# 1912

## *Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt*

A 50-minute lesson on the 1912 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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

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1. Cover
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3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
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# 1912: Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt

## 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

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| 5 min | **Warm-up** | List two structural conditions in 1908-1912 America that would produce a Republican Party split. For each, identify the specific 1909-1911 development most responsible. |
| 15 min | **Reading + vocab** | 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.<br><br>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 (Democrats gained 58 House seats). 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.<br><br>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.<br><br>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.<br><br>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 Progressive 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 four competing political frameworks. (1) Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" - strong federal government regulating big business. (2) Wilson's "New Freedom" - breaking up big businesses, protecting small business and competition. (3) Taft's conservative Republicanism - judicial-procedural antitrust, modest reform. (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 901,551 (6.0%); Chafin (Prohibition) 208,156 (1.4%); Reimer (Socialist Labor) 29,374 (0.2%). Wilson-Roosevelt popular-vote margin: 2,173,563.

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. Taft would later remark: "I have one consolation. No one candidate was ever elected ex-president by such a large majority." 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. Major achievements: (1) The October 1913 Underwood Tariff - substantial reduction (from 41% to 27% average). (2) The December 1913 Federal Reserve Act - creating the Federal Reserve System. (3) The October 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act - strengthening the 1890 Sherman Act with specific prohibitions. (4) The September 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act - creating the FTC. (5) The July 1916 Federal Farm Loan Act - federal credit for farmers. (6) The September 1916 Adamson Act - 8-hour day for railroad workers. (7) The September 1916 Workmen's Compensation Act - for federal employees. (8) The 16th Amendment income tax operationalization (first tax under 1913 Underwood Tariff). (9) The 17th Amendment direct election of senators (ratified April 1913). (10) 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.

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| | | 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. |
| **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

### 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.

### 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.

### Schrank shooting

The October 14, 1912 attempt to assassinate Theodore Roosevelt in Milwaukee. Saloon-keeper John Schrank shot Roosevelt; 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.

### Federal Reserve Act

The December 1913 federal law creating the Federal Reserve System. Wilson's major banking-reform achievement. Established 12 regional Federal Reserve Banks coordinated by the Federal Reserve Board (now the Federal Open Market Committee).

### 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).

### Eugene V. Debs (1912 peak)

Socialist Party presidential candidate. 1912 was the Socialist Party's electoral peak: 901,551 votes (6.0%).

### Underwood Tariff

The October 1913 federal law substantially reducing tariff rates (from 41% to 27% average). The first major tariff reduction since 1857. Operationalized the 16th Amendment income tax provision to replace the lost tariff revenue.

## The New Nationalism speech

### THEODORE ROOSEVELT, AUGUST 31, 1910

*Roosevelt delivered this speech at Osawatomie, Kansas on August 31, 1910 - 18 months after leaving the presidency and two years before the 1912 Republican Convention. The speech articulated a more comprehensive Progressive agenda than the Square Deal. It explicitly called for stronger federal regulation of corporations, a graduated income tax, an inheritance tax, federal labor regulation including workers' compensation, conservation, and child-labor laws. The "human welfare" passage articulated a fundamental shift in the federal government's constitutional role: from limited 19th-century governance to active welfare-state provision. The 1910 New Nationalism speech is widely cited as Roosevelt's most fully articulated political philosophy and as the structural foundation for the 1912 Progressive Party platform.*

> *"The American people are right in demanding that New Nationalism, without which we cannot hope to deal with new problems. The New Nationalism puts the national need before sectional or personal advantage. It is impatient of the utter confusion which results from local legislatures attempting to treat national issues as local issues. It is still more impatient of the impotence which springs from over-division of governmental powers, the impotence which makes it possible for local selfishness or for legal cunning, hired by wealthy special interests, to bring national activities to a deadlock. This New Nationalism regards the executive power as the steward of the public welfare. It demands of the judiciary that it shall be interested primarily in human welfare rather than in property, just as it demands that the representative body shall represent all the people rather than any one class or section of the people."*

**Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism speech" (Osawatomie, Kansas, August 31, 1910). Public domain.**

# The 1912 Election

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

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did Wilson, Roosevelt, and Taft each win in 1912?

( ) A. Wilson 347, Roosevelt 100, Taft 84
( ) B. Wilson 435, Roosevelt 88, Taft 8
( ) C. Wilson 482, Roosevelt 49, Taft 0
( ) D. Wilson 404, Roosevelt 127, Taft 0

**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.

**QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Roosevelt says the "New Nationalism regards the executive power as the steward of the public welfare." What political philosophy does this articulate?

**QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ**

On the 1912 election map, identify Wilson's 40 states, Roosevelt's 6 states (PA, MI, MN, SD, WA, CA), and Taft's 2 states (UT, VT). What does the geographic pattern reveal about the Republican split?

# Answer key

## QUESTION 1

Wilson 435, Roosevelt 88, Taft 8. Wilson carried 40 states; Roosevelt carried 6 states; Taft carried 2 states.

AP students should know the 435/88/8 split.

## QUESTION 2

6.0%. Debs won 901,551 popular votes - the Socialist Party's electoral peak.

AP students should know the 1912 Debs 6% 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 chain of events: (1) Roosevelt had been disappointed in Taft's 1909-12 presidency. (2) Roosevelt announced his candidacy February 24, 1912: "My hat is in the ring." (3) Roosevelt won 9 of 12 state Republican primaries 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. Platform: comprehensive Progressive reform including women's suffrage, federal social insurance, direct election of senators, recall of judges. The 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. New Nationalism: (1) Accept concentrations of capital as inevitable. (2) Strong federal government to regulate corporate behavior. (3) Active federal welfare provision. (4) Federal regulation of railroads, telegraphs, telephones. New Freedom: (1) Break up big business concentrations through antitrust. (2) Protect small business and free enterprise. (3) Limited federal welfare provision - prefer state-level reform. (4) Tariff reduction to reduce monopoly advantage. The frameworks differed primarily on mechanism. They agreed on Progressive reform goals; they disagreed on the federal role. Wilson's 1913-21 presidency would actually adopt many New Nationalism elements (Federal Reserve, FTC, federal labor regulation), demonstrating the frameworks were less opposed than the 1912 campaign suggested.

AP students should be able to articulate both frameworks.

## QUESTION 5

Roosevelt's "executive power as the steward of the public welfare" articulates an active-federal-government philosophy. Core elements: (1) The presidency is responsible for protecting the public welfare - not just enforcing laws. (2) The executive has affirmative authority to act for the public good even without specific congressional direction. (3) The federal government takes responsibility for problems that local governments cannot solve. (4) The judiciary should defer to executive determinations of public welfare. The framework represents a structural shift from limited 19th-century governance to active 20th-century federal-government governance. It explicitly challenges the 19th-century Jeffersonian-Jacksonian limited-government tradition. The 1910 framework would be operationalized through Roosevelt's 1912 Progressive Party platform demanding constitutional amendments and federal social insurance. Wilson's 1913-21 New Freedom would operationalize many Stewardship principles through the Federal Reserve, FTC, Clayton Antitrust, Federal Farm Loan, and Adamson Act. FDR's 1933-45 New Deal would further deepen the Stewardship framework into the modern welfare state.

AP students should be able to articulate the Stewardship doctrine.

## QUESTION 6

Wilson states (40): all 11 Solid South states; all 4 Border States (KY, TN, MO, MD); all of New England except VT; all of the Mid-Atlantic except PA; all of the Old Northwest except MI; plus AZ, NM, NV, ID, MT, WY, CO, KS, NE, OK, AR, ND, IA, WI, IL, IN, OH, NJ, NY, DE, WV. Roosevelt states (6): PA, MI, MN, SD, WA, CA - the industrial Midwest plus the Pacific Northwest plus California. Taft states (2): UT (with strong LDS Church loyalty to Taft for his Philippines work) and VT (conservative New England). The geographic pattern reveals: (1) Roosevelt held Progressive Republican strongholds in the industrial Midwest, West Coast, and Mountain West. (2) Taft held only two states - the worst incumbent president result in U.S. history. (3) Wilson won every state outside the Roosevelt + Taft 8 states. (4) The Republican split was structurally even and produced disaster for both Republican factions. Combined Roosevelt + Taft popular vote (50.6%) > Wilson 41.8%; a unified Republican Party would have won easily.

AP students should be able to articulate the Republican split.