The President as Statesman

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SIX

Toward Party Reform and Realignment

Although the New Freedom period demonstrated the promise of Wilson's approach to relations between the president and Congress, it also demonstrated the limitations imposed on it by the state of the U.S. party system, in particular the Democratic Party. From 1914 to 1916, Wilson undertook several initiatives in the hope of making his party a more suitable instrument of responsible government. His attempts to overhaul his party, while not completely in vain—they helped him demonstrate his progressive bona fides, which proved crucial to his reelection in 1916—were largely unsuccessful. By the end of his first term, he was more and more convinced that at least so long as the separation of powers was in place, the president could not transform his party through personal leadership.

I

Wilson's first serious attempt to reform party politics came in 1914, after the initial year of the New Freedom, when he began pushing his plan for a national presidential primary. Although his support for the direct primary had at first been extorted by progressives in New Jersey, he had since come to be persuaded that the primary was one way of transcending what he regarded as the debilitating constraints of traditional party politics. In the Palmer letter of February 1913, Wilson argued that the popular nomination of presidential candidates not only would guard against the temptation to construct a presidential machine for reelection purposes (as Taft had notoriously done in 1912) but also would establish an unmistakable bond between the successful presidential candidate and the dominant trend in public opinion. Popular nominations would thus reduce the president's need to rely on the usual, objectionable methods of party management while carrying out the multiple duties of his office.
Wilson also became an advocate of the presidential primary because he believed it would deflate support for another popular reform that would do more harm than good: a constitutional amendment establishing a single, six-year term for presidents. The activities of the GOP machine on behalf of Taft’s campaign for reelection had only bolstered support for the amendment, which passed the Senate in early 1913. Wilson held that one extended term would be too long for a bad president, too short for a good one. He therefore proposed in the Palmer letter that it was better to clean up presidential politicking with the primary rather than attempt to eliminate it with one six-year term.\(^2\)

In Wilson’s first annual message to Congress, on December 2, 1913, he proposed that the Democrats follow up on their presidential primary platform plank and called for federal legislation instituting presidential primaries nationwide. The party convention, in Wilson’s plan, would simply ratify the choice of the primary voters. Wilson gave his plan a notable twist, though, by including an idea he had discussed in the Palmer letter. He proposed that the party’s platform be drafted by the convention delegates, in his plan an exclusive group consisting of the politicians then holding or campaigning for federal office under the party’s rubric, along with its national committee. Their platform would be the equivalent of a parliamentary mandate, on which the party-in-government would stand at the November election and for which it could be held responsible thereafter. Because the party line in Wilson’s program would be ratified (or not) by voters before its influence was felt, the resulting discipline would not suffer the same criticisms as that imposed by the caucus.\(^3\)

Wilson’s party reform figured prominently on his agenda in early 1914, and he met with legislators to discuss how to frame it. However, as he admitted, there were more pressing policy matters to be taken up than this political reform, most notably the trust package.\(^4\) A few months later, the president and Congress were preoccupied with the international upheaval resulting from the outbreak of war in Europe. The course of events pushed the primary bill into the background, but so did the nature of the reform itself. There were considerable doubts on Capitol Hill concerning the propriety of the federal government dictating to the states and the parties the means by which candidates for the presidency were to be selected. Constitutional objections aside, Wilson recognized that aligning the timing and form of the states’ nominating processes would be a formidable job. He also was aware that were a presidential primary bill to pass, it might only have the ironic effect of increasing the influence of money and political managers
in the nomination process, the concern that had prompted Wilson's earlier opposition to the direct primary.

By the fall of 1914, in the face of these complexities, he announced that the party reform package was being put on hold. Then, in March 1915, when a Senate report indicated that Wilson's primary plans required a constitutional amendment, the administration was given a pretext to drop the matter altogether. Thereafter, Wilson paid occasional lip service to the idea of presidential primaries but did nothing about them in practice. In the 1916 Democratic platform, which Wilson drafted himself, the primary plank of 1912 fell from view. While the distinguishing features of the traditional party system discomfited Wilson, he concluded that the struggles that would arise from attempting to change those features with his reform proposal would be even more troublesome.

Notwithstanding this retreat, Wilson's support for the presidential primary has figured prominently in interpretations of his historical legacy. Many political scientists argue that his advocacy of popular nominations had a significant influence on the establishment of presidential primaries in the 1960s and 1970s, even going so far as to blame Wilson for the erosion of both the strength of the party organizations and the veneration of the Founders' constitutional design that have accompanied modern primary reform. Such criticism seems hard to sustain given that Wilson's active support for the presidential primary came relatively late in the Progressive Era and was short in duration. Furthermore, Wilson proposed his presidential primary plan not to undermine but rather to help salvage party government and a Founding principle. His primary plan would have convened a well-defined set of party elites, candidates, and officeholders to put together the party's legislative agenda. By creating this symbolically compelling mechanism of collective responsibility, Wilson's twist on the conventional presidential primary stood ready to counter the political individualism that otherwise would flourish with popular nominations. In addition, his advocacy of the presidential primary stemmed in large part from his desire to preserve a key component of the Founders' design, namely, the reeligibility of the executive, by deflating the movement for a single, six-year term. Indeed, the argument that Wilson pressed against this constraint on the president in the Palmer letter was essentially a reaffirmation of that of Hamilton in Federalist 72.

II

In December 1914, after Wilson had come to realize that his primary plan was not feasible, he took another tack in his efforts to transform traditional
party politics. His new approach was traditional in its own right, reminiscent of actions taken by Presidents Garfield and Cleveland in the Gilded Age. In a straightforward assault on “senatorial courtesy,” a linchpin of the spoils system, Wilson made several recess appointments of U.S. marshals, revenue collectors, district attorneys, and postmasters without observing the norm of consulting the Democratic senators in whose jurisdictions the positions were being filled, namely, James Reed of Missouri, James O’Gorman of New York, and James Martine of New Jersey. Throughout the struggle for the New Freedom bills, these senators had been persistent critics of Wilson’s policies and his encompassing leadership. Now that the major pieces of legislation had been passed and Wilson was not so reliant on Congress, he opted to test the system of senatorial privilege by refusing to name the henchmen of the three renegades.8

After the 63d Congress reconvened in December 1914 for its last session, Wilson put forward his recess appointments for regular positions. The first two of Wilson’s nominees, for postmasterships in Buffalo and Kansas City, respectively, were unanimously rejected by the Senate upon the advice of Reed and O’Gorman. The New York Times reported that Wilson’s defeat was “almost unprecedented in the history of the Government. Few Presidents had the control of their party that Mr. Wilson has exercised; but no one can recall so sudden and sharp a rebuff administered to a President by a House of Congress in which his party had safe control.”9

Undaunted, Wilson decided to escalate the confrontation: he sent another slate of recess appointments to the Senate, and administration sources let it be known that if necessary Wilson was willing to wait and reappoint the nominees rejected by the Senate to new recess appointments. For its part, the Senate promised to reject all such candidates. It also set up a special committee to investigate the constitutionality of Wilson’s tactics. The confrontation soon focused on one Ewing Charles Bland, a municipal judge whom Wilson had given a recess appointment for a U.S. marshal’s post in western Missouri without consulting Reed. Wilson was determined to install Bland in office, and Reed was just as determined to prevent it. The president’s sudden refusal to grant senatorial courtesy attracted widespread interest, and not just among reporters looking for interbranch intrigues. At long last, it appeared to reformers, the professor who had lectured on the public administration ethic in the classroom was going to stand up for it in the White House.10

In early January 1915, Bland’s appointment came before the Senate. Once again, the Senate was unanimous in rejecting Wilson’s nominee. Once again, Senator Reed, whose opposing arguments were supported by Senator
O’Gorman, carried the debate. Now Wilson faced a hard choice: to escalate his showdown with the Senate, which had thus far been more than equal to his challenge, perhaps by waiting and appointing Bland to another recess appointment, or to back down and withdraw his nominee, thereby losing face and leaving the spoils system even more solidly entrenched.11

The bold, uncompromising rhetoric of the Jackson Day address that Wilson delivered on January 8, 1915, two days after the defeat of Bland’s nomination, in which the president warned his fellow Democrats that “the Democratic Party is still on trial. . . . the country is not going to use any party that cannot do continuous and consistent teamwork,” suggested that he was prepared to go public in the face of the Democratic senators’ obstructionist tactics.12 But now Wilson also had legislative concerns of the sort that had made him hesitant to stop handing out patronage during the New Freedom period. Among other things, he had begun pushing a controversial shipping bill, and the opposition to it was strongest in the Senate. If Wilson and the Senate were at loggerheads over patronage, the farmer’s shipping bill, not to mention the rest of his legislative priorities, would hardly be well received by the latter. Word soon filtered out of the administration that the president was willing to withdraw Bland’s name and put forward another candidate for the U.S. marshal’s post, one acceptable to (if not selected by) Senator Reed.13

Once again, political expediency limited how far Wilson was willing to go to reform the party system. And once again, Wilson relied on a constitutional pretense in order to justify his retreat from party reform. In a report that made its way into the newspapers, Attorney General Thomas Gregory instructed that Wilson’s course, if maintained, would amount to a departure from constitutional tradition. Wilson wrote a letter of apology to Bland, explaining that he felt honor bound “to live up, not only to the letter, but to the spirit of the Constitution.”14

Wilson’s decision not to press ahead with party reform and his persisting difficulties in separating politics from administration were disappointing but not surprising to the editors of the New Republic: “It would be unreasonable to expect any such sacrifices from Mr. Wilson. He is seeking above all to govern by means of his party and to give renewed vitality to the system of partisan government. Congressional control over patronage is essential to the partisan system as it has been built up under American conditions. The President who seeks to destroy it must be ready to get along without organized partisan support and without any but indispensable Congressional cooperation.”15 These men looked forward to the day when presidents would forget about party leadership. Wilson was not willing to forgo his program,
however, notwithstanding the conundrums of government and politics he was encountering because of it.

III

Although Wilson gave up on his primary plan and his attack on senatorial courtesy, both of which would have profoundly reformed the Democratic party-in-government and the party organization, he did not give up on party reform. He pursued it at another level, continuing his efforts, first undertaken as a gubernatorial candidate in New Jersey, to make the Democratic Party a progressive electoral majority. Remaking the party in the electorate promised to alleviate the frustrations that Wilson and his program for responsible government were meeting with at the other levels in the party system.

The imperative of an electoral shake-up became all too clear to Wilson in the wake of the congressional elections of 1914. Before these elections, he took it for granted that the voters would reward his party for passing the key planks in the 1912 platform during the 63d Congress. The voters disappointed him. While the Democrats picked up five seats in the Senate, bringing their majority in that body to sixteen, they lost sixty-one seats in the House, reducing their majority to twenty-five. The falloff in the Democratic vote in the midterm elections was predictable. Apart from the normal decline at such a juncture, the Democrats were also hurt by the economic turmoil resulting from the New Freedom reforms, whose benefits were not yet fully realized, and the drift of Progressive Party voters back to the GOP. Indeed, considering the circumstances, many Democratic analysts were inclined to interpret the returns favorably; the outcome certainly could have been worse. But Wilson was surprised and rendered distraught by the returns. He regarded the defeat suffered by congressional Democrats as a repudiation of the party’s collective efforts during the 63d Congress and thus of his administration. 16

Wilson and the Democrats were going to have to do better if they were to retain power in 1916. Clearly their electoral fortunes would hinge on whether they could pick up sustaining support from the many voters estranged from the two major parties in 1912, a group amounting to 5.3 million voters, or 35 percent of the presidential electorate in that year. Wilson revealed his grasp of the situation with his widely commented upon Jackson Day address of January 8, 1915. After noting the crucial role that the “independent” voter would play in 1916, he proposed that in light of the standpatters’ dominance in the GOP and the proven progressive record of the Democratic Party, this voter’s natural home was in the latter. For his part,
Wilson was going to see to it that such a realignment occurred: “I have this ambition, my Democratic friends—I can avow it on Jackson Day: I want to make every independent voter of this country a Democrat.”

Wilson had taken steps toward this objective well before his Jackson Day vow, most notably by presiding over the establishment of the Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Trade Commission. In working to create these agencies, which were insulated from direct political control and given considerable latitude to intervene in the economy, Wilson had reversed his earlier avowed opposition to independent—i.e., “irresponsible”—commissions.

The reversal was prompted in large part by politics. The president realized that a public, semiautonomous Federal Reserve Board was perhaps the only way to meet the demands of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party for government control of the banking system without completely alienating Bourbons who were fearful of a Bryanite seizure. With the Federal Trade Commission, Wilson was seeking to preempt the criticism that was destined to surface in the election of 1914 from progressives and businessmen if the Democrats did nothing about the trusts except to bolster the prohibitions and sanctions of the Sherman Act.

Yet more than political expediency was involved. Once Wilson entered office and began hashing out these policies with his advisers and the Democratic leaders in Congress, he was persuaded that independent government agencies were the best course to follow in terms of policy. It increasingly appeared to him that the problems of the money supply and monopoly could not be adequately resolved on an ongoing basis (as they needed to be) through the normal legislative, administrative, and judicial channels. Wilson’s search for a solution in both instances was helped along considerably by the fact that Louis Brandeis, his chief economic adviser, had concluded that a combination of governmental control and administrative autonomy was needed to deal with the problems of the financial sector and the trusts. After receiving Brandeis’s counsel, Wilson came out strongly for the Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Trade Commission in the forms that they eventually assumed.

In early 1916, Wilson initiated a move that led to yet another independent agency, a tariff commission that was to have considerable investigatory power to gather information concerning tariff rates and advise the president and Congress as to how and where they should be set. The idea of such a commission had long been an anathema to most Democrats, including Wilson; they regarded it as a Trojan horse for protectionism. However, given the havoc the war in Europe was wreaking on international commerce, the problems accompanying the inflexible and frequently haphazard charac-
ter of congressionally mandated tariff schedules were becoming insufferable. The circumstances of global war overwhelmed the Democratic Party's nineteenth-century tariff truisms. Wilson's economic advisers convinced him to go with a tariff commission, and in this case, too, good policy was also good politics. Progressive Democrats such as Senator Robert Owen made it clear to Wilson that a commission would make a profound impression upon Bull Moosers still inclined to see the Democrats as a party committed to outdated Jeffersonian policies.21

The tariff commission, along with the Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Trade Commission, did indeed change some minds, most notably at the New Republic. In September 1916, its editors proposed that the belated, ironic embrace of the independent commission by Wilson and the Democrats pointed to "their readiness to discard obsolete principles and to consult realities in the preparation of their legislation." That Wilson had persuaded the Democrats to raise certain questions above party politics indicated to Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly that more and more the president was becoming a national, progressive leader deserving the support of the voters who four years earlier had stood with Roosevelt at Armageddon.22

Wilson's efforts to establish a tariff commission came to fruition in 1916. This achievement was but one of several initiatives with profound implications for domestic affairs and the party balance that Wilson and the congressional Democrats agreed upon and enacted before the November elections. In January, Wilson gave his enthusiastic support to a bill erecting a system of rural credits for debt-ridden farmers, a measure that populists in the South and West had long been advocating. In July, he provided critical assistance to progressive Democrats as they successfully fought for bills that limited child labor and extended workmen's compensation to federal employees. Wilson also signed off on the plans of southern radicals for a sharply progressive income tax hike that put the onus of paying for military and naval improvements on the northeastern establishment that had been most vocal in demanding them. Finally, at the end of the summer, he pushed through the Adamson Act, which resolved a railroad strike by granting workers the eight-hour day they had sought, much to the protests of the railroads and businessmen generally. With virtually all of these measures, Wilson was only facilitating—albeit skillfully and with important results—progressive legislation developed under the initiative of congressional Democrats.23 He was once more displaying his penchant for accommodation with his party's legislators in domestic affairs; their policies became his policies.

What made his support of these measures particularly striking was that, as in the case of independent commissions, they represented a clear reversal
of his previous positions. Wilson had not supported the federal regulation of child labor because he thought it would be held unconstitutional (as indeed the Supreme Court soon deemed it in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*). And he had considered it a matter of principle to oppose "class" legislation framed at the behest of farmers, labor, aggrieved sections of the nation, and so on.24

What explains Wilson's dramatic move to the left? More than anyone, Wilson knew, as he reminded a conservative Democratic senator in May, that "our whole fortune in the coming election depends on whether we gain or do not gain the confidence of the independent voters."25 Hence his striving to win over the social justice advocates, workers, and agrarian radicals whose votes were up for grabs in 1916. Yet Wilson's support for a far-reaching progressivism in 1916 was also the result of a genuine rethinking on his part, one related but not reducible to political considerations, of how to secure fully the liberty and fair competition that had been promised in the rhetoric of the New Freedom. This rethinking was certainly pressed along by his experience in government, grappling with practical issues of how best to frame and administer laws that would turn the rhetoric into reality.26 Wilson's views would continue to be transformed in this way, in keeping with his ideal of interpretive statesmanship.

To facilitate the electoral realignment he was seeking, Wilson combined the policy shifts in 1916 with active and progressive leadership of the Democratic Party during the campaign. Here, too, the advice of Senator Robert Owen bolstered the president's progressivism. In a series of letters solicited by the White House, Senator Owen stressed the importance, both as a matter of principle and of political expediency, of including a plank on social justice similar to that which had been included in the Progressive Party platform. Wilson asked Owen to send him a sample plank and incorporated the senator's suggestions in the draft that he sent out to the St. Louis convention. In this draft Wilson endorsed, among other things, the general concepts of workmen's compensation, a minimum wage, an eight-hour day and a six-day workweek, vocational training and assistance for the unemployed, and the regulation of child labor.27 With an eye toward winning over pacifists and progressive internationalists, Wilson also included planks on the Democratic commitment to peace and a preliminary outline of a "feasible association" that would guarantee world peace after conflict in Europe was over.28

Progressive platform aside, Wilson still had a problem. He led a party that was widely perceived to be dominated by unreconstructed southerners and the bosses of the big city machines and wedded to the spoils system it had created in the Jacksonian period. To accommodate the nonaligned leaders
and voters who were willing to support the president but not yet the Democratic Party, Wilson and party chair Vance McCormick set up organizational halfway houses. In July, with Wilson’s enthusiastic support, volunteers led by Representative William Kent of California established the Woodrow Wilson Independent League. In August, after extended negotiations, Wilson and McCormick persuaded seven prominent ex-Bull Moosers to join an auxiliary wing of the Democratic Campaign Committee—the Associated Campaign Committee of Progressives—under the direction of Bainbridge Colby, the New Yorker who had given the nominating speech for Roosevelt at the Progressive convention in 1912. For his part, Wilson interpreted the endorsement of these “independent men whose convictions I share” as a clear indication “that the political processes of the country are clearing for a new and more effective combination.”

Wilson had good reason to be encouraged about the prospects for the realignment he had long prophesied. In addition to the leaders of the Independent League, the Associated Campaign Committee, and New Republic editors Croly and Lippmann, the list of progressive intellectuals, journalists, and public figures who endorsed Wilson eventually included, among others, Amos Pinchot, Jane Addams, Ida Tarbell, John Dewey, Harry Garfield, Max Eastman, Lincoln Steffens, John Reed, Upton Sinclair, and Helen Keller. On November 1, eleven of the nineteen members of the platform committee of the Progressive Party in 1912 announced they were supporting Wilson, claiming that he had made good on twenty-two of their thirty-three planks.

However, while Wilson was apparently winning over those whose votes hinged on progressivism and political reform, he was losing ground among certain groups of voters whose loyalties were determined more by their ethnic-cultural ties. Wilson’s understanding of party realignment rested on the assumption that voters responded to the broader questions raised in policy debates. He continued to criticize the Americans whose views of national politics were influenced by their loyalties to a foreign nation, the so-called hyphen vote.

Wilson’s foreign policy, though, stirred adverse reactions among at least two important ethnic groups. His administration’s hostility to the conservative Huerta regime in Mexico (which was aligned with the Catholic Church) drew the ire of many Irish-Americans. Their anger was only heightened by the apparent British tilt in Wilson’s proclaimed neutrality vis-à-vis the European belligerents, in which he acquiesced in the British navy’s aggressive and expanding blockade while taking a harsh stand against German submarine warfare. And, of course, Irish complaints about a
de facto Anglo-American alliance were reiterated with considerable vehemence by German-Americans: on October 1, 1916, the New York Times reported that out of the more than one hundred German-language newspapers in the United States, Wilson was receiving the active support of only one.\textsuperscript{34} Just as World War I had strained the Democrats' time-honored positions on issues like the tariff, so too was it jeopardizing the party's political coalition.

Wilson made a point of denouncing the ethnic groups' concerns, "corruptions of the mind and heart" he termed them in his annual message of 1915. He inserted an "Americanism" plank into the 1916 Democratic platform that singled out as "subversive" and "destructive" any group "political or otherwise, that has for its object the advancement of the interest of a foreign power." Finally, in a highly publicized exchange in September 1916, Wilson lashed out at Jeremiah O'Leary, a prominent Irish-American leader and critic of the administration's foreign policy. The president declared that he would be "mortified" to receive the votes of O'Leary and his followers, "disloyal Americans" all.\textsuperscript{35}

The fact was, of course, that whether or not Wilson wanted the support of the hyphenated voters, he knew that he and his party needed it, especially when it came to the Irish, Catholic, and recently immigrated ethnic groups who provided the voting base for the Democratic Party in the North.\textsuperscript{36} After the O'Leary exchange had established Wilson's "Americanist" bona fides, he substantially muffled his criticism of the hyphenates. What was more, the Democratic National Committee, the activities of which Wilson was fully informed about, surreptitiously set up special bureaus in order to make tailored appeals to ethnic voters in Yiddish, Polish, Italian, Spanish, French, Norwegian, and Russian.\textsuperscript{37}

When the results of the vote finally were established in 1916—Wilson's managers stayed up most of election night thinking he had lost—the president had defeated Charles Evans Hughes. In the popular vote, Wilson prevailed with 9,126,300 votes (49.24 percent) to Hughes's 8,546,789 (46.11 percent). In the electoral college, Wilson defeated Hughes by a vote of 277 to 254.\textsuperscript{38} In light of the previous discussion, several aspects of the 1916 vote merit attention.

Wilson's attempt, through his rhetoric and policy shifts, to stand as the candidate of progressivism and peace was relatively successful; indeed, it was the key to his own reelection. Demographically, women (where they could vote), farmers, and workers were the most prominent converts to his coalition. In terms of parties, historians have estimated that Wilson garnered approximately 20 percent of the 4.1 million voters who backed Roosevelt in 1912 and approximately 33 percent of the 900,000 who voted for Debs
in that election. The support Wilson received from former Bull Moosers and Socialists was most apparent west of the Mississippi River, where he won all but four states and where in most cases the new members of his coalition provided him with his margin of victory. By adding the West to the solid South and the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland, Wilson built the intersectional electoral base that Bryan had thrice essayed but never established. With the support of two northeastern states—he won Ohio and New Hampshire—this new foundation proved sturdy enough to elect a Democrat to the presidency in a two-way race. 39

However, while many nonaligned voters responded positively to Wilson's policies and the progressive rationale underlying them, the president did not fare as well among German- and Irish-Americans. To be sure, there was no mass defection among these groups, and in some locations Wilson ran surprisingly well among them. Roosevelt's belligerent speeches and the Democratic claim that Wilson had "kept us out of the war" softened the ethnic reaction against the administration. 40 Nevertheless, as David Sarasohn and Meyer Nathan have demonstrated, the Irish-and German-American dissatisfaction with his administration's pro-British leanings cost him and his party votes. Wilson did not experience the same surge in support from these groups as he did generally in 1916. Indeed, in Irish and German wards and counties the vote for Wilson typically dropped below his previous percentages as well as below the percentages that Democrats running for other offices were receiving in 1916 and the surrounding years. While it is bold to suggest, as Sarasohn does, that the drop in support from hyphenates in 1916 prevented a realignment of the sort that took place during the 1930s, the returns from that year nevertheless indicate that to Wilson's disadvantage the ethnocultural loyalties disparaged by him continued to be a leading determinant of voting behavior in the American electorate. 41

Another defining characteristic of the vote in 1916 was that Wilson's victory was largely personal. The worries of Wilson, House, and McCormick about the image of their party proved to be justified, as many voters pulled the lever for Wilson but not for his legislative supporters. Nationwide, while Wilson was winning 49.24 percent of the popular vote, Democratic candidates received only 46.27 percent of the total vote cast for the House of Representatives. 42 This result translated into a loss of fourteen seats and the complete erasure of the Democratic majority in the House (though with the help of a handful of minority party candidates the party would still be able to retain organizational control over the body when it convened the following year). The Democrats retained a majority of eleven seats in the Senate,
but one of the three seats they lost belonged to floor leader and staunch Wilsonian John Worth Kern of Indiana.\textsuperscript{43}

The results in the congressional elections indicated that the clarifying realignment that Wilson had been attempting to invoke in 1916, and for many years before that, had not occurred. After the election, he admitted to a member of the Associated Campaign Committee of Progressives that he was befuddled by the persistence of these traditional patterns of voting behavior. The “rigidity of party association so far as it affects a very large proportion of the voters” made the question of how to bring about a fundamental shift in the electorate “one of the most puzzling questions.” Though answering it, Wilson noted, would be “by no means easy,” doing so remained “the fundamental job in the next four years. I gladly open my mind to instruction on the subject.”\textsuperscript{44}

IV

That Wilson would open his mind to practical instruction in this regard was not out of the question. He was doing just this with the prospects for informal constitutional change and the place of the presidency in the political system. Wilson came into the presidency assuming that the office was emerging as the linchpin of responsibility in the U.S. polity, and that this emergence would continue by means of the evolutionary processes of political development and interpretive leadership on the part of visionary presidents like himself. The New Freedom period confirmed Wilson’s reading of American political development in this regard.

However, in the next two years, as Wilson came into increasing conflict with Congress and members of his own party, he called these views into question. In private conversations, Wilson began arguing that the institutional jealousy and political independence of the executive and legislature resulting from the separation of powers required a formal remedy after all. He returned to his original plan for responsible government, in which a constitutional amendment would clear the way for a parliamentary-style executive cabinet in Congress.\textsuperscript{45}

After a dinner at the White House in early 1915, for example, Wilson read to some friends from his chapter on the presidency in \textit{Constitutional Government}, noting that it was the first time he had revisited his famous chapter since he wrote it in 1907. In the conversation that followed, Wilson confided that he was discouraged because the “irresistible” power that he had ascribed to the presidency in theory simply did not exist in practice. He now concluded that “the ideal form of leadership in this country” (which he prom-
ised to write a book about at some point) was one in which “the President should be a mere figure-head like the King of England. The leader of the Party should be the leader in Congress and heard in debate fully.”

But the establishment of parliamentary government in the United States would obviously require far-reaching political and constitutional changes. As president, Wilson was no more able than he had been as a graduate student to give a realistic account of how those changes might come about. And he recognized that until they did come about, the presidency would remain the dominant institution, to the extent that there was one, in the political system, especially when it came to foreign affairs.

In early November 1916, with the race between Hughes and Wilson still too close to call, Wilson’s thinking in this regard presented an immediate problem. What if Hughes won? He would not be inaugurated until March. Yet the United States was engaged in delicate negotiations with the European belligerents to end the war, and the issue of American involvement might well surface during the talks. A president turned down at the polls, Wilson believed, could not serve as an authoritative leader in such circumstances.

Colonel House, the adviser with whom Wilson was wont to discuss the issues accompanying constitutional reform, proposed a remedy. House suggested that if Wilson lost, he should name Hughes to be his secretary of state, and then the president and vice president should both resign. Under the rules of succession, Hughes thus would become president without having to await an inauguration five months later, and the United States would continue to have a responsible leader handling affairs of state. Wilson found House’s plan compelling. In order to commit himself to following through on this contingency and to insulate himself from charges, should they arise, that he was resigning in spite, two days before the election Wilson wrote a letter to his secretary of state, Robert Lansing, outlining the plan and stating his intention to pursue it if he were defeated.

Wilson adopted the resignation plan for two reasons. The first stemmed from his belief that, as he wrote to Lansing, “the choice of policy in respect of our foreign relations rests with the Executive.” Citing the unprecedented “critical circumstances” the United States faced, Wilson concluded that “it would be my duty to step aside so that there would be no doubt in any quarter how that policy was to be directed, towards what objects and by what means.” Second, he noted that the resignation appealed to him because “all my life long I have advocated some such responsible government for the United States . . . as such action on my part would inaugurate, at least by
example. Responsible government means government by those whom the people trust."

Wilson did not have to set this example. He defeated Hughes, albeit narrowly. And the passage of the Twentieth Amendment in 1933, which moved the presidential inauguration date from March 4 to January 20, alleviated what Wilson had singled out in his letter to Lansing as “the extreme disadvantage of having to live for four months . . . under a party whose guidance has been rejected at the polls.” His resignation scheme thus stands as a remarkable “what if” in American political history, an indication of the lengths to which he was willing to go to institute more responsible government in the United States.

But perhaps what is most interesting about Wilson’s resignation scheme is the contradiction it embodied. On the one hand, he insisted that the “choice of policy” in foreign affairs was exclusively the executive’s. On the other hand, he indicated that in order to exercise this choice effectively, the executive had to depend on a popular and partisan mandate for his leadership. Over the course of Wilson’s presidency, in the pointed debates about American participation in the Great War and the peace that followed, his attempt to resolve this contradiction had momentous consequences.