



Election of 1912: The Progressive Era TEACHER GUIDE

Lesson Overview

This lesson uses primary source analysis and exploration to examine the election of 1912 as the beginning of a transformation in the role that the federal government played in encouraging progressive values. It is designed for students currently studying U.S. history or government in the classroom and scaled to the 11th grade TEKS. Lessons can also be used with younger students with some modifications.

The lesson is designed to be completed in a single 45- to 60-minute class period.



Essential Question

What were the competing visions for how the federal government could resolve the problems of American society?

Objectives

- Students will engage with primary sources to understand the beginnings of the movement that ultimately led to Progressive-Era reforms and a new relationship between the government and its citizens.
- Students will use multimodal engagement strategies to develop their historical thinking skills.
- Students will analyze, organize, and use information from a variety of primary sources and communicate that analysis through writing and discussion.

Key Vocabulary

Students will need to have an understanding of the following terms to effectively complete the lesson:

- Urbanization
- Industrialization
- Nationalism
- Socialism



TEKS

113.41.4.A; 113.41.5.A,C

Lesson Procedure

Warm-Up

There are two possible components for the lesson warm-up: an election snapshot and a primary source document for the class to analyze together. Depending on your classroom needs, you may choose to complete one or both components. The content for both the snapshot and the warm-up document analysis are available as PDF documents and a teacher slide deck.

1. Using the election snapshot, briefly review the main ideas, issues, and players of the election of 1912.
 - a. Be sure to remind students that while the election was important for many reasons, the main thing that you'll be focusing on today is how the election can be seen as a way to understand the beginnings of the impact of the Progressive Era on American society.
2. Using the sample primary source, review with your students how to thoroughly analyze and explore primary sources.
 - a. This lesson uses a simplified version of the [National Archives and Records Administration's Document Analysis](#) strategies.
 - b. As a group, use the warm-up exercise to review "The Right of the People to Rule." Remind students that it is important to use close reading skills and apply historical context that they have already learned.
 - c. After analyzing the source as a whole, answer the "Checking for Understanding" questions to ensure student comprehension.

Exploring Primary Sources

The purpose of this section is to have students explore primary sources that describe the extent to which the election of 1912 represented the increasing political divide over the federal government's role in regulating social and economic aspects of American life.

There are many ways that you can choose to engage with the primary sources with your students. Depending on interest, student level, and classroom goals, you may choose to engage with any or all of the provided primary sources.

Three possible engagement models are suggested here:

Write

Using the worksheets provided, have your students work individually to read and examine the documents and then write their answers to the comprehension questions.

The most important takeaway for this engagement model is determining WHO is writing/speaking and WHAT each primary source is about.

Speak

Divide students into groups and provide one primary source to each group. After reading the source on their own, have students discuss the author of the source and their perspective.

The most important takeaway for this engagement model is determining HOW they are communicating and WHY they are saying what they are saying.

Draw

Have students, working individually or in pairs, design a creative, visual representation of the main argument of one primary source. They may choose to create a Venn diagram, a flow chart, or an identity map.

The most important takeaway for this engagement model is determining WHO is writing/speaking and HOW they are getting their point across.

Discussing Primary Sources

In this section, students will discuss their observations, analysis, and conclusions gleaned from analyzing primary sources about the central issues of the election of 1912.

Lead a discussion of the issues at hand. Students will use the key ideas learned during the warm-up and their analyses of primary sources to answer questions.

1. Who were the four presidential candidates in the election of 1912, and what political parties did they represent?
2. What was unusual and significant about the election results of the election of 1912?
3. Progressives aimed to expand the role of the federal government to solve the problems created by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. How did the viewpoints of the Republican and Socialist Parties compare to this vision?
4. Did the expanded role envisioned for the federal government lead to an expanded democracy?
5. Compare and contrast what Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" and Wilson's "New Freedom" envisioned for the role of government in society.
6. How did those visions differ from those of the Republican Party and Socialist Party?

Closure

If desired, use the final few minutes of the lesson to write or discuss, or assign as homework, the following prompt, which encourages students to compare the issues in the election of 1912 to contemporary election cycles:

What similarities and differences do you see between the issues that divided the political parties during the Progressive Era and the issues that divide political parties today?



Election of 1912: The Progressive Era Election Snapshot

Essential Question

What were the competing visions for how the federal government could resolve the problems of American society?

Key Ideas

- Americans faced growing problems related to economic and social changes brought on by rapid urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Four candidates appeared on the ballot in 1912, each offering different solutions to these problems and envisioning different roles for the federal government in American life.
- Progressives looked to transform the relationship between government and people based on these values: the desire to reform society, the desire to use governmental authority to solve problems, and the desire for greater social control.
- Though the Progressive Party did not win the election, it was the only time in the history of the American two-party system that a third-party candidate received more popular and electoral votes than a major party nominee.
- The election of 1912 revealed deep divisions within the Republican Party, ultimately causing the progressive wing of the party to leave and the remaining members to become increasingly conservative.

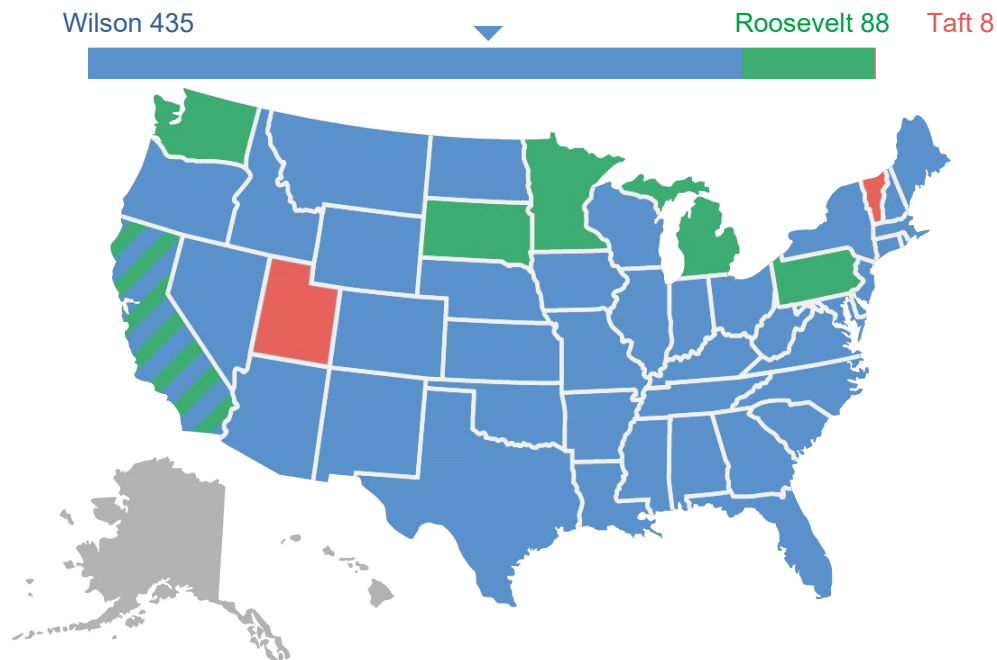
Candidates and Outcome

Woodrow Wilson
(Democrat)

William Howard Taft
(Republican)

Theodore Roosevelt
(Progressive/Bull Moose)

Eugene V. Debs
(Socialist)





Election of 1912: The Progressive Era Primary Sources and Questions

Warm-Up

“The Right of the People to Rule” [audio source], 1912
Theodore Roosevelt
[Library of Congress](#)

Primary Sources

“New Nationalism” speech [excerpt], 1910
Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt gave this speech two years prior to the election. In the speech, he laid out his vision for the nation which included greater protections for human rights and the end to special privileges for businesses in government.

[Teaching American History](#)

Republican Party Platform [excerpt], 1912
Republican Party

Though progressives within the Republican Party controlled a majority of the legislature, conservative Republicans controlled the party machinery. Taft, the incumbent president, was nominated at the Republican National Convention on a more conservative platform.

[The American Presidency Project](#)

“Speech of Acceptance” [excerpt], 1912
Eugene V. Debs

Eugene V. Debs led the establishment of the Socialist Party of America in 1897 and ran as its presidential candidate five times. The election of 1912 was his fourth candidacy.

[History Matters](#)

“The Elephant” [visual source], 1912
E.W. Kemble

This cartoon was created after the election results were in and supports the argument that the split within the Republican Party helped Woodrow Wilson win the election.

[History Teaching Institute](#)

“New Freedom” speech [excerpt], 1913
Woodrow Wilson

In 1913, Woodrow Wilson published the book *The New Freedom*, describing his plans for social and governmental reform first expressed in his 1912 campaign platform and speeches.

[Project Gutenberg](#)



**Warm-Up: Excerpt from “The Right of the People to Rule”
Theodore Roosevelt
March 1912**

The great fundamental issue now before our people can be stated briefly. It is, are the American people fit to govern themselves, to rule themselves, to control themselves? I believe they are. My opponents do not. I believe in the right of the people to rule. I believe that the majority of the plain people of the United States will, day in and day out, make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any smaller class or body of men, no matter what their training, will make in trying to govern them. I believe, again, that the American people are, as a whole, capable of self-control, and of learning by their mistakes. Our opponents pay lip-loyalty to this doctrine; but they show their real beliefs by the way in which they champion every device to make the nominal rule of the people a sham.

...

... I am not leading this fight as a matter of aesthetic pleasure. I am leading because somebody must lead, or else the fight would not be made at all. ... We the people cannot turn back. Our aim must be steady, wise progress.

It would be well if our people would study the history of a sister republic. All the woes of France for a century and a quarter have been due to the folly of her people in splitting into the two camps of unreasonable conservatism and unreasonable radicalism.

...

... May we profit by the experiences of our brother republicans across the water, and go forward steadily, avoiding all wild extremes; and may our ultra-conservatives remember that the rule of the Bourbons brought on the Revolution, and may our would-be revolutionaries remember that no Bourbon was ever such a dangerous enemy of the people and of freedom as the professed friend of both, Robespierre. There is no danger of a revolution in this country; but there is grave discontent and unrest. ...

Friends, our task as Americans is to strive for social and industrial justice, achieved through the genuine rule of the people. This is our end, our purpose. The methods for achieving the end are merely expedients, to be finally accepted or rejected according as actual experience shows that they work well or ill. But in our hearts we must have this lofty purpose, and we must strive for it in all earnestness and sincerity, or our work will come to nothing. In order to succeed we need leaders of inspired idealism, leaders to whom are granted great visions, who dream greatly and strive to make their dreams come true; who can kindle the people with the fire from their own burning souls. The leader for the time being, whoever he may be, is but an instrument, to be used until broken and then to be cast aside; and if he is worth his salt he will care no more when he is broken than a soldier cares when he is sent where his life is forfeit in order that the victory may be won. In the long fight for righteousness the watchword for all of us is spend and be spent.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Warm-Up Exercise: Understanding Perspective
Excerpt from “The Right of the People to Rule”

Analyzing a Source: Use the chart below (which is based on the National Archives and Records Administration analysis model) to examine the primary source. Remember that every document is created by a person with a specific point of view that is based on their background, beliefs, and experiences. These questions help you to understand that point of view, or perspective.

Meet the source. What type of source is it? What do you notice first? How would you describe it to someone who hasn't read it?	
Observe its parts. Who created it? Who is the intended audience? When was it created? Where was it created?	
Try to make sense of it. What is it talking about? Why did the maker create it? What was happening at the time in history when this source was created?	
Use it as historical evidence. What did you find out that you might not learn anywhere else? What evidence does the creator present that you should “fact check”? What questions do you have that this source doesn't answer?	

Checking for Understanding: After reviewing the source using the chart above, answer these questions as a class.

- According to Roosevelt, why should people rule themselves?
- What warning does Roosevelt give relating to the events of the French Revolution? Why do you think he uses this analogy?
- What does Roosevelt mean by “social and industrial justice”?
- What does Roosevelt say about the importance of leaders to achieving progress?



**Excerpt from “New Nationalism”
Theodore Roosevelt
August 31, 1910**

Context: Theodore Roosevelt gave this speech two years prior to the election. In the speech, he laid out his vision for the nation which included greater protections for human rights and the end to special privileges for businesses in government.



...

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 that 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.

I believe in shaping the ends of government to protect property as well as human welfare. Normally, and in the long run, the ends are the same; but whenever the alternative must be faced, I am for men and not for property, as you were in the Civil War. I know well that the reformers must not bring upon the people economic ruin, or the reforms themselves will go down in the ruin. But we must be ready to face temporary disaster, whether or not brought on by those who will war against us to the knife. Those who oppose reform will do well to remember that ruin in its worst form is inevitable if our national life brings us nothing better than swollen fortunes for the few and the triumph in both politics and business of a sordid and selfish materialism.

If our political institutions were perfect, they would absolutely prevent the political domination of money in any part of our affairs. We need to make our political representatives more quickly and sensitively responsive to the people whose servants they are. More direct action by the people in their own affairs under proper safeguards is vitally necessary. The direct primary is a step in this direction, it is particularly important that all moneys received or expended for campaign purposes should be publicly accounted for, not only after election, but before election as well. Political action must be made simpler, easier, and freer from confusion for every citizen. I believe that the prompt removal of unfaithful or incompetent public servants should be made easy and sure in whatever way experience shall show to be most expedient in any given class of cases.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for Excerpt from “New Nationalism”

1. According to Roosevelt, what did New Nationalism require of each branch of government?
2. Roosevelt acknowledged that he (and reformers) must balance which two competing interests when considering how to reform the role of the federal government?
3. What reasons did Roosevelt give for supporting the direct primary?
4. Roosevelt called for a system in which “all moneys received or expended for campaign purposes should be publicly accounted for” before and after an election. How does this align with other progressive values?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for Excerpt from “New Nationalism”

1. According to Roosevelt, what did New Nationalism require of each branch of government?

Executive: that it be a steward of public welfare

Judiciary: that it be more interested in human welfare than in property

Legislative: that it represent all people, not just one class or section of people

2. Roosevelt acknowledged that he (and reformers) must balance which two competing interests when considering how to reform the role of the federal government?

Reformers must balance human welfare with the needs of the economy.

3. What reasons did Roosevelt give for supporting the direct primary?

Roosevelt supported the direct primary because he said it would stop money from dominating politics, make politicians more “quickly and sensitively responsive” to the people, and allow for more direct action by people in their own affairs.

4. Roosevelt called for a system in which “all moneys received or expended for campaign purposes should be publicly accounted for” before and after an election. How does this align with other progressive values?

Progressivism desired a new relationship between the people and the government characterized by greater accountability and expanded democracy, both of which align with Roosevelt’s desire for transparency with regard to campaign monies.



**Excerpt from the Republican Party Platform
Republican National Convention
June 18, 1912**

Context: Though progressives within the Republican Party controlled a majority of the legislature, conservative Republicans controlled the party machinery. Taft, the incumbent president, was nominated at the Republican National Convention on a more conservative platform.



...

The Republican party . . . will strive, not only in the nation but in the several States, to enact the necessary legislation to safeguard the public health; to limit effectively the labor of women and children, and to protect wage earners engaged in dangerous occupations; to enact comprehensive and generous workman's compensation laws in place of the present wasteful and unjust system of employers' liability; and in all possible ways to satisfy the just demand of the people for the study and solution of the complex and constantly changing problems of social welfare.

In dealing with these questions, it is important that the rights of every individual to the freest possible development of his own powers and resources and to the control of his own justly acquired property, so far as those are compatible with the rights of others, shall not be interfered with or destroyed. The social and political structure of the United States rests upon the civil liberty of the individual; and for the protection of that liberty the people have wisely, in the National and State Constitutions, put definite limitations upon themselves and upon their governmental officers and agencies. To enforce these limitations, to secure the orderly and coherent exercise of governmental powers, and to protect the rights of even the humblest and least favored individual are the function of independent Courts of Justice.

The Republican party reaffirms its intention to uphold at all times the authority and integrity of the Courts, both State and Federal, and it will ever insist that their powers to enforce their process and to protect life, liberty and property shall be preserved inviolate. An orderly method is provided under our system of government by which the people may, when they choose, alter or amend the constitutional provisions which underlie that government. Until these constitutional provisions are so altered or amended, in orderly fashion, it is the duty of the courts to see to it that when challenged they are enforced.

That the Courts, both Federal and State, may bear the heavy burden laid upon them to the complete satisfaction of public opinion, we favor legislation to prevent long delays and the tedious and costly appeals which have so often amounted to a denial of justice in civil cases and to a failure to protect the public at large in criminal cases.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for Excerpt from the Republican Party Platform

1. According to the Republican Party platform, what should not be interfered with or destroyed?
2. Why did the national and state constitutions put “definite limitations upon themselves and upon their governmental officers and agencies”? According to the platform, which branch of government could best enforce these limitations?
3. The Republican Party platform asserted that if people are dissatisfied with the constitutional provisions that underlie the government, they have an established procedure to address that dissatisfaction. What should they do?
4. In the choice between individual liberty and governmental authority which did the Republicans believe would best solve the problems of society? What evidence might Republicans have used to support that conclusion?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for Excerpt from the Republican Party Platform

1. According to the Republican Party platform, what should not be interfered with or destroyed?

The rights of individuals to develop their own resources and control their own property should not be interfered with or destroyed.

2. Why did the national and state constitutions put “definite limitations upon themselves and upon their governmental officers and agencies”? According to the platform, which branch of government could best enforce these limitations?

Limitations were placed to protect liberties because “the social and political structure of the United States rests upon the civil liberty of the individual.”

The judicial branch can best enforce these limitations.

3. The Republican Party platform asserted that if people are dissatisfied with the constitutional provisions that underlie the government, they have an established procedure to address that dissatisfaction. What should they do?

They should amend the Constitution.

4. In the choice between individual liberty and governmental authority which did the Republicans believe would best solve the problems of society? What evidence might Republicans have used to support that conclusion?

Governmental authority.

Student must make a claim and support it with evidence. Answers should point to details about the authority of the courts and the party’s belief in citizens agreeing to imposed limits on individual liberty for the good of society.



**Excerpt from “Speech of Acceptance”
Eugene V. Debs
October 1912**

Context: Eugene V. Debs led the establishment of the Socialist Party of America in 1897 and ran as its presidential candidate five times. The election of 1912 was his fourth candidacy.



It is with a full sense of the responsibility it imposes and the service it exacts that I accept the nomination for president tendered to me by the Socialist party of the United States. Personally, I did not wish the nomination. It came to me unsought. It came as summons to service and not as a personal honor.

...

My chief concern as a presidential candidate is that I shall serve well the party, and the class and the cause the party represents.

The Socialist party is fundamentally different from all other parties. It came in the process of evolution and grows with the growth of the forces which created it. Its spirit is militant and its aim revolutionary. It expresses in political terms the aspiration of the working class to freedom and to a larger and fuller life than they have yet known

...

Capitalism is rushing blindly to its impending doom. All the signs portend the inevitable breakdown of the existing order. Deep-seated discontent has seized upon the masses. They must indeed be deaf who do not hear the mutterings of the approaching storm.

Poverty, high prices, unemployment, child slavery, widespread misery and haggard want in a land bursting with abundance; prostitution and insanity, suicide and crime, these in solemn numbers tell the tragic story of capitalism’s saturnalia of blood and tears and shame as its end draws near.

It is to abolish this monstrous system and the misery and crime which flow from it in a direful and threatening stream that the Socialist party was organized and now makes its appeal to the intelligence and conscience of the people. Social reorganization is the imperative demand of this world-wide revolutionary movement.

The Socialist party’s mission is not only to destroy capitalist despotism but to establish industrial and social democracy. To this end the workers are steadily organizing and fitting themselves for the day when they shall take control of the people’s industries and when the right to work shall be as inviolate as the right to breathe the breath of life.

Standing as it does for the emancipation of the working class from wage-slavery, for the equal rights and opportunities of all men and all women, for the abolition of child labor and the conservation of all childhood, for social self-rule and the equal freedom of all, the Socialist party is the party of progress, the party of the future, and its triumph will signalize the birth of a new civilization and the dawn of a happier day for all humanity.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for Excerpt from “Speech of Acceptance”

1. What did Eugene V. Debs identify as his chief concern as a presidential candidate?
2. According to Debs, how was the Socialist Party different from other political parties?
3. Debs described capitalism as “this monstrous system” and contended that it was “rushing blindly to its impending doom.” What evidence did Debs cite that led him to this conclusion?
4. According to Debs, what was the mission of the Socialist Party, and what changes would accomplishing that mission bring to the United States? Why might some Americans have been attracted to this vision?

ANSWER KEY

Questions for Excerpt from “Speech of Acceptance”

1. What did Eugene V. Debs identify as his chief concern as a presidential candidate?

He wanted to serve the party well and the cause and class of people that it represented.

2. According to Debs, how was the Socialist Party different from other political parties?

“It came in the process of evolution and grows with the growth of the forces which created it. Its spirit is militant and its aim revolutionary. It expresses in political terms the aspiration of the working class to freedom and to a larger and fuller life than they have yet known.”

3. Debs described capitalism as “this monstrous system” and contended that it was “rushing blindly to its impending doom.” What evidence did Debs cite that led him to this conclusion?

Debs listed a number of negative impacts of capitalism, including poverty, high prices, unemployment, child slavery, widespread misery; prostitution, insanity, suicide, and crime.

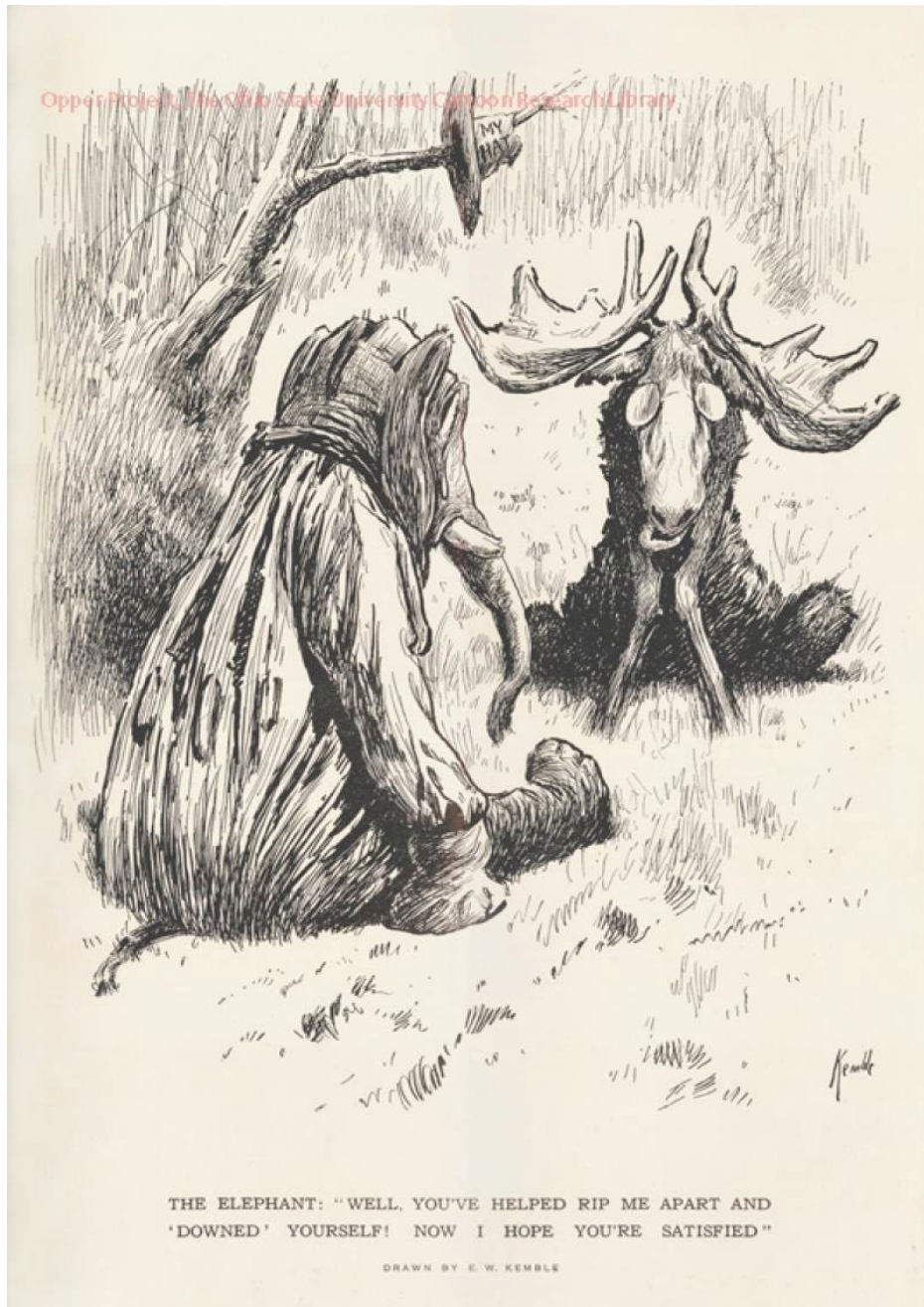
4. According to Debs, what was the mission of the Socialist Party, and what changes would accomplishing that mission bring to the United States? Why might some Americans have been attracted to this vision?

The Socialist Party’s mission was to destroy capitalistic despotism and establish industrial and social democracy. The United States would see freedom from wage slavery, equality for all, social self-rule, and “a happier day for all humanity.”

Student must make a claim and support it with evidence.

“The Elephant”
E. W. Kemble, *Harper’s Weekly*
November 16, 1912

Context: This cartoon was created after the election results were in and supports the argument that the split within the Republican Party helped Woodrow Wilson win the election.



Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for "The Elephant"

1. What political parties and candidates are represented in this cartoon?
2. In your own words, explain what the elephant is saying about the results of the election.
3. Why might Roosevelt have been willing to "rip" the party apart rather than concede the nomination to Taft?
4. The winning political party is not pictured in this cartoon. What is the cartoon implying about how and why the Democrats won the election?

Questions for “The Elephant”

1. What political parties and candidates are represented in this cartoon?

Taft (Republican) and Roosevelt (Bull Moose/Progressive)

2. In your own words, explain what the elephant is saying about the results of the election.

The elephant is blaming the split of the Progressives from the Republican Party for destroying the party and losing the presidential election.

3. Why might Roosevelt have been willing to “rip” the party apart rather than concede the nomination to Taft?

Student must make a claim and support it with evidence.

4. The winning political party is not pictured in this cartoon. What is the cartoon implying about how and why the Democrats won the election?

The cartoon is implying that the Democrats only won because of the damage that the Progressives and Republicans did to each other during the election.



**Excerpt from “The New Freedom”
Woodrow Wilson
1913**

Context: In 1913, Woodrow Wilson published the book *The New Freedom*, describing his plans for social and governmental reform first expressed in his 1912 campaign platform and speeches.



THERE is one great basic fact which underlies all the questions that are discussed on the political platform at the present moment. That singular fact is that nothing is done in this country as it was done twenty years ago.

We are in the presence of a new organization of society. Our life has broken away from the past. The life of America is not the life that it was twenty years ago; it is not the life that it was ten years ago. We have changed our economic conditions, absolutely, from top to bottom; and, with our economic society, the organization of our life. The old political formulas do not fit the present problems; they read now like documents taken out of a forgotten age. The older cries sound as if they belonged to a past age which men have almost forgotten. . . .

. . .

Politics in America is in a case which sadly requires attention. The system set up by our law and our usage doesn't work,—or at least it can't be depended on; it is made to work only by a most unreasonable expenditure of labor and pains. The government, which was designed for the people, has got into the hands of bosses and their employers, the special interests. An invisible empire has been set up above the forms of democracy.

. . .

. . . We are going to climb the slow road until it reaches some upland where the air is fresher, where the whole talk of mere politicians is stilled, where men can look in each other's faces and see that there is nothing to conceal, that all they have to talk about they are willing to talk about in the open and talk about with each other; and whence, looking back over the road, we shall see at last that we have fulfilled our promise to mankind. We had said to all the world, “America was created to break every kind of monopoly, and to set men free, upon a footing of equality, upon a footing of opportunity, to match their brains and their energies.” and now we have proved that we meant it.

Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Questions for Excerpt from “The New Freedom”

1. Wilson asserted that all questions discussed in the political platforms of 1912 were based on one basic fact. What was it?
2. According to Wilson, what conditions changed the organization of American life? Given the changes in American society, what did Wilson find in need of repair?
3. Although Wilson believed that government in the United States had been designed for the people, he found it now controlled by what groups?
4. Would you describe the tone of Wilson’s speech as optimistic or pessimistic? Explain.

ANSWER KEY

Questions for Excerpt from “The New Freedom”

1. Wilson asserted that all questions discussed in the political platforms of 1912 were based on one basic fact. What was it?

Wilson asserts that the country was not the same as it was twenty years earlier.

2. According to Wilson, what conditions changed the organization of American life? Given the changes in American society, what did Wilson find in need of repair?

Economic conditions, and therefore the organization of people’s lives, changed. The “old political formulas” needed to change.

3. Although Wilson believed that government in the United States had been designed for the people, he found it now controlled by what groups?

It was now controlled by special interest groups.

4. Would you describe the tone of Wilson’s speech as optimistic or pessimistic? Explain.

Student must make a claim and support it with evidence from the text.