

Section 2: Woodrow Wilson and the New Freedom

Progressivism
Takes Hold

Did You Know?

When he was 16 years old, Woodrow Wilson hung a picture of British statesman William Gladstone over his bed. “This Gladstone is the greatest statesman that ever lived,” Wilson told his father. “I intend to be a great statesman too.”

I. Wilson’s Rise to Power (page 275)

- A. Wilson learned a firm set of moral beliefs from his father, a Presbyterian minister, and his mother, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. He overcame a learning disability and went on to become a professor and then president of Princeton University.
- B. When Wilson ran for governor of New Jersey, he sounded every bit a conservative. He openly admired the British system, which allowed for slow change under the strong leadership of an educated elite.
- C. Once elected, Wilson proved himself independent from the political machine that had recruited him to run as governor. He also supported one progressive reform after another, revamping election laws, establishing utility regulatory boards, and allowing cities to adopt a commissioner form of government.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

How do you think Wilson’s childhood years might have influenced his decision to fight the New Jersey political machine? *(Answers will vary, but students will probably say that political corruption was contrary to the moral beliefs taught to Wilson by his parents.)*

II. The Election of 1912 (pages 275–278)

- A. The Democrats had elected only 1 President since the Civil War. After a heated battle, the Illinois political machine threw its support behind Wilson, hoping his stance on reform would win the White House.
- B. Victories by Democrats in the 1910 congressional elections convinced many progressive Republicans that Taft would lose the election to Wilson. They appealed to Roosevelt to seize the nomination.



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- C. When Taft won the nomination, Roosevelt and his supporters bolted the Republican Party to form the Progressive, or Bull Moose, party.
- D. The Progressive party platform included many progressive goals: a minimum-wage law for women; prohibition of child labor; workers' compensation laws; a federal trade commission to regulate business and industry; woman suffrage; and initiative, referendum, and recall.
- E. Eugene Debs, a believer in socialism, ran as a fourth candidate. Debs passionately spoke out against the injustices of capitalism.
- F. The election soon turned into a two-way race between Wilson and Roosevelt. Because the two candidates agreed on many basic issues, such as federal regulation of the economy, the candidates squared off on the one issue over which they did not agree—trusts.
- G. Roosevelt believed trusts had become intertwined with industrialism and that it was “futile madness” to break them up. He proposed a federal commission of experts to oversee trade practices in a regulatory program that he called New Nationalism.
- H. Wilson labeled Roosevelt's program “regulated monopoly” and argued that the federal government should dismantle trusts so small businesses could once again compete freely. Wilson called his program New Freedom.
- I. The brilliant, fiery oratory of the candidates drew crowds, but failed to send them to the polls. Only about 59 percent of the voters cast their ballots, and they did so along traditional party lines. With the Republicans split between Roosevelt and Taft, the election went to Wilson.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What were the similarities and differences among the candidates in the 1912 election? (*Taft, Roosevelt, and Wilson were progressives who believed in reform but differed on the federal government's approach to big business. Debs stood apart from the other three candidates, who accepted capitalism, in his support of socialism.*)



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III. The New Freedom in Operation (pages 278–279)

- A. Like Roosevelt, Wilson knew the power of public opinion. He was the first President to hold regular press conferences to push his reforms.
- B. Wilson appeared before Congress—something no President had done since John Adams in 1800—to push a bill to reduce tariffs. He argued that taxes on imported goods protected big business and that consumers paid for the protection in the form of higher prices.
- C. Wilson personally lobbied members of Congress and publicly attacked the lobbyists who represented the trusts. With the voters focused on the issue by Wilson's charges, Congress passed the Underwood Tariff, which cut tariffs to about half the rate in the 1890s.
- D. Wilson's second reform initiative attempted to restore public faith in the banking system. He proposed a Federal Reserve System in which banks would have to keep a portion of their deposits as a financial cushion against economic downswings.
- E. Debate erupted over who should control the reserve system—the government or big banks with financial expertise. Wilson proposed a compromise system composed of 12 regional banks that a board appointed by the President would oversee. Congress approved Wilson's proposal in 1913, creating the Federal Reserve System.
- F. As President, Wilson vowed to break up trusts. He supported the Clayton Antitrust Act, which broadened the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 by prohibiting interlocking directorates aimed at reducing competition. He also backed creation of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which attempted to stop unfair trading and business practices.
- G. Wilson also supported a variety of labor laws such as workers' compensation laws and child labor laws.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What are some of the methods Wilson used to expand the power of the presidency? (*Wilson held regular press conferences to push his proposals, personally lobbied members of Congress, and took an active role in legislative debates.*)

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