1912

Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt

A 75-minute lesson on the 1912 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1912: Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt

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 1912 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1912 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. 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 (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. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 18-22, 1912. Roosevelt had won 9 of the 12 state Republican primaries and 1.4 million votes compared to Taft's 766,000. But Taft controlled the convention's credentials committee, which seated 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 was VP. Roosevelt addressed the convention: "We stand at Armageddon, and we battle for

the Lord." The party's platform endorsed comprehensive Progressive reform.

The Democratic National Convention met in Baltimore on June 25 - July 2, 1912. The convention nominated Wilson on the 46th ballot after Bryan switched his support from Champ Clark. Thomas R. Marshall of Indiana was VP. 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.

The Socialist Party of America nominated Eugene V. Debs for the fourth time. Debs would win 901,551 popular votes in 1912 (6.0%) - the Socialist Party's electoral peak.

The campaign featured four competing political frameworks: Roosevelt's New Nationalism, Wilson's New Freedom, Taft's conservative Republicanism, and Debs's socialism.

The campaign's most dramatic moment was the October 14, 1912 Schrank shooting in Milwaukee. Roosevelt was shot by saloon-keeper John Schrank just before a campaign speech; 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."

Wilson won 435 electoral votes; Roosevelt won 88; Taft won 8. Wilson carried 40 states; Roosevelt carried 6 states (PA, MI, MN, SD, WA, CA); Taft carried 2 states (UT, VT). 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%). Wilson-Roosevelt popular-vote margin: 2,173,563.

The geographic pattern showed the Republican split structurally. Wilson's 41.8% popular vote was less than Bryan had received in 1908 (43.0%). 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.

Wilson was inaugurated March 4, 1913. He governed as a Progressive Democrat. Major achievements: October 1913 Underwood Tariff; December 1913 Federal Reserve Act; October 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act; September 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act; July 1916 Federal Farm Loan Act; September 1916 Adamson Act; September 1916 Workmen's Compensation Act; 16th Amendment income tax; 17th Amendment direct election of senators (April 1913); 19th Amendment women's suffrage (August 1920).

The 1916 rematch between Wilson and Republican Charles Evans Hughes 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.

Roosevelt's political career effectively ended with 1912. He would attempt to recover the 1916 Republican nomination but lost to Hughes. He died January 6, 1919 - too late to attempt a 1920 campaign. Roosevelt's last major statement before his death was his strident opposition to Wilson's 1918 League of Nations.

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 (Versailles Treaty 1919, League of Nations rejected by Senate 1919-20, Treaty of Berlin 1921). Fourth, it ended Roosevelt's political career.

Wilson's 1913-21 presidency would be defined by three structural phases: (1) The 1913-16 domestic Progressive reform phase - Federal Reserve, FTC, Clayton Antitrust, Adamson Act, Underwood Tariff, Federal Farm Loan. (2) The 1917-18 World War I phase - declaration of war April 6, 1917; mobilization; the Espionage Act 1917 and Sedition Act 1918; armistice November 11, 1918. (3) The 1919-21 post-war phase - Versailles Treaty negotiations January-June 1919; the League of Nations rejection by the Senate; Wilson's September 1919 stroke; the 1920 Republican landslide (Harding 404-127 EV) returning Republicans to power.

The Bull Moose Party effectively dissolved after 1912. Most Progressive Republicans returned to the Republican Party by 1916 to support Hughes against Wilson. The Progressive Party ran a final candidate in 1916 (Roosevelt declined; the party nominated John M. Parker of Louisiana, who received 0.2%); after 1916, the Progressive Party dissolved. The structural lesson: third-party movements typically achieve their policy demands and dissolve, rather than sustaining as independent organizations. The Progressive Party's legacy was substantial: women's suffrage (19th Amendment 1920), federal social insurance (eventually Social Security 1935), and many other Progressive demands. 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 1912 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

Bull Moose Party (Progressive Party)

The 1912 third party formed by Theodore Roosevelt. 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).

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. 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.

Woodrow Wilson

The 28th U.S. president (1913-21). Former Princeton University president and New Jersey governor. The only academic professor ever elected president.

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). First major tariff reduction since 1857.

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.

> *"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 (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 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. Did the 1913-21 Wilson presidency adopt one framework or both?

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?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the 1916 election (Wilson vs Hughes) demonstrated that the 1912 result had been entirely a product of the Republican split.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1912 election map, identify Wilson's 40 states, Roosevelt's 6 states, and Taft's 2 states. What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Wilson 435, Roosevelt 88, Taft 8.

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

QUESTION 2

6.0%.

AP students should know the Debs 1912 peak.

QUESTION 3

Theodore Roosevelt started the Bull Moose Party because the Republican Convention nominated Taft instead of him. Roosevelt won 9 of 12 state primaries with 1.4M votes vs Taft's 766K, but Taft controlled the convention's credentials committee, which seated Taft delegates from contested states. Roosevelt and his supporters bolted. The Progressive Party Convention August 5-7, 1912 nominated Roosevelt. Platform: comprehensive Progressive reform. The split was the only major reason Wilson won.

AP students should be able to articulate the split.

QUESTION 4

New Nationalism (Roosevelt): accept concentrations of capital as inevitable; strong federal government regulating corporations; active federal welfare provision. New Freedom (Wilson): break up big business through antitrust; protect small business; limited federal welfare. The frameworks differed primarily on mechanism. Wilson's 1913-21 presidency adopted BOTH frameworks: New Freedom in the Clayton Antitrust Act and Underwood Tariff (breaking up monopoly advantage, restoring competition); New Nationalism in the Federal Reserve Act (federal control over banking) and Federal Trade Commission Act (federal regulation of business practices) and Adamson Act (federal labor regulation). The blending was a structural feature of Progressive Era reform: as Wilson governed, he came to accept that regulating concentrations was structurally easier than breaking them up. By 1916, Wilson's presidency was substantively closer to Roosevelt's New Nationalism than to his own 1912 New Freedom. The lesson: governance often blends competing campaign frameworks into structural compromise.

AP students should be able to articulate the framework synthesis.

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. (3) The federal government takes responsibility for problems 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 would be operationalized through the 1912 Progressive Party platform, Wilson's 1913-21 New Freedom, FDR's 1933-45 New Deal, and Truman's Fair Deal.

AP students should be able to articulate the Stewardship doctrine.

QUESTION 6

The 1916 election (Wilson 277-254 EV over Republican Charles Evans Hughes, with 49.2% to 46.1% popular vote, decided by California by 3,773 votes) demonstrated that the 1912 result had been entirely a product of the Republican split. Specific evidence: (1) Wilson's 1916 popular vote (49.2%) was actually 7.4 percentage points HIGHER than his 1912 popular vote (41.8%). His vote total grew from 6.3M to 9.1M. So Wilson was MORE popular in 1916 than 1912. Yet his electoral vote total DROPPED from 435 to 277 - a 158-EV decline. (2) The 1916 Republican vote (Hughes 46.1%, 8.5M votes) was higher than the combined 1912 Roosevelt + Taft vote (50.6% but only 7.6M votes due to lower 1912 turnout). (3) California - a Roosevelt state in 1912 (Roosevelt 41.8%, Wilson 41.8% almost-tie) - decided 1916 by just 3,773 votes for Wilson. Without the 1912 Republican split, the unified Republican vote would have won easily. The 1916 race was structurally close because the Republican Party had reunified by 1916 - Roosevelt declined the Progressive nomination; the Progressive Party endorsed Hughes; most Roosevelt 1912 supporters voted for Hughes in 1916. The lesson: 1912 was structurally a Republican election that Wilson won by exploiting the Republican split.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural lesson.

QUESTION 7

Wilson states (40): Solid South + Border States + all of New England except VT + all of Mid-Atlantic except PA + all of Old Northwest except MI + 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 - industrial Midwest + Pacific Northwest + California. Taft states (2): UT (LDS Church loyalty) and VT (conservative New England). Geographic pattern: (1) Roosevelt held Progressive Republican strongholds. (2) Taft held only 2 states - worst incumbent president result ever. (3) Wilson won every state outside the 8 Republican-split states. (4) The Republican split was structurally even and produced disaster for both factions. (5) Combined Roosevelt + Taft popular vote (50.6%) > Wilson 41.8%; unified Republican would have won easily.

AP students should be able to articulate the Republican split geography.

Discussion prompts

1. Roosevelt won 88 EV and 27.4% popular vote in 1912 - the best third-party performance in U.S. history. Identify two structural reasons the Roosevelt-Taft split could not be repaired before the 1916 election and assess whether the Republican Party's eventual reconciliation was inevitable or contingent.

2. The 1912 election featured three Progressive candidates (Wilson, Roosevelt, Debs) and a conservative incumbent (Taft). Identify three structural reasons that 1912 produced unusually broad Progressive electoral support and assess whether the Progressive coalition would have produced a Wilson victory without the Republican split.