3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1912

Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt

A 35-minute lesson on the 1912 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Progressive Era	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Woodrow Wilson (Democratic) · 435 EV	RUNNER-UP Theodore Roosevelt (Progressive) · 88 EV
KEY ISSUE Progressive reform; trust-busting; tariff; Republican Party civil war	TURNOUT 59.0%

CONTENTS

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

1912: Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When the dominant party of an era splits, the result is often a third party that briefly elects a candidate from the opposition party. Why might a party split produce a structural opportunity for the opposition?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1912 election was the 32nd U.S. presidential election. It produced Woodrow Wilson's 435-88-8 electoral-vote victory over Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft - the only major Democratic break in 1896-1932 Republican dominance. The election was a four-way race involving three Progressive candidates (Wilson, Roosevelt, Debs) and a conservative incumbent (Taft). Roosevelt's decision to bolt the Republican Party after losing the nomination produced the structural split that elected Wilson. The political conditions had been transformed by the Roosevelt-Taft feud. After Taft's 1909 inauguration, the Payne-Aldrich Tariff (August 1909) and Ballinger-Pinchot affair (January 1910) had alienated Roosevelt. By the November 1910 midterm elections, Progressive Republicans had won the House of Representatives in a structural insurgency against the Taft administration. By December 1910, Roosevelt was publicly criticizing Taft. In August 1910, Roosevelt had delivered his "New Nationalism" speech at Osawatomie, Kansas - articulating a more comprehensive Progressive agenda than Taft's. By late 1911, Roosevelt was actively considering challenging Taft for the Republican nomination. He formally announced his candidacy on February 24, 1912: "My hat is in the ring. The fight is on and I am stripped to the buff." Roosevelt and Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin (the Progressive Republican leader) competed for Progressive Republican support; Roosevelt eventually consolidated the Progressive faction. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 18-22, 1912. The convention was deeply divided. Roosevelt had won 9 of the 12 state Republican primaries (the first cycle in which state primaries had been used) and 1.4 million votes compared to Taft's 766,000. But Taft controlled the convention's credentials committee, which decided to seat Taft delegates from contested states. Roosevelt was denied the nomination. Taft was renominated on the first ballot. Roosevelt and his Progressive Republican supporters bolted the Republican Party. They held the Progressive National Convention in Chicago on August 5-7, 1912. Roosevelt was nominated by acclamation; Hiram Johnson of California (the Progres-

sive Republican governor) was the vice presidential candidate. Roosevelt addressed the convention: "We stand at Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord." The party's platform endorsed comprehensive Progressive reform: women's suffrage, federal social insurance, federal regulation of corporations, direct election of senators, the recall of judges, and constitutional amendments to operationalize Progressive demands. The popular name "Bull Moose Party" came from Roosevelt's declaration that he felt "as strong as a bull moose."

The Democratic National Convention met in Baltimore on June 25 - July 2, 1912. The convention faced a structural choice between three candidates: Speaker of the House Champ Clark of Missouri (the front-runner with substantial Bryan support); Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey (the Progressive favorite); and Representative Oscar Underwood of Alabama (the Southern conservative). On June 30, Bryan publicly switched his support from Clark (whom Bryan accused of being controlled by Tammany Hall) to Wilson. Wilson was nominated on the 46th ballot. Thomas R. Marshall of Indiana was the vice presidential candidate.

Wilson was 55, a former Princeton University president (1902-10) and New Jersey governor (1911-13). He was the only academic professor ever elected president. He had a PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins (1886) and was the author of major scholarly works including "Congressional Government" (1885). His political career had been brief: elected New Jersey governor in 1910 on a Progressive reform platform; reformed New Jersey politics in 1911-12 by breaking the state Democratic machine.

The Socialist Party of America nominated Eugene V. Debs for the fourth time. Debs would win 901,551 popular votes in 1912 (6.0% of the popular vote) - the Socialist Party's electoral peak and the highest percentage any Socialist would receive in U.S. history.

The campaign featured three competing Progressive frameworks. (1) Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" - strong federal government regulating big business, accepting concentrations of capital as inevitable but regulating them. (2) Wilson's "New Freedom" - breaking up big businesses, protecting small business and competition. The frameworks were largely intellectual differences between Progressive policy mechanisms; both candidates supported the underlying Progressive reform agenda. (3) Taft's conservative Republicanism - judicial-procedural antitrust, modest reform, fiscal conservatism. (4) Debs's socialism - public ownership of the means of production.

The campaign's most dramatic moment was on October 14, 1912 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A saloon-keeper named John Schrank shot Theodore Roosevelt with a .38 caliber pistol just before Roosevelt was to give a campaign speech. The bullet passed through Roosevelt's folded 50-page speech and his metal eyeglass case before lodging in his chest muscle. Roosevelt insisted on giving his 90-minute speech

with the bullet still in his chest. He opened: "Friends, I shall ask you to be as quiet as possible. I don't know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot - but it takes more than that to kill a bull moose." Roosevelt was off the campaign trail for two weeks. The bullet remained in his chest for the rest of his life. Schrank was committed to a mental institution.

Wilson won 435 electoral votes; Roosevelt won 88; Taft won 8. Wilson carried 40 states; Roosevelt carried 6 states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota, Washington, California); Taft carried 2 states (Utah, Vermont). The popular vote: Wilson 6,296,284 (41.8%); Roosevelt 4,122,721 (27.4%); Taft 3,486,242 (23.2%); Debs (Socialist) 901,551 (6.0%); Chafin (Prohibition) 208,156 (1.4%); Reimer (Socialist Labor) 29,374 (0.2%).

The geographic pattern showed the Republican split structurally. Wilson won every state outside Roosevelt's 6 states + Taft's 2 states. Wilson's 41.8% popular vote was actually less than Bryan had received in 1908 (43.0%) - Wilson's 435-EV victory was entirely a product of the Republican split, not of expanded Democratic support. The combined Roosevelt + Taft popular vote (50.6%) showed that a unified Republican Party would have won easily.

Taft's 8 EV was the worst incumbent president result in U.S. history. The 1912 Republican coalition had two structural elements: (1) Roosevelt's Progressive Republican faction (27.4%) - primarily in the industrial Midwest and Mountain West. (2) Taft's conservative Republican establishment (23.2%) - primarily in New England and the Northeast. The split was structurally even and produced disaster for both factions.

Wilson was inaugurated March 4, 1913. He would govern as a Progressive Democrat: the December 1913 Underwood Tariff (substantial reduction); the December 1913 Federal Reserve Act; the October 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act; the September 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act; the July 1916 Federal Farm Loan Act; the September 1916 Adamson Act (8-hour day for railroad workers); the September 1916 Workmen's Compensation Act for federal employees; the 16th Amendment income tax operationalization; the 17th Amendment direct election of senators (ratified April 1913); the 19th Amendment women's suffrage (ratified August 1920). Wilson's "New Freedom" Progressive agenda was substantively as comprehensive as Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" had been.

The 1916 rematch between Wilson and Republican Charles Evans Hughes (without Roosevelt third-party challenge) would be close: Wilson 277-254 EV with 49.2% to 46.1% - decided by California by 3,773 votes. Wilson's narrow 1916 re-election demonstrated that the 1912 result had been entirely a product of the Republican split.

The 1912 election's structural significance was fourfold. First, it was the only major Democratic break in 1896-1932 Republican dominance. Second, it demonstrated

		the structural power of third-party splits to produce minority-faction victories. Third, it produced the Wilson presidency that would deeply transform U.S. governance through World War I and the post-war settlement. Fourth, it ended Roosevelt's political career - he would attempt to recover the 1916 Republican nomination, lose to Hughes, and die January 6, 1919 before he could attempt a 1920 campaign.
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 1912 Election

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Key words

Bull Moose Party (Progressive Party)	The 1912 third party formed by Theodore Roosevelt after the Republican Convention nominated Taft. Roosevelt declared he felt "as strong as a bull moose." Platform: comprehensive Progressive reform - women's suffrage, federal social insurance, direct election of senators, recall of judges. Won 88 EV (best third-party result in U.S. history).
Woodrow Wilson	The 28th U.S. president (1913-21). Former Princeton University president (1902-10) and New Jersey governor (1911-13). The only academic professor ever elected president. PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins (1886).
New Nationalism vs New Freedom	The contrasting 1912 Progressive policy frameworks. Roosevelt's New Nationalism: strong federal government regulating big business. Wilson's New Freedom: breaking up big businesses, protecting small business and competition. Both supported Progressive reform; the differences were intellectual differences over mechanism.
Eugene V. Debs (1912 peak)	Socialist Party presidential candidate. 1912 was the Socialist Party's electoral peak: Debs won 901,551 votes (6.0%) - the highest percentage any Socialist would receive in U.S. history.
Schrank shooting	The October 14, 1912 attempt to assassinate Theodore Roosevelt in Milwaukee. Saloon-keeper John Schrank shot Roosevelt with a .38 caliber pistol; the bullet passed through Roosevelt's folded speech and lodged in his chest. Roosevelt gave his 90-minute speech with the bullet still in his chest: "It takes more than that to kill a bull moose."

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Woodrow Wilson win in 1912?

( ) A. 347
( ) B. 404
( ) C. 435
( ) D. 477

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What percentage of the popular vote did Eugene V. Debs receive in 1912?

( ) A. 2.8%
( ) B. 4.5%
( ) C. 6.0%
( ) D. 8.5%

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Theodore Roosevelt start the Bull Moose Party in 1912?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Compare the "New Nationalism" and "New Freedom" Progressive frameworks.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

435. Wilson 435; Roosevelt 88; Taft 8.

Wilson's 435-EV margin was decisive but reflected the Republican split, not expanded Democratic support.

QUESTION 2

6.0%. Debs won 901,551 popular votes - the highest percentage any Socialist would receive in U.S. history. 1912 was the Socialist Party's electoral peak.

AP students should know the Debs 1912 6.0% peak.

QUESTION 3

Theodore Roosevelt started the Bull Moose (Progressive) Party in 1912 because the Republican Convention nominated William Howard Taft instead of him. The structural chain: (1) Roosevelt had been disappointed in Taft's 1909-12 presidency - the August 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff, the January 1910 Ballinger-Pinchot affair, Taft's alignment with the conservative Republican establishment. (2) Roosevelt formally announced his candidacy February 24, 1912: "My hat is in the ring." (3) Roosevelt won 9 of 12 state Republican primaries (the first primary cycle ever held) and 1.4 million primary votes vs Taft's 766,000. (4) But Taft controlled the Republican Convention's credentials committee, which seated Taft delegates from contested states. (5) Roosevelt was denied the nomination. (6) Roosevelt and his Progressive Republican supporters bolted the Republican Party. (7) The Progressive Party Convention August 5-7, 1912 nominated Roosevelt; Roosevelt declared he felt "as strong as a bull moose" - hence the popular name. The party platform: comprehensive Progressive reform including women's suffrage, federal social insurance, direct election of senators, recall of judges. Roosevelt-Taft split was the only major reason Wilson won.

AP students should be able to articulate the Bull Moose split.

QUESTION 4

The "New Nationalism" (Roosevelt) and "New Freedom" (Wilson) were the two contrasting Progressive policy frameworks of 1912. New Nationalism: (1) Accept concentrations of capital (trusts, large corporations) as inevitable in modern industrial economy. (2) Use a strong federal government to regulate corporate behavior. (3) Active federal welfare provision - federal social insurance, federal labor regulation. (4) Federal regulation of railroads, telegraphs, telephones. (5) Roosevelt: "the executive power as the steward of the public welfare." New Freedom: (1) Break up big business concentrations - antitrust enforcement to restore competition. (2) Protect small business and free enterprise. (3) Limited federal welfare provision - prefer state-level reform. (4) Tariff reduction to reduce monopoly advantage. (5) Wilson: federal government should remove obstacles to competition rather than provide direct welfare. The frameworks differed primarily on mechanism - Roosevelt wanted big regulated business; Wilson wanted small unregulated business. They agreed on the goal of Progressive reform; they disagreed on the role of the federal government in the modern economy. The 1913-21 Wilson presidency would actually adopt many New Nationalism elements (Federal Reserve, FTC, federal labor regulation), demonstrating that the frameworks were less opposed than the 1912 campaign suggested.

AP students should be able to articulate both frameworks.