1912

Woodrow Wilson vs Theodore Roosevelt

A 20-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. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
4. Teacher notes

1912

The 1912 election had THREE major candidates instead of two. This was very unusual.

First: William Howard Taft, the sitting Republican president. Theodore Roosevelt had picked him in 1908. But Roosevelt was disappointed in Taft. Taft was more conservative than Roosevelt expected.

Second: Theodore Roosevelt, the former Republican president! Roosevelt had promised in 1904 not to run again. But by 1912 he had changed his mind. He ran against Taft for the Republican nomination. Roosevelt lost at the Republican Convention. So he started a brand new party - the Progressive Party. People called it the "Bull Moose Party" because Roosevelt said he felt "as strong as a bull moose."

Third: Woodrow Wilson, the Democrat. Wilson was a college professor and the governor of New Jersey. He had been president of Princeton University. He was 55 years old and very serious. He had been governor of New Jersey for less than two years. The Democrats had nominated him because their party was united around Progressive reform.

Look at the picture. That is Woodrow Wilson - the man who would become the 28th president.

A fourth candidate also ran: Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist Party. Debs got 901,551 votes - 6% of all votes! This was the most a Socialist would ever get in U.S. history.

The campaign had three Progressive candidates fighting each other. Roosevelt called his program the "New Nationalism" - he wanted a strong federal government to regulate big business. Wilson called his program the "New Freedom" - he wanted to break up big businesses and protect small business. Taft was more conservative than both. Debs wanted workers to own the factories.

In October 1912, a crazy thing happened. A saloon-keeper named John Schrank shot Theodore Roosevelt in Milwaukee, Wisconsin! The bullet hit a folded speech in Roosevelt's coat pocket. Roosevelt was wounded but ALIVE. He insisted on giving his 90-minute speech with the bullet still in his chest! Roosevelt said: "It takes more than that to kill a bull moose!"

On Election Day, Wilson won 435 electoral votes. Roosevelt won 88. Taft won only 8! This was the worst result for a sitting president in U.S. history. Wilson became the first Democrat elected president



Woodrow Wilson, the 28th U.S. president. He was the first Democrat elected since Cleveland 1892 and the only academic professor ever elected president.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 28th U.S. president after the 1912 election?

2.

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

3.

What happened to Roosevelt during the 1912 campaign?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1912 a famous former president decided to run AGAINST his handpicked successor! Theodore Roosevelt ran on a brand new party called the "Bull Moose" Party. He split the Republican vote. A college professor named Woodrow Wilson won.

Answer key

1.

Woodrow Wilson. He won 435 electoral votes - the most of any candidate. Wilson was the first Democrat elected president since Grover Cleveland in 1892. Wilson was a former Princeton University president (1902-10) and New Jersey governor (1911-13).

AP students should know Wilson and his 435-EV margin.

2.

Theodore Roosevelt started the Bull Moose (Progressive) Party in 1912 because the Republican Convention nominated William Howard Taft instead of him. Roosevelt had been disappointed in Taft's 1909-12 presidency - Taft's August 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff was too conservative; the January 1910 Ballinger-Pinchot affair saw Taft fire Roosevelt's conservation appointee Gifford Pinchot. By 1912 Roosevelt wanted to recover the Republican nomination from Taft. The Republican Convention denied Roosevelt the nomination. Roosevelt declared he felt "as strong as a bull moose" - so the party became popularly known as the Bull Moose Party. The party's formal name was the Progressive Party. Roosevelt's decision to bolt the Republican Party and run as a third-party candidate split the Republican vote: Roosevelt got 88 EV, Taft got 8 EV, but together they had 96 EV - less than Wilson's 435 EV. The Roosevelt-Taft split was the only major reason Wilson won.

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

3.

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 - causing a serious but not life-threatening wound. Roosevelt insisted on giving his 90-minute speech with the bullet still in his chest. He opened the speech: "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 completed the speech, then was taken to a hospital where doctors decided the bullet was safer left in place. 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; he died in 1943. The incident demonstrated Roosevelt's extraordinary physical courage and political dedication - and made him a folk hero.

AP students should know the Milwaukee shooting.