagan 49-state).

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.

Discussion prompts

1. Roosevelt's "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination" promise on Election Night 1904 would shape U.S. politics for the next eight years. Identify three specific 1908-1912 consequences of the promise and assess whether Roosevelt could have anticipated them in 1904.

2. The 1904 election was the worst Democratic performance since Reconstruction (37.6%). Identify two structural reasons Parker's conservative Democratic strategy failed and what this revealed about the 1896-1932 Republican alignment.