The President as Statesman

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Progressivism and Politics in New Jersey and the Nation

In an essay written in 1907, Wilson compared the fermenting political situation to that in the years just prior to the Civil War. "Parties have not yet squarely aligned themselves along what must of course be the line of cleavage," he mused. Accelerating social and economic changes necessitated a fundamental adjustment in politics and policies, but "party programmes are not yet explicit for the voter's choice." 1 The reason for the continued "dissolution of parties" and "confusion of issues," Wilson suggested in 1908, was a "notable absence of leadership," not so much of the party organizations "but of the leadership of the constructive thought and purpose of the country." 2 This was exactly the form of leadership that Wilson himself had always wanted to provide and for which he believed he had a special gift. And it was the form of leadership upon which his program for responsible government depended. In the years preceding Wilson's debut in electoral politics, his program quickened and focused his ambitions. At the same time, the imperatives of this debut began to alter the program.

I

The first murmurings of political support for Woodrow Wilson came in 1902, the same year he became president of Princeton. They reached a steady pitch within a few years, unaffected by his weak protests. Wilson's growing prominence on the national scene as an academic and political reformer, his dynamic presence at the podium, and—most important—his enduring and public commitment to the Bourbon principles of free trade, sound money, and efficient administration all made him an appealing figure to gold- bug Democrats. Foremost among Wilson's conservative backers was Colonel George Harvey, editor of Harper's Weekly, who began endorsing Wilson for the presidency in 1906. Wilson maintained that his political ambitions were limited and unlikely. Nevertheless, he made sure to emphasize the conser-
ative aspects of his political views to please his new patrons. And, using the parliamentary terms of his program, Wilson admitted to a supporter in March 1906 that he was willing to have his name put forward to help with “organizing an Opposition with which conservative men could without apprehension ally themselves.”

After Bryan’s defeat in 1908, Wilson voiced a new resolution about what needed to be done “to organize a successful party of opposition” and the role he might play in doing it. Only a rejuvenated Democratic Party could offer a serious challenge to the Republicans, and this rejuvenation could not take place unless “men as unlike Mr. Bryan as principle is unlike expediency will devote themselves to gaining influence and control as if to a daily business, as Mr. Bryan has done.” Wilson now anticipated taking the initiative himself, if it was necessary, in the fight for “a genuine rationalization and rehabilitation of the Democratic party on lines of principle and statesmanship.”

But if Wilson was going to lead the Democratic Party to power, he could not afford to be “unlike Mr. Bryan,” at least not in terms of the policies Bryan espoused. Amid the progressivism of the time, the Bourbons and financiers whose favor Wilson was attempting to curry represented a diminishing segment of public opinion. Wilson needed to rethink his unstinting opposition to the Bryanite agenda. To do so was not conceptually troubling for him. As Wilson had told the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce in November 1907, in phrases strikingly similar to those he had used in “Leaders of Men” eighteen years earlier, “a man engaged in party contests, must be an opportunist. Let us give up saying that word as if it contained a slur. If you want to win in party action . . . you have got to fish for the majority, and the only majority you can get is the majority that is ready.”

Following his own advice, in late 1908 Wilson started to warn businessmen that they held an ethical obligation to be fair and just in their dealings with “the common man.” At this point in American history, Wilson argued, to be a conservative meant to be in favor of reform so as to prevent more dramatic and destructive changes. In his arguments against the protective tariff, Wilson now proposed that it had produced the trusts and was insinuated in the unseemly alliance between the Republican Party and big business. Given that Wilson’s conservatism had always been organic rather than doctrinal in character, it was not hard for him to make these arguments. Through these exhortations and emphases, Wilson subtly shifted his political agenda and, in the process, his attractiveness as a political candidate.

By 1910, Wilson’s efforts to reestablish himself as a more progressive Democrat, one who was not beholden to party conservatives and financial interests,
began to pay off. Colonel Harvey and ex-Senator James Smith, the Demo-
ocratic boss of Newark (and, for all practical purposes, of New Jersey) had
come to believe that Wilson was the man whom the party should run for
governor. The Democrats had been in the political wilderness in New Jersey
since the 1890s, when the party had been corrupted by racetrack interests
and voted out of power. In the meantime, the standpat Republicans who
controlled the state government had alienated the insurgent reformers in
their party, known as the New Idea men, as well as the growing number of
progressives generally. Were the Democrats to wrest control of the guber-
natorial chair, the successful candidate would have to be in a position to
attract progressive support both from within and—especially—outside of
his party. Wilson seemed to be just that sort of candidate. Indeed, if things
worked out well for Wilson in New Jersey, Harvey and Smith anticipated
that they might have a national political prodigy on their hands. As Wilson’s
patrons and he himself recognized, the same characteristics that made him
attractive as a Democratic candidate for governor in New Jersey augured
well for a presidential bid.

Of course, Wilson’s background made him something of an unknown.
Before his sponsors gave him their active support, they made discreet inquir-
ies about how he would treat the machine politicos. Wilson let it be known
to Smith and Harvey that, in his words, “I should deem myself inexcusable
for antagonizing [the machine], so long as I was left absolutely free in the
matter of measures and men.” Wilson evidently assumed that he had been
understood and could govern as he wished if elected; Smith and Harvey
likewise assumed that the professor from Princeton would not be a threat to
their political plans. Neither Wilson nor his patrons, it turned out, were cor-
rect in their assumptions.

As the Newark machine went about securing Wilson’s nomination, it
appeared to many progressives in and outside the Democratic Party that Boss
Smith was using the Princeton professor as a Trojan horse with which to
take Trenton. Wilson began to counter this suspicion when he made a point
of declaring in an acceptance speech—which, against precedent, he chose to
give himself at the convention—that he had no political debts outstanding.
Furthermore, he declared, “the future is not for parties ‘playing politics,’ but
for measures conceived in the largest spirit, pushed by parties whose leaders
are statesmen, not demagogues, who love not their offices, but their duty and
opportunity for service. We are witnessing a renaissance of public spirit, a
re-awakening of sober public opinion. . . . Shall we not forget ourselves in
making [the Democratic Party] the instrument of righteousness for the State
and for the nation?” As consistent as Wilson’s pronouncements were with
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his own thinking over the years, they seemed remarkable indeed to both the machine politicians and reformers then battling in New Jersey.

A notable departure in Wilson's thinking did occur a few weeks later, however. It came about when George Record, the leader of the GOP New Idea men, on whose support the election would hinge, took up Wilson's standing offer to debate anyone on the issues of the campaign. In a public letter, Record asked Wilson to state unequivocally and for the public record his positions on a number of progressive concerns, including the regulation of public utilities, the direct election of senators, and workmen's compensation. The key questions that Record posed, however, concerned party reform, in particular the direct primary, the top concern for most New Idea men and New Jersey progressives. Record and the New Idea men had good reason to be suspicious of Wilson's commitment to progressivism and party reform. After all, Wilson had previously espoused conservative policies and lectured progressives on the unsuitability of the primary as a means for serious party reform. Presently he was the handpicked candidate of Boss Smith. Record's letter presented Wilson with some stark choices. Wilson knew that if he did not answer it, his integrity, his progressivism, and his political independence would be subject to even greater speculation. At risk were the votes outside of the Democratic Party, where he needed all the support he could get. As a result, he felt compelled to ignore the advice of Smith and Harvey and issue a reply to Record.

In his response, Wilson left no doubt that he would support the agenda of the New Idea Republicans. He endorsed the primary without reservation and promised to press for the abolition of boss rule. "I should deem myself forever disgraced," Wilson stated to Record, "should I even in the slightest degree cooperate in any such system or any such transactions as you describe in your characterization of the 'boss' system. I regard myself as pledged to the regeneration of the Democratic Party which I have forecast above."

The force in Wilson's denunciation of machine politics was no accident. Once Wilson decided to reach out to the New Idea men and other reform-minded voters, he could not afford even the appearance of equivocation in his stance vis-à-vis traditional party politics, lest these voters continue to harbor doubts about his independence. Wilson was discovering that progressivism had a logic of its own, one that ruled out the nuanced treatment that the traditional parties had received in Constitutional Government.

"That letter will elect Wilson governor," George Record was reported to have said upon reading it. And, indeed, Wilson won on election day by a majority of 49,056 (out of the 433,560 votes that were cast). It was not just Wilson who ran well. In an unforeseen development, the Democrats also
gained control of the assembly. Wilson's goal of appealing to Republican insurgents and independents had paid off, for him and his party. As Wallace Scudder, editor of the *Newark Evening News* put it, "Mr. Wilson owed his nomination to the Democrats. He owes his election to the independents."\(^{14}\)

The latter debt, in light of its more recent incurrence and greater significance, was the one that Wilson chose to discharge in the controversy that erupted shortly after his victory, when Jim Smith told Wilson he wanted to go back to the Senate. During the campaign, Smith had led Wilson to believe that he would not seek the seat. Were Smith now elected senator, it would falsify Wilson's oft-repeated professions about his independence from his patron, not to mention his criticism of boss rule. The situation was even more ticklish because there had been a nonbinding Democratic primary for the Senate seat, in which the voters were allowed to declare their preference to guide the legislators who would later vote on the matter. Smith had not entered the nonbinding primary, in which voter participation was low. The primary was won instead by James Martine, a hapless Bryanite who had conducted several failed campaigns for various offices in New Jersey. Although Martine may have been a buffoon, his election, the defeat of boss rule, and the validation of the primary principle quickly became intertwined ideals after the election. Wilson's political future, progressive associates warned him, both in New Jersey and as a presidential candidate hinged on whether these ideals were realized.\(^{15}\)

In a letter to Harvey, Wilson revealed his quandary as well as the aspirations it might thwart. He wished he could back Smith, "but his election would be intolerable to the very people who elected me and gave us a majority in the legislature... the 'progressives' of both parties." The integrity of the primary principle did not concern Wilson, only the impression its violation would make. "It is a national as well as a State question," he argued. At stake for the Democratic Party was nothing less than "the chance to draw all the liberal elements of the country to it, through new leaders, the chance that Mr. Roosevelt missed in his folly, and to constitute the ruling party of the country for the next generation."\(^{16}\) Wilson exaggerated. The Democratic Party was not destined to fall apart if New Jersey sent one more boss to the Senate. But if Wilson was going to instigate an enduring realignment in the party system, and if he was going to lead the transformed Democratic Party as it conducted more responsible government, both of which he was ambitious to accomplish, then for him to give in to Smith would mean disaster.

Wilson had hoped that Harvey would be able to persuade Smith to drop out of the race. But Smith was resolute in the face of Wilson's opposition to his candidacy, and a personal visit from the governor-elect on December 7
did nothing to resolve the issue. Stymied, Wilson resorted to a series of increasingly combative press releases and speeches denouncing Smith. Wilson combined this public coercion with extensive lobbying of the legislators who would be voting in the election. On January 24, 1911, Martine was elected senator. The college professor had given the boss from Essex County a lesson in hard-nosed politics. 

At first glance, Wilson's fight against Smith might seem to indicate that he was indeed dedicated to the rhetorical leadership of public opinion, the destruction of the traditional party organizations, and the establishment of direct democracy. But such an impression is misleading. The fight against Smith was, in a sense, not Wilson's, who was no defender of the direct primary until he received clear signals that his political future depended on his becoming one. Even then, Wilson worked behind the scenes in order to persuade Smith to drop out of the race; it was only when Smith refused, and dire political consequences seemed imminent, that Wilson resorted to a public showdown.

Wilson's confrontation with Smith needs to be understood as an effort not only to preserve Wilson's own fortunes but also the future of the Democratic Party. "Young men are flocking into the Democratic Party now," Wilson reminded an audience in Trenton on January 5, 1911, in the middle of one of his stem-winders against Smith. "These men will not have anything to do with the Democratic Party if it is to be dominated by the influences which in some quarters have dominated it in past years." Indeed, it was not just the Democratic Party but the very idea of a party system that Wilson believed was at issue in his fight against Smith. He was attempting to salvage some legitimacy for the system as it then operated, instead of rejecting it out of hand as so many were prepared to do. "I believe in organization," Wilson asserted, "I desire to cooperate with the Democrats of every affiliation in carrying the party forward." But if Smith went to the Senate, it would only provide further confirmation of the accusations of the antiparty reformers in the state and nation, leading more and more people to "distrust both primaries and parties." 

That Wilson prevailed over Smith meant that for the time being, at least in New Jersey, the Democratic Party and party politics in general were spared the difficulties that might otherwise have befallen them. Wilson also reaped the political benefits that he himself stood to gain. Democrats and progressives from around the country wrote to salute his stand. The most important message came from William Jennings Bryan. "The fact that you were against us in 1896," Bryan wrote, "raised a question in my mind in regard to your views on public questions but your attitude in the Senatorial
cause has tended to reassure me."\textsuperscript{20} That Bryan was now prepared to commend him, notwithstanding their past disagreements, was a most pleasing development, for as Wilson emphatically put it, "of course no Democrat can win whom Mr. Bryan does not approve."\textsuperscript{21}

But Wilson still had a way to go to win Bryan's full approval—specifically, on the initiative, referendum, and recall. While party conservatives feared these measures, the Bryanite wing of the Democratic Party had come to regard support for them as "the acid test of a man's democracy these days," as Charles Bryan put it.\textsuperscript{22} This acid test presented a problem for Wilson. He had always argued against direct legislation by the voters as the epitome of a wrongheaded, inorganic approach to government, one that asked the voters to perform tasks of which they were manifestly incapable. However, shortly after being elected governor, Wilson had a visit with William S. U'ren, the leading proponent of the "Oregon system" of direct democracy, who urged Wilson to adopt this system in its entirety, not just the anticorruption and direct primary laws that already were planned but also provisions for direct legislation and the recall. Many of Wilson's own progressive associates in the New Jersey Democratic Party shared U'ren's views, and they also expounded to the governor the political benefits of a change in his positions. In the face of these arguments, theoretical and practical, Wilson's opposition to the initiative, referendum, and recall began to dissipate. It would soon drop altogether.\textsuperscript{23}

In May 1911, Wilson headed out to Bryan country and the West Coast on a speaking tour in which he intended both to explore and nurture his presidential prospects. At the first stop on this tour, in Kansas City, Wilson announced his firm support for the initiative, referendum, and recall. He defended his dramatic change of heart by denying that the measures were radical: "Their intention is to restore, not to destroy, representative government."\textsuperscript{24} When party conservatives raised their objections, Wilson would emphasize that he did not see the initiative, referendum, and recall as universal solutions; whether they would be useful depended on conditions in each state and locality. Wilson also consistently disavowed the recall of judges and judicial decisions, a reform that Theodore Roosevelt had taken to championing. Traditionalists abhorred the judicial recall, and Wilson agreed that it threatened the basic idea of constitutionalism.\textsuperscript{25} And, as he had in the confrontation with Smith over primary reform, Wilson stated that his advocacy of direct democracy was by no means a repudiation of organized partisanship, which would always be necessary for effective political action, but only of legislators and executives controlled and corrupted by backroom politicos.\textsuperscript{26} With his change of positions on the Oregon system,
Wilson sought to preserve the legitimacy of party action by giving voters the electoral tools they were demanding to punish the degradations of machine politics.

But this, of course, was not the whole of Wilson's endeavor. His full-scale endorsement of direct democracy, while couched in conservative terms of restoration rather than transformation, was a crucial and attractive shift in the view of Bryanites and other progressive Democrats. Throughout the remainder of the year, Wilson continued to seek the favor of these elements in the party. Toward this end, he began criticizing the money trust and distancing himself from Colonel Harvey.27

In January 1912, however, all of Wilson's efforts to win the support of Bryan and his followers threatened to come undone. Back in 1907, when Wilson was still an avowed goldbug Democrat, he had expressed a fateful wish to a correspondent: "Would that we could do something, at once dignified and effective, to knock Mr. Bryan once for all into a cocked hat." Five years later, this wish suddenly reappeared in the newspapers, at the very moment that the Democratic National Committee was convening in Washington for its Jackson Day meeting. Wilson knew that he had some explaining to do if he wanted to keep his presidential hopes alive. The man who, in 1908, had refused even to break bread with Bryan at a Jefferson Day banquet was now prepared to eat Jackson Day crow in front of the Commoner and the entire party.28

In the middle of his speech, Wilson made his apology by way of a salute: "While we have differed with Mr. Bryan upon this occasion and upon that in regard to the specific things to be done, he has gone serenely on pointing out to a more and more convinced people what it was that was the matter. He has . . . not based his career upon calculation, but has based it upon principle."29 Wilson's testimony was remarkable, not least because it was precisely in these terms that he had previously praised Grover Cleveland and condemned William Jennings Bryan. It is hard to imagine a more profound statement of the extent to which Wilson had overhauled his Bourbon inclinations to accommodate political reality. Indeed, by the logic of his salute to Bryan, he himself was as contemptible as the Nebraskan was commendable.

In fact, Wilson held a more subtle conception of political leadership than this. To be sure, he had always praised the leader who held fast to a particular agenda, on principle, and who in the process gradually turned from a dissenter to a harbinger to a spokesman of the majority. This quality was the basis for his admiration of John Bright. But Wilson reserved more admiration for another kind of statesmanship, in which convictions and policies evolved over the years in response to the prevailing sentiments of pub-
lic opinion, the logic of compelling ideas, and the experience of and responsibility for governing—the search for truth that Wilson's hero of long-standing, William Gladstone, had undertaken.

Thus despite the inconsistencies that had surfaced in Wilson's positions vis-à-vis big business, political machines, and direct democracy during his initial forays into politics, and notwithstanding the political ambitions that helped bring about these inconsistencies, his actions and statements in these years had integrity at a fundamental level. In responding to public demands for reform, pursuing the logic of progressivism as it was mapped out by the likes of Record, U'Ren, and Bryan, and learning from his experience in his struggles with Boss Smith, Wilson emerged as the sort of interpretive statesman he had always esteemed, a leader who, among other things, could initiate a regeneration in the party system and the polity at large.

II

As much as his endorsement of William Jennings Bryan and the Bryanite political agenda, Wilson's legislative accomplishments during his first year as governor established him as a viable and attractive Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1912. In Trenton, Wilson sought to provide the encompassing leadership of his party, the legislature, and public opinion that he had been calling upon chief executives to exercise. His governorship served, then, as a preliminary test of his program. 30

In October 1910, during the gubernatorial campaign, Wilson offered a preview of his brand of leadership in response to a speech by his Republican opponent, Vivian Leigh. Leigh had proposed that he would be a "constitutional governor," i.e., one who would not seek to lead the legislature actively and personally but instead only through written messages and, if necessary, vetoes. If those were the standards of a constitutional executive, Wilson proudly declared, then he would be an "unconstitutional governor" and actively lead the legislature, explaining with his own voice to its members—and to the people at large—why the measures he would propose were sound and necessary. Dismissing the whiggish scruples of his opponent, Wilson argued that his vision of engaged, public, and comprehensive executive leadership actually served the spirit of New Jersey's constitution, for it "relieves the Legislature of certain kinds of pressure which they will find it very welcome to be relieved of." 31

Wilson wasted little time in putting his theory into practice. On January 16, 1911, the day before his inauguration, Wilson met with several Democratic legislators, party advisers, and George Record to map out the legislation he would advocate. They agreed to focus on four major proposals
from the Democratic platform: a direct primary law and corrupt practices act and bills providing for workmen's compensation and a strengthening of the public utilities commission.\(^32\) Having decided upon the agenda, in his inaugural address Wilson began the publicity campaign that he had promised on its behalf. He kept up the publicity with a barrage of press releases, public addresses, and interviews with journalists.\(^33\) Wilson also brought his "talking" campaign to the legislature itself, taking the unprecedented step of meeting in closed sessions with the Democratic members of the assembly to explain the proposals he had put before them.\(^34\) Wilson's visits generated considerable opposition from some members of his audience, who regarded it as a clear violation of the separation of powers. But as Wilson pointed out to them on one occasion, the New Jersey constitution mandated that "the Governor shall communicate by message to the legislature at the opening of each session, and at such other times as he may deem necessary, the condition of the State, and recommend such measures as he may deem appropriate."\(^35\)

It was not only through public pronouncements and his ample reading of his gubernatorial prerogatives that Wilson sought to lead the legislature. He used more consensual means as well. Much to the consternation of progressive associates such as James Kerney and George Record, Wilson invited a leader of the Smith forces in the legislature to attend the January meeting at which his administration's agenda was mapped out. Once the agenda was announced, Wilson became an effective lobbyist for it, meeting frequently with members of the legislature to plead his case. He subsequently compromised with wavering legislators on numerous provisions. Various parts of the primary bill, for instance, were altered to alleviate the concerns of traditional politicians, again over the complaints of progressives. Finally, although he was not an informal man, Wilson acknowledged the need to facilitate the cooperation of legislators by swapping stories and engaging in their carryings-on. In April, near the end of the legislative session, Wilson found himself cakewalking around a dance floor with a senator. "Such are the processes of high politics," a bemused Wilson wrote to a confidant. "This is what it costs to be a leader."\(^36\)

The synthesis of assertive and consensual executive leadership that Wilson had called for in his academic works had proved to be remarkably productive in its first practical application, facilitating the passage of the four major bills that Wilson and his aides had set as priorities in January. Reformers in the state and nation hailed Wilson's legislative success as a tremendous achievement, a result of his encompassing leadership and initiative.\(^37\) Just after the adjournment, he sought to put things in perspective for a friend: "As a matter of fact, it is just a bit of natural history. I came to the office in
the fullness of time, when opinion was ripe on all these matters, when both
parties were committed to these reforms, and by merely standing fast, and
by never losing sight of the business for an hour, but keeping up all sorts
of (legitimate) pressure all the time, kept the mighty forces from being di-
verted or blocked at any point." 38 Wilson took pride not just in his legislative
achievements but also in the methods that had produced them. No doubt he
saw his success in this regard as just as much "a bit of natural history" as
were the legislative achievements themselves.

Yet as Wilson was soon to realize, if he had not already, the methods and
effects of his gubernatorial leadership were not completely consistent with
his program. The Darwinian evolution of politics upon which this program
was premised lagged somewhat, at least in New Jersey. It is interesting to
note that even when writing to a close friend, as he was in the passage above,
Wilson felt the need to note parenthetically that he was, of course, exercising
only "(legitimate)" pressure on the legislature. What might constitute ille-
gitimate pressure? In Constitutional Government and in his prophetic, preelec-
tion declaration that he would be an "unconstitutional governor," Wilson
identified two particularly egregious forms of pressure that executives had
been known to resort to: using patronage to purchase votes in the legislature
and setting up a political machine of their own to fight their political op-
ponents. 39 Wilson had in part developed his conception of interpretive lead-
ership, in which the leader drew strength from his public elaboration and
defense of a principled program, so that executives might free themselves,
and the public interest, from the debilitating influence of "mere partisanship."

Thus on March 20, 1911, when New Jersey Democratic Party Chairman
James Nugent, Jim Smith's son-in-law and henchman, accused Wilson of
using the very same illicit methods of partisanship that the governor had
repeatedly condemned, an enraged Wilson chucked the politico out of his
office, thereby adding to his growing reputation as the scourge of the bosses.
However, what the press took for righteous indignation might well have
been anger generated by a guilty conscience. 40

Recall that Wilson failed to resolve a fundamental ambivalence if not a
contradiction in his program regarding party politics. On the one hand, he
proposed that executives could and should refuse to stoop to the rough-
hewn methods by which party leaders had traditionally secured votes in the
legislature and the electorate. On the other hand, he had come to appreciate
the integrating functions of the traditional party organizations and the ex-
tent to which a party's performance of these essential functions hinged on
their making the "petty choices" of politics, especially at the state and local
level.
Notwithstanding Wilson's mounting criticism of the boss system, criticism in large part driven by the progressive tide he was attempting to ride in New Jersey and the nation, he retained his realistic understanding of what made for effective party action after he embarked on his political career. His realism in this regard led him to ask Joseph Tumulty, an ex-assemblyman and a regular in the Hudson County machine run by Robert Davis, to be his secretary. Like several other reform-minded Davis men, Tumulty had first come into the Wilson camp when it appeared that candidate Wilson was turning away from his patron, James Smith, whose Essex County machine was the chief intraparty rival of their own. During the rest of 1910, Wilson appreciated and benefited from Tumulty's practical advice and support, especially in the early days of the showdown with Smith. In early January, when Wilson was realizing more and more the extent to which he would have to beat Smith at his own game, he offered Tumulty the job “in order that I may have a guide at my elbow in matters of which I know almost nothing.”

In addition to practical advice on how to proceed in the fight to deny Smith the Senate seat he coveted, Wilson relied on Tumulty to recommend men for virtually all of the appointments he made as governor. Not wanting to handle this duty himself but recognizing that it had to be done, and done well, Wilson assigned it to his new assistant. Tumulty's heartier scruples and broader experience made him, as Wilson no doubt knew, a better man for the job. Tumulty had received his political education in a system where bosses kept tight control over the sustaining spoils. He was caught off guard even as he was delighted by this “most remarkable assignment.” In consultation with his friend James Kerney, a Trenton newspaperman who, like Tumulty, coupled an appreciation for Wilson's vision with a realistic understanding of what was needed to make it work, the young aide filled in the roster of appointments. Kerney later recalled that “Tumulty and I made a sincere effort to pick men who would be a credit to Wilson and who furthermore had rendered party service and would not be offensive to the organization.” Acting upon Tumulty's advice and upon their implicit mutual objective of reconciling progressivism and politics, Wilson completely cut out the Smith machine in making his appointments; nevertheless, the state Democratic chairman could later boast that Wilson had filled 80 percent of the jobs at his disposal with party regulars. More important, Wilson kept most of his appointments in hand until after his legislation had made it through the statehouse, keeping the carrot out in front of the legislators expected to hold the party line.

Tumulty and Wilson, though the governor was not prepared to admit it, were not only interested in securing votes in the legislature but also in the
New Jersey electorate before the legislative elections in 1911—and in any elections that Wilson might be standing in the following year. Tumulty prepared his patronage lists with an eye to fostering a Wilson machine throughout the state that could defeat the Smith faction. The crown jewel of his strategy was to capture as much of the Hudson County machine, then in flux after the death of Bob Davis, as was possible, thereby establishing for Wilson a major urban base (Jersey City) to balance that controlled by Smith (Newark).

This plan, however, entailed Wilson’s warming up to some Jersey City politicos with more than just patronage. Thus in the primary season of 1911, for example, during which Wilson took what he pointed out with a boast was the unprecedented step of stumping the state to condemn the intraparty opponents of his policies, most of whom were Smith’s men, he shocked his progressive supporters when he did not come out against two Hudson County assemblymen who had been among the most recalcitrant in opposing his legislative agenda. Having the sole virtue of not being in Smith’s pocket, the two bosses from Jersey City received Wilson’s stamp of approval.

Wilson’s tacit collaboration with machine elements in New Jersey politics, opportunistic and hypocritical though it may have seemed to James Nugent and New Idea men alike, was in fact rooted in a nagging contradiction in his program. Other problems surfaced with the returns and aftermath of the 1911 elections. According to Wilson’s program, these elections should have produced Democratic majorities. He and his party had run on a progressive platform and carried it out systematically, precisely the circumstances that he had always believed would produce a groundswell of electoral support. “You voted for the forecast. Are you going to confirm the reality?” Wilson asked voters in Morristown on October 16. Later that day, in Madison, Wilson bluntly told his audience: “If you don’t vote to return a Democratic Legislature on November 7 you lied when you voted for me last fall.”

Arthur Link documents that Wilson’s leadership and the Democratic record of 1911 do appear to have spurred on the Democratic vote. Whereas Republican candidates for the legislature, taken as a whole, had run up statewide majorities of 61,586 votes in 1908 and 41,502 votes in 1909, in 1911 they were outpolled by their Democratic rivals by 3,100 votes. Nevertheless, in 1911 the voters of New Jersey sent Republican majorities to both houses in Trenton. The GOP won thirty-seven of the sixty assembly races and five of the eight Senate races. What produced the defeat? The Wilson ticket had been knifed by Smith’s machine. Had the Democrats carried Essex County,
they would have had majorities in both houses, but the silence of Smith’s papers during the campaign and his machine’s deliberate refusal to get out the Democratic vote in Essex County, which fell from 40,516 voters in 1910 to 23,360 in 1911, kept this from happening.47

Wilson was caught off guard by the returns and enraged by Smith’s pyrrhic vengeance. His conception of party leadership had suddenly been confounded: notwithstanding his successful execution of his mandate, he—the prime minister—now faced the prospect of having to deal with a legislature controlled by the opposition. The day after the election, Wilson stated tersely, “I look forward with great interest to the next session as affording an opportunity to the Republican leaders to fulfill the very explicit pledges of their platform.” He was clearly putting the onus for constructive legislation on the GOP.48

In the next few months, Wilson became precisely the sort of “constitutional governor” that he had earlier derided. Apart from a proposal for administrative reorganization, Wilson took no initiative in matters of policy, in stark contrast to the previous session. He also reacted against Republican measures by issuing some fifty-seven vetoes (as compared with thirteen the year before), many of which were drafted in acerbic form.49 Having effectively buried the separation of powers in the New Jersey constitution in 1911, Wilson exhumed the arrangement and used it to fight a rear-guard action against the Republican majorities in 1912.

Wilson’s record as governor of New Jersey provides an early glimpse of the central insights and contradictions in his program for responsible government. The comprehensive leadership he had provided in 1911, combining as it did public and private, forceful and consensual means, was by all accounts masterful and a major factor in the remarkable legislative achievements of that year. At the same time, however, Wilson’s program did not map an easy route through the maze of traditional party politics; its key assumption about the translation of legislative success into electoral reaffirmation was overridden at the polls; and it offered no effective formula for—indeed, it appeared to exacerbate—the circumstances of divided government.

III

Wilson’s apparent abdication of gubernatorial leadership in 1912 no doubt stemmed partly from his increasing preoccupation with the presidential campaign. At the same time that his program was being sorely tested in Trenton, it was also being put to the test at the national level. Wilson’s advocacy of his candidacy and his party’s platform in the months leading up to the presidential election rested in large part on a defense of his program
against the standpattism of Taft and the Republicans, on the one hand, and the radical departures envisioned by Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Party, on the other. On questions of political economy, for example, Wilson denounced the Taft administration’s willingness to rely on the Sherman Act to cope with the problem of monopoly and its support for high protective tariffs. But Wilson insisted that the remedies to these problems in the Progressive platform were likewise unacceptable.

Theodore Roosevelt and sympathetic intellectuals such as Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann disdained what they regarded as the heavy-handed and all too often parochial attempts by Congress and the political parties to solve increasingly complex social and economic problems by means of formal laws. They thought it far better to turn over these vexsome tasks to independent commissions, in which expert administrators, well insulated from political pressures, would be in the ideal position to discern and act upon the public interest. The Progressive Party platform reflected this argument in planks that called for the establishment of independent commissions to regulate business and oversee the setting of tariff rates.  

To be sure, Wilson believed in experts and the need to grant them sufficient discretion. However, he had long insisted that to be legitimate, agencies had to be directly controlled by political leaders and parties that were in turn directly accountable to the electorate. Independent boards and commissions not only violated the ideals of political responsibility and the rule of law but also increased the likelihood that private interests would capture such agencies and use them for their own purposes. In 1912, Wilson insisted that more partisanship, not less, was the solution for problems like the tariff and the trusts—that is, responsible partisanship of the sort that produced coherent and systematic legislation.

But was such partisanship possible? At a more fundamental level, Wilson had to defend the idea of responsible partisanship against the alternative notions embodied in the campaigns of his rivals. William Howard Taft’s campaign was both an unashamed display and defense of traditional party politics against the antipartisan insurgency led by Theodore Roosevelt. The Republican presidential machine cracked the patronage whip with great efficiency as it lined up convention delegates for the incumbent. Taft’s forces also squelched calls for primary reform, which stood to benefit the more popular Roosevelt, ignoring the outraged protests of the Bull Moose and his supporters. Determined to stand against such “radicalism and demagogy,” Taft vowed that “even if I go down to defeat it is my duty to secure the nomination if I can, under the rules that the Republican Party Convention has established, in spite of all the threats to bolt or to establish a third
party.” The resolve of Taft along with that of Elihu Root and Henry Cabot Lodge, who joined the incumbent in his stand against Roosevelt, was ultimately prompted by Roosevelt’s championing of direct democracy, especially the judicial recall, which horrified constitutional conservatives.

Undaunted by the determined opposition of his former associates, Roosevelt continued his demands for more direct democracy, even on constitutional questions, and pressed his assault on “the spoils politicians and patronage mongers,” in his graphic phrasing, by lashing his candidacy directly to the cause of primary reform. In June, on the eve of the Republican National Convention from which he would soon bolt, he declared, “I have absolutely no affiliation with any party.” The progressives who followed Roosevelt out of the convention had likewise given up on party politics. In its first platform plank the Progressive Party condemned “The Old Parties” as obsolete and corrupt and deemed itself “a new instrument of government through which to give effect to [the people’s] will in laws and institutions.” It went on to endorse a sweeping program of direct democracy, including the judicial recall at the state level, intending to drain the power from “the state of courts and parties” that Taft and his supporters were defending. As Sidney Milkis and Daniel Tichenor have observed, the Progressive Party was a paradox, “a party to end party politics.”

It was between these two extremes, the uncritical acceptance or principled rejection of party politics, that Wilson was trying to navigate in 1912. His criticism of the stultifying effect that the traditional parties had on political debate, legislation, and administration—criticism that he had sharpened after his entrance into electoral politics in 1910—continued as he campaigned for the White House. So did his recently adopted advocacy of the direct primary and the initiative, referendum, and recall (though he continued to oppose Roosevelt’s judicial recall as inconsistent with the rule of law). That a progressive politician in Wilson’s day would criticize backroom politics while advocating direct democracy is not surprising. What is striking is Wilson’s insistent efforts to defend responsible party government.

Wilson emphasized two main themes in this defense. First, he sought to redefine party politics. “A boss isn’t a leader of a party,” Wilson insisted in a recurring campaign argument. “Parties don’t meet in back rooms; parties don’t have private understandings; parties don’t make arrangements which never get into the newspapers.” In lieu of this common conception of party politics, he offered an alternative view in which principles and public policy, not patronage and political power, were what animated and united the partisans. Thus it was that Wilson told an audience in New Jersey, while wrapping up his presidential campaign, “I look upon the party as an instru-
ment, not as an end. I do not limit my view by the Democratic Party, but I look through the Democratic Party to the destinies of the United States." If ever the two diverged, he continued, he would stick with the larger destinies. He knew that if parties could be seen in this light, as instruments oriented to the public and national interests, then party government could take on a new legitimacy.

At the same time that Wilson was attempting to redefine partisanship, he continued to stress the importance of political organization. Indeed, whenever he endorsed direct democracy as a reform agenda, he almost always urged that it be considered not as a substitute but only as a correction for an organization gone awry. Wilson expounded on these imperatives in the first plank of a draft platform that he proposed for the national Democratic Party in 1912: "Political organization is absolutely indispensable to the successful action of parties, and should . . . be fostered so long as it constitutes the means of carrying out the principles of a party and of serving the public interest. It becomes hurtful or illegitimate only when it is perverted and degenerates into a mere 'machine' for the advancement of personal fortunes (either economic or politic)."

Both reformers and party regulars doubted, albeit for different reasons, whether the creation and maintenance of such an organization, at once principled and effective, was possible. Certainly the history of party politics in the United States gave ample evidence for their doubts. Wilson acknowledged the difficulty of the juggling act he was proposing but also argued that the legitimacy and efficiency of the party organization were not opposed but in fact intertwined. On September 12, 1912, when Wilson addressed the leaders of the New York State Democratic Party, in which machine and reform elements were at loggerheads, he elaborated as follows: "The strength of a party, the fighting strength of a party, lies in its organization, but the strength of an organization lies in the purpose which it has in view. Without the right purpose, organization can't succeed in the long run. With the best of purposes, you can't succeed without organization. And that is the whole quandary of politics."

It was indeed a quandary. In formulating his program and attempting to put it into practice in New Jersey, Wilson had yet to reconcile the demands of party legitimacy and efficiency. His opponents in 1912 had forsaken the attempt altogether, Taft digging in with his organization to defend the old ways, Roosevelt and his followers bolting with their principles and faith in direct democracy. But Wilson himself remained convinced, or at least was not ready to give up his lifelong hope, that a leader of vision who abstained
from the baser methods of party management but nevertheless stayed within the party fold would be able to solve the quandary of party politics in the United States.

The three different views on party politics held by Taft, Roosevelt, and Wilson in 1912 ran parallel to differences in the candidates’ views on presidential leadership. Taft, for his part, came close to embodying the whig presidency that Wilson had criticized. After leaving the White House, Taft would argue that “the President can exercise no power which cannot be fairly and reasonably traced to some specific grant of power or justly implied and included within such express grant as proper and necessary to its exercise.” Taft did not always hold to such a narrow and lawyerly view of presidential power, as demonstrated by his unstinting campaign against Roosevelt in 1912. That being said, Taft’s famous definition of the constraints on the executive reflected a conception of the office that was much more limited than those held by his rivals in the 1912 election.

Wilson and Roosevelt believed that the president could and should take much more initiative in leading Congress and public opinion. But there were clear differences in their approaches. In Wilson’s estimation, public opinion leadership primarily involved the recognition and explanation of emerging political developments. Insofar as the leader’s speech was inspirational, it should be because of the powerful truths and principles that were being explained. Roosevelt, in contrast, subscribed to a heroic conception of leadership that inspired more of an emotionally charged, even spiritual response. Although Wilson regarded Roosevelt as something of a demagogue, other progressive thinkers warmed to his outbursts. Herbert Croly admired him as “Thor wielding with power and effect a sledge-hammer in the cause of national righteousness.” Walter Lippmann remarked that Roosevelt “haunts political thinking. And indeed, why shouldn’t he... government under him was a throbbing human purpose. . . . I believe we need offer no apologies for making Mr. Roosevelt stand as the working model for a possible American statesman at the beginning of the twentieth century.” Roosevelt’s thunderous rallying cry to his fellow progressives in 1912—“We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord”—is a perfect example of the heroic, radical rhetoric that set his leadership apart from the more professorial, interpretive approach of Wilson.

Wilson also held that the executive leader was connected with his party in ways that Roosevelt ultimately found unacceptable. The two leaders’ behavior leading up to the 1912 election is revealing on this point. Wilson had, over time, moved toward the progressive majority in his party. Roosevelt, in
contrast, sought to impose his more progressive views on a party, and when it was clear that he and his policies were going to lose, he appeared in person to denounce the proceedings and led his supporters away. During the Democratic Convention, Wilson disavowed any personal appearances and ordered his delegates to be released when he concluded that he could not win the nomination. Unwilling to give up so easily, Wilson’s floor managers did not carry out his instructions, and subsequently, through the vagaries of the two-thirds rule and some old-fashioned back room dealing, the Wilson men prevailed. The outcome notwithstanding, the contrast between Wilson’s and Roosevelt’s behavior reflects different convictions concerning the relationship between leaders and their parties.  

Looking at the 1912 election, then, it is apparent that the program embodied in Roosevelt’s candidacy and theorized by Croly and Lippmann was the source of the unsettling ideas for which James Ceaser, Jeffrey Tulis, and others have criticized Wilson. While Wilson shared many of the concerns of Roosevelt and his followers, he proposed to conserve and refine many aspects of the old order. It is in the Bull Moose’s candidacy that one finds a highly distilled call for the subordination of the Constitution and traditional party politics to plebiscitarian leadership and direct democracy. It is particularly revealing that the self-conscious defenders of the Founders’ regime felt compelled to defeat Roosevelt’s program. That doing this required Taft, Root, and Lodge to turn on a friend and former leader, to sacrifice knowingly the political fortunes of the Republican Party in 1912, and to allow the Democrats to take control of the government reveals the intensity of their convictions about the radicalism of Bull Moose progressivism. Conversely, it reflects the less objectionable nature of Wilson’s program to the friends of the Constitution and the traditional party system.

The contrasts among the candidates in 1912 also point to the continuity in Wilson’s thinking over the years, the altered institutional dynamics of his program notwithstanding. In the 1880s, Wilson had defended the idea of party government against Albert Stickney’s call for a nonpartisan administration of the “best men” at the same time that he had opposed Sir Henry Maine’s and A. Lawrence Lowell’s endorsements of the constitutional and political status quo. In 1912, Wilson was occupying the same ground for the same reasons. He still did not believe that party government could or should be rejected in favor of an omnipotent executive and an expanded bureaucracy. Yet Wilson also remained convinced that the constitutional balance of power between the executive and legislature, as well as the means and ends of party politics, needed to be adjusted if the nation was to cope with its new predicaments.
Another perennial aspect of Wilson's program figured prominently, and was of more immediate relevance, in his 1912 presidential campaign: the need for a realignment that would sweep away the last remnants of Gilded Age politics, define a more principled and relevant debate between the parties, and establish the Democrats as a reform-minded majority in the process. As David Sarasohn has demonstrated, the wide agreement within the Democratic Party on a progressive agenda and the electoral surge that it had recently been enjoying in some key states and Congress made the prospects for a realignment look very good indeed in 1912. Wilson's desire to help foster and then to benefit from this realignment had informed his entrance into electoral politics in 1910 and shaped his political leadership in New Jersey. He understood that his fortunes in national politics as well as the fate of his program for responsible government would ultimately depend on such a sweeping change in the party system.

In the spring of 1911, as Wilson tacitly opened his presidential campaign with a cross-country speaking tour, he drew attention to the ferment in the American polity. "Party lines are resting lightly on the people these days," he contended in Indianapolis on April 13. "I do not believe there will be any new parties, but I believe there will be a redistribution of the voters between the parties." Wilson was optimistic in this regard because of what he interpreted as fundamental changes occurring in voting behavior. In Kansas City on May 6, Wilson proposed that "the voters now are becoming what might be called detachable voters. They don't have to be pried off with a crowbar. They follow their convictions. There was a time, you remember, when a man couldn't have been torn from his party for anything. But the times have changed. . . . The old arguments of the parties do not ring [true] any more. The people want new proposals and the party that offers them will win." In noting the erosion of the fervent partisan identification that had characterized party politics in the "party period" of the nineteenth century, and in drawing attention to the difficulties that the two major parties were having in accommodating the issues that had come to the fore in the Progressive Era, Wilson was pointing out developments that have since been confirmed by political scientists and historians. But at the same time he was also attempting to "interpret" a realignment that would bring him and the Democratic Party to power.

To spur along the realignment, Wilson urged that citizens put aside family traditions and sectional and ethnocultural loyalties when they entered the voting booth. Voting decisions—or nondecisions, in Wilson's estimation—
arising from these factors had contributed to the political and governmental stagnation that had constrained the nation's development for too long. "We have made a mess of voting sentimentally," he argued at the height of the 1912 campaign. "We have made a mess of being disinclined to vote tickets which our fathers wouldn't vote." Instead, Wilson proposed that voters decide on the basis of what he believed were national, contemporary issues. 68

Were voters to decide on the issues, on which party's programs were the best suited for the nation's problems, then Wilson had no doubt that the Democrats not only would win the election but also acquire, through a realigning shift, the support of a majority in the electorate. The Republicans, Wilson argued, had been thoroughly corrupted by their years in power and their de facto alliance with large industrial and financial concerns. The insurgent protests and the schism within the Republican ranks were apt reflections of the corruption of the GOP. But the insurgents were fooling themselves by attempting to form a third party, an effort that could not result in any constructive change. Only the Democratic Party—the Opposition Party—was in a position to produce such change. Having been out of power for so long, it was free of the corrupting effects of holding power, and its economic program sought to countervail rather than collude with powerful economic interests. Therefore, Wilson reasoned, the Democrats were both the deserving and the only suitable recipients of the progressive voter's loyalty. 69

It would be easy to dismiss Wilson's discussion of realignment, and his general defense of responsible partisanship, as the campaign rhetoric of a politician seeking to line up votes, which Wilson certainly was. But there was more to his speeches. They expressed ideas that had always been at the core of his program for responsible government. Wilson understood his own victory and the Democratic capture of both houses of Congress in the 1912 elections as a profound historical confirmation of his ideas. "There has been a change in Government," Wilson announced at the start of his inaugural address on March 4, 1913, in distinctively parliamentary phrasing. His party, the emerging majority party, had a mandate to govern: "No one can mistake the purpose for which the nation now seeks to use the Democratic Party. It seeks to use it to interpret a change in its own plans and point of view."70

Looking back at 1912, political scientists and historians have generally disagreed with Wilson's confident judgment and have been inclined instead to see the Democratic victory in 1912 as a historical accident produced by the divided GOP ticket. Were Roosevelt's 4.1 million votes and Taft's 3.5 million votes pooled together, this line of analysis runs, the Republicans easily would have overcome Wilson's 6.3 million votes. The electoral troubles that Wilson eventually encountered were to be expected: he was only
presiding over a deviating "Democratic interlude," as Walter Dean Burnham has put it, that shook up but did not realign the Republican-dominated electoral "system of 1896."71

Looked at from another angle, however, the election of 1912 takes on a different light. The three-way race in 1912 was not an accident but rather the result of deep fissures that had been brewing in the Republican Party for some time. Taft, Roosevelt, and their respective supporters were in fundamental disagreement over the appropriate forms of party politics and constitutionalism in the United States. The two campaigns also had divergent understandings of how and to what extent the government should intervene in the industrial economy. It is far from clear, therefore, that Taft's and Roosevelt's votes simply can be combined after the fact. The evidence indicates that a significant percentage of Republican and progressive voters just could not have brought themselves to vote for the rival faction. Had either Taft or Roosevelt run alone, Wilson still may well have won.72

That Wilson and the Democrats may not have been predestined for decimation by a return to Republican normalcy in 1920 is given further credence by a reconsideration of the process of partisan realignment itself. Recently, political scientists and historians have suggested that while the process of realignment begins with shifts in the electorate, it concludes and is ultimately distinguished by the achievements of the officeholders invested with power by those shifts. In this conception of realignment, leaders and parties in government, as much as voters in the electorate, serve as the "mainsprings" of American politics. Presidents and their congressional parties secure realignments by undertaking reforms and making policies that consolidate and sustain a majority base in the electorate. Such a top-down understanding of realignment suggests that the electoral fate of Wilson and the Democrats was not yet determined in 1912–1913; instead, this fate would hinge on the leadership and policies that would follow.73

When considered from this angle, the prospects for a Democratic realignment looked promising as Wilson was taking office in 1913. There was widespread support in public opinion and in Congress for action on the three items at the top of Wilson's agenda: tariff revision, banking and currency reform, and antitrust legislation. In the elections of 1912, the Democrats considerably increased the House majority they had won in 1910, holding 291 out of 435 seats; in the Senate, they gained 10 seats and a new majority of 6. These majorities were eager and organized to work with the president, and 114 of the House Democrats were freshmen elected with Wilson on the New Freedom ticket. Since the overthrow of Speaker Cannon in 1910, the delegation had organized and disciplined itself through the party caucus
under the leadership of Majority Leader and Ways and Means chairman Oscar Underwood of Alabama, who was heading up the tariff revision. In the Senate, the slimmer majority was partially offset by the influx of several progressive Democrats, the likely support of the administration’s economic reforms by Republican insurgents, and the selection of John Worth Kern, a progressive from Indiana and Bryan’s running mate in 1908, as floor leader.  

The election of 1912, then, opened a window of opportunity for Wilson and the Democrats that boded well for legislative achievement and a realignment of the party system. To secure these policy and political goals, Wilson had to begin to put his program for responsible government into practice. He knew that if he was going to exercise systematic leadership of the domestic agenda at this critical juncture in American history, he needed to bridge the constitutional divide between Congress and the president with authoritative leadership and to turn the Democratic Party into a party that was animated more by principles and policies and less by patronage and parochial concerns. The resulting reputation for masterful leadership and the creation of a more progressive Democratic Party, in turn, would certainly enhance if not guarantee the political fortunes of Wilson and his party, not to mention a fuller establishment of his program for responsible government.