

1912 and 2012: The Tide of Progressivism in American Presidential Politics

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On December 6, 2011, Barack Obama traveled to Osawatomie, Kansas, where he delivered remarks to students and guests at Osawatomie High School. Encouraged by a handful of eminent historians with whom he had dined during his first years in office, Obama quite obviously was channeling Theodore Roosevelt, who, almost 100 years prior, had given a celebrated address in Osawatomie declaring his commitment to something called the “New Nationalism.”¹ The term derived from a book written by Herbert Croly and published in 1909.² Roosevelt, a Republican and popular former president, was setting the stage for his political restoration in the forthcoming presidential campaign. His New Nationalism speech called for increased government activism in American social and economic life and a stronger executive office than recent tradition had provided.

¹ “The New Nationalism,” *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt: National Edition*, vol. 27, ed. Hermann Hagedorn (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 5-22. For each of president Obama’s first three years in office he met at dinner annually with the historians. They included Michael Beschloss, H. W. Brands, Douglas Brinkley, Robert Caro, Robert Dallek, Doris Kearns Goodwin, David Kennedy, Kenneth Mack, and Garry Wills. See Jodi Kantor, “Now, a Chance to Catch Up to His Epochal Vision,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/07/us/politics/now-a-chance-to-catch-up-to-his-epochal-vision.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>; and Kenneth T. Walsh, “Obama’s Secret Dinner With Presidential Historians,” July 15, 2009, *U.S. News*, <<http://www.usnews.com/news/obama/articles/2009/07/15/obamas-secret-dinner-with-presidential-historians>>.

² *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909). Also see John Allphin Moore, Jr., ed., *Herbert Croly’s The Promise of American Life At Its Centenary* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

Theodore Roosevelt routinely serves as an icon for modern Republicans, like Senator John McCain; however, in this instance, it was the Democrat Obama who announced his political solidarity with the storied “TR.”

In his 1910 speech, Roosevelt quoted Abraham Lincoln as once saying: “I hold that while man exists it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind....[And, what is more,] Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”³ Roosevelt then asserted that government henceforth should act to equalize opportunity, to ensure a fair chance for all (his so-called “Square Deal”), to free government from influence or control by special interests, and, accordingly, to prohibit the use of corporate funding, “directly or indirectly,” for political purposes. The former president went on to champion a graduated income tax and a graduated inheritance tax on big fortunes. Then, in ringing language, he declared that the New Nationalism would put “the national need before sectional or personal advantage” and elevate the executive office as “the steward of the public welfare.” Contemporary accounts reported that Roosevelt received a warm response.

In spring 2012, Obama, like Roosevelt, revived Lincoln’s left side. The president told the nation’s newspaper editors that he shared with Lincoln a belief that, “through government, we should do together what we cannot do as well for ourselves.”⁴ The

³ Taken, liberally, from Lincoln’s “Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society,” 1859. In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol 3. Roy P. Basler, et. al., eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 477-482. Note that Croly, in his 1909 book that so influenced Roosevelt, had privileged Lincoln, as well as Alexander Hamilton, whom he saw as exponents of a strong national government.

⁴ AP Luncheon, April 3, 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/04/us/politics/obamas-remarks-to-newspaper-editors.html?pagewanted=all>>.

referenced Lincoln statement, made in 1854, was, verbatim, “The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do, for themselves, in their separate and individual capacities.”⁵

In *his* Osawatomie speech, Obama approvingly reminded his audience of Roosevelt’s New Nationalist vision. He agreed with the Rough Rider that “this country succeeds when everyone gets a fair shot.” Here are his most Roosevelt-correlated passages:

We are a richer nation and a stronger democracy because of what he [TR] fought for in his last campaign [1912]: an eight hour work day and a minimum wage for women; insurance for the unemployed, the elderly, and those with disabilities; political reform and a progressive income tax.... Just as there was in Teddy Roosevelt’s time, there’s been a certain crowd in Washington for the last few decades who respond to this economic challenge with the same old tune. “The market will take care of everything,” they tell us. “If only we cut more regulations and cut more taxes—especially for the wealthy—our economy will grow stronger.” We simply cannot return to this brand of you’re-on-your-own economics if we’re serious about rebuilding the middle class in this country.⁶

Obama’s remarks calling forth the ghosts of Teddy Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln should be seen as part of his gearing up for the election of 2012. The president’s prospects some eleven months before the election looked, at best, problematic. Economic recovery from the Great Recession remained static; GDP growth was anemic. No

⁵ “The Nature and Objects of Government, with Special Reference to Slavery,” about July 1, 1854. *Life and Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 3, Marion Mills Miller, ed. (New York: The Current Literature Publishing Co., 1907), 215.

⁶ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/president-obamas-economic-speech-in-osawatomie-kans/2011/12/06/gIQAVhe6ZO_print.html>. Robert Reich noted that Obama was backing Herbert Croly's New Nationalism *idée fixe* that large corporations be regulated for the nation’s good. But, Reich said, Obama was updating Croly. “The Most Important Economic Speech of His Presidency,” Posted: 12/ 6/11, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-reich/obama-inequality-speech_b_1133147.html>.

incumbent president since Franklin Roosevelt (in 1936) had been re-elected with such a high unemployment rate as the country faced at the onset of 2012. The president's signature legislative accomplishment—comprehensive health care reform—continued to be unpopular according to all polling data. But thirteen months earlier, Obama's Democratic Party had suffered a stunning loss of seats in House of Representatives elections, as defiant Republicans moved from the minority into a sizeable majority; in the Senate, too, the GOP made substantial gains, minimizing the president's odds to move legislation through the two chambers. The negative gap between approval and disapproval of Obama's performance edged beyond double digits in daily tracking surveys, placing the president in the unenviable position of being considered a likely loser by November, no matter who his main opponent was to be.⁷

In Osawatomie, the newly-forged acolyte of Teddy Roosevelt now set out to claw back from a daunting third-quarter deficit, and, in the event, salvage America's 20th century progressive heritage. And, notably, the year 2012 was the centenary of TR's last campaign, which took place during one of the most exciting and momentous presidential elections in US history. A progressive movement—surfacing out of a more particularistic populist movement—seemed poised to move the country to the ideological left. Four principal candidates competed in 1912's general election: incumbent Republican William Howard Taft, Democrat Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Party candidate Theodore

⁷ Quinn Bowman, "Poll Finds Young People Skeptical of Obama's Re-election Prospects," *PBS News Hour*, December 15, 2011, <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2011/12/harvard-poll-finds-young-people-skeptical-of-obama-s-re-election-prospects.html>>. Nikitas3, "Obama Re-election Prospects Dim," December 15, 2011, <<http://nikitas3.com/962/obama-re-election-prospects-dim/>>. Michael Barbaro, Jeff Zeleny, and Monica Davey, "Democrats Fret Aloud Over Obama's Chances," *New York Times*, September 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/us/politics/11obama.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all&>.

Roosevelt, and Socialist Eugene V. Debs. Heated debates hinged on which of the candidates could most effectively claim a progressive reform mantle.

Although a nebulous project, progressivism's triumphs following the 1912 election marked a shift in the meaning of government, erecting a more powerful and intrusive national state (via an enhanced Presidency, a national income tax, a Federal Reserve System, economic and workplace regulations, an acknowledgement of labor rights, an expanded electorate, in due course federally-mandated social programs, and more).

2012's presidential election saw a conservative movement—surfacing out of a more particularistic Tea Party movement—poised to overturn much of what the progressives had realized. A number of 2012's presidential aspirants claimed an *anti*-progressive mantle, seeking to effect a much weakened national government, via challenges to the national income tax, restraints on the Federal Reserve System, curbs on labor rights, a bolstering of states-rights, a more humble Presidency, and, above all, a curtailment to government regulations and government social programs. One 2012 candidate proposed eliminating the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, providing for the direct election of US Senators.⁸ The Republican Party Platform contained a plank recommending repeal of the 16th Amendment, which had established the national income tax.⁹ Both amendments had been milestones of the progressive movement.

Recent works by Lewis Gould, Brett Flehinger, Sidney Milkis, Lara Brown, and

⁸ Rick Perry, *Fed Up* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2010), 39-43.

⁹ See "Fundamental Tax Principles," in the Platform at <http://www.gop.com/2012-republican-platform_Restoring/#Item5>.

the late James Chace have brought new light and added thrill to the 1912 election.¹⁰

These authors complement previous works on America's political history.¹¹ While it is worthy—maybe even compelling—to revisit the earlier period, it also may be worthy—even compelling—to think about 1912 in the context of 2012 politics (or vice versa).

That very interlacing, as unwieldy as it may seem, is this paper's intent. A comparative assessment across exactly one century may yield a singular prospect on history as well as a more disinterested perspective on the politics of our own time than what we infer in the heat of the moment.

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The immediate background to the 1912 election offers context for considering this remarkable political event.

In the years following the assassination of Lincoln, the US national government had been characterized by what we might call legislative supremacy. Presidents from Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt are hardly household names today. It was the national Congress that made policy. The era began with the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, and the legislature hung on to its dominant role well into the 20th century. The alternate theory of presidential leadership, offered up by both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in 1912, faced this recent tradition.

¹⁰ Lewis L. Gould, *Four Hats in the Ring: The 1912 Election and the Birth of Modern American Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Brett Flehinger, ed., *The 1912 Election and the Power of Progressivism* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003); Sidney M. Milkis, *Theodore Roosevelt, The Progressive party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Lara M. Brown, *Jockeying for the American Presidency* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010); and James Chace, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs: The Election That Changed the Country* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

¹¹ Earlier works informing this paper include Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1955), George E. Mowry, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Movement* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), and Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (New York: Harper, 1954).

The turn into the new century witnessed a troubling tension between capital and labor. Membership in the American Federation of Labor had recently multiplied about seven times, from a quarter of a million in 1897 to almost 1,700,000 by 1904. Strikes increased and intensified, as did the tough business reaction. That is, growing militancy from both labor and capital afflicted the nation as the progressive movement arose. Progressives such as Herbert Croly thought hard about addressing this worrisome trauma.

Concurrently, the so-called “New Immigration” was fundamentally altering the country’s demographic composition. In the first decade of the 20th century there were almost 9 million immigrants flooding into the country (many, if not most, via Ellis Island). This represented a higher percentage of the full US population than did immigrant numbers at the end of the 20th century and into the new millennium. Over 70% of these newcomers were from southern and eastern Europe. They were Catholic and Jewish, Slavic and Italian, often from rural areas, and much different from the American population they joined. The new immigrants tended to settle in crowded areas in the growing urban centers that sprung up with the accelerating industrialization of the country. By 1920 the US Census would show more Americans living in cities than in the countryside. Hastening urban development occasioned all kinds of new difficulties, and inspired some of the first progressive reform strategies.

We should add into the mix a vibrant women’s movement, at its core demanding the right to vote for half the country’s population, an incipient civil rights movement cresting with the 1909 founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the lingering but muscular demands of a rural-based Populist movement which had, in the 1890s, mounted an anomalous national political taunt to the

traditional parties.

Hovering over all this ferment was the prodigious American economy. From 1865 to the turn of the century, the US had gone from number five in industrial production to number one, significantly outpacing all close competitors. And new legal forms of business organization had transformed the nature of American production and distribution. The corporation, or trust—a legal concept of concentrating production and distribution in ever-larger entities—became a fixture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The corporation was formed with state governmental approval in order to act as an artificial person to carry on business, issue shares of stock to raise funds, and realize a limitation on liability for damages or debt to only its assets. That way, stockholders could be protected from personal claims. Several court cases upheld the legitimacy of corporations, including the Supreme Court case *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819), which recognized corporations as having the same rights as natural persons to contract and to enforce contracts, and *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886), in which the Supreme Court recognized corporations as persons for the purposes of the Fourteenth Amendment.

By 1909, concentration of economic activity in large corporations had developed apace. About one percent of the total industrial firms in the country produced some 44% of manufactured goods. In addition, the late 19th century witnessed an important advance in the nature and locus of economic and financial control. Some scholars have called this the evolution of “finance capitalism.”¹² J. P. Morgan’s banking firm in New York most clearly defined the new situation. Forming a pool of credit, the Morgan firm marketed

¹² Rudolf Hilferding, an Austrian Marxist economist, coined the term in the early 20th century. See Bülent Hoca, “A Suggestion for a New Definition of the Concept of Finance Capital using Marx’s Notion of ‘Capital as Commodity’,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, January 23, 2012, vol. 36, issue 2, 419-434.

capital instead of goods. Investing, lending, and seeking enhanced profits, finance capitalism centralized economic control in New York City; it was dissociated from particular regions and particular industrial processes. The Morgan firm was also a very powerful player in the economy.

In terms of economic development, the US had undergone a radical transformation as the country moved into the 20th century. What had happened decidedly did not seem “conservative.” Still, some historians have detected a conservative defense of the economic royalty that surfaced as a consequence of American industrialization. They call this defensive doctrine “Social Darwinism.”¹³ Social Darwinism was the application of Darwinian biological theory to society. That is, it applied the theory in an intra-species way, unlike Darwinism, which described inter-species competition in nature. Social Darwinists argued that society's winners and losers—typically in the free market—were determined naturally. The survival of the fittest within the struggle for survival defined the very nature of capitalism. The crude theoretical result (derived in part from the English philosopher Herbert Spencer) was to confirm that affluent industrialists and financiers were the fittest. Some thought that workers, immigrants, African Americans, and others—by virtue of their lower class standing and alleged inability to compete in the unfettered market—were inferior, or “unfit.” Considering William Graham Sumner, the Yale professor—acknowledged by respected historians as the main intellectual source in America for Social Darwinism—the term more precisely means that government should leave society alone and let nature run its course. Sumner believed that almost any government interference into humans’ environment was useless

¹³ The classic text is Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); also see Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, Chapter 5. Goldman preferred dissecting the uses of Darwinism into “Conservative” and “Reform” Darwinism.

and, indeed, likely damaging to the natural, unimpeded “struggle for survival” going on in society, which brought the fittest to the top. Sociologist Lester Ward was Sumner's main intellectual adversary. He argued that government could actually influence the environment (the environment, of course, was an important consideration in Darwinism) so that we could have more planned progress and greater inclusion of diverse peoples. Whether it was that influential or not, the argument about Social Darwinism (even today) has to do with the ongoing debate between progressives and conservatives as to the role of government. Progressives, espousing government regulation of the economy, would challenge the laissez-faire implications of the doctrine.¹⁴ (It is relevant to the present study to note that, in spring 2012, president Obama kindled something of a firestorm in characterizing his conservative opponents as throwback “Social Darwinists.”¹⁵)

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Who were the progressives and what did they seek as reforms for the country? Brett Flehinger's multi-faceted definition of progressivism is to the point: the movement, drawing into its orbit politicians, social reformers, intellectuals, and economists, was an attempt to use government and new quasi-governmental institutions to reform and improve America's political, social, and economic system. Most particularly, progressivism sought to address the issue of corporate power and concentration while

¹⁴ Robert Bannister's careful treatment of Sumner and Ward, and the whole issue of “Social Darwinism” is, to my mind, more lucid and balanced than the traditional treatment of the subject as it appears in many texts. See relevant chapters in *Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Responding to Republican budget proposals in the spring of 2012, Obama said: “This congressional Republican budget is something different altogether... it is really an attempt to impose a radical vision on our country. It is thinly veiled Social Darwinism.” “Obama's Remarks to Newspaper Editors,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2012; <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/04/us/politics/obamas-remarks-to-newspaper-editors.html?pagewanted=all>>. See David Brooks' criticism of the President, “That Other Obama,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2012; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/opinion/brooks-that-other-obama.html?_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>.

seeking to resuscitate democracy, which progressives believed under duress as a consequence of the remarkable economic changes since the Civil War.¹⁶

Almost all progressives favored enhancing democracy. The movement had inherited from the Populists a commitment to “direct democracy.” This included the initiative, referendum, and recall (enacted in several western states), the Australian, or secret ballot, the direct election of US Senators (realized in 1913 with the 17th Amendment to the Constitution), and, for many, women’s suffrage (the effort succeeded with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920).

Important for our time’s politics was the introduction of the direct primary—at both the state and national level—as a nominating method to replace caucuses and conventions. 1912 was the first year that primaries played a role in presidential nominations. Roosevelt was the Republican candidate most triumphant in the new format, winning primaries in nine of the twelve states that held primaries.¹⁷ However, it would be some time before primaries became the chief method of determining a party’s nominee (as it was in 2012, and in the several years before). Taft controlled the Republican Party machinery so as to ensure his nomination at the Chicago convention in June. At that point Roosevelt petulantly walked out, only to return to the city later in the summer to the newly constituted Progressive Party’s convention, where he received its nomination.¹⁸

¹⁶ *The 1912 Election*, vii, 4.

¹⁷ LaFollette won in North Dakota and his home state of Wisconsin, Taft won Massachusetts; Roosevelt carried Illinois, Pennsylvania, California, Minnesota, Nebraska, Maryland, South Dakota, Ohio, and New Jersey.

¹⁸ Conservative columnist George Will finds that TR, chafing under constitutional restraints, went haywire after 1909. “By preventing former president Theodore Roosevelt from capturing the 1912 Republican presidential nomination from President William Howard Taft,” Will explains, “the GOP deliberately doomed its chances for holding the presidency but kept its commitment to the Constitution....The GOP’s defeat in 1912—like that in 1964 under Barry Goldwater, whose spirit infuses the tea party—was

On the Democratic side, Speaker of the House Champ Clark had been most victorious in winning the new primaries, and he may have reasonably expected the nomination, except that the Democrats adhered to a rule that a two-thirds vote was necessary to capture the party's nomination at the convention. This rule, now archaic, allowed Wilson to manipulate a win at Baltimore's Democratic convention (finally obtained on the 46th ballot).

A number of progressives urged legislation to improve social conditions, including the enactment of employer's liability laws, protection for working women and children, compulsory school attendance, and maximum hours and minimum wage laws. The Progressive Party platform, additionally, called for comprehensive, national, social insurance.

Seemingly an outlier scheme, but a coveted reform in some progressive circles, was prohibition. By the 18th Amendment, added to the Constitution in 1919, prohibitionists attained a long-sought goal.

For all that, the movement painstakingly concentrated on economic questions revolving around the dramatic changes that had recently transpired in the country. As revealed above, Roosevelt's New Nationalism complemented themes announced by Herbert Croly in his 1909 book, *The Promise of American Life*.¹⁹ Croly preferred Alexander Hamilton to Thomas Jefferson in contemplating the historic ideological divide between the two. That is, like Hamilton, Croly favored the nation over the primary

profoundly constructive. By rejecting TR, it preserved the Constitution from capricious majorities." George F. Will, "Texas's Ted Cruz gives tea party a Madisonian flair," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2012, found at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion/george-will-texas-ted-cruz-gives-tea-party-a-nadisonian-flair/2012/08/01/gJQApiwePX_story.html>.

¹⁹ The following paragraph is taken from Moore, *Croly's Promise*, Introduction.

community, the federal government over states, and active over passive government. He was particularly sympathetic to a robust Presidency (Abraham Lincoln was his paramount hero). Thus he is seen as having been influential in transforming reform liberalism from a reverence for limited government, individualism, and extreme laissez-faire economic practices, into what became the interceding, top-down, administrative state. Croly thought that America's promise—enjoyment of economic independence and prosperity, free political institutions, provision of a refuge for the oppressed, equality, democracy, a progressive and improving society, and a “hope that men can be improved without being fettered”²⁰—was in perilous trouble by the 20th century's commencement. New social and economic forces, unknown to the country's founders, challenged conventional views about government. The growth of powerful economic trusts had led to an unacceptable maldistribution of wealth. Croly saw these new economic behemoths, however, as a natural development, evolving to bring efficiency to production and distribution. The problem was that they were completely self-interested, rather than being dedicated to the common good. This problem at the top of the economic heap was but a reflection of the deeper problem bequeathed the United States by Jefferson's fatal error in presuming that the nation could progress with each individual simply seeking his or her own self interest while ignoring the collective national purpose. Indeed, Jefferson's sanguine conception of human nature had left the condition of American life tending to “encourage an easy, generous, and irresponsible optimism.”²¹ Croly insisted that human agency, particularly in the form of an active and progressive national government, headed by an assertive chief executive, was essential for genuinely bolstering the American

²⁰ Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 9-13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

promise. No longer could the country rely on that “irresponsible optimism” assuming that if each individual pursued private advantage, with no solicitude for the public good, things would only get better. They would not. Rather, things likely would get worse. For things to get better, a focused national government, armed with well-designed and determined programs, had to assume a more forceful role in directing policy and anticipating the future. National governmental regulation of economic trusts, Croly held, would ensure that efficient big businesses would act in the public interest rather than only for wealthy owners.²² A potent national government could represent a publicly-interested intermediary in labor-capital disputes, acting as a balancing referee, also in the public interest. And so on. Croly thought that his nostrums represented a novel American response to modernity, balanced between alien European notions of socialism on the one hand, and unworkable laissez-faire individualism on the other. (Critics later noted the eerie correspondence of Croly’s ideas with some—not perhaps the more offensive—attitudes of emerging fascist ideology in Europe.²³)

Croly’s views dovetailed almost exactly with Roosevelt’s refining political philosophy (and, indeed, it would appear, with president Obama’s own take on 21st century politics). The Progressive Party Platform of 1912 comprehended into a large statement the various aspects of the New Nationalism.²⁴ It called for all the reforms of “direct democracy,” including direct preferential primaries, the direct election of US

²² For a 2012 update on the Croly thesis, see Steven Rattner, “Regulate, Don’t Split Up, Huge Banks,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2012, found at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/01/opinion/sanford-weills-glass-steagall-distraction.html?_r=1>. Rattner argues against the view that the United States should break up big banks into many smaller units. “In a world of behemoth banks,” he says, “it is wrong to think we can shrink ours to a size that eliminates the ‘too big to fail’ problem without emasculating one of our most successful industries....[As to the large banks,] like prison guards, regulators are essential.”

²³ Although covering a later period, instructive in this regard is John Garraty, “The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 78 (October 1973), 907-944.

²⁴ For the Progressive Party Platform of 1912 see:

Senators, the initiative, referendum, and recall, and suffrage for women. It insisted on “strict limitation” of all campaign contributions, minimum wage and maximum hours (the eight hour day) legislation, conservation of natural resources, a graduated income tax prescribed in a constitutional amendment, and, in a disparagement of “states rights,” the platform insisted on “bringing under effective national jurisdiction those problems which have expanded beyond reach of the individual States.” It commended “strong National regulation of inter-State corporations.” Conceding, as had Croly, that the corporation was “an essential part of modern business,” it found the concentration of business “both inevitable and necessary for national and international business efficiency.” However, “the existing concentration of vast wealth under a corporate system, unguarded and uncontrolled by the Nation, has placed in the hands of a few men enormous, secret, irresponsible power over the daily life of the citizen.” The answer for Roosevelt’s Bull Moose Party was national regulation in the public interest. This included national control over interstate commerce, national jurisdiction of the currency, government supervision over investments (a harbinger of Obama’s Consumer Financial Protection Agency²⁵), and even “the union of all the existing agencies of the Federal Government dealing with the public health into a single national health service.”

Under the influence of Louis Brandeis, Wilson formulated a challenge to the New Nationalism. Called “The New Freedom,” the Democrat’s approach to reform tended to emphasize the anti-trust solution to economic concentration—at least initially—rather

<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29617#axzzlrZ3SrjPX>>.

²⁵ The Bank Reform Bill of 2010 set up a Consumer Financial Protection Agency to be under the Federal Reserve. Regulators gained the authority to split up large banks. The bill eliminated loopholes for hedge funds, derivatives, and mortgage brokers, and banned Wall Street banks from owning hedge funds.

than national regulation.²⁶ In contrast to Roosevelt's and Croly's view, Brandeis saw corporations as unnatural and socially destructive. He believed that they stifled beneficial competition and were inefficient (all candidates in 1912 were obsessed with efficiency).

One way to parse the New Freedom as contrasted to the New Nationalism is to note that the former sought the *redistribution of power and responsibility*. For example, the 1912 Democratic Party Platform gave prominence to tariff reform, calling for revising tariff rates downward from the high rates backed by Republicans. Thus, by denying preferential shelter to large enterprises and by consequently lowering prices, the New Freedom sought to empower a broad base of consumers instead of protected businesses. Moreover, noting that "A private monopoly is indefensible and intolerable" the New Freedom called for vigorous prosecution under existing anti-trust law and even new laws to enhance the federal government's ability to break up large concentrations; here the effort was to return the country to a more competitive economic environment and to ensure that power and responsibility devolved to smaller and more traditional and diverse enterprises.

Although the Democratic platform was vague on banking reform, Wilson and his advisers did craft a comprehensive blueprint on the issue that fit into the objective of redistributing power and responsibility. To challenge the influence of financial capitalists over the economy, the new approach (eventually installed in the Federal Reserve System) give birth to a novel semi-public, semi-private banking system, with branch banks spread throughout the country. That is, it was both national and federal in nature, and attempted

²⁶ For the New Freedom, see Louis Brandeis, "Trusts, Efficiency, and the New Party," *Collier's Magazine*, September 14, 1912, 14-15; relevant selections in Woodrow Wilson, *A Crossroads of Freedom: The 1912 Campaign Speeches* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956); and The Democratic Party Platform 1912, found at <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29590#axzz1rqaSTHst>>.

to extend financial control and accountability away from the dominating private institutions of Wall Street.

The New Freedom's stance regarding labor was similar to the Progressive Party's. (During the subsequent campaign, Wilson seemed to duplicate TR's views on labor as they were articulated at Osawatomie in 1910: "The wage earners of this country, in the broadest sense, constitute this country."²⁷) The Democratic platform declared that there should be "no abridgement of the right of the wage earners and producers to organize for the protection of wages and the improvement of labor conditions, to the end that such labor organizations and their members should not be regarded as illegal combinations in restraint of trade." The party also advocated workmen's compensation laws and promised the enactment of a statute creating a department of labor represented independently in the president's cabinet.

These four policy areas—tariff reform, antitrust legislation, banking reform, and labor rights—represented the heart of the New Freedom. Yet, like the Progressive Party, Wilson's Democrats also supported the direct election of US Senators, preferential primaries, transparency in campaign contributions (including prohibiting corporations from funding campaigns), the granting of power to the national government to impose income taxes, and conservation of natural resources. Moreover, in select statements, the 1912 platform revealed an intriguing opening for turning toward the New Nationalism: "We favor the efficient supervision and rate regulation of railroads, express companies, telegraph and telephone lines engaged in interstate commerce," and "the union and strengthening of the various governmental agencies relating to pure foods, quarantine,

²⁷ In "Speech at Buffalo, New York," September 2, 1912, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 25, Arthur Link, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 72-85.

vital statistics and human health.”

What followed was a spirited political contest that seemed to focus on Roosevelt and Wilson, even as Taft gave effort (in a more traditional, muted, way) and Debs campaigned fervently before enthusiastic crowds. As Eric Goldman once observed, the distinction between the New Nationalism and the New Freedom “was lost in the fog of oratory. The similarity of most specific planks in the Bull Moose and Democratic platforms increased the confusion.”²⁸ Even in our day, the fusion of the two seems palpable, as then Senator Obama revealed in his campaign book, *The Audacity of Hope*, where he praised Teddy Roosevelt for being a “trust-buster” while promoting “active national government” to make “investments that private enterprise can’t or won’t make” and that is “indispensable in dealing with market flows.” Obama linked Roosevelt and Wilson, indistinctly commending both for the Federal Reserve System, the Pure Food and Drug Act (passed in TR’s first term in 1904), and the Meat Inspection Act (1906).²⁹

What was clear was that for possibly the first time, certainly the first time since the Civil War, all major candidates—but particularly the Bull Moose and Democratic nominees—were progressives, and they debated meaningful reform before a national audience. The election’s outcome demonstrated stout support for genuine and innovative liberal reform.

Wilson garnered about 42% of the vote with an overwhelming 435 electoral votes; Roosevelt’s numbers were 27% of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes—a high-water mark for any Third Party candidate in US history. Taft slipped back to 23% and only 8 in the Electoral College; Debs, the socialist, scored an impressive 900,000 votes,

²⁸ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 168.

²⁹ *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown, 2006), 153.

representing 6% of the popular count.³⁰ Three-quarters of the electorate had cast ballots for Wilson's New Freedom, Roosevelt's New Nationalism, or Debs' socialism. It was a landmark election in the history of American liberalism.

There were interesting features of the campaign that are worthy of remark as we contemplate the political situation as it was in 2012. For one, the Republicans were split, in several ways. Wisconsin governor Robert LaFollette had sought to be the progressive alternative to Taft within the Republican Party, or even a third party candidate, but was removed from the picture by Roosevelt's large presence; LaFollette eventually endorsed Wilson. And, of course, the party was rendered helpless with the split between Taft and Roosevelt, making Wilson's victory virtually assured.

Second, the campaign witnessed the first important use of the direct primary, which has become central to presidential politics over the last half century.

The place of the South in 1912 was a flipped reverse from our time. A conservative southern Democratic Party, captivated by dark memories of the Civil War and Emancipation, dominated the South as the single party in the region. The party was based on white voters only—African Americans had lost the right to suffrage through churlish imposition of Jim Crow laws. Republicans upheld the fiction of a southern presence by recruiting a few African Americans to front for the party. But for Blacks, political circumstances were miserable. There was simply no good choice for them in 1912. Both the Republicans and Progressives abandoned any defense of African-American aspirations. W.E.B. Dubois, a co-founder of the NAACP, in desperation, even

³⁰ <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1912.html>>.

endorsed the Democrat Wilson.³¹ That was hardly a satisfactory option. Wilson, one of America's first PhDs, had written a five-volume *History of the United States*, in which he praised the Ku Klux Klan and demeaned "ignorant negroes."³² When he got to office he agreed to a White House screening of the groundbreaking, yet scandalously racist, D.W. Griffith film, *Birth of a Nation*.³³ Finally in the 1960s the Democrats, during an era of extraordinary progressive activity, became fully committed to Civil Rights. Today the South continues to be conservative, but its dominating party is Republican.

Like today, religion played a key role in 1912 politics, but it was a definably different kind of participation. The "Social Gospel" was associated with reformers like theologian Walter Rauschenbusch and activist and writer Jane Addams (who became the first woman to second a presidential nomination when she did so for Roosevelt at the Progressive Party convention in 1912). The Social Gospel strove to apply Christian ethics to social problems. In our contemporary lexicon the movement was engaged in "social justice." It sought to address problems associated with the gap between excessive wealth and poverty, immigrant distress, racial injustice, child labor, slums, struggling labor unions, poor schools, and the dangers of war.³⁴ While in 2012 we thought of evangelical Christians—either Catholic or Protestant—as appealing to conservative, and usually white, voters, the Social Gospel reformers were, by all measurements, progressives,

³¹ John Milton Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 211. Cooper is perhaps the most authoritative scholar on Wilson studies since Arthur Link. Sidney Milkis opines that DuBois anticipated the future political alignment bringing the African American vote into FDR's Democratic Party. *The Progressive Party*, 197.

³² Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*, vol. 5 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 58.

³³ See the discussion in Anthony L. Brundage, "The Birth of a Nation: entertainment, propaganda, and critical response," Chapter 5, *Going to the Sources*, 5th ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2012).

³⁴ See Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1907), and Jane Addams, *Twenty years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910). Informative is David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

appealing to a wide audience. They were overwhelmingly Protestant, and they were a vital and influential force in the progressive movement.

Today it would be difficult to imagine a socialist candidate like Eugene Debs ever gaining any political traction. As Debs campaigned there was no discernable “red baiting” as might have been expected; noteworthy anti-socialist manifestations awaited the end of World War I. 1912 was the peak moment for socialism in the United States.

Principled campaign practices in 1912 may also be of interest to those of us who follow politics in a dissonant media- and internet-saturated present. On October 14, 1912, Roosevelt was in Milwaukee to give a campaign speech. An assassin shot him right in the heart; the bullet slammed into the Bull Moose’s glasses case and a copy of his copious speech notes that were in his breast pocket. TR, astonishingly, abandoned his prepared remarks and proceeded to improvise a rousing oration before a mesmerized audience, after which he was speeded to hospital care. During the 10 days he was hospitalized, Wilson made no public campaign appearances. Then, when obscure rumors suggested that Wilson may have engaged in a sexual dalliance outside of marriage at some time in the recent past, no competing candidate, nor any media source, ever excavated the rumors for any broadcast. The general public never heard a word about any such indiscretion.³⁵

Although there were no polls as we have in abundance in the 21st century, the 1912 campaign took on certain features that made it a precursor to modern politics. As noted above, preferential primaries began the process of democratizing presidential nominations. The major candidates—Wilson and Roosevelt—along with Debs, hit the hustings without pause, and in ways different from former, more nonchalant campaigns.

³⁵ Gould, *Four Hats in the Ring*, 162. The woman was Mary Allen Hulbert; Wilson kept up a cordial and informative correspondence with her for a number of years. See Link, ed. *Wilson Papers*, Index.

Wilson and Roosevelt, both accomplished historians, wrote their own speeches (different, for the most part, from the practice today, where a bevy of speechwriters serve candidates). For the first time, movies were used in a campaign. Both Roosevelt and Wilson contracted with movie producers to follow the campaigns and film for later release in movie houses (Wilson used the new Universal Studios). That is, 1912 witnessed the turn to candidate-centered politics rather than party-centered contests.³⁶

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Wilson's victory brought with it Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. This allowed the new president to follow his own advice, or predilections, as first announced in his PhD dissertation of 1885, *Congressional Government*.³⁷ The detailed thesis in part compared the US Constitutional system of checks and balances with the parliamentary system in European states. Wilson reflected on how to make improvements in the nation's constitutional framework so as to bring public administration up-to-date and encourage more efficient law making.³⁸ By March 1913, when he took office, the new president was to have the opportunity to try out his theories. The result would be the most active Presidency in American history to that time —that is, in terms of legislative accomplishment. Only FDR's early New Deal period and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society of the middle 1960s would exceed Wilson's performance.

On October 3, 1913, Wilson signed the Underwood-Simmons Tariff Bill, fulfilling a campaign promise to lower tariff rates substantially; included in the tariff

³⁶ See Milkis, *The Progressive Party*, 189, 243. Lara Brown deviates from this judgment, finding a "strong party" era from 1884-1968, followed by a "modern party" era from 1972 on. See *Jockeying for the American Presidency*.

³⁷ A recent edition of the dissertation has been made available by Dover Publications (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006).

³⁸ See also, Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly*, II (June 1887), 197-222.

legislation was an income tax, made possible by the recently approved 16th Amendment to the Constitution.³⁹ On December 23, 1913, the new president signed the Glass-Owen Federal Reserve Act, creating the unique Federal Reserve System, with a Federal Reserve Board presiding over a semi-public, semi-private institution that would be as close as the US would get to a central bank for the whole nation. The following October saw the signing of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, which added more restraints on corporations. In 1913, a Department of Labor, with a new Secretary, joined the president's cabinet, again fulfilling a campaign promise. (By September 1916, the Adamson Act had established an eight-hour day for all railroad workers and that same month Wilson signed the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act—later struck down by the Supreme Court.) In the blink of an eye the New Freedom's core promises had been realized. Then, in the midst of all this activity, Congress passed and the president signed, on September 10, 1914, the Federal Trade Commission Act, authorizing a powerful new trade commission to regulate business activity. The New Freedom had morphed into a combined New Freedom and New Nationalism, and this new, transcendent, and commanding political project furnished the prototype for future progressive activism—right up through the 1960s.

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For much of the 20th century, progressivism's legacy not only seemed intact but on the march. Evolving progressivism became, under Franklin Roosevelt—followed by Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and even the mootable Richard Nixon (who sanctioned a growth in federal entitlements, launched

³⁹ An interesting anecdotal description of the origins of the 16th Amendment on the occasion of its 100th birthday can be found in Thomas V. DiBacco, "The birth of the income tax," *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2013, at: <<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-dibacco-income-tax-20130203,0,7041094.story>>.

national affirmative action practices, and signed bills establishing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Consumer Products Safety Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency)—the regulatory state, headed by a strong president, and committed to expanding opportunity and equality.

But dissent was always lurking. In 1955, William F. Buckley, Jr. founded *The National Review* as a conservative counter to ascendant liberal journals such as *The New Republic*. (Willard and Dorothy Straight started the latter journal in 1914 and picked Herbert Croly to be the first editor; the journal continued to be a major voice of liberalism into the 1970s; it is still being published, but has faded as a major force in American politics.) Then, in his inaugural address of 1981, newly-elected Ronald Reagan announced, for all practical purposes, the end of progressivism in national politics: “Government,” the president declared, “is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem.”⁴⁰ Even Democrat Bill Clinton seemed to agree, announcing in his 1996 State of the Union Address that “The era of big government is over.”⁴¹

Unease about an unduly aggressive and insensitive national bureaucracy, an exploding national debt, a perceived excessive tax burden, and the apparent denial of legitimate regional, local, even parochial wishes, fueled the growing conservative backlash. Reaction hardened with calculations that various progressive entitlement programs—most conspicuously Social Security and Medicare—were expanding beyond the reach of reasonable public financing. Passage of The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in early 2010 (culmination of a progressive yearning since the Bull Moose Party advocated national health care in 1912) turned out not to be an immediate

⁴⁰ <<http://www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/first.asp>>. President Reagan made the emphasis in his speech.

⁴¹ State of the Union Address, January 23, 1996, <<http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/other/sotu.html>>.

political triumph for resurgent liberalism, but rather, if the polls were accurate, a possible nail in progressivism's coffin. As of mid April 2012, in the midst of the primary season, an *ABC/Washington Post* poll reported that Americans opposed the new health care law by a margin of 53-39%.⁴² The gap—largest in December 2011, at the time of Obama's Osawatomie speech—remained wide right up to the November election.⁴³

A parallel bugbear for anti-progressives as the 2012 election approached (and afterward) was the growing percentage that the accumulated national debt represented of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). For the election year of 1912, the percentage had been a miniscule 3.4%, rising to 33.4% in 1919, following the accumulation of debt to fight in World War I. The percentage reached its all-time high at the conclusion of World War II, when it amounted to a whopping 112.7%. In 1975, as the country was winding down its involvement in Vietnam, the debt-GDP correlation had declined to 25%.⁴⁴ But by 2011, following the economic collapse of the previous three years and the stimulus package intended to address the crisis, the percentage had risen to 67.8%. According to data from the Central Intelligence Agency, that placed the country in 37th place in the world, behind such advanced economies as Austria (72.2%), Canada (87.4%), France (86.1%), Germany (80.6%), Japan (205.5%), and the United Kingdom (85.3%). The average debt-to-GDP figure for the world was 63.9%.⁴⁵

⁴² <<http://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm>>. Although, oddly, the same poll showed that Americans thought President Obama would do a better job of handling health care policy than his Republican opponent Mitt Romney. The margin was a surprising 48-38%. See <<http://www.pollingreport.com/wh12.htm>>.

⁴³ <http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/current_events/healthcare/health_care_law>. The margin narrowed right at election time to 50-44, still a negative for the President.

⁴⁴ <<http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/longterm/pdfs/federal-debt-public.pdf>>.

⁴⁵ <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2186.html>>.

Some projections showed the US number pushing beyond 90% by the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks beseeched political leaders to do something sweeping about the fiscal predicament, since “Debt could approach a ruinous 90 percent of G.D.P. in a decade and a cataclysmic 247 percent of G.D.P. 30 years from now.”⁴⁶ Brooks garnered his gloomy figures from the economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, who have compiled studies to show that the median growth rate of economically advanced nations have declined by as much as one half as their debt levels rose from under 30% of GDP to 90% or above. Reinhart and Rogoff thus imply that the United States could face an enervating slowdown in economic growth should mounting deficit levels remain unaddressed.⁴⁷

Still, some commentators, including Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman, argued that the 90% figure did not represent a “red line,” that advanced countries could pursue budget management by accommodating Keynesian stimulus techniques to countermand economic downturns, and that, in fact, nations should do exactly that.⁴⁸ Indeed, the high debt to GDP level of 1945 had been followed by a majestic growth of the American economy, while at the same time the country

⁴⁶ David Brooks, “Another Fiscal Flop” *New York Times*, December 31, 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/01/opinion/brooks-another-fiscal-flop.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>>.

⁴⁷ The National Bureau of Economic Research, “Growth in a Time of Debt,” January 11, 2013, <<http://www.nber.org/digest/apr10/w15639.html>>. And, Carmen M Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, 22 October 2012, “This time is different, again? The US five years after the onset of subprime,” <<http://www.voxeu.org/article/time-different-again-us-five-years-after-onset-subprime-0>>. Also see Walter Russell Meade, who, critiquing what he has called the dysfunctional, deficit-plagued, progressive “blue model,” has written: “The core institutions, ideas and expectations that shaped American life for the sixty years after the New Deal don’t work anymore. The gaps between the social system we inhabit and the one we now need are becoming so wide that we can no longer paper over them. But even as the failures of the old system become more inescapable and more damaging, our national discourse remains stuck in a bygone age. The end is here, but we can’t quite take it in.” “The Once and Future Liberalism,” *The American Interest*, March/April 2012, <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1183>>.

⁴⁸ <<http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/27/bad-analysis-at-the-deficit-commission/>>; <<http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/debt-and-transfiguration/>>.

experienced a notable expansion of progressive measures, including those of the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, the Great Society, the War on Poverty, and president Nixon's robust programs. And when the era reached its conclusion, the debt to GDP calculation was, as we see above, an affordable 25%. Krugman has maintained that history shows that properly nurturing the economy with tested Keynesian methods could turn the economy around from its sclerotic post-2008 performance and make the alarmist debt-to-GDP discussion seem quaintly vacuous as time goes on.

Of course, the situation is different today from what it was in 1945, when the United States emerged out of World War as a financial power unmatched in history and primed to accelerate economically. Today, worries about debt persist, and there appears to be a gathering—even bipartisan—consensus that the nation must address the fiscal predicament.⁴⁹ Whether or not the country is now on the cusp of a new burst of economic growth—which Krugman and his followers see as bringing rationality to the debt-GDP relationship—is a crucial question for the future of progressivism, which has depended, in the long run, on a steady, robust, economy.

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In 2012 we can find both similarities and differences with the environment of the century-old presidential contest that elevated progressivism in American politics. For example, immigration is a large feature of our present day as it was 100 years ago, and it is controversial, as any glance at the news reveals.⁵⁰ Advancing technology drove

⁴⁹ See the official web site for the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, called more succinctly the Simpson-Bowles Commission: <<http://www.fiscalcommission.gov>>.

A summary is found at:

<http://www.naela.org/App_Themes/Public/PDF/Advocacy%20Tab/Federal%20Fiscal%20Policy/Full%20Fiscal%20Commission%20Summary%20by%20NAELA.pdf>.

⁵⁰ A comparative review about recent immigration, is Tomás R. Jiménez, “Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?” EU: Migration Policy Institute, May 2011;

economic activity then and does so today. Technological innovation also affects politics, as anyone with an email, twitter, or Facebook account knows; the same was true 100 years ago. Concerns with advancing democracy and undergirding individual rights (including rights for new classes of citizens unacknowledged in 1912—such as gays, lesbians, and the disabled—while traditional grievants, such as women, ethnic and racial minorities continue to harvest attention) persevere today; the use of progressivism’s direct democracy tools has, if anything, accelerated to a perplexing extreme. Unlike politics of the late 19th century, our national political consciousness today centers on the Presidency, partly a result of the homage to the office wrought by the original progressives. Nonetheless, the chief executive remains constrained by constitutional and political limits. No president since LBJ has completely had his way with the national agenda.

Scholars such as Robert Putnam and Daniel Rodgers counsel a more intricate, lush—even disheartening—depiction of the changes in late 20th century America that have made us different politically from what we were before.⁵¹ The credo of the common good and shared sacrifice that we knew during the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and into the era of the New Frontier and Great Society, they point out, no longer exists. Putnam documents the decline in associational memberships in recent years; Rodgers argues that from the 1970s on, Americans started thinking of their country in terms not of common purposes and social responsibilities, but from the perspective of

<<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/integration->>. Also see the Pew Research Center report released June 19, 2012, “Pew Social and Demographic Trends,” showing that, as of 2010, Asians represented a higher percentage of in-migrants into the U.S. than Hispanics and that “Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States.” Found at: <<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>>.

⁵¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Daniel Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). See also the discussion of Rodgers’ book in “America in an Age of Fracture: A Forum,” *Historically Speaking*, April 2011, 12-19.

“choice-making individuals.” As he explained, “the realm of the social fractured....One heard less about society...one heard more and more about individuals, contingency, and choice.” Rodgers was talking about recent reactions within the political (and intellectual) Left as well as Right. If he is correct, then we should expect that the almost mystical sense with which Herbert Croly voiced his New Nationalism—a collaborative political attitude central to the progressive conceit—is, in the face of such a splintering into multiple particularized narcissisms, fading from the American scene. That is, the substructure upon which progressives like Obama think they can build a politics of shared intention may have cracked beyond rescue.

Complicating matters further is perhaps the most intriguing of cross-century comparisons, having to do with economic conditions—the focus of progressive trepidation long ago. Although the Labor Movement (note the capitals) began its rise to importance with the progressives, labor clout has, by most measurements, been in decline in the past several decades. In the mid 1950s more than a third of non-farm workers belonged to labor unions. Their wages tended to boost them into middle-class status, and they retained valuable pension benefits. By 1980 the number had fallen to 20%, and continued to decline sharply. In 2010 the percentage of workers belonging to unions was barely over 11%. This compared, just for one striking illustration, to 70% in economically flourishing Finland. Excluding public unions (virtually the only area of growth for the union movement in recent times), membership in private sector unions was down to 7%.⁵² A key ally of progressive politics for almost a century was in severe

⁵² Union Members Summary, Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 27, 2012; <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>>. OECD, Trade Union Density Figures, <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN_DEN>.

remission.

Three other related issues remind us that the economic challenges facing the United States in 2012 have a resonance with progressive's disquiet in 1912. These issues are, first, the accelerated concentration of corporate power, second, the widening maldistribution in income, and third, the shock of the 2008 financial crisis, which tended to draw studied attention to the first two issues.

Between the Reagan era and the first decade of the 21st century the national government backed away from the progressive practice of strict regulation of big businesses, encouraging unprecedented mergers and concentration into large conglomerates. A good deal of the concentration took place in the financial and banking sector of the economy. At the same time, some of the new, often multinational, organizations had begun as innovative start-up firms in the technology, computer, software, information processing, and media businesses. These new areas of enterprise stimulated the economy, hired educated, usually young, workers, and hinted at what would be the future of a newfangled, avant-garde American economy. During the Clinton Administration, the Dow Jones stock price index shot up in value (the market value of American companies during Clinton's time in office nearly tripled) and the percentage of Americans who owned stock rose from about 13% in 1980 to over 50% by the turn into the new millennium. The economy grew at a more than respectable 3% annual rate, and the national budget came into balance; in fact, the Administration was able to record a budget surplus by the conclusion of Clinton's second term. When Republicans took over the reigns of government in the first decade of the 21st century they pressed further the now fashionable strategy of deregulation, lowered taxes across the board—particularly

benefiting high incomes—and adhered to the theory called “supply-side” economics (a better, perchance more accurate, moniker for our time than “Social Darwinism”).

Ominously, however, with high expenditures for two foreign wars and dwindling tax revenues, the national budget once again soared into the red.

Moreover, a worrying trend of income inequality became ever more noticeable. The incomes of the top 1% of Americans grew by an average of 275% between 1979 and 2007. (Middle income Americans did well too, realizing an income rise of about 40%.) As taxation became more regressive in the 2000s, the earnings of the top 1% rocketed in comparison to other Americans. Then, the severe economic downturn beginning in 2008 exacerbated income gaps further. According to some studies, the top 1% saw their share of total wealth grow from just under 35% to over 37%, while median household wealth dropped about 36% (the drop of the 1% was about 11% during the recession). The income gap was greater than at any time since 1928, just before the most famous stock market crash in history.⁵³

As ominously, a Federal Reserve Report of mid June 2012 showed that in 2010 median family net worth was approximately the same as it had been in 1992 (adjusting for inflation). Median net worth had declined from \$126,400 in 2007 to \$77,300 in 2010; that is, there had been a plummet of about 39%. During the same period, median incomes fell from \$49,600 to \$45,800, a drop of 7.7 percent.⁵⁴ (In a separate survey the Fed

⁵³ *Dave Gilson and Carolyn Perot* “It’s the Inequality, Stupid,” *Mother Jones*, March/April 2011; <<http://motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-in-america-chart-graph>>. Hannah Shaw and Chad Stone, “Tax Data Show Richest 1 Percent Took a Hit in 2008, But Income Remained Highly Concentrated at the Top; Recent Gains of Bottom 90 Percent Wiped Out,” May 25, 2011, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; <<http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3309>>. Also see Thomas Frank, “The Fight over Inequality,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2012; <<http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/the-fight-over-inequality/?ref=opinion>>.

⁵⁴ <<http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/bulletin/2012/PDF/scf12.pdf>>.

reported that total family net worth had actually climbed 4.7 percent in the January-March quarter of 2012 to \$62.9 trillion, about 28% above its recession low. These figures, for the most part, reflected stock market gains.⁵⁵)

There seemed little doubt that the global financial crisis that hit in 2008 may have begotten the worst economic difficulty since the Great Depression. It featured the foundering of huge financial institutions, controversial government bailouts of once seemingly invulnerable banks, a collapsing stock market, and a complete bursting of the US housing market.⁵⁶ The subsequent government attempts to deal with the crisis (based on Keynesian tactics of deficit spending to stimulate a failing economy)—first in the lingering months of the G.W. Bush Administration, then throughout the first years of Obama’s tenure—aroused more controversy than national unity. So, while the crisis highlighted fragile features of the American economy, it also spawned a voluble, sometimes acrimonious, political debate.

2012’s volatile political backdrop, sharpened by economic uncertainty, foreboded peril for historic progressivism. Comparing the off-year elections of 1910 and 2010 suggested a key difference between the two political environments. Democrats and insurgent/progressive Republicans were the big winners in the off-year elections of 1910. After Taft’s victory in 1908, Republicans had an imposing majority in both houses—a 60-32 margin in the Senate and 219-172 in the House. 1910, however, heralded a shift to reform politicians. While the Republicans held a 52-44 advantage in the Senate, their numbers included a number of insurgent/progressive Republicans. Democrats’ numbers

⁵⁵ <<http://www.boston.com/business/personal-finance/2012/06/11/fed-reports-how-much-recession-shrank-wealth/6r9k6bRuQ84qApCFGuIBYM/story.html>>.

⁵⁶ <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2009/0615_economic_crisis_baily_elliott/0615_economic_crisis_baily_elliott.pdf>.

increased markedly in the House, where the party added 58 seats to take a 230-162 advantage. (With Wilson's victory in 1912, Democrats gained working majorities in both Houses, which made the president's legislative ambitions almost a sure thing.) Compare that outcome with the 2010 off-year elections, when Democrats saw their 233-202 edge in the House disappear in what pundits called the Republican "tsunami." When the election was over, Republicans had added 40 seats to take a 242 to 193 majority into what became a rancorous legislative session. The legislative situation was made more complicated for president Obama by the diminishment of Democrats in the Senate, falling from a 57-seat majority back to 51, accenting a Republican upswing, while removing any chance of thwarting a Republican filibuster threat. From the historic perspective of off-year elections, liberal Obama in 2012 corresponded with conservative Taft, while opposing conservative Republicans, like the reformers 100 years ago, seemed poised to capture both the executive and legislative branches of the national government—that is, if the comparison had held.⁵⁷

There was, however, as might be expected, another way of looking at the straightforward political situation after 100 years. We should keep in mind that in the 25 presidential campaigns from 1912 through 2008 (omitting for the moment the 2012 result), the Democratic candidate won 13, the Republican 12. To truncate the time to the post-World War II period (starting, suitably, in 1944), Democrats won 8 contests,

⁵⁷ For a number of years, some scholars have been predicting an emerging Democratic/Progressive majority, based on voting trends of young people, ethnic minorities and white, college-educated city dwellers. The 2012 results may have confirmed this prophecy. See Ruy Teixeira, "New Progressive America: Twenty Years of Demographic, Geographic, and Attitudinal Changes Across the Country Herald a New Progressive Majority," *Center for American Progress*, March 2009: <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:nBDZXXa9AaUJ:www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/progressive_america.pdf+&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESgg78DMHG2FX1nfjqYe4RvEGvm4vQNwDFuqAfFMeSMBcb4-6x5fP8HmhOERtrHSYgD5v38AUU3nSze8ZGuJEh9DFBZikQtGgT34730ZwSUa-ZDK419Um6fv7aT4wzZPEkhScLAo&sig=AHIEtbQ3p8YrC5phaOXkXw-yobTuM6yPYg>.

Republicans 9 (including the disputed 2000 election, when Democrat Al Gore actually received about half a million more popular votes than eventual winner G.W. Bush). That is, from the most unadorned perspective, the American two-party system has been highly competitive. Perhaps neither progressives nor conservatives should expect unchallenged rule. Each side has always needed to work to gain allies and win policy victories; *even if there appeared to be a midcentury liberal consensus bridging the two parties that no longer exists.*

In 1912, all earnest aspirants for the Presidency wanted to be identified as “progressive.”⁵⁸ In 2012 (as revealed plainly in the Republican primary season), president Obama’s challengers were all discernibly anti-progressive.⁵⁹ As we have seen, the 2012 Republican Party platform advised repealing the 16th and 17th Amendments to the Constitution—two of the key legacies of progressivism that had been supported by both major parties and the Progressive Party a century ago. Governor Romney’s choice of Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan as vice presidential running mate spotlighted the anti-progressive lunge. In April 2010, Ryan told conservative TV commentator Glenn Beck:

What I’ve been trying to do is indict the entire vision of progressivism because I see progressivism as the source, the intellectual source for the big government problems that are plaguing us today. And so to me it’s really important to flush progressives out into the field of open debate—so people can actually see what this ideology means and where it’s going to lead us and how it attacks the American idea.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See the discussion in Flehinger, *The 1912 Election*, at pages 4-5, plus the political cartoon on page 157, from the *Saint Louis Post Dispatch*, October 6, 1912, 3.

⁵⁹ An unrestrained case in point was Newt Gingrich’s campaign book, *To Save America: Stopping Obama’s Secular-Socialist Machine* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2010).

⁶⁰ <<http://www.theblaze.com/stories/flashback-glenn-beck-interview-with-paul-ryan-from-2010/>>. George Will agreed, critiquing Wilson, FDR, and LBJ as “progressives” who deviated from founding principles. “Obama: the real radical,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-will-obamas-desire-to-transform-the-united-states/2012/09/05/35f2d582-f790-11e1-8398-0327ab83ab91_story.html>.

In 2012 there did not seem to be a Third Party possibility on the horizon to match Teddy Roosevelt's historic run (Americans Elect—which proposed to nominate a candidate via an online convention in June—qualified in a number of states, but by late spring 2012 gave up the effort).⁶¹ If there were any 2012 equivalent to Eugene Debs, oddly, it may have been Ron Paul, except that, ideologically, Paul, a staunch libertarian, is the exact opposite of Debs the socialist. Indeed, socialism—benignly treated in 1912—is today a pejorative in American political discourse. But Paul, like Debs, attracted an idiosyncratic, steadfast (if small) following, campaigned with vigor, and became a staple in our political consciousness. His forthright attack on the Federal Reserve System, which he would try to abolish if he were ever to become president, received no discernable rebuff from fellow Republicans during the primary season. (Paul would have been an obvious third party contender; however, he might have held out as a loyal Republican as long as there was a chance that Romney might have picked his son Rand as a VP running mate.) Former Senator Rick Santorum and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, the lingering challengers to Governor Romney up to late spring 2012, seemed quixotically right-leaning in their politics. Santorum represented the farthest reaches of his party's cultural conservatism, and Gingrich, trained in American history, is a pugnacious opponent of historic progressivism in almost all its forms (indeed, his “Contract with America,” the 1994 national platform for Republicans running effectively

⁶¹ Columnist Thomas Friedman approved the plans of Americans Elect. Lamenting that no major 2012 presidential candidate had offered solutions to America's pressing need for improvements in infrastructure and education, and in long-term reform in fiscal, tax, and entitlement matters, Friedman recommended—rather like a nostalgic evoking of TR's Progressive action in 1912—that Michael Bloomberg declare his candidacy and force a national debate to consider seriously what must be done. “One for the Country,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2012; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/18/opinion/friedman-one-for-the-country.html?_r=1&ref=opinion>.

to capture control of the House of Representatives, was an overt promise to annul as much as possible of the liberal/progressive deeds associated with the Wilson, FDR, and Lyndon Johnson administrations.)

To be precise, as the discussion immediately above shows, the cardinal features of historic progressivism that were under attack in 2012 were 1) Anti-trust sentiment, or, more broadly and accurately, the New Freedom prescription of redistributing power and responsibility in the American economy, 2) regulatory policy, the core of Croly's and Roosevelt's New Nationalism, 3) a palpable pro-labor stance, and 4) a dedication to "social justice" and publically-ensured social programs (the Progressive Party's plank on health insurance being the clearest example). Conservatism today accepts the idea of lubricated, tariff-free international trade, thus, on that fifth point, agreeing with the progressive attitude of Democrats under the leadership of Wilson through FDR (in fact through Clinton and Obama). But the disagreements represented in the first four categories underscore sincere differences historically, as well as between Obama and his Republican opponents right now. The current political milieu then, could bring into sharper relief a contemporary debate about progressivism in American history. The emergence of cultural issues that were ignored or understated a century ago consumes much public discussion, and, of course, is of consequence. These new, often "wedge" issues, energize the committed party faithful, especially the newer constituencies who have joined both parties over the past couple of generations.

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An appraisal of 2012 politics cannot be complete without inserting a reference to the so-called Tea Party movement, which—curiously—offers up a comparative

possibility with the Populist movement, a precursor to progressivism and a promoter of certain initiatives later absorbed into the progressive template. Like the Populists, Tea-Partyers often represent rural, small town, white, working class Americans; they see themselves as real Americans, resisting the blandishments of those who seem to be the “other,” such as exotic, and Ivy League-educated Barack Obama.⁶² Both Populists and Tea-Partyers sensed that abstract forces, often far away in big cities, impudently attempt to run the lives of real Americans. In the 1890s, disgruntled Populists became active in politics and realized some conspicuous gains in electing local and state officials. They then interrupted national politics, mounting an energetic Third Party effort for the Presidency in 1892, and in 1896 backed the Democratic nominee, William Jennings Bryan, who carried nationwide a populist message, even if in a losing campaign. Tea Party activism in 2010 helped fuel the resurgent Republican Party as it set about reclaiming the majority in the House of Representatives. Today, the House is filled with Tea Party sympathizers. Their presence was felt in the raucous Republican primary season, and they appear to be a force to contend with among conservatives. And, importantly, Tea Partiers are often heard proclaiming that they “want our country back,” a not-so-veiled plaint about the appearance since the 1960s of various new, diverse, and often strident special interests—ethnic groups, racial groups, feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, and more—all the beneficiaries of a liberal/progressive thrust to forward legally-recognized civil and human rights, irrespective of race, class, sex, origin, disability, or any other discriminating liability.

In fact, these legislative and judicial (even, in some instances executive) triumphs

⁶² Jill Lapore, Harvard historian and *New Yorker* staff writer, has written an unflattering exposé of the Tea Party. See *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).

are among the most prized feats of 20th century American liberalism. Obama’s election in 2008, plainly unlikely a mere few years earlier, signified the triumph of a truly “liberal” venture. The consequence is that the United States has without doubt become a fairer, more open, and less oppressive society. But, while cultural liberalism thrives, despite the clamor from the political right, economic developments—including brisk globalization and the latest rise of powerful economic combinations (which, more often than not, welcome and approve the features of cultural liberalism)—may have challenged the old progressive doggedness about economic opportunity or even economic fairness. As the left-leaning critic Eric Alterman has pointed out, sounding a plaintive contemporary echo of Herbert Croly, “economic liberalism is on life-support....Liberals must find a way to combine their cultural successes with new approaches to achieving economic equality.”⁶³

What then to say about the now withered “Occupy Wall Street” movement? Reminiscent of ardent, Dadaistic, protest movements of the 1960s, Occupy Wall Street initially spilled out onto the streets of lower Manhattan in objection to the self-satisfied rich of Wall Street finance, who had, the Occupiers averred, triggered the economic crash of 2008, been rescued with an enormous government bailout, and then, shamefully, continued to prosper as the rest of the country suffered the severe downturn.⁶⁴ Spreading to other cities, the movement began to appeal to some Democrats hoping to harness its drive and its buzz for their own political purposes. A few commentators opined on the similarity of Tea Partyers and Occupiers, since each was reacting to aloof forces considered malevolent. Each protested the apparent control over events that powerful

⁶³ “Cultural Liberalism Is Not Enough” *New York Times*, April 7, 2012;

<<http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/07/cultural-liberalism-is-not-enough/?ref=opinion>>.

⁶⁴ My spouse, Linda Christ Moore, and I made several observational pilgrimages to Zuccotti Park in the Fall 2011, and then followed up with more limited visits to Occupy sites in Washington, DC, Providence, RI, and Claremont, CA.

others orchestrate. Yet the differences were clear. Occupiers tended to be young, Tea Partyers older; Occupiers started in New York, Tea Partyers in smaller town venues. Occupiers saw the chief enemy as private bankers on Wall Street, who should be reigned in for the public good; for Tea Partyers, the enemy was the government, not big business or formidable financial institutions. They wanted government out of their lives, with its purported favoritism toward undeserving constituents, including certain businesses, but also others who always demanded notice and sought undeserved entitlement. It is hard to fit our current visible protesters into a comparative replica of 1912.

So, while there is no exact parallel with the protest climate nor with the candidate configuration of 1912 (which in itself was unique in American history), there is an opportunity for us to assess the ups and downs of progressivism over the course of a century by considering the 2012 presidential debate. A look at Republican Mitt Romney's political platform reveals a somber challenge to the tenets of once ascendant progressivism.

On September 5, 2011, Governor Romney published in *USA Today* "My Plan to Turn Around The U.S. Economy."⁶⁵ The plan consisted of 59 explicit proposals. Herein, Romney stressed that he would undo president Obama's economic policies, specifically those that rely on government regulation. His view was "supply-side," in that he wanted government to be as completely uninvolved with business as possible, inasmuch as the private sector, left alone, has the economic wherewithal to generate the millions of jobs needed and to jump-start and sustain economic growth. Thus, Governor Romney would

⁶⁵<http://useconomy.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=useconomy&cdn=newsissues&tm=221&f=00&su=p284.13.342.ip_&tt=11&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/09/my-plan-turn-around-us-economy>.

Also see Kimberly Amadeo, "Mitt Romney and the Economy: 2012 Presidential Campaign Plan," *About.com Guide*; <http://useconomy.about.com/od/fiscalpolicy/p/Mitt_Romney.htm>.

have emphatically lowered personal, investment, and corporate taxes—certainly retaining the “Bush” tax cuts, possibly lowering rates further. That is, he advised lowering the corporate tax rate from 35% to 25%, permitting businesses to write off capital investments since 2010, and ending the estate tax. To meet any budget shortfalls resulting from decreased tax revenues, he would have reduced non-defense government spending by eliminating regulations and unnamed government departments,⁶⁶ and he would have eliminated “Obamacare.” He cited Obama’s “bowing” to labor unions and their demands as harmful to the economy and detrimental to job growth. During the primary debates he argued for “right-to-work” laws. He would have returned some federal powers to the states. Romney would only have allowed new regulations if the cost was offset by eliminating other regulations (and he joined with the other GOP aspirants during the primary season in denouncing the Environmental Protection Agency, created during the Richard Nixon administration). He would have curtailed regulations that impeded energy production of nuclear power, coal, oil, and gas and he called for a balanced budget Constitutional Amendment and reducing Medicare (except for current seniors).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Although, at a mid April private fund-raising event for high-dollar donors in Palm Beach, Florida, Romney indicated that he would end the Department of Housing and Urban Development (once headed by his father) and appreciably reduce, possibly eliminate, the Department of Education. <<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/romney-talks-of-curtailing-specific-tax-deductions/?ref=politics>>.

⁶⁷ Romney outlined ten action steps he would have taken on his first day of office:

1. End “Obamacare.”
 2. Order all agencies to end Obamacare and all other regulations that hinder job creation.
 3. Issue oil drilling permits for pre-approved sites.
 4. Cite China as a currency manipulator and assess duties on Chinese imports if the country does not float its currency.
 5. Strike Obama’s executive order that encourages using labor unions on government contracts.
- For the remaining five first day actions, he would have submitted five bills to Congress that:
6. Reduce the corporate tax rate to 25%.
 7. Approve Free Trade Agreements with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea.
 8. Begin a study of better utilization of natural resources and initiate all approved leases.
 9. Consolidate federal retraining programs and pass funding and management of such programs back to the states.
 10. Cut non-security discretionary spending by 5% across the board.

Although members of his own party sometimes considered Governor Romney as too moderate, his manifesto, at first glance, seemed a stretch from even recent Republican leaders (say, from Ford through Bush I, even to 1996 candidate Robert Dole). Even so, the governor's schemes tantalized earnest, patriotic, well-meaning, and intellectual adherents; they questioned profoundly progressivism's soundness, sometimes its constitutional reliability, its economic doctrine (which, critics emphasize, is hazardously budget-busting), and, above all, its dependence on overweening government action. In this latter sense, Romney's carefully thought-out campaign project leaned toward a libertarian, laissez-faire, and pro-big business stance. It was remindful of dominant political and economic theory in the prelapsarian days prior to progressivism's nascent fervor. Comparing Romney's rhetoric and his detailed plan of action with Obama's remarks at the beginning of this paper may not offer as stark a contrast as devotees of each side insisted. But in 2012 it could have put on notice the uncertain place of historic progressivism in today's politics. Situating the drama of 1912 into the framework of 2012's campaign scene, and vice versa, could afford a more detached, thorough, and clear-sighted insight into the course of American political history than would fretting about the immediate here and now.

The president had campaigned with verve as a reformer of erstwhile mold. He had had to defend an overflowing and activist record: faced with an exceptional economic and financial crisis during his first term, Obama had presided over a massive, Keynesian-guided, economic stimulus, via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Tax Relief Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization and Job Creation Act of

2010; continuing to respond to the economic collapse, the president reasserted a policy of regulation within the financial realm by urging and signing the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010. Additional legislative actions included the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, reauthorization of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (2009), the Budget Control Act of 2011, the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012, and the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act of 2010 (Obama became the first sitting US president publicly to support legalizing same-sex marriage).⁶⁸

With the outcome finally registered on November 6, *the electorate approved the most active and progressive presidential administration since the days of Lyndon Johnson almost a half century earlier.* The president, and progressivism, had weathered the considerable storm of 2012. Obama had proved yet again to be an adroit campaigner; he won a substantial majority in the Electoral College (332-206) and a secure majority in the popular vote—the margin was 51% to 47%, an ample 4% spread that even exceeded Nate Silver’s final estimate.⁶⁹ Obama’s approval rating climbed from a miserable double-digit negative reading in December 2011 (which remained consistently negative late into the campaign) to almost a 20 percent positive response one month after the election—exactly a year after his Osawatomie speech, when his nadir portended a humiliating loss—for him, for Democrats, and for progressivism.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ The President’s foreign policy record for the first term included: ending US military involvement in Iraq, ratification of the New START arms control treaty with Russia, involvement with NATO allies in Libya, and receiving the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Both Fred Kaplan of SLATE and David Brooks of the *New York Times* have more extended approbation for Obama in the foreign policy sphere. See:

<http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2012/06/mitt_romney_s_foreign_policy_id_eas_can_t_be_taken_seriously_single.html>.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/opinion/brooks-where-obama-shines.html?hp>>.

⁶⁹ <<http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php>>. Silver was close, projecting a 50.8-48.3 victory for the President; <<http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com>>.

⁷⁰ For complete details on presidential approval and disapproval over the entire period, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/obama_job1.htm>.

Democrats (not all of them “progressive”) improved their numbers in the Senate—helped along by some inept opposing candidates. In the immediate aftermath of the election, pundits remarked on the now more apparent budding Democratic majority and the diminishing white, male, and older Republican minority, each of which augured ill for the GOP in future presidential elections. Indeed, counting 2012, Democratic presidential candidates now had won the popular vote in five of the last six quadrennial elections (including Al Gore’s narrow popular vote margin in 2000).

Did this mean that historic progressivism had survived, strengthened? Or, was the conservative challenge still alive, well, and threatening?⁷¹ Election 2012 left Republicans with continued control of the House of Representatives, and a clear majority of those Republicans are, by sensible definition, anti-progressive. Also, the GOP maintained a preponderance of governorships (a three to two margin, again, featuring a number of anti-progressive state executives).⁷²

Thus, it remained to be seen whether 2012 represented an unambiguous triumph or a momentary reprieve for a progressivism that had burst onto the American political scene a century before. Meantime, Osawatomie voted overwhelmingly conservative Republican in 2012, as did the entire state. In 1912, Democrat Woodrow Wilson (who

⁷¹ A much larger, disquieting, challenge to the United States, and particularly to its dependence on a democratic electoral system to provide high-quality leadership, has been forwarded by Eric X. Li, and others (*New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman among them). Here is what Shanghai-based Li has said: “While China’s might grows, the West’s ills multiply: since winning the Cold War, the United States has, in one generation, allowed its middle class to disintegrate. Its infrastructure languishes in disrepair, and its politics, both electoral and legislative, have fallen captive to money and special interests. Its future generations will be so heavily indebted that a sustained decline in average living standards is all but certain...Claims that Western electoral systems are infallible have hampered self-correction. Elections are seen as ends in themselves, not merely means to good governance. Instead of producing capable leaders, electoral politics have made it very difficult for good leaders to gain power. And, in the few cases where they do, they are paralyzed by their own political and legal systems.” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013), 45-46. See Yasheng Huang’s critique of Li’s verdict, “Democratize or Die,” *Ibid.*, 47-54.

⁷² <<http://swampland.time.com/2012/11/08/82127/>>.

collected all 10 electoral votes) and Progressive Theodore Roosevelt, combined, won over 70% of the popular vote in Kansas.⁷³

⁷³ Osawatomie is in Miami County, Kansas, which voted 66% to 32% for Romney over Obama; <<http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?f=0&fips=20&year=2012>>. In 2008 the county voted 61% to 37% for McCain over Obama; <<http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/president/kansas.html>>. For 1912, see <<http://www.uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?f=0&fips=20&year=1912>>.

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