

1912 Election

As president, William Howard Taft was miscast. Not only did he disdain the competitive arena of politics, but his personal qualities made for an unflattering contrast with Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a captivating public orator; Taft spoke in a dull, soporific style. Where Roosevelt was energetic and athletic, Taft was slow and lethargic. Roosevelt's dynamic, visionary leadership enlarged the powers of the presidency; Taft's approach to the office was disappointingly stolid and unimaginative. Having a legal cast of mind, he believed that he should scrupulously observe the limits of presidential power, and he frequently ended up deferring to Congress. Moreover, in the tightrope walk between conservatives and progressives, Roosevelt had maintained a balance for most of his presidency. Taft leaned in a conservative direction and alienated progressives, even though his record of progressive reform legislation was impressive.

Woodrow Wilson 1856– 1924 A deeply religious man and son of a minister, Wilson believed that divine power helped him to win the Democratic nomination and the presidency. After leaving the presidency, Roosevelt embarked on an African hunting safari and an extended junket in Europe. Even thousands of miles away, he heard progressives' rumblings of discontent with Taft. After getting fired by Taft, progressive ally and conservationist Gifford Pinchot went to Europe in hot haste and met with Roosevelt to complain about Taft. In 1910 Roosevelt returned to his home on Long Island. Though he said he wanted to retire, he was itching to return to politics. And he could no longer conceal his mounting dissatisfaction with Taft. He had entrusted Taft with the progressive agenda and felt that Taft had "completely twisted around the policies I advocated and acted upon." In February 1912, he declared, "My hat is in the ring." What followed was a bitter intraparty fight. Roosevelt trounced Taft in the primaries, winning nine states compared to Taft's one (Roosevelt even won the primary in Taft's home state of Ohio). Roosevelt approached the party's national convention in Chicago confident of winning the nomination, but Taft, as president, controlled the Republican National Committee, and he was the favorite of the Old Guard. Moreover, most states selected delegates through local caucuses or conventions, where Taft supporters ran the show. So the national committee ignored the primary results, and Taft won the nomination. Infuriated, Roosevelt supporters stalked out of the convention. The Republicans continued about their business, selecting James Sherman once again to run with Taft. (Sherman died just before Election Day, on October 30; his replacement was Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University.) Roosevelt and his supporters immediately regrouped in Chicago and formed a third party, the Progressive Party, with the former president as their nominee and Governor Hiram Johnson of California taking second place on the ticket. The delegates gave Roosevelt a 52-minute standing ovation. "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord," he declared in his acceptance speech. The Progressive platform, embodied by Roosevelt's "New Nationalism," was ambitious and detailed. It called for an eight-hour workday and a six-day workweek; an end to child labor under the age of 16; women's suffrage, which made the party the first major national party to demand

the vote for women; and many other reforms. After Roosevelt declared that he was as “strong as a Bull Moose,” the Progressive Party became known as the Bull Moose Party. The Republicans were hopelessly divided. The split between Taft and Roosevelt almost ensured the election of the Democratic nominee. Both men were likely aware of this certainty, but they were too stubborn to compromise. The Democrats, sensing a real chance to gain the White House after 16 years, met in Baltimore in June. The leading contender for the nomination was House Speaker Champ Clark of Missouri. But William Jennings Bryan declared his opposition to Clark, and the Nebraska delegation eventually supported the liberal reform governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson. After 46 agonizing ballots, the convention finally nominated Wilson. (Wilson felt a sense of gratitude toward Bryan, and after his election selected the Nebraskan as his secretary of state.) The vice presidential candidate was Governor Thomas Marshall of Indiana, best known for his witticism, “What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar.” Wilson came from a background different from that of any other president. After graduating from law school, he dabbled briefly in a legal career and then studied political science at Johns Hopkins University, where he earned a doctorate, making him the first presidential candidate to have a Ph.D. He became a college professor, wrote several books, and in 1902 became president of Princeton University. Eight years later he left the university and was elected governor of New Jersey. Where most presidential candidates had come from a political or military background, Wilson had spent most of his adult life in academia. With three distinguished candidates, the election of 1912 was an exciting contest. Most of the media focused on Wilson and Roosevelt. After a few speeches early in the campaign, Taft became listless. He was the first president ever to take to the campaign stump after winning renomination, but he expected defeat, and his heart was not in the contest. “Sometimes I think I might as well give up... . There are so many people in the country who don’t like me,” he wrote. Taft felt that Roosevelt had betrayed him, and he persisted in the campaign to prevent his former friend from winning. Roosevelt and Wilson were relatively close on the issues. Wilson called his version of progressivism “New Freedom” and took an antimonopoly stance. While both men favored an activist federal government, Wilson shied away from federal government planning and programs and was more sympathetic to states’ rights. Roosevelt’s New Nationalism, which he had first promulgated in 1910, called for a protective tariff as well as stronger intervention by the government to control corporations and protect labor, women, and children. But the two strains of progressivism were very similar. The most tense moment of the campaign came in its last few weeks. On October 14, in Milwaukee, Roosevelt was on his way to give a speech when a crazed gunman shot him in the chest. The bullet lodged near his heart, but its path had been slowed by a spectacle case and a folded copy of the speech that Roosevelt had in his breast pocket. Roosevelt insisted on delivering the address, and the audience gasped as he pulled out the blood-drenched text. In a typical display of vim, he spoke for an hour and a half, but he had to take two weeks off from campaigning to recuperate. Out of respect for Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson suspended their campaigns as he convalesced. Wilson proved to be an effective campaigner—eloquent, cogent, and even witty. While he restricted his campaigning primarily to the Northeast, Bryan went on the stump for him in the

West, where he made a significant contribution to Wilson's cause. In the electoral college Wilson demolished his opponents. Roosevelt won 6 states, while Taft won only Utah and Vermont. But in popular votes Wilson's victory was not nearly as impressive. He was a minority president, winning only 41.9 percent of the popular vote. His total of 6,293,454 was less than Bryan's 6,409,104 in 1908. Roosevelt came in second, a testimony to his popularity; it was the strongest showing of any third-party candidate in American history and was one of only two times that a third party won more than 20 percent of the popular vote. Taft trailed with the lowest share of the popular vote for any president seeking reelection. The candidate of the Socialist Party, Eugene Debs of Indiana, made a respectable showing. Although he won no electoral votes, he did attract 900,000 popular votes, 6 percent of the total, the highest amount ever for a Socialist candidate and more than twice the 400,000 votes he had won in 1904 and 1908. Although Wilson did not win a majority of popular votes, the support for himself and for Roosevelt's Progressive Party constituted a mandate to proceed with progressive reform. Taft's dreary showing, and the support received by Roosevelt and Debs, indicated that the electorate did not want conservative rule. Moreover, the Democrats won control of the Senate, so that they now ruled both houses of Congress. The way was clear for a period of reform legislation and activist presidential leadership.

Yanek Mieczkowski, "1912," *Routledge Historical Atlas of Presidential Elections* (Routledge Atlases of American History)