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## The Transformation of American Democracy: Teddy Roosevelt, the 1912 Election, and the Progressive Party

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### Abstract

*Progressivism came to the forefront of our national politics for the first time in the election of 1912. The two leading candidates after the votes were tallied were both Progressives: the Democratic Party's Woodrow Wilson, who won the presidency, and the Progressive Party's Theodore Roosevelt. The election was truly transformative. It challenged voters to think seriously about their rights and the Constitution and marked a fundamental departure from the decentralized republic that had prevailed since the early 19th century. The 1912 election did not completely remake American democracy, but it marked a critical way station on the long road to doing so. In a very real sense, Theodore Roosevelt won the 1912 election: The causes he championed with extraordinary panache still live on today.*

I have always been interested in the way elections and parties have shaped America's constitutional democracy. The 1912 presidential election was one of those rare campaigns that challenged voters to think seriously about their rights and the Constitution. It was the climactic

battle of the Progressive Era that arose at the dawn of the 20th century, when the country first tried to come to terms with the profound challenges posed by the Industrial Revolution.

It should be noted that the 1912 election was not a major realigning election: It did not determine the fortunes of parties as decisively—or lead to the emergence of a new political order—as did the election of 1800, the election of 1860, or the election of 1936. But it was a critical prelude to the New Deal and, more than this, a contest that initiated important changes that redefined the meaning and practice of self-government in the United States.

The election showcased four impressive candidates who engaged

in a remarkable debate about the future of American politics:

- Theodore Roosevelt bolted from the Republican Party and ran as the standard bearer of the Progressive Party—or the “Bull Moose Party,” as he famously called it.
- William Howard Taft, the incumbent Republican President, defended conservatism, albeit a particular form of conservatism that sought to reconcile constitutional sobriety and Progressive policies.
- Eugene Debs, the labor leader from Terre Haute, Indiana, ran

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on the Socialist Party ticket at the high tide of Socialism.

- Finally, of course, Woodrow Wilson, the governor of New Jersey, was the Democratic candidate and eventual winner of the election.

Wilson had a PhD in history and political science—the two were merged at the time—and remains to this day the only PhD to become President of the United States. He ran as a Progressive, posing as a more moderate reformer than Roosevelt; but it was Wilson’s academic credentials that captured the popular imagination.

A September issue of *Life*, a very popular magazine at the time, depicted Wilson as a Roman consul with the owl of learning sitting nearby, and it celebrated him in Latin as “an executive, a teacher, and a spokesman of the people.” This celebration of Wilson’s academic credentials, gilded as a professor and president of Princeton University, conformed to Progressives’ belief that, as the prominent reform thinker and publicist Herbert Croly put it, the best way remake American democracy was “to popularize higher education.”<sup>1</sup>

All four candidates acknowledged that fundamental changes were occurring in the American political landscape, and each attempted to define the Progressive Era’s answer to the questions raised by the rise of a new industrial order within the American constitutional system. In particular, each candidate tried to grapple with the emergence of corporations—the trusts, as reformers dubbed them—embodying a concentration of economic power that posed

fundamental challenges to the foundations of the decentralized republic of the 19th century.

During the 1830s, the brilliant French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville had identified local self-government as the foundation of American democracy, but federalism now seemed overawed and corrupted by giant corporations. These combinations of wealth aroused widespread fears that growing corporate influence might jeopardize the equality of opportunity of individuals to climb the economic ladder.

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**THE PROGRESSIVE PARTY REPRESENTED THE VANGUARD OF THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT. IT WAS JOINED BY AN ARRAY OF CRUSADING REFORMERS WHO VIEWED ROOSEVELT’S CAMPAIGN AS THEIR BEST HOPE TO ADVANCE A PROGRAM OF NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION.**

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Reformers excoriated the economic conditions of this period—dubbed the “Gilded Age”—as excessively opulent and holding little promise for industrial workers and small farmers. Moreover, many believed that great business interests had captured and corrupted the men and methods of government for their own profit. Party leaders—Democrats and Republicans—were seen as irresponsible bosses who did the bidding of “special interests.”

The fundamental changes that the 1912 election registered and inspired in American politics underscore the importance of the Progressive Party. The party represented the vanguard of the Progressive movement. It

was joined by an array of crusading reformers who viewed Roosevelt’s campaign as their best hope to advance a program of national transformation. Not only did it dominate the agenda of the election, but, with the important exception of the Republican Party of the 1850s, it was the most important third party in American history. With the celebrated former two-term President Roosevelt—arguably the most important figure of his age—as its candidate, the Progressive Party won over 27 percent of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes.

This was extraordinary for a third party. No other third-party candidate for the presidency has ever received as large a percentage of the popular vote or as many electoral votes as TR did. In fact, had the Democrats not responded to the excitement aroused by TR and the Progressive Party and nominated their own Progressive candidate—and it took 46 ballots for Wilson to get the nomination—Roosevelt might have been elected to a third term in 1912 as the head of a party and movement dedicated to completely transforming America.

**The Progressive Party and “Modern” American Politics**

As it was, the Progressive Party pioneered a new form of politics explicitly defined as modern—one that would eventually displace the traditional localized democracy shaped by the two-party system that had dominated representative government in the U.S. since the beginning of the 19th century. Many characteristics of our politics that are conventionally understood as new or as being of recent vintage were

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1. Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), p. 377.

born of or critically advanced by the Progressive Party campaign of 1912.

Having been denied the Republican nomination in spite of trouncing incumbent William Howard Taft in the primaries—this was the first primary contest in American presidential politics—TR bolted from the Republican Party. Then he declared in his “Confession of Faith” at the Progressive Party convention, “We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

The religious language was no accident, as Roosevelt was drawing support and inspiration from the Social Gospel Movement, whose members saw the Progressive Party as a political expression of their commitment to promoting Christian social action on Earth. It was, if you will, a religious Left that was very important at the beginning of the 20th century.

Roosevelt and his fellow Bull Moosers defined the Lord’s cause as a new idea and practice of democracy. TR’s crusade made universal use of the direct primary, a cause célèbre. Political reforms had established the popular selection of candidates as a fixture of local, state, and congressional elections during the first decade of the 20th century; however, the 1912 campaign was the first time that direct primaries played a significant role in a presidential election.

Prior to TR’s campaign, the direct primary was used to select delegates in only six states: North Dakota, California, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nebraska. All of these states—save New Jersey, which enacted a direct primary

law as part of Governor Woodrow Wilson’s reform program—were in the Midwest and West, where Progressive reforms to this point had made the greatest impact.

As a consequence of Roosevelt’s championing the direct primary during his 1912 campaign, many northern states fought fiercely over the adoption of electoral reform. In the end, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, and South Dakota adopted the device. “With the six states in which the system was already in operation,” historian George Mowry wrote, “this made a sizable block of normal Republican states from which a popular referendum could be obtained.”<sup>3</sup>

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**THE 1912 CAMPAIGN WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT DIRECT PRIMARIES PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.**

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Roosevelt carried carried nine of these 12 states in the primary, accumulating 278 delegates to Taft’s 48 and Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette’s 36. Roosevelt even won Taft’s home state of Ohio by an almost three-to-two margin. But two-thirds of the convention delegates were selected at gatherings still dominated by state party leaders, who much preferred Taft’s stolidity to Roosevelt’s militant Progressivism. With good reason, they perceived that Roosevelt’s celebration of the popular primary presupposed a direct relationship between candidates and public opinion that portended a fundamental challenge to the essential role that

party organizations had played in American politics since they had become critical intermediaries in politics and government.

Indeed, Roosevelt’s direct appeal to mass opinion also involved an assault on traditional partisan loyalties, the championing of candidate-centered campaigns, and innovative uses of a newly emergent mass media. There was no television yet, but there were independent newspapers, popular magazines, and movies. The latter, which featured campaign advertisements for the first time in 1912, were especially important in circumventing party leaders and organizations. Movies were still silent, but Roosevelt also made audio recordings of his most important campaign rhetoric that were central to the campaign.

Finally, Roosevelt convened an energetic but uneasy coalition of self-styled public advocacy groups, many of which became core constituencies of contemporary Progressive politics. For example, 1912 was the first presidential election in which African Americans and women played an important part.

All of these features of the Progressive Party campaign of 1912 make the election of 1912 look more like that of 2008 than that of 1908. This is not to argue that so-called modern politics was created out of whole cloth in 1912. The candidate-centered campaign and the biblical assault on corporate power first became an important feature of American politics in 1896, when William Jennings Bryan—the Great Commoner—became the first presidential candidate to campaign

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2. Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Progressive Party, August 5, 6, and 7, 1912, Progressive Party Archives, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3. George Mowry, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 228.

throughout the country. He did so by train, and the “whistle-stop tour” became a staple of American politics after that.

What is different about the Progressive Party was that it launched a systematic attack on political parties and the critical role these organizations had played in American elections and government. It championed instead a fully elaborated “modern” presidency as the leading instrument of popular rule. Public opinion, Progressives argued, now buried by inept Presidents and party bosses, would reach its fulfillment with the formation of an independent executive power, freed from the provincial and corrupt influence of political parties.

Prior to the Progressive Era, the executive was considered a threat to self-government. The decentralized institutions of the Constitution—states and the Congress, buttressed by an intensely mobilized and highly decentralized two-party system—kept power close to the people and were thus thought to be more democratic than the executive branch. But in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, TR argued that the President, rather than Congress and the states, must become the “steward of the public welfare.”<sup>4</sup> As a party that embraced and went far in legitimizing new social movements and candidate-centered campaigns, the Progressive Party animated a presidency-centered democracy that evolved over the course of the 20th century and appears, for better or worse, to have come into its own in recent elections.

Both Barack Obama and John McCain channeled TR in 2008. In fact, neither McCain nor Obama would have won his nomination were it not for the primaries and caucuses where rank-and-file voters and party activists, not elected officials and party veterans who dominated the political process prior to 1912, choose the candidates.

### **The Progressive Party’s Assault on Constitutional Government**

Roosevelt’s celebration of Progressive democracy was perhaps the most radical campaign ever undertaken by a major American political figure. It was rooted in a belief that localized parties arrested the development of what Progressives saw as the national character of the Constitution.

As Croly lamented, the Democratic and Republican parties “bestowed upon the divided Federal government a certain unity of control, while at the same time it prevented increased efficiency of the Federal system from being obnoxious to local interests.”<sup>5</sup> This was a “state of courts and parties,” as political scientist Stephen Skowronek has put it, for the shackles it placed on the national government and the President were codified by a judiciary that proscribed economic regulations that presumed to curb the worst abuses of big business and to protect workers as violations of “natural rights.”<sup>6</sup>

Progressives charged that the 1905 case of *Lochner v. New York*, which struck down a New York state

law that prohibited the employment of bakery workers for more than 10 hours a day or 60 hours a week on the grounds that such codes violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s right of due process, illustrated all too clearly that a natural rights understanding of constitutionalism simply could not cope with the realities of a 20th century industrial order. Reformers were especially outraged by state court decisions like *Ives v. South Buffalo Ry. Co.*, handed down by the highest court in New York in March 1911, which held that the state’s recently enacted workmen’s compensation law was unconstitutional.

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#### **ROOSEVELT’S CELEBRATION OF PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRACY WAS PERHAPS THE MOST RADICAL CAMPAIGN EVER UNDERTAKEN BY A MAJOR AMERICAN POLITICAL FIGURE.**

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The *Ives* decision was so disturbing to Progressives because it confirmed the enduring importance of “Lochnerism,” which interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment as a rampart of property that forbade the sort of basic protections against corporate power that had gained currency in most other industrial countries. Although they excoriated the limits imposed on the states’ police power, TR and his Progressive allies believed that only federal authority, in the form of national laws and regulatory bodies, could match the strength of the corporations and trusts.

Reformers acknowledged that popular sovereignty had increased

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4. *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, national ed. (New York: Scribner’s, 1926), Vol. 17, p. 19.

5. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, p. 347.

6. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 41.

dramatically during the 19th century, but the Industrial Revolution created new economic needs that had to be met. “Our aim,” Roosevelt argued, “should be to make [the United States] as far as may be not merely a political, but an industrial democracy.” This meant, he elaborated, that “we will protect the rights of the wealthy man, but we maintain that he holds his wealth subject to the general right of the community to regulate its use as the public welfare requires.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the high ideals of Roosevelt’s Progressive Party campaign were never achieved, leaving their advocates in some ways bitterly disappointed, the election marked a critical juncture between the Founders’ limited constitutional government rooted in a natural rights understanding of the Constitution and the Progressive vision of an executive-centered administrative state that presumed to give authoritative expression to mass public opinion. That many Americans and their representatives today believe that Social Security and Medicare are not merely policies but programmatic rights that transcend party politics and elections is an important sign that Progressive democracy has become a powerful, enduring part of the country’s political life. For many, rights are no longer pre-political and, therefore, a limitation on government action but instead are subject to changes in economic conditions that require leaders to guide Americans in redefining the social contract for their own time.

The Progressive Party itself had a brief life. When TR refused to run again in 1916, he doomed the party to

the dustbin of history. Still, the platform of the Progressive Party and the causes it championed would endure. It was not, as many historians and political scientists assert, merely an extension of TR’s enormous ambition—as enormous as it was. Rather, it represented the culmination of a concerted programmatic effort that began three years before, one that included many reformers who stood at the vanguard of Progressive reform.

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**THE ELECTION MARKED A CRITICAL JUNCTURE BETWEEN THE FOUNDERS’ LIMITED CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT ROOTED IN A NATURAL RIGHTS UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONSTITUTION AND THE PROGRESSIVE VISION OF AN EXECUTIVE-CENTERED ADMINISTRATIVE STATE THAT PRESUMED TO GIVE AUTHORITATIVE EXPRESSION TO MASS PUBLIC OPINION.**

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For example, the Progressive Party included the celebrated journalist Jane Addams, the highly regarded journalist William Allen White, and the aforementioned Herbert Croly, one of the founders of the important journal *The New Republic* and arguably the prophet of Progressive democracy. All of these individuals played a critical part in the platform’s creation.

Among the platform’s planks were proposals for national regulations and social welfare—such as minimum wage and maximum hours

legislation, restraints on financial markets, protection against unemployment, and security for the elderly—that would not be enacted until the New Deal. In fact, with respect to certain measures, most notably national health insurance, the Progressive Party prescribed core Progressive commitments that remained unfulfilled at the dawn of the 21st century.

During the battle over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), enacted in 2010, President Obama often pointed out that Theodore Roosevelt was the first President to champion a national health insurance plan. Yet TR’s support for a full-blown social insurance state did not occur during his presidency between 1901 and 1909, when his reform ambitions were far more modest. Rather, TR promoted, as the Progressive platform read, “the protection of the home life against the hazards of sickness, irregular employment and old age through a system of social insurance adopted to American use”<sup>8</sup> during the Bull Moose campaign, when he was out of power and scrambling to catch up with a surging movement.

In addition to these social welfare measures, the Progressive Party advocated important *political* reforms—not just measures to strengthen representative government, such as the right of women to vote and the direct election of Senators, but also reforms dedicated to what TR called “pure” democracy that would remove the constitutional obstacles that obstructed the direct rule of the people. As Roosevelt put it in his “Confession of Faith”:

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7. Theodore Roosevelt, “A Charter for Democracy,” address before the Ohio Constitutional Convention at Columbus, Ohio, February 21, 1912, Roosevelt Collection.

8. Draft platform with handwritten changes by TR and “A Contract with the People,” Platform of the Progressive Party, adopted at its First National Convention, August 7, 1912, Progressive Party Publications, 1912–1916; both in Roosevelt Collection.



The people themselves must be the ultimate makers of their own Constitution, and where their agents differ in their interpretations of the Constitution the people themselves should be given the chance, after full and deliberate judgment, authoritatively to settle what interpretation it is that their representatives shall thereafter adopt as binding.<sup>9</sup>

These measures included the universal use of the direct primary, marking a full-scale attack on the party convention system that denied TR the Republican nomination; the initiative, which would allow voters themselves to make laws; the recall of public officials, which would allow voters to remove their representatives from office before their elected term had expired; and, most controversially, popular referenda on laws that the state courts declared unconstitutional.

Although this proposal allowing voters to overturn judicial decisions was limited to the state courts, the Progressives set their sights on national judges as well, calling for an easier method to amend the Constitution. This assault on constitutional obstacles to national reform ambitions anticipated Franklin D. Roosevelt's court-packing plan, and these measures continue to guide reformers—liberals and conservatives alike—who seek a more direct relationship between government and public opinion.

### Varieties of Progressivism

The Progressive Party's declaration of "pure democracy" was

especially important in defining its collective mission. Above all, these proposals unified the Progressive movement and ensured its lasting legacy. As Roosevelt said in his "Confession of Faith," "the first essential of the Progressive programme is the right of the people to rule."<sup>10</sup> This right demanded more than writing into law such measures as the direct primary, recall, and referendum. It also required rooting firmly in custom the unwritten law that the people's representatives derived their authority "directly" from the people.

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#### THE PROGRESSIVE PARTY WAS SERIOUSLY THREATENED BY FUNDAMENTAL DISAGREEMENTS AMONG ITS SUPPORTERS OVER ISSUES THAT BETRAYED AN ACUTE SENSITIVITY TO THE DEEP-ROOTED FEAR OF CENTRALIZED POWER IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY.

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Then and now, critics of the Progressive Party have pointed to the apparent contradiction between its supporters' celebration of direct democracy and their pledge to build a full-blown welfare and regulatory state, which presupposed, as Croly admitted, "administrative aggrandizement"—that is, reliance on a powerful and independent bureaucracy. But Progressives viewed the expansion of social welfare and "pure democracy" as inextricably linked: Unlike their European and British counterparts, American reformers were reluctant "state builders."

As Jane Addams counseled her fellow reformers, there was no prospect in the United States—where centralized administration was a cardinal vice—that the people would grant legitimacy to a welfare state "unless the power of direct legislation is placed in the hands of the people, in order that these changes may come not as the centralized government [has] given them, from above down, but may come from the people up; that the people should be the directing and controlling force of legislation."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, the Progressive Party was seriously threatened by fundamental disagreements among its supporters over issues that betrayed an acute sensitivity to the deep-rooted fear of centralized power in American democracy. For example, the Progressive Party was bitterly divided over civil rights, a division that led to struggles at its convention over delegate selection rules and the platform—struggles that turned on whether the party should confront the shame of Jim Crow. In the end, the party preferred to let the states and localities resolve for themselves the matter of race relations in the U.S.

The Progressive Party also waged a fractious struggle at its convention over the appropriate methods to tame big business, especially the trusts that had obtained monopoly power over entire industries. This was a contest to determine whether an interstate trade commission, vested with considerable administrative discretion, should regulate business practices or whether that reform would be better achieved

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9. Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Progressive Party.

10. Ibid.

11. Jane Addams, "Social Justice Through National Action," speech delivered at the Second Annual Lincoln Day Dinner of the Progressive Party, New York City, February 12, 1914, printed manuscript located in Jane Addams Papers, File 136, Reel 42.

through aggressive federal and state efforts to dismantle powerful business interests.

Led by Roosevelt, the militant New Nationalists, as they called themselves, prevailed, pledging that the party would regulate rather than dismantle corporate power. But this disagreement carried over to the general election. The Democratic Party, under the guidance of their candidate for President Woodrow Wilson and his adviser Louis Brandeis, embraced the New Freedom version of Progressivism, which prescribed antitrust measures and state regulations as an alternative to the expansion of national administrative power.

Anticipating the debate of our own time about whether corporations can grow too big to fail, Wilson and Brandeis argued that the American people would not accept the aggrandizement of national administrative power that would be required to control immense trusts. Although Wilson and Brandeis hoped that much reform to ameliorate corporate abuses could occur at the state level, they recognized that national action was necessary as well. But rather than creating a regulatory juggernaut, New Freedom Progressives called for tariff reform, which would disentangle the unsavory partnership between business and government that restricted international trade, and stronger anti-trust laws, which would empower the Justice Department and courts to break up corporations that held monopoly power. A sign of the Democratic Progressives' anti-statism was that Wilson ran on a platform calling for a constitutional amendment that

would establish a one-term limit for the President.

### **Progressivism and the “Rule of the People”**

In the final analysis, then, the Progressive Party's program disguised fundamental disagreements among leading Progressive reformers about the critical issue of the national government's role in regulating the economy and society. There was, however, one party doctrine that unified the disparate strands of Progressivism: rule of the people. Sensing that pure democracy was the glue that held together the movement he sought to lead, Roosevelt made the cause of popular rule the centerpiece of his insurgent presidential campaign.

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**THE PROGRESSIVE PROGRAM SEEMED TO CHALLENGE THE VERY FOUNDATION OF REPUBLICAN DEMOCRACY THAT JAMES MADISON PRESCRIBED IN THE *FEDERALIST PAPERS*: THE IDEA THAT INSTITUTIONAL DEVICES SUCH AS THE SEPARATION OF POWERS AND FEDERALISM ALLOWED REPRESENTATIVES TO GOVERN FAIRLY AND THAT THE TASK OF REPRESENTATIVES WAS “TO REFINE AND ENLARGE THE PUBLIC VIEWS.”**

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This program itself was highly controversial, in particular the plan calling for popular referenda on court decisions, but TR's championing of an unvarnished majoritarianism was even more controversial than the Progressive

Party's platform. In September, he announced during a speech in Phoenix, Arizona, that he would go even further than the Progressive Party platform in promoting the recall of public officials: He would apply the recall to everybody, including the President!

Roosevelt “stands upon the bald doctrine of unrestricted majority rule,” the *Nation* warned. “But it is just against the dangers threatened, by such majority rule, in those crises that try the temper of nations, that the safeguard of constitutional government as the outgrowth of the ages of experience has been erected.”<sup>12</sup> Even the Great Commoner blushed: Plebiscitary measures such as the recall and referendum, Bryan insisted, should be confined to the states.

Roosevelt's defense of direct democracy infused his campaign with deep constitutional significance. In its ambition to establish a direct relationship between public officials and mass public opinion, the Progressive program seemed to challenge the very foundation of republican democracy that James Madison prescribed in the *Federalist Papers*: the idea, underlying the U.S. Constitution, that space created by institutional devices such as the separation of powers and federalism allowed representatives to govern competently and fairly and that the task of representatives was not to serve public opinion, but rather, as Madison put it in *Federalist* 10, “to refine and enlarge the public views.”

Madison's constitutional sobriety had not gone unchallenged prior to 1912. Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln all championed, as Jefferson put it, “the people in mass.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed,

12. “Let the People Rule!” *The Nation*, September 26, 1912, p. 277.

13. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Judge Spencer Roane, Poplar Forest, September 6, 1819.

Lincoln acknowledged during the debate over slavery that “public opinion in this country is everything.”<sup>14</sup> But these great reformers of the 19th century believed public opinion should be filtered by political parties and the states. In contrast, TR’s Progressivism threatened to sweep all intermediary institutions off the stage, to usher in a cult of personality—or, as the Progressive political scientist Charles Merriam candidly put it, “a democratic Caesarism.”<sup>15</sup>

### Taft’s Constitutional Progressivism

In the face of Roosevelt’s powerful challenge to the prevailing doctrine and practices of representative government in the U.S., the burden of defending constitutional sobriety fell most heavily on William Howard Taft. In a certain real sense, the most important exchange in the constitutional debate of 1912 was between TR and Taft—a struggle that flared in the battle for the Republican nomination.

Taft did not take easily to this contest with TR. He thought it humiliating to be the first President to have to campaign for his party’s nomination. He was personally offended—even brought to tears, the press tells us. After all, Roosevelt had passed the Progressive scepter to him in 1908. He was TR’s heir apparent.

As a member of TR’s Cabinet—he was Secretary of War—Taft had supported the pragmatic Progressive program that TR had pushed while

he was in the White House, when Roosevelt worked for specific proposals such as moderate railroad reform (the 1906 Hepburn Act) within existing constitutional boundaries and with the cooperation of the Republican Party. Now Taft found his own efforts to carry on further pragmatic and constitutional reforms the object of scorn as a result of TR’s celebration of pure democracy. “The initiative, the referendum, and the recall, together with a complete adoption of the direct primary as a means of selecting nominees and an entire destruction of the convention system are now all made the *sine qua non* of a real reformer,” Taft lamented. “Everyone who hesitates to follow all of these or any of them is regarded with suspicion and is denounced as an enemy of popular government and of the people.”<sup>16</sup>

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**EVEN AS TR’S DEFENSE OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY FOUND GREAT FAVOR THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, TAFT RESISTED THE ATTEMPT “TO TEAR DOWN ALL THE CHECKS AND BALANCES OF A WELL, ADJUSTED, DEMOCRATIC, CONSTITUTIONAL, REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT.”**

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And yet Taft’s very hesitation enabled him to find honor in the charge of conservatism leveled against him. Even as TR’s defense of direct democracy found great favor throughout the country, Taft

resisted the attempt “to tear down all the checks and balances of a well, adjusted, democratic, constitutional, representative government.”<sup>17</sup>

Although not uncritical of prevailing partisan practices, Taft considered political parties a vital part of a “well adjusted” form of American democracy: “the sheet anchor of popular government.”<sup>18</sup> Competition between two parties refined checks and balances in American constitutional government, transforming narrow factionalism into contests of principle.

The Progressives’ attack on representative institutions called forth a new understanding of Republican conservatism. His was a “progressive conservatism,” Taft claimed, which was rooted less in a defense of business, as formulated by former President William McKinley and Republican Senator Mark Hanna, than it was leavened by a Whiggish—that is, a more legalistic—understanding of ordered liberty. “The real usefulness of the Republican Party,” Taft argued, “consisted in its conservative tendencies to preserve our constitutional system and prevent its serious injury.”<sup>19</sup>

Such a defense of constitutional forms was not reactionary, Taft insisted; only “conservative progressive government” buttressed by constitutional forms made lasting reform possible. Roosevelt’s proposal to wed national regulation and mass opinion would undermine the foundation of a free enterprise system,

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14. Abraham Lincoln, speech at Columbus, Ohio, September 16, 1859.

15. Charles E. Merriam, *A History of American Political Theories* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), pp. 305–333.

16. William Howard Taft, “The Sign of the Times,” address given before the Electrical Manufacturers Club, Hot Springs, Virginia, November 6, 1913, William Howard Taft Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

17. Statement dictated by the President for Harry Dunlop, for publication in the *New York World*, November 14, 1912, Taft Papers.

18. *Ibid.*

19. William Howard Taft to Charles P. Taft, May 14, 1913, Taft Papers.



providing “no means of determining what is a good trust or a bad trust.” Offering no guide other than that of “executive discretion exercised for the good of the public,” Roosevelt’s Progressive democracy amounted “to nothing but the establishment of a benevolent despotism.”<sup>20</sup>

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**WITHOUT THE RIGHT OF PROPERTY AND CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION OF MINORITY RIGHTS, TAFT BELIEVED, AN EXCITED AND UNTRAMMELED MAJORITY AROUSED BY A DEMAGOGUE WOULD RIDE ROUGHSHOD OVER THE “UNALIENABLE RIGHTS” CHAMPIONED BY THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.**

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Taft’s ultimate fear was that an executive tribunal would jeopardize the right of property. Without the right of property and constitutional protection of minority rights, he believed, an excited and untrammelled majority aroused by a demagogue would ride roughshod over the “unalienable rights” championed by the Declaration of Independence, “taking away from the poor man the opportunity to become wealthy by the use of the abilities that God has given him, the cultivation of the virtues with which practice of self-restraint and the exercise of moral courage will fortify him.”<sup>21</sup>

The danger he saw in TR’s “pure democracy” was a constant source of strife in the cyclical life of the ancient republics: the same threat, Taft claimed, that motivated the

Founders toward a properly checked and balanced republican government. As the President warned his fellow Republicans at a Lincoln day celebration in 1912:

With the effort to make the selection of candidates, the enactment of legislation, and the decision of the courts depend on the momentary passions of the people necessarily indifferently informed as to the issues presented, and without the opportunity to them for time and study and that deliberation that gives security and common sense to the government of the people, such extremists would hurry us into a condition which would find no parallel except in the French revolution, or in that bubbling anarchy that once characterized the South American Republics. Such extremists are not progressives—they are political emotionalists or neurotics—who have lost that sense of proportion, that clear and candid consideration of their own weaknesses as a whole, and that clear perception of the necessity for checks upon hasty popular action which made our people who fought the Revolution and who drafted the Federal Constitution, the greatest self-governing people that the world ever knew.<sup>22</sup>

Support for “pure democracy,” Taft charged, found its “mainspring” in the very same “factional spirit” that James Madison warned against in his celebrated discussion of republican government in *Federalist* 10: an

unruly majority that would “sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens.”

Despite Taft’s indictment that the Progressives threatened to trash the Constitution, and despite the hope of TR’s political enemies that such a bold campaign would kill him politically, it was not Roosevelt but Taft who suffered humiliating defeat. TR thrashed him in the primary contests, even in Taft’s home state of Ohio. In the general election, Taft won only two states, Utah and Vermont, garnering 23.2 percent of the popular vote. In contrast, although his most radical proposals would never be implemented, TR’s strong showing—he came in second to Wilson—and dominant presence in that campaign signaled the birth of a modern, mass democracy in the United States, one that placed the President, whose authority rested in national public opinion, rather than Congress, the states, or political parties at the center of American democracy.

Indeed, in the wake of the excitement aroused by the Progressive Party, Wilson, whose New Freedom campaign was far more sympathetic to the decentralized state of courts and parties than TR’s, felt compelled (or embraced the opportunity) as President to govern as a New Nationalist Progressive. Wilson quickly abandoned the Democratic Party’s platform plank that called for a constitutional amendment to limit the President to one term. He said nothing about the term limits provision prior to Election Day but now argued, much as Roosevelt had

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20. Address of William H. Taft, April 25, 1912, Senate Document 615, 62nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1912, pp. 3–8.

21. William Howard Taft, address at the banquet of the Republican Club, New York, February 12, 1912, Taft Papers.

22. *Ibid.*

throughout his insurgency campaign, that it would betray the critical need for a strong executive in a nation transformed by the Industrial Revolution.

The proper task, Wilson insisted, was to reconstitute the executive as the embodiment of popular will. As he lamented to Representative A. Mitchell Palmer of Pennsylvania in February 1913, Progressive Democrats “are seeking in every way to extend the power of the people, but in the matter of the Presidency we fear and distrust the people and seek to bind them hand and foot by rigid constitutional provision.”<sup>23</sup> Hoping to deflate support for a single term, Wilson proposed a national primary that, rather than diminish the exercise of executive power, would make it more democratic.

Having embraced Roosevelt’s concept of the executive as steward of the people, Wilson also supported the idea of a regulatory commission with broad responsibilities for overseeing business practices, resulting in the creation in 1915 of the Federal Trade Commission. In addition, in 1913, Wilson and the Democratic Congress enacted the Federal Reserve Act, which established a board to oversee the national banking and currency system. Under the editorial leadership of Croly, the *New Republic* celebrated rather than scorned the inconsistency of Wilson and the Democrats: “The Progressive party is dead, but its principles are more alive than ever, because they are to a greater extent embodied in the official organization of the nation.”<sup>24</sup>

### The New “Voice of the People”

Taft and Wilson, as well as most Democrats and Republicans, were surprised that Roosevelt’s provocative campaign for pure democracy was so well received in many parts of the country. Communicated directly to voters through a newly emergent mass media—the independent newspapers, popular magazines, audio recordings, and movies that Progressives used so skillfully—the Bull Moose campaign resonated especially well in urban and industrial counties with the highest rate of population growth. As a result, Roosevelt’s support appeared to reveal how the Progressive commitments to political and social reform appealed to those who best represented the future of the country, just as Wilson and (even more so) Taft tended to celebrate the virtues of the decentralized republic of the past.

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Progressives insisted, with considerable political effect, that they did not seek to destroy the Constitution. Rather, they argued that they sought to revitalize and democratize the Constitution and to restore the dignity of the individual in the face of the Industrial Revolution and the hard challenges it posed for constitutional government.

In their earlier calls for reforms, Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln drew inspiration from the Declaration and Bill of Rights, championing an understanding of natural rights that recognized the importance of maintaining limited constitutional government. The Progressives were the first reformers to emphasize the Preamble of the Constitution. Their task, they claimed, was to make practical the exalted yet elusive idea of “We the people.”

This idea would receive its highest expression in the autonomous political executive freed from the gravitational pull of party-dominated legislatures and lawyer-dominated courts. As the Progressive journal *The Arena* put it, echoing the Jacksonians: “The voice of the people is the voice of God.” But they added: “This means the voice of the *whole* people.”<sup>25</sup> Rejecting the partisan and sectional disputes that hitherto had characterized American democracy, Progressives promised a “living Constitution” that would empower the President, as steward of the “whole people,” to meet the imposing domestic and international challenges of modern America.

The Progressive Party’s attempt to join heroic popular leadership and effective government received welcome support in its well-publicized endorsement by Thomas Edison. In going through the archives, I learned that the famed inventor contributed \$100 to its cause, but his endorsement was worth far more. A mark of his celebrity was that a 1913 readers’ poll conducted by *Independent* magazine rated him “the most useful

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23. Woodrow Wilson, “A Campaign Speech on New Issues, Hartford, Connecticut,” in Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), Vol. 25, p. 235.

24. Editorial, “The Democrats as Legislators,” *The New Republic*, September 2, 1916, p. 103.

25. William Helmstreet, “Theory and Practice of the New Primary Law,” *Arena*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (December 1902), p. 592 (emphasis in original).

contemporary American.”<sup>26</sup> His allegiance was announced with great fanfare by *The New York Times* in an article with the appropriate headline, “Edison discovers he is a Bull Mooser.”<sup>27</sup>

Although constitutional conservatives like President Taft feared Progressive democracy’s faith in public opinion, Edison saw it as a virtue, especially as it would free the country to experiment politically. His experiments led to electric light bulbs replacing gas lights; by the same token, Edison claimed, the Progressive Party heralded the displacement of party politics—the political anchor of limited constitutional government—by democratic innovations such as the referendum and recall. Such political experimentation, Edison insisted, celebrated rather than denigrated American individualism.

### **Progressivism and Socialism in the 1912 Election**

Paradoxically, TR’s more radical critics on the Left agreed, albeit grumpily, that Progressive democracy did not pose a radical threat to the American political tradition. Eugene Debs attacked the Progressive Party as a “reactionary protest of the middle classes, built largely upon the personality of one man and not destined for permanence.”<sup>28</sup>

The Progressive Party’s fragility stemmed not just from TR’s notoriety, Debs argued, but also from the flimsy doctrine that underlay its campaign. Although the Bull Moose

platform endorsed many of the more moderate objectives supported by the Socialist Party—the regulation of hours and wages; the prohibition of social insurance that would protect against the hazards of old age, sickness, and unemployment; and equal suffrage for men and women—Debs insisted that these limited measures were badly compromised by Roosevelt’s celebration of “pure democracy” as the centerpiece of his crusade.

Though supportive of political reform, Debs had long considered devices such as the referendum a very small part of the Socialist Party program. “You will never be able, in my opinion, to organize any formidable movement upon [the referendum] or any other single issue,” he wrote in 1895:

The battle is narrowing down to capitalism and socialism, and there can be no compromise or half way ground ... Not until the workingman comprehends the trend ... of economic development and is conscious of his class interests will he be fit to properly use the referendum, and when he has reached that point he will be a Socialist.<sup>29</sup>

Given his view of Progressivism, Debs was chagrined that TR “stole the red flag of socialism”<sup>30</sup> to symbolize his fight for the rule of the people. Debs had good reason to regret that Roosevelt selected the red bandanna handkerchief as a symbol of the

Progressive Party. Like President Obama today, Roosevelt was often accused of being a stalking horse for socialism, but he and his Progressive allies insisted that, to the contrary, their movement—promising to reform rather than destroy capitalism—was a necessary antidote to a more radical solution.

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In fact, Roosevelt’s most dramatic speech in this campaign came in October in Milwaukee, a hotbed of Socialism. Although he was nearly assassinated while standing in a car outside the hotel, waiting to go to the Milwaukee Auditorium, he insisted on giving the speech anyway.

Roosevelt’s determination to keep this appointed hour with a bullet in his chest not only brought the “bloody shirt” to a new level, but also was a remarkable effort to establish himself as the martyr of Progressivism. Although the would-be assassin, John Schrank, had no known connections to any political movement, Roosevelt denied, as he would repeatedly afterward, that the attempt on his life was the random act of a madman. Rather, it was

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26. See Eldon Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), p. 41.

27. “Edison Discovers He’s a Bull Mooser,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1912.

28. Quoted in “The New Party Gets Itself Born,” *Current Literature*, September 1912, p. 256.

29. Letter to the Editor, *Social Democratic Herald*, November 19, 1898, Eugene V. Debs Papers, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana.

30. Eugene V. Debs, “The Greatest Political Campaign in American History,” St. Louis Campaign Opening Speech, July 6, 1912, Eugene V. Debs Papers, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana.

an act of violence related to, if not directly caused by, the advent of raw and disruptive class conflict in the country. Only the Progressive Party, TR insisted, seeking to forge a third way between socialism and laissez-faire—between the “greed” of the “haves” and the “have nots”—could stave off the violent confrontation foreshadowed by the attempt on his life.

“Roosevelt’s performance,” historian Patricia O’Toole has written, “was an astonishing effort to capitalize on the moment.”<sup>31</sup> With this dramatic stroke and his effective appeal to the whole people, TR stole the thunder of the Socialist movement just as it was becoming an important

force in American politics. Although Socialist Party candidate Eugene Debs received 6 percent of the popular vote—the most votes a Socialist presidential candidate had ever gotten—he would by all accounts have received many more votes were it not for the preemption of the Progressive Party.

Political scientists and historians have forever asked the question of “Why no Socialism in America?” I think the Progressive Party is an important part of the answer. We can, of course, debate whether Progressivism, as Taft and his supporters argued, posed a more insidious threat to representative constitutional government. I will close

instead by saying that TR and the Progressives’ successful positioning of their party as a reform alternative to Socialism—and this under circumstances of great economic stress—goes far to explain why the 1912 election initiated a critical transformation of American democracy.

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31. Patricia O’Toole, *When Trumpets Call: Theodore Roosevelt After the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 218.