K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1904

Theodore Roosevelt vs Alton B. Parker

A 20-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%

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2. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
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1904

Theodore Roosevelt had been president since September 14, 1901 - when McKinley died after being shot. Roosevelt was full of energy. He had a famous saying: "Speak softly and carry a big stick." This meant: be polite but be ready to fight if needed.

Roosevelt did big things in his first three years as president. He used a federal law to break up a huge railroad company called Northern Securities. He stopped a long coal miners' strike in 1902 by bringing both sides to the White House. He built up the U.S. Navy. He started planning to build a canal across Panama to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. He created national forests and national parks to protect nature.

Roosevelt called his program the "Square Deal" - meaning a fair deal for everyone, not just rich people or big companies. He said: "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."

In 1904, Roosevelt was ready to run for president on his own. The Republicans nominated him by acclamation. The Democrats picked Alton B. Parker - a New York judge nobody had heard of. Parker was a quiet, conservative Democrat. He was the OPPO-SITE of Roosevelt in every way.



Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th U.S. president. He won the 1904 election by the biggest margin since Lincoln's 1864 re-election.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS - PUBLIC DOMAIN PRE-1930 PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH (SAME IMAGE AS 1900)

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who won the 1904 U.S. presidential election?

2.

What was the Square Deal?

3.

What promise did Roosevelt make on Election Night 1904 that he would later regret?

Warm-up (5 min)

After Theodore Roosevelt finished McKinley's term, he ran for president on his own in 1904. He won by the biggest margin since Lincoln's 1864 re-election. The American people wanted his "Square Deal."

Answer key

1.

Theodore Roosevelt. He won 336 electoral votes to Alton B. Parker's 140. Roosevelt won the popular vote by 2,545,514 - the biggest margin since Lincoln's 1864 re-election. Roosevelt won 56.4% of the popular vote.

Roosevelt's 1904 victory was decisive and confirmed his Progressive policy mandate.

2.

The Square Deal was Theodore Roosevelt's 1901-09 progressive policy agenda. 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." The Square Deal had four pillars: (1) Trust-busting - using the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act to break up monopolies (Northern Securities 1902, Standard Oil 1906’1911 breakup). (2) Federal regulation - the Hepburn Act 1906 strengthened the ICC's railroad-rate authority; the Pure Food and Drug Act 1906 and Meat Inspection Act 1906 established federal food/drug regulation. (3) Conservation - 150 million acres of national forests, U.S. Forest Service 1905, Bureau of Reclamation 1902, 5 new national parks. (4) Labor protection - Roosevelt mediated the 1902 anthracite coal strike (the first time a U.S. president intervened in a labor dispute as a neutral arbiter rather than as strikebreaker).

AP students should be able to articulate the Square Deal's four pillars.

3.

On Election Night 1904, Roosevelt issued a statement: "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." Roosevelt promised not to run for president again. The promise was made in the context of the unwritten two-term tradition (established by Washington, broken only by Lincoln's 1864 third nomination - which Lincoln did not survive). Roosevelt would later deeply regret the promise. By 1908, he was popular and at the peak of his political power. He chose William Howard Taft as his successor and worked actively to elect Taft. But Taft's 1909-12 presidency proved more conservative than Roosevelt had expected. By 1912, Roosevelt was attempting to recover the Republican nomination from Taft. He lost it at the Republican Convention; he bolted to form the Progressive Party (the "Bull Moose Party"). The 1912 split produced Woodrow Wilson's Democratic victory - the only major Democratic break in 1896-1932 Republican dominance. Roosevelt's 1904 promise had foreclosed the simpler path of seeking 1908 renomination, which he likely would have won easily.

AP students should be able to articulate the consequences of Roosevelt's 1904 promise.