

History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for October 22, 2020
Election of 1912

Main Readings: O'Mara (chapter 2) and Nelligan post

The 1912 election was a four-way race that highlights the impact of third parties on American electoral politics. O'Mara also does a good job of conveying various ways that this contest marked a transition between nineteenth-century partisanship and the more "modern" candidate-driven politics of the twentieth century.

Here is a selection of student comments.

PROGRESSIVE ECONOMIC APPEALS

STUDENT COMMENT: "*Pivotal Tuesdays* by Margaret O'Mara, highlights how the Election of 1912 reshaped the importance of the third-party system and the Progressive Party's power. The candidates of the 1912 election, Eugene Debs, Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Taft exposed the shift of opinion within political parties after the Industrial Revolution and the need for fundamental changes in American politics. When the Election of 1912 began, American citizens looked to candidates to either help diminish or increase corporate and government power. Working-class citizens demanded an establishment of human rights within their workplace and substantial wages. They also wanted to break apart corporate monopolies to limit corruption. These working-class individuals believed that the government favored the corporations' right over theirs which then pushed them to support the idea of minimizing government official power. However, middle or upper-class citizens sided heavily towards the belief the government should have the majority of the authority rather than the corporations. American citizens' division on these types of social issues affected the political realm and candidates' strategies to get the most votes."

STUDENT COMMENT: "O'Mara's overview and analysis of the election of 1912 puts forth a great deal of ideas about its significance, however I found most interesting the fact that it seemed to set the groundwork for the so-called "party switch" (though that title may oversimplify what took place). By the time of this election, "it was unclear which party would become the party of progressive reform" (O'Mara, 55). The outcome of this election and Woodrow Wilson's presidency, fated by timing to be incredibly consequential, would prove that the Democrats would become this party. This was remarkable for several reasons, most notably the most "radical" ideas that won out did not come from the Republican party, a party founded on radical ideas for 1850s standards, but from the Democrats. William Jennings Bryan may have been more towards the radical end of the sliding scale, but Wilson won the presidency whereas Bryan did not, and thus Wilson's ideas had a stronger impact on the future of American government. Wilson's progressive ideas were more indicative of the future of the democratic party, one that hardly 20 years later would be churning out reforms like never before during the Great Depression. Even if Wilson did not win, this would solidify

the Democrat's ownership over a more progressive future because of Teddy Roosevelt's break from the Republicans, "taking a large cohort of earnest reformers with him" (O'Mara, 46) after the Republican National Convention in the summer of 1912. Roosevelt was experiencing a peak of wild popularity for him and his ideas leading up to the convention, and despite this popularity advantage over Taft the party refused to nominate Roosevelt, seemingly against their better judgement due to the threat that Roosevelt's progressive ideas posed to the stability of the party. The fact that even with such an advantage over Taft he could not push progressive ideas into the Republican party and had to split with them to make his voice heard showed that the Republicans had now safely fallen toward the political middle and would be dominated by conservative voices in the coming decades. Though not every aspect of the "party-switch" had been set up, this election was the beginning of that event.

THIRD PARTY DYNAMICS

STUDENT COMMENT: "The election of 1912 featured a truly viable third-party candidate in Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive party. With the political landscape changing, and politics shifting from a party-centered vote to a candidate-centered vote, Roosevelt would be incredibly popular just for his personality and ego alone. (O'Mara, 37) Campaign reform across the board was happening on both sides of the aisle. In 1912, the push to end government corruption and reduce the influence of special interests had led to new innovations at the ballot box. Initiatives and referendums put voters in charge of important decisions that normally would be taken care of by their elected officials. (O'Mara, 39) Direct primary voting also became the standard. This reduced the influence of political insiders, and allowed for the rise of candidate-centered platforms. This added fuel to the already burning fire of Roosevelt and Taft's fight for the Republican Party nomination, culminating in the Republican National Convention in Chicago in June of 1912. Despite the efforts to upend the old guard, Taft ended up walking away with the nomination. (O'Mara, 44)"

EVOLVING ROLE OF MEDIA

STUDENT COMMENT: "The election of 1912 was the catalyst for the age of press in politics that has lasted to the present day. Throughout her narrative of the election, O'Mara describes a "media-driven political system" where media connections and shocking headlines could make or break a campaign. Woodrow Wilson won the election thanks in part to his years-long relationship with the press in New York—the media capital of America—as well as due to his having "mastered the art of making headlines." Wilson's connections to the press were straight-forward, well-established, and mutually beneficial; the press got attention-grabbing headlines and Wilson got widespread promotion. However, it is in negative interactions with the press where the beginnings of today's media culture are truly visible. In 1912, Robert La Follette destroyed his own campaign after giving a speech that amounted to a "rambling, disconnected attack on his audience [of newspaper publishers] and the sinister influence of the press." The resulting headlines were un-ignorable—why would you rant and ramble about a tool for your own political success? At the time, the press was

respected and somewhat non-partisan; according to O'Mara, the press had become a major player in politics after it "adopt[ed] a journalistic ethos of impartiality and objectivity." As a result, La Follette suffered and the press thrived, sowing the seeds for the future success of bold headlines. By the time of the election of 2016, a significant portion of the media had reverted to partisanship and sensationalism. A campaign scandal always attracted far more attention than a simple speech, and when Donald Trump came out decrying the media, the press ate it up. It didn't matter who was under attack as long as it made headlines and attracted readers."

STUDENT COMMENT: "The election of 1912 took place amidst a dramatic transformation in almost all aspects of American life, including politics, as it blended the old era with the new. The driving force behind the transition in American politics was the broad reform consensus that had developed at the dawn of the twentieth century (O'Mara, 36). Populism and socialism had risen in popularity over the previous two decades and progressive views were pervasive in both the Republican and Democratic parties. At the same time, the media had undergone a dramatic change as technology progressed, making it quicker and more readily available. Journalists adopted an "ethos of impartiality and objectivity," which differed greatly from the partisan press of the nineteenth century and has carried on to the present day (37). The internal factions caused by reform movements, along with the ability of individual candidates to use the media to their advantage, seriously challenged the old party system which had dominated the previous century. Though the party machinery remained intact, it was losing its power to the people, as two-thirds of the states now elected the nominee by a direct primary (39)"

GROUND-BREAKING CAMPAIGN

STUDENT COMMENT: "When Roosevelt saw that the convention was not going his way, he attempted to use his favorite tactic to regain support. In a completely unprecedented move, he went to the convention and was welcomed by cheers and public support, however even this was not enough to win the support of the party elites and caused fist fights on the floor. This led him to claim that the convention was rigged and to start his own progressive party which was founded on public support and engagement. At the convention he delivered a rousing speech to his supporters who were young and passionate. He took that spirit across the whole country with speeches in 32 states. However, Wilson employed mostly the same public engagement strategies along with presenting himself as more progressive than Roosevelt on the issue of breaking up monopolies. Both the Democrats and the Progressives tried to make themselves look like the most progressive party and they took many Socialist and leftist talking points and policies and incorporated them as planks in their platform. Taft's Rose Garden strategy proved ineffectual and it was clear well before election that he had no chance of winning. Roosevelt's dramatic display at the Republican convention and creation of a rival party caused the party to shift from pro-Taft to anti-Roosevelt. Many high-ranking Republican officials supported Wilson which expanded his already large coalition. He walked the line of southern, pro-states' rights, and modern progressivism nearly perfectly. Roosevelt polled well below Wilson for most of the election, however

he was given a large boost after a failed assassination attempt catapulted him to front pages across the country in the month leading up to the election. However, it was not enough to break Wilson's wide appeal. Wilson won 40 states to Roosevelt's 6. Both candidates proved that a new type of campaign was required to run for president and changed the relationship between the people and the parties."

GENERAL CRITIQUE

STUDENT COMMENT: The article, *The Campaign of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt and the Election of 1912*, written by Will Nelligan talked about the significance of the 1912 election with its importance in relation to women's right to vote. The article also analyzed some of Roosevelt's actions during the election and what he did personally on the day of the election. Overall both readings for today were very interesting, O'Mara's chapter was very engaging during her telling of what went on during the 1912 election. The second reading for today was also intriguing because we learned more about his character by his actions during election day.

STUDENT COMMENT: "Margaret O'Mara concludes the second chapter of her book entitled "Pivotal Tuesdays" by leaving readers with three components of the legacy of the election of 1912. O'Mara first discusses the rise of the progressive party resulting from the influence of third (or independent) parties like Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party. O'Mara not only describes the precedent that was set by third parties for future elections but also highlights how 1912 served as a defining moment for both the Democratic and Republican Party as only one of them emerged as the "Progressive Party" (it would be Woodrow Wilson's Democratic Party). O'Mara then moved to the discussion of what she identified as "candidate centered electoral politics" (40). In the 1912 debates, candidates became increasingly engaged with their audiences and became the face of their campaigns. This shattered the norms of prior presidential campaigns in which "candidates did not need to sully themselves with the daily routines of the stump, much less attend the rowdy and argumentative national political conventions" (40). Additionally, the establishment of "national media," which was a drastic change from "localized" news outlets, also engaged voters with candidates in ways never seen before. Lastly, O'Mara highlights the debate (still ongoing) about the government's function within society, and specifically, its interaction with the "individual rights" of the people (50). O'Mara demonstrates what polarized views might have looked like during the 1912 debate by comparing the opinions of Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, or as she puts it, between the ideals of "New Freedom" and "New Nationalism" (50). The legacy of the 1912 presidential debates helped to structure political discourse for the 20th century. Its legacy also extended beyond the 20th century by serving as a model for the modern practices of politicians, and even continues to be a source for contemporary debates."