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The U.S. Presidential Campaigns of 1908 and 1912: The Reshaping of American Political Communication

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The U.S. Presidential Campaigns of 1908 and 1912: The Reshaping of American Political Communication

Abstract

Scholars routinely observe that the advent of radio reshaped political speech from the impassioned pleas bellowed to thousands, to conversations among intimates in the quiet of the living room. But for more than a decade before the first commercial radio broadcast station was inaugurated in Pittsburgh in 1920, citizens in their living rooms, drawing rooms, and parlors had been listening to candidate speeches. This feat was made possible by the phonograph.

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The U.S. Presidential Campaigns of 1908 and 1912

The Reshaping of American Political Communication

Scholars routinely observe that the advent of radio reshaped political speech from the impassioned pleas bellowed to thousands, to conversations among intimates in the quiet of the living room. But for more than a decade before the first commercial radio broadcast station was inaugurated in Pittsburgh in 1920, citizens in their living rooms, drawing rooms, and parlors had been listening to candidate speeches. This feat was made possible by the phonograph.

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, phonographers captured speeches for the public and posterity. Defined by Webster's in 1909 as "An instrument for mechanically recording and reproducing human speech and other sounds,"¹ "phonographs" permitted voters to listen to campaign appeals at their leisure. At this time, there were three major manufacturers of recording devices utilizing two different types of technology: a vertical-cut machine which played wax cylinders and a lateral-cut machine which played flat, shellac disks. All three major companies produced the recordings in the 1908 campaign: The National Phonograph Company, better known as "Edison", the Victor Talking Machine Company and the Columbia Company. During that campaign, Taft "made twelve cylinders for Edison, thirteen discs for Victor, and ten discs and five cylinders for Columbia"² His opponent William Jennings Bryan recorded ten cylinders for Edison, eleven discs for Victor and twelve discs for Columbia³. Many of the speeches of both candidates were repeated for the different record companies and not all speeches were published. In 1912, Woodrow Wilson recorded six short speeches on September 24 for Victor⁴. Taft made seven discs for Victor on October 1, 1912 in Beverly Massachusetts.⁵ Roosevelt recorded short speeches for Edison and Victor in 1912 as well.⁶

* * *

"Judge Taft has consented to make several short speeches into talking machines for reproduction," noted an article in the *New York Times* on August 3, 1908. "As the process of making a campaign speech is somewhat different from making a campaign speech from the back of a car platform or from a front porch, Mr. Taft to-day found Mrs. Taft laughing at him as he was doing a bit of rehearsing for the real records."⁷ The speeches, noted the article, averaged 300 words in length.

A member of Congress from Nebraska from 1891 to 1895, William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) had lost a bid for the Senate in 1894. In 1908 Bryan who had won the Democratic nomination in 1896 with his impassioned "cross of gold speech," was the standard bearer for his party for the third time. In 1896 and 1900 Republican nominee William McKinley had defeated him. Facing Bryan in 1908 was William Howard Taft, the heir apparent of incumbent second term President Theodore Roosevelt.

Entering government service as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) was a minor player in the first McKinley administration (1897). Transformed into a popular hero by his service with the Rough Riders in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, Roosevelt was elected governor of New York in 1898. In 1900 as McKinley's vice presidential running mate, T.R. was swept into national office. His time in that office ended abruptly with the assassination of McKinley only a few months after the election.

In September 1901, at the age of forty-three, Theodore Roosevelt became president of the United States. In 1904 he

easily secured a second term by defeating Democratic Party nominee Alton Parker. The ticket campaigned on a platform supporting the protective tariff and maintaining the gold standard. From 1901–1909, Roosevelt served almost two terms as the twenty-sixth president of the United States. Of his decision not to seek a third term, T.R. wrote “However certain I might be that in seeking or accepting a third term I was actuated by a sincere desire to serve my fellow countrymen, I am very much afraid that multitudes of thoroly (sic) honest men who have believed deeply in me, (and some of whom, by the way, until I consented to run might think that they wisht me to run) would nevertheless have a feeling of disappointment if I did try to occupy the Presidency for three consecutive terms, to hold it longer than it was deemed wise that Washington should hold it...”⁸ Since he had publicly promised not to seek a third term, Roosevelt made it plain that he wanted Taft as the next president.

William Howard Taft (1857–1930) was elected the twenty-seventh president of the United States in 1908 in the first presidential campaign to make widespread use of the phonograph record as a means of campaign communication. Appointed Secretary of War by Republican president Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, Taft was a close political adviser of the popular president. In 1906 T.R. tagged Taft as his successor ensuring his nomination in 1908. The speeches by Taft on the CD might suggest to the unenlightened listener that Roosevelt is indeed seeking a third term:

He recommended the passage of the law, which the Republican convention has since specifically approved, restricting the future issue of stocks and bonds by interstate railways that such as may be authorized by federal authorities. He demonstrated to the people by what he said, by what he recommended to Congress, and by what he did. The sincerity of his efforts to command respect to the law, to secure equality of all before the law, and to save the country from the dangers of a plutocratic government towards which we were fast tending. In this work, Mr. Roosevelt has the support and sympathy of the Republican party, and his chief hope of success in the present controversy must rest on the confidence which the people of the country have in the sincerity of the party’s declaration in his platform that it intends to continue his policy.

Campaigning on a pledge to continue the Roosevelt tradition, Taft handily defeated Bryan in 1908.

During his first term, however, Taft alienated the progressives in his own party and his mentor by refusing to join efforts to oust the unpopular Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon and by supporting the Payne–Aldrich Tariff. Roosevelt responded by fighting Taft for the nomination of the Republican Party in 1912. Allen Churchill wrote that T.R. became a “hater... capable of man-sized fury.... Theodore, who always liked to say he felt strong as a bull moose, now began to resemble a wounded one.”⁹ When Taft secured that nomination, T.R. broke from the Republicans to head the Progressive party. Drawing on T.R.’s statement that “I’m feeling like a bull moose,” the progressives are better known as the Bull Moose party.

Congressional Government (1885), Wilson had secured the governorship of New Jersey as a reformer. In 1912, when the leading candidate, Champ Clark, failed to secure the two-thirds needed for the Democratic nomination and William Jennings Bryan threw his support to the New Jersey governor, Wilson won the nomination on the Democratic convention’s forty-sixth ballot. Woodrow Wilson was the beneficiary of the split between Taft and T.R. With the Republican vote divided, he won the presidency with 435 electoral votes.

The presidential election of 1912 played out against the backdrop of a presidency whose powers had been dramatically enlarged by Theodore Roosevelt’s two terms. “Roosevelt viewed the Presidency as a ‘big stick’ and as a podium,” writes Marcus Cunliffe. “He tackled difficulties with a freewheeling, happy ferocity...

On the CDs we hear the differences that marked the candidacies of William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, William Howard Taft, and Theodore Roosevelt. Where T.R. and Wilson sound extemporaneous, Taft’s awkward intonational patterns and flat delivery suggest that he is tied to scripted texts. Where Roosevelt’s tone is urgent and occasionally angry and bitter, Wilson’s is more professorial. Of the four, Bryan is most clearly the master stump orator less comfortable with the intimate medium of communication through phonographs.

Finally, these segments of discourse harken to a time in which the laws that we take for granted were under consideration. Note Roosevelt’s impassioned plea for a minimum wage and Wilson’s response that it would result in a lowering of existing wages. Observe Roosevelt’s call for an eight-hour workday.

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¹ Webster's 1909, p. 1623.

² Robert and Celia Dearling, *The Guinness Book of Recorded Sound*. Guinness Books, 1984, p. 184.

³ Compiled by Brian Rust, *Discography of Historical Records on Cylinders and 78s*. Westport CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1979, pp. 44-45.

⁴ Robert and Celia Dearling, *The Guinness Book of Recorded Sound*. Guinness Books, 1984, p. 185.

⁵ Ibid. p. 184.

⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

⁷ "Virginians Will Hear Taft," *New York Times*, August 4, 1908, p. 3.

⁸ Marcus Cunliffe, *The American Heritage Pictorial History of the Presidents of the United States*. "Letter to George Trevelyan," New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968, p. 308.

⁹ Quoted in *The American Heritage History of the Presidency*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968, p. 655.

¹⁰ Cunliffe, *The American Heritage History of the Presidency*. p. 306.



In Their Own Voices:
The U.S. Presidential Elections of 1908-1912

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-- *From the Introduction by Kathleen Hall Jamieson.*



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