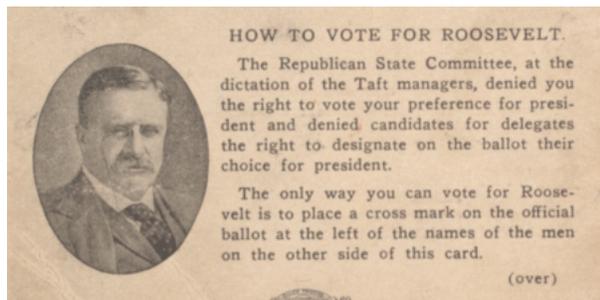


Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Era

The Spectacles of 1912

by Patricia O'Toole



Sample ballot card for the 1912 Republican National Convention. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The presidential election year of 1912 began with one unprecedented spectacle, ended with another, and sandwiched a few more in between. In February, former president Theodore Roosevelt stunned the country by challenging President William Howard Taft for the Republican nomination. The move was not only a repudiation of his old friend Taft; it also violated an unwritten rule of American politics: Roosevelt had already had two terms in office, and no president had ever had a third.

Roosevelt was immediately accused of megalomania, but he insisted that he was running out of duty, not personal ambition. As president, he had charted a politically progressive course, but under Taft, his chosen successor, the ship of state had been drifting further and further to the right. Although Taft had proved to be an aggressive trust buster, he had otherwise been a pushover. Many of TR's environmental gains had been rolled back, and Taft's effort to wean American industry from high tariffs had been easily thwarted. Roosevelt's friends understood why he felt compelled to run, but few approved. He was sure to lose, they said, and however high-minded his motives, his fight with Taft looked like a vendetta.

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TR had neither the desire nor the time to rethink his decision. The next unprecedented spectacle—primary season—would begin in mid-March. Primaries were still a novelty, and 1912 was the first year they played a significant role in presidential politics. A dozen states were holding primaries, and there were 362 Republican delegates at stake. If TR did well, he could justifiably claim to be the candidate of the people rather than the party bosses. After a slow start, he sprinted to an impressive finish, beating Taft 278 to 48. (The remainder went to another challenger, Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin.)

But in the thirty-six states without primaries, the bosses still called most of the shots, and by June, when the Republicans convened in Chicago, Taft's campaign managers were boasting that their man had 557 delegates, seventeen more than he needed for the nomination.

Publicly, TR's aides scoffed at the opposition's math. Privately they were reckoning with the fact that he was about seventy votes shy of the magic 540. In the days before the convention came to order, they appeared before the Republican National Committee and contested the legitimacy of scores of Taft's

delegates—to little avail.

Once TR saw that he could not win, he hired a hall, strode to center stage, and ordered the curtain raised on the next spectacle. The Republicans had stolen the convention, he said, at great length and the top of his lungs. He would have nothing more to do with them.

TR's bolt from the Republican Party was one of the boldest, wildest maneuvers ever made in American presidential politics. Without it, he would have suffered the humiliation of losing the Republican nomination, and his run for president would have been over. The bolt kept him in the race, as the candidate of a brand-new party, created on the spot. (TR's new organization, the National Progressive Party, would always be better known as the Bull Moose Party, a nickname that came from the answer TR had given when a man in a crowd outside his hotel yelled out to ask how he felt. "Like a bull moose," he yelled back.)

Although conservatives would portray the Progressives as renegades and radicals, they were a textbook example of *la petite bourgeoisie*—teachers, lawyers, engineers, prosperous farmers, small merchants, social reformers, and political activists. They were "Yes, we can" optimists who put country first—impatient with special-interest politics but not as disaffected as Eugene V. Debs and his Socialists.

TR welcomed African Americans into the party, and in August, when the Progressives returned to Chicago for their convention, there were blacks in several of the northern delegations. But TR's white allies in the Deep South had persuaded him that if any black men were permitted to hold a party office or serve as a delegate, southern whites would refuse to join. Forced to choose between acquiescence and nonexistence, Roosevelt acquiesced and argued that by mobilizing the most progressive-minded whites in the South, the party would in time be able to improve the lives of southern blacks. Unimpressed, W. E. B. Du Bois and other black leaders threw their support to the Democratic nominee, Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey.

The Progressives were enthusiastic and wildly energetic but by no means united, except in their attraction to TR. Jane Addams of Hull House, for example, shared many of Roosevelt's views on social justice and agreed to give one of the speeches seconding his nomination, but she found the party's support for naval expansion "very difficult to swallow." Nor did she like the party's stand in favor of fortifying the Panama Canal. How absurd, she thought, to turn it into a target after all that had been done to wipe out the mosquitoes and otherwise safeguard the health of the men digging the canal.

TR got his fractious followers to coalesce around a two-step agenda. First they had to rescue the country from the "invisible government" of Washington—the special interests who had forged an "unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics." Then they could work to make government "an agency of human welfare." Years later, recalling the excitement of 1912, the newspaper editor William Allen White wrote, "Lord, how we did like that phrase, 'using government as an agency of human welfare!' That was the slogan, that was the Bull Moose platform boiled down to a phrase." The platform was a generation ahead of its time in calling for a minimum wage, social security, federal regulation of stock offerings, and full disclosure of corporate finances.

Political conventions are supposed to be spectacular, but even the most jaded observers of American politics found the Bull Moose convention a spectacle of an entirely new order—part coronation and part tent meeting with an old-fashioned barn-raising thrown in. The crowd sang, it roared, and it interrupted Roosevelt's acceptance speech 145 times to applaud and cheer.

For vice president, TR chose Hiram Johnson, governor of California and leader of the state's

progressives. Johnson wished the new party well, but he deeply wanted not to be on the ticket. He saw defeat ahead and believed that it would end his career in politics. TR's staff wore him down by challenging his patriotism. If a man as great as Theodore Roosevelt was willing to risk all, they asked, shouldn't every aspiring statesman be willing to do the same?

Election Day, November 5, was two months off when TR went out to battle Wilson. (Taft had more or less given up.) William Allen White would say that the difference between Roosevelt and Wilson in 1912 was the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, but in retrospect the gulf seems considerably wider. Wilson was a states'-rights man who maintained that the history of liberty was a history of limiting the power of the national government. His Cabinet would be dominated by southern Democrats, and they would meet no resistance from Wilson when they resegregated the civil service. During the Roosevelt and Taft administrations, the civil service had hired thousands of African Americans.

Roosevelt was a confirmed nationalist, convinced that the complexities of industrial society required a strong central government because no other entity had enough power to stand up to Big Business and Big Finance. Presidential nominees did not debate in person until the Kennedy-Nixon exchanges of 1960, so Roosevelt and Wilson punched and counterpunched in separate speeches, focusing almost entirely on the economy. The still-unreformed tariff was the major sore point. The tariff was the government's principal source of revenue (income tax being a thing of the future), and it had also been used to shield the country's manufacturing establishment from foreign competition. The tariff was supposed to guarantee high wages for American workers, but wages had not kept pace with consumer prices or with factory owners' profits. Wilson promised an immediate overhaul. Roosevelt, arguing that a sudden change would hurt the economy, proposed gradual reform through recommendations from a permanent nonpartisan commission of experts.

TR also recommended a bipartisan commission of business leaders to regulate corporations. They would examine a company's operations, require change when there was evidence of anti-competitive practices, and issue an approval when all was in order. Once approved, the company could operate without fear of prosecution under the country's anti-trust law, which had in fact sown a good deal of uncertainty. Wilson predicted that such an arrangement would allow Big Business to regulate the regulators. Even Taft came out of his miasma for a moment to ridicule the idea as "the most monstrous monopoly of power in the history of the world."

Wilson made relatively few speeches, but Roosevelt whistle-stopped up the East Coast and down, across the South, and deep into the Midwest, where the campaign's last spectacle unfolded. On the evening of October 14, as he stood in an open car to wave to a cheering crowd in Milwaukee, TR was shot in the chest by a man standing only a few feet away.

Long prepared for such a moment, Roosevelt felt his lips, and when he found that he was not bleeding from the mouth, he knew that the bullet had not punctured a lung. Slowed by the steel eyeglass case in his breast pocket, the bullet had lodged in a rib.

Roosevelt ordered his aides to proceed to the auditorium and over strenuous protests took the stage. In full command of his dramatic talents, he began by opening his jacket to show the crowd his bloodstained shirt. "I have just been shot," he said, "but it takes more than that to kill a bull moose." Sideline for two and a half weeks, TR managed one last speech, to a packed hall, just before the election.

No candidate campaigned harder than Roosevelt, but in the end, the country chose Wilson. The vote of 1912 looked a lot like the vote of 1992, when Ross Perot's third-party run deprived Bill Clinton of a popular majority but gave him a victory, with 43 percent of the vote. Wilson's share was 42 percent.

Roosevelt finished with 27 percent, Taft with 23 percent, Debs with 6 percent.

The standard take on the election of 1912 is that Roosevelt's run split the Republican vote and thereby cheated Taft out of a second term. A more accurate reading: 77 percent of the electorate wanted anyone but Taft. If Roosevelt hadn't run, at least some of his followers would have voted for Wilson, and Wilson would have needed only one in four of them to beat Taft.

The Bull Moose Party collapsed in the midterm elections of 1914 and died in 1916, but the ideals that TR and the Progressives articulated in 1912 lived on in American politics for decades. Their influence can be seen in Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Many of the Progressives' ideas had been proposed by candidates in previous elections, but Roosevelt deserves credit for synthesizing them in a grand vision of the role that the national government could play in furthering equality. He also engaged Americans in one of the most serious conversations they had ever had about who they were as a nation, and what they might become.

Hiram Johnson made out all right, too. California reelected him governor in 1914 and in 1916 sent him to the US Senate, where he served until his death in 1945.

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