Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson
PROGRESSIVISM, INTERNATIONALISM, WAR, AND PEACE

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In his inaugural address of March 4, 1913, Woodrow Wilson heralded the triumph of progressivism in American politics, confirming his commitment to restore “equality” and “justice” by shielding citizens “from the consequences of great industrial and social processes which they cannot alter, control, or singly cope with.” He further pledged to derive the policies of this progressive agenda not from elegant theories but from close observation of “the facts as they are.” In short, he forecast the ascendancy of a humane empiricism in national politics. “We shall deal with our economic system as it is and as it may be modified, not as if it might be if we had a clean sheet of paper to write upon,” he announced, “and step by step we shall make it what it should be in the spirit of those who question their own wisdom and seek counsel and knowledge.” More than a “cool process of mere science,” the task at hand was “to understand our time and the need of our people,” determining through constant reflection “whether we be indeed their spokesmen and interpreters, whether we have the pure heart to comprehend and the rectified will to choose our high course of action.”

Empirical yet empathetic; reformist yet restrained—what exactly was the nature of the progressive politics Wilson brought to the White House? His injunction against drawing-board reforms sounds like the creed of a conservative, while his
rejection of ideological rigidity created a safe distance from the “radicals” of his day. Yet his legislative accomplishments in office mark him as one of the most radical reformers to occupy the presidency. In fact, the sweeping changes he effected in office can only be understood as the product of a skeptical and deliberative yet creative and adaptive mind—as the work of a radical empiricist in politics.

That “the facts as they are” might be the basis rather than the nemesis of change was a belief characteristic of Wilson, but not endemic to him. For many leading lights of American social thought, the Darwinian revolution in natural science had recast all aspects of the human condition as historically conditioned and inherently protean phenomena susceptible to conscious manipulation. Perhaps most famously, the self-styled “radical empiricist” William James developed a method—which he dubbed “pragmatism”—for deciding philosophical, epistemological, and moral questions in a “world of pure experience,” and in the process he influenced a host of liberal reformers fascinated by his work. John Dewey, Jane Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann were only the foremost among those who saw pragmatism as a fundamentally radical approach to human experience with transformative political implications.1 James’s theory of “corrigible” truth and vision of a deliberative “intellectual republic” taught these reformers to challenge outmoded political ideas, while his writings on ethics taught them how to replace those ideas in an interdependent society with democratic aspirations.2 In James’s view, only an “ethical republic,” deliberating over as wide a range of demands as possible, could discover the relationships among individual moral ideals and determine truly social values; and even these would never be final, “until the last man has had his experience and said his say.”3 James’s students in the progressive movement applied this method to political values and the institutions enshrining them, hoping not only to achieve specific reforms but also to perpetuate the experiment in interventionist government that was the essence of progressivism.4

James was dead by 1910, the year Wilson came to national prominence as a progressive; and as governor of New Jersey, Wilson spoke more often of restoring than relativizing democratic institutions. In many ways Wilson was conservative, skeptical of reforms for which large sectors of the public were unprepared. But James, too, recognized that changes in thinking were typically incremental, constrained by a social environment shaped in turn by the past, so that “truth” developed “much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium.”5 In his first book on government, Wilson took a similarly organic view of the institutions embodying America’s political ideas. “The noble charter of fundamental law given us by the convention of 1787 is still our Constitution,” he wrote, but it was “only the sap-centre of a system of government vastly larger than the stock from which it has
branched.” Though it was Wilson’s own, this conception of the state as an organic expression of political values in constant creation was eminently Jamesian. And though Wilson was no devotee of James, pragmatism provides a vocabulary uniquely suited to explaining the political philosophy and practice of a remarkably elastic thinker. Indeed, Wilson’s consistent promotion of a powerful yet flexible and more truly representative national government embodied the pragmatic progressive ideal: continuous political and social reconstruction through broadly inclusive, deliberative discourse—or as Wilson called it, “common counsel.”

“A Root, Not a Perfect Vine”

Political and social reconstruction were the foci of Wilson’s earliest writings on government. In his dissertation at Johns Hopkins, published as *Congressional Government* in 1885, he argued that the American political system—in which “all motive and regulatory power” resided in a feckless, splintered oligarchy of standing congressional committees—required reshaping. The Constitution was “a root, not a perfect vine,” whose natural development toward greater centralization had grown twisted during a century of neglect justified by strict adherence to the separation of powers. The damage must be undone so that coordinated legislative programs, formulated cooperatively by the executive and his party in Congress, and tempered by exhaustive debate, might replace the piecemeal policymaking of committees in camera. Wilson argued that only through some such analog of British cabinet government could the American system become truly “representative,” empowered not only “to speak the will of the nation” but also “to lead it to its conclusions, to utter the voice of its opinions, and to serve as its eyes in superintending all matters of government.”

*Congressional Government* was inspired by Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution* (1867), and Bagehot’s historicist approach to politics left a lasting impression on Wilson. Throughout the 1880s, Wilson argued that democracy’s vibrancy depended upon the deliberate adaptation of political institutions to changing social and economic conditions, rather than adherence to what Bagehot termed “the literary theory” of constitutions. Wilson’s second major book, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (1889), revealed him still as a disciple of Bagehot, committed to demonstrating the underlying premise of *Congressional Government*: that government was “merely the executive organ of society” and that this organic relationship justified changing government’s form and functions as society changed. But Wilson was also influenced by another political economist of historicist leanings, his instructor at Hopkins, Richard T. Ely, and
he shared Ely’s simultaneously religious and scientific perspective on the state’s role in promoting social change. In 1885 Wilson wrote that propagating “the supreme and peaceful rule of counsel,” so to draw humanity toward “kinship with God” by affirming “reason over passion,” was the ministry of “the modern democratic state.” This divine commission, however, demanded more than proselytizing zeal. Sharing “the benefits of political cooperation” required that their mechanisms be “found by experiment, as everything else has been found out in politics.”

Along with Ely’s disdain for what he thought to be the inhumane and unscientific rigidity of classical political economy, Wilson absorbed his teacher’s interest in nonrevolutionary socialism as a source of experimental tactics for reinvigorating the “rule of counsel” in industrial America. After reading Ely’s *The Labor Movement in America* (1886), Wilson gave his own vigorous nod to the salutary potential of an interventionist state in “Socialism and Democracy” (1887), arguing that self-government implied society’s use of the state as a tool upon itself. There was no theoretical basis for assuming socialist methods incapable of producing democratic results, he explained, for “in fundamental theory socialism and democracy are almost if not quite one and the same,” resting together “upon the absolute right of the community to determine its own destiny and that of its members.”

Wilson was suspicious of many socialist reform schemes, asking “not whether the community has power to act as it may please” but “how it can act with practical advantage—a question of policy.” Nonetheless, he also suspected that question must be answered, in its broadest terms, just as social democrats like Ely predicted: by translating the language of interdependence characterizing the new social science into government action. In *The State*, he endorsed a host of reforms, from regulation of monopolies to child labor laws and factory sanitation standards, all justified in terms of government’s duty to maintain the health of the whole social organism. “It should be the end of government to assist in accomplishing the objects of organized society,” he wrote. “Every means, therefore, by which society may be perfected through the instrumentality of government, every means by which individual rights can be fitly adjusted and harmonized with public duties, by which individual self-development may be made at once to serve and to supplement social development, ought certainly to be diligently sought. . . . Such is the socialism to which every true lover of his kind ought to adhere with the full grip of every noble affection that is in him.”

Such passages suggest that Wilson fully embraced the radical but nonrevolutionary ethos of interdependence that would mark Ely’s “Wisconsin School”
progressivism. Indeed, Wilson never wavered from the conviction that reconciling “individual self-development” with “social development” was government’s prime directive. But his ideas about government’s role in fostering what is now called “positive freedom” had by no means crystallized in 1889. As industrial violence flared in the 1890s, he found another alternative to revolution in Edmund Burke’s prudent gradualism. Though rarely invoked by reformers then or now, Burke’s rejection of “speculative politics” for “practical politics” seemed to Wilson the best model for achieving justice and stability in a volatile, variegated society. “Speculative politics treats men and situations as they are supposed to be,” Wilson explained while ruminating on Burke in 1893, whereas “practical politics treats them . . . as they are found at the moment of contact.”

Throughout the 1890s, Wilson promoted such “practical politics,” exhorting “leaders of men” to marshal “the major thought of the nation” behind change while respecting the centripetal force of tradition. True leaders, Wilson advised in 1898, must appreciate with Burke the value of a politics that “invent[ed] nothing” yet “had the power of life in it,—and, if the power of life, the power of growth.”

Still, Wilson translated Burke’s paens to prudence loosely. “Burke is the apostle of the great English gospel of Expediency,” he told his students in 1893. As Wilson interpreted it, this was the same “expediency” he had endorsed in *The State* to justify the catalog of regulatory responsibilities that should comprise modern government’s “ministrant functions.” Wilson greatly admired Burke, whom he once referred to as “the Master.” But to make too much of this comment is to risk labeling pragmatism conservatism and obscuring Wilson’s belief in the practical merits of majoritarian democracy. In fact, he considered Burke as visionary in his own way as the Jacobins he famously scorned. Though Burke’s insight into the evolutionary nature of the state explained “the high purposes he had ever in view,” his mistrust of the mass of Englishmen made it “impossible he should be followed so far.” At the same time, Burke was “too timid. . . . He erred when he supposed that progress can in all its stages be made without changes which seem to go even to the substance.” In this sense, Burke failed to practice the expediency he preached. In any case, using Wilson’s admiration for Burke’s anti-ideological politics as evidence of a fundamentally conservative mindset is tendentious. Nearly two decades after rediscovering Burke and after countless genuflections before his genius, Wilson still could say to that bastion of conservatism, the American Bar Association, “I do not fear Revolution. I do not fear it even if it comes. I have unshaken faith in the power of America to keep its self-possession.”
A revolution of sorts was occurring in Woodrow Wilson’s own life that summer of 1910, when he delivered his speech to the American Bar Association. He had seized his chance to be a “leader of men” in 1902 by accepting the presidency of Princeton University, and he had put his leadership ideal into practice with a host of curricular and administrative reforms that made him one of America’s foremost educators. By 1910, however, a series of bitter controversies culminated in his defeat in a highly publicized contest over the location of Princeton’s new graduate school. By the battle’s end, confidence in his leadership had so ebbed that any agenda he might have conceived for the school was foredoomed to stagnation. Yet his shade-like existence in administrative limbo would not last long. Straight through the Princeton graveyard came the political express train, run by powerful interests determined to make him governor of New Jersey.

Though in a sense messengers of a new dispensation, Wilson’s suitors were neither angels nor strangers. George Harvey, editor of the J. P. Morgan mouthpiece Harper’s Weekly, and former U.S. Senator James Smith, boss of the New Jersey Democratic machine, were kingmakers who had tried to run Wilson as a candidate for senator in 1906. Harvey had been impressed with Wilson’s personal magnetism since hearing his Princeton inaugural in 1902. Subsequently, he detected in Wilson’s frequent strictures against hasty reform the signs of a conservative who respected the power—and perquisites—of the nation’s economic elite, and who if groomed as a presidential candidate might break William Jennings Bryan’s grip on the Democratic Party. Believing that no Democrat could repudiate the party’s progressive wing and win the presidential nomination, Wilson declined to be Harvey’s candidate. Still, Harvey took such a shine to Wilson that from 1906 he emblazoned each issue of Harper’s Weekly with the words: “For President—Woodrow Wilson.”

Harvey and company, however, never had the bead on Wilson they thought they did; and by the time Wilson took their hand and plunged into politics he had, ironically, regained full confidence in the legitimacy and prudence of government intervention to restore the voice of “the people” to its deliberations. His flirtation with conservatism was a phase in a much longer development of his political thought culminating in his 1907 Blumenthal Lectures at Columbia University. These lectures, published as Constitutional Government in 1908, confirmed once and for all his commitment to an adaptive, experimental, and radically democratic politics mirroring Jamesian pragmatic ethics.
The advanced positions staked out in the Blumenthal lectures—to be discussed a few paragraphs below—are the more remarkable in light of the three-year period preceding them: From roughly 1904 to 1907, Wilson sympathized with a brand of political conservatism seemingly antithetical to James’s “ethical republic.” Though often characterized as Wilson’s “states’-rights” phase, “antipopulist” would be a more accurate description. Wilson blamed demagogues in the Democratic Party for stripping the national leadership of the power to organize an effective assault on Republican hegemony. The two-party system itself, he thought, was consequently threatened. To avoid the Scylla of anarchy and the Charybdis of one-party rule, the country needed “a party of conservative reform, acting in the spirit of law and of ancient institutions,” to restore efficiency and deliberation to the center of politics.24

Wilson’s vision of “conservative reform” coincided with Harvey’s goal: breaking the power of Bryan. Bryan, in Wilson’s judgment, lacked a “mental rudder,” whipping followers into frenzies over serious economic problems he did not understand.25 Theodore Roosevelt’s 1904 presidential win convinced Wilson once and for all that the Democrats’ exile from the White House would never end while Bryan’s “populists and radical theorists, contemptuous alike of principle and of experience,” dominated the party. From 1905, Wilson became something of a stumper for Democratic conservatism as an alternative to both Bryan’s populism and Roosevelt’s “paternalism.”26 He seemed over the next two years to repudiate almost entirely the views he had expressed in The State.27

The election of 1904, therefore, caused a change in Wilson’s politics. But it was a shift, not a break, in his thinking; and a leaning, not a turn, to the right. He decried “hasty” trust-busting, claiming, “We can’t abolish the trusts. We must moralize them.”28 He proposed, however, not to coax moral conduct but compel it. The government should investigate the social impact of corporate practices and pass laws to “individualize” corporate morals rather than “lump and merge” executives in the larger anonymity of a “socialist” state. Democracy depended upon “individual responsibility,” and, if not fostered among citizens, that ethos would never characterize a government that absorbed them. On similar grounds, Wilson criticized unions for elevating artificial equality over responsible self-government. Referring to the practice, in some trades, of limiting production to the level of the least skilled, he explained: “The objection I have to labor unions is that they drag the highest man to the level of the lowest.”29

Though his naive understanding of unions made him question their activities, Wilson never questioned their right to exist, just as he never questioned the right of businesses to form large corporations. Economic life was an aspect of political
life, and in political life organization was crucial: “Until the reformers can organize as Tammany has organized, they can never successfully keep the field against her.” The question was, How to cultivate the right spirit and habit of organization among the nation’s citizens? Wilson’s answer in the early 1900s was to begin locally, and this accounts for his reputation as a states’-rights Jeffersonian. But his argument was pragmatic, not dogmatic. Instead of invoking states’-rights theory to defend local government, he evoked the analyses of Tocqueville, which had impressed him in the 1880s. “It is easier to apply morals in limited communities than in vast states, easier for neighbors to understand one another than for fellow citizens of a continent,” Wilson wrote for a Jefferson Day address in 1906. Long training in this communal application of morals had developed the habits of self-government Tocqueville identified as the lifeblood of American democracy, and Wilson believed the continued health of that democracy required a recommitment to such training. But still it was training in which Wilson was interested; the conditioning necessary to sustain a much larger, nobler movement toward unified national life. Even when attacking “paternalism,” Wilson echoed its ostensible sponsor, Theodore Roosevelt, in urging his listeners “to think of this country as every citizen should, as a single whole, a thing to be served not merely in its parts and in its separate interests, as the States are intended to serve it, but also in its entirety as the Federal Government is intended to serve it, keeping all interests harmonious, all powers co-operative.”

Thus, while lauding the “spirit” of his party’s patron saint, Wilson argued that Jefferson’s extreme individualism and fear of government must yield to modern exigencies. It was not the “tenets” of Jefferson but “the end we are interested in, the realization of the rights of individuals and an impartial development of the people’s life,” and this required instilling in all citizens the “principle . . . that their object is [the] service, not of private interests, but of the general development.” This principle in turn demanded abandoning laissez-faire attitudes toward “the great undertakings which feed the industrial life of the nation.” Finally, Wilson never, even at the height of his antipopulism, sought to take government out of the hands of the majority. Rather, he “would turn again, and turn with confidence, to the common people of the country,” who “speak in their judgments the true and simple spirit of all just law.” Even when extolling individualism, he reminded listeners that “particular interests have been suffered both to check and determine the economic growth of the United States,” whereas the “Jeffersonian principle means this: all interests upon an equal footing and everyman singled out for his personal responsibility.” This simultaneous critique and codification of American individualism captures the ambiguities in Wilson’s
thinking at the time. The following, from the same transcript, indicates the direction he was heading: “I cannot make Democratic theory out of each of you, but I could make a Democratic theory out of all of you.”

Wilson’s political thought had evolved, then, since he wrote *The State*, notably in its emphasis on personal responsibility. But Wilson’s democratic vision had always compassed this “covenantal” aspect. Furthermore, neither his Burkean preference for pragmatic reform over populist revolution, nor his countervailing belief in the supreme duty of government to implement the will of the people, had changed. Alarm and ambition combined to make stability his watchword from 1904 to 1907; he feared the populist threat to party government and coveted the recognition his role as conservative spokesman garnered. By the last quarter of the decade, however, he was uncomfortable in that role and began reaffirming his support for a strong central government committed to solving the nation’s social and economic ills. The lectures that became *Constitutional Government* revealed much about the direction his self-correction would take him and contain the most important of the political principles he brought to his governorship and the presidency.

Wilson’s intellectual affinity with pragmatic political ethics appears in his very definition of “constitutional government,” in which the necessity of conflict between society and the individual is implicitly rejected: “A constitutional government is one whose powers have been adapted to the interests of the people and the maintenance of individual liberty,” he wrote. Though liberty was the “ultimate object of a constitutional system,” Wilson insisted that “there can be no constitutional government unless there be a community to sustain and develop it—unless the nation, whose instrument it is, is conscious of common interests and can form common purposes.” Such common purposes were not self-evident but “formed only by the slow processes of common counsel.” Thus, securing for individuals the “means of enforcing the understandings of the law” against society’s encroachments depended upon two more fundamental tasks: First, “To bring the active and planning will of the government into accord with the prevailing popular thought and need”; and second, “To give to the law thus formulated under the influence of opinion . . . both stability and an incorruptible efficacy.”

Wilson resolved the paradox of an individual liberty at once supreme and contingent upon “prevailing” common counsel by affirming the basic principle of pragmatic ethics: the contingent nature of all values. “The ideals of liberty cannot be fixed from generation to generation,” he wrote. “Liberty fixed in unalterable law would be no liberty at all. Government is a part of life, and, with life, it must change, alike in its objects and its practices.” Certainly “the best practicable
adjustment between the power of the government and the privilege of the individual" should be sought, but "the freedom to alter the adjustment" was, in Wilson's mind, "as important as the adjustment itself." Hence the need for representative bodies and courts—the first to amend the law, the second to provide a "nonpolitical forum" in which its scope could be negotiated between the government and citizens who felt their personal ideals had been trammeled.

Wilson's return to form in *Constitutional Government* also included a revived interest in organic metaphors of state development, leading him, for the first time, explicitly to claim Darwinian science as the model for his political analysis. Wilson's political Darwinism, however, was prescriptive as well as descriptive. Though all governments were organic, a truly "constitutional" government was one in which this organic principle was recognized and put to use: "Living Constitutions," he explained, "must be Darwinian in structure and in practice." A Darwinian theory of politics thus justified constitutional experimentation on the grounds that human actions shape human constructs—and conscious action might shape them to our liking. Whether Wilson's political science bore any more resemblance to true Darwinian science than did William Graham Sumner's is debatable. More important are the results of its application. The organic metaphor facilitated an account of the powers and responsibilities of government that suggested the two major themes of Wilson's governorship and presidency: the legitimacy of an interventionist state and the necessity of an activist executive.

The logic of interventionism proceeded from a constitutional government's basic function: to be the "active and planning will" of an evolving body politic. Wilson preferred that the states would take it upon themselves to make their legislatures more responsive to public opinion, thus resuming their role as crucial organs of social interpretation and action. Still, one has to read states'-rights theory into *Constitutional Government* to find it. Wilson worried about "a mere act of will on the part of the government" usurping powers not implied by the Constitution in its current form; he said nothing against the states granting power to the federal government if circumstances required. Categorically prohibiting such grants of power was to hew to an "old theory of sovereignty" that had "lost its vitality." The nation was an indivisible whole, and to focus its diffuse interests into political will and action required a center of power responsible to the entire mass.

In 1885 Wilson had found this power, if not responsibility, in Congress. By 1907 the "natural evolution" of government had selected the president as the coordinating organ, effecting the "close synthesis of active parts" efficient representative government required. "His is the only national voice in affairs,"

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Wilson wrote of the president. “If he rightly interpret the national thought and boldly insist upon it, he is irresistible.” This power entailed the responsibility to bend the other branches to the national will—not by fiat but by faithfully representing public opinion in “daily consultations” with his party and Congress. By performing an epistemological function analogous to that in James’s scheme of human psychology, the president could truly be the head of government—registering, interpreting, and acting upon public opinion to facilitate informed and efficient collective action. Just as the art of knowing, for the pragmatists, required the creative reconciliation of conflicting ideas and the will to test the result, Wilson believed that “synthesis, not antagonism” was “the whole art of government”; he could not “imagine power as a thing negative and not positive.”

Positively “Unconstitutional”

From 1908 to 1910, Wilson consistently affirmed his belief in government’s “positive” power to experiment with ever more efficient means of implementing the popular will. His recent personal experience of power, however, had been anything but positive. Wilson’s defeats at Princeton made him receptive to outside opportunities. Furthermore, despite the reputations of his political backers, a newly reoriented Wilson was eager to take advantage of the rising tide of progressivism in the Democratic Party. To his surprise and relief, Harvey and Smith seemed content to promote their candidate without extracting the expected promises. Aware of the cross-party appeal of progressivism to voters nationwide, they decided it was better to have a moderately reformist Democrat in the governor’s seat—and if all went well, the White House—than a Republican.

The nomination was hard-won. In 1909 Wilson had again scolded labor leaders for tolerating production limits, and most of the state’s progressive newspapers portrayed him as the pawn of bosses and thrall to the J. P. Morgan financial empire. Having renounced campaigning as a token of his disinterestedness, Wilson abandoned silence only once, in August, when the Federation of Labor officially denounced him as antagonistic to their cause. Asked by the editor of the Labor Standard to respond, he replied that he thought it “not only perfectly legitimate, but absolutely necessary that Labor should organize if it is to secure justice from organized Capital.” But his profession of “hearty support” for accident insurance, just wages, and “reasonable” working hours won few converts in the labor movement. Furthermore, though he and Harvey had drawn up a platform tailor-made for his party’s progressives, he could not reveal
it until nominated without reneging on his pledge of silence. The task of securing the nomination fell to Boss Smith, who would not rest—and on the eve of the convention did not sleep—until he had convinced the major cogs in his loosely run machine to deliver their delegates’ votes, and with them the nomination, to Wilson on September 15, 1910.51

Wilson promptly declared independence from his sponsor. “I shall enter upon the duties of the office of Governor, if elected, with absolutely no pledge of any kind to prevent me from serving the people of the State,” he told a roomful of doubtful delegates. Though “this day of re-adjustment” posed difficult questions, the means of finding answers was clear. “Government is a matter of common counsel, and everyone must come into the consultation with the purpose to yield to the general view.” Though “not a warfare of interests,” good government required an “implacable determination to see the right done” that recognized some interests might be sacrificed for others higher. Just as James argued that “there is always a pinch between the ideal and the actual” requiring that “some part of the ideal must be butchered,” Wilson explained that “strong purpose, which does not flinch because some must suffer, is perfectly compatible with fairness and justice and a clear view of the actual facts.”52 He then presented what seemed to many delegates the most astounding fact of all: his platform, incorporating almost every plank in the progressive shed. It called for equalizing the tax burdens of individuals and corporations, reforming educational funding, conserving natural resources, a public utilities commission, an extended employer’s liability act, an eight-hour day for government employees, increased state control over corporations, a corrupt practices act, an expanded civil service, and electoral reform. When, after ending his remarks, he was called back to the stage by an enchanted crowd, he expressed in two sentences the conviction of a generation of reformers: “We must reconstruct, by thoughtful processes, economic society in this country, and by doing so will reconstruct political organization. This reconstruction will be bigger than anything in American history.”53

Putting economic relationships at the heart of modern politics, Wilson accepted the fundamental premise of a progressive spectrum ranging from Ely’s Wisconsin School to Croly’s New Nationalism. The erstwhile anti-Wilsonian Joseph P. Tumulty recalled the cry that rippled through the convention’s reformist ranks: “Thank God, at last, a leader has come!”54 Of course, the leader was not yet in office and had not led anyone anywhere. The first of these obstacles Wilson overcame with the unwitting help of a formidable critic, the Jersey Journal columnist George L. Record. In an exchange published in the Trenton True American on October 26, Wilson unequivocally endorsed Record’s proposals for strengthening
the public utilities commission, instituting a “drastic corrupt practices act,” mandat-
ing worker’s accident insurance for all industries, and instituting the direct elec-
tion of senators. Then, pledging to abolish bossism through “pitiless publicity,” he
began the process immediately, “denouncing” efforts by Smith and others to
maintain machine control. He promised never to “submit to the dictation of any
person or persons” but to welcome “suggestions from any citizen” and consider
them “on their merits.” An open administration was the wellspring of “the regen-
eration of the Democratic Party which I have forecast above.”

Wilson’s widely read reply to Record probably won him the governorship. More
important, the Record exchange revealed the sharpening of Wilson’s pro-
gressive vision. Confronted with specific issues during the campaign, he treated
them discretely rather than as political stereotypes, working out policies with a
practical rather than rigidly philosophical coherence and formulating the type of
coordinated yet anti-ideological agenda he had extolled since Congressional
Government. Even more significant was the effect of this pragmatic approach on
his political thought in general. His campaign speeches demonstrated an increas-
ingly sophisticated rationale for reform, consistent with his rapid reorientation
over the past four years. He still believed self-government required “poise,
patience, and the ability to make progress by these virtues.” But “progress” was
his emphasis: “If any part of the body politic were to lose its impulse for progress
it would die.” Progress depended upon “respect for the law,” but only such law as
preserved “the free determination to change it.” Though Republican candidate
Vivian Lewis pledged to be “a constitutional Governor” who would never “coerce
the Legislature into doing anything simply because it was in the interests of the
people,” Wilson promised to be “an unconstitutional Governor” who would do
just that. Maintaining order through change, by actively expounding the conclu-
sions of the broadest “common counsel”; this was the lens through which Wilson
projected his governorship to the voters of New Jersey, who liked what they saw.

Once in office, Wilson gave substance to the image in which he had cast
himself. He pushed an electoral reform bill through the New Jersey Legislature,
ignoring all precedent on March 13 by personally addressing a legislative caucus
and convincing the shocked assemblymen to support the bill as a party meas-
ure. Soon bills on corrupt practices, utility regulation, and workers’ compen-
sation were enacted. When the legislature adjourned on April 22, Wilson could
look back on a ninety-day period in which he had personally propelled the type
of coordinated party government he first theorized a quarter century earlier. He
had been the “leader of men” upon whom responsible government depended.
Moreover, compared with other major-party reformers with presidential
prospects, Wilson was “much the more radical” when it came to his “social program,” as the editor of *The Nation* argued. “If we interpret Gov. Wilson’s attitude correctly,” the editor continued, cleaning up government was “only a first step. He is deeply aroused by the failure of representative institutions to represent, and he is prepared to go far, it may seem to many too far, in his desire to make these institutions over.”

“A New Method and Spirit of Counsel”

Wilson’s stellar first term as New Jersey’s governor made him the Democrats’ choice for president in 1912. He was no shoe-in: Democratic progressives saw Harvey as a monkey on his back, the machines backed Speaker of the House Champ Clark, and the nomination came only after Ellen Wilson facilitated a personal rapprochement with Bryan, who one last time was the dominant figure at the national convention. But Wilson’s national fame as a reformer provided the momentum that carried him to Baltimore. Once it became a four-way race, in which he alone had a major party’s full support, 1912 was Wilson’s year. It was also the year progressivism went national.

All four candidates in 1912 paid homage to the need for change and were in surprising agreement over the ends toward which to direct it. Even William Howard Taft, the candidate of the Republican “stand-patters,” proclaimed that “the best government, the government most certain to provide for and protect the rights and governmental needs of every class, is that one in which every class has a voice.” Theodore Roosevelt could have spoken these words to the Progressives at Armageddon, and even “Red” Eugene Debs, the Socialists’ candidate, could not have painted a rosier political picture. The question in 1912 was not whether or whither to change, but how—a question of method. “We need no revolution,” Wilson declared in accepting the Democratic presidential nomination. “We need only a new point of view and a new method and spirit of counsel.” What exactly that method should be was a question for voters and for Wilson. How could New Jersey’s democratic restoration be replicated on the national level? How could he articulate his answer so that voters found it a proposition worth testing? Wilson quite consciously asked himself these questions, but it was only after meeting Louis Brandeis that he realized how central the question of method would be to his message of reform.

This meeting occurred relatively late in the game. It was not until August 28, 1912—two months before the election—that Wilson called Brandeis to Sea Girt, New Jersey, in hopes the “people’s attorney” could help him reach the people.
Wilson was lucky; Brandeis had been preparing to help him for weeks, and developing the means to do so for years—means that were distinctly pragmatic. Brandeis had long been receptive to James’s work and ideas, and he had developed a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the individual and society that mirrored the pragmatists’. In fact, Brandeis knew James, through their mutual friend Elizabeth Evans and as a member of the Philippine Information Society (PIS) in Boston.66 James referred to engagements and discussions with the Brandeises on multiple occasions in correspondence from 1897 to his death, and in August 1906 he vacationed in the Adirondacks with Brandeis, at one point discussing his psychical research over tea with the lawyer.67 Though that particular discussion may or may not have touched upon moral questions, Brandeis was familiar with James’s social, ethical, and political ideas through talks at Evans’ house and meetings of the PIS.

The pragmatic cast of Brandeis’s thought is readily apparent. Brandeis was a radical empiricist; he believed the only useful ideas were those suggested by and successfully tested against experience. “Knowledge of the decided cases and of the rules of logic cannot alone make a great lawyer,” Brandeis told a young associate in 1893. “He must know, must feel ‘in his bones’ the facts to which they apply.”68 In the explosive light of Homestead and Pullman, Brandeis realized that blind adherence to abstract principles was not just a professional hazard; rather, “to be controlled by logic and to underestimate the logic of facts” was a hazard to society itself. “My early associations were such as to give me greater reverence than I now have for the things that are because they are,” he recalled in 1913 of his first years practicing law. “I trusted only expert opinion. Experience of life has made me democratic. I began to see that many things sanctioned by expert opinion and denounced by popular opinion are wrong.”69 This thoroughly pragmatic belief in the complementariness of empirical and democratic practice impelled every work of public service Brandeis undertook; as John Dewey wrote years later, “reference to factual context” was the hallmark of Brandeis’s method. After examining the facts in 1912, Brandeis, a long-time member of the Progressive Republican League, announced that “progressives, irrespective of party affiliations, should in my opinion support Woodrow Wilson for the Presidency. He is thoroughly democratic in spirit.”70

Though Brandeis ranked Wilson’s nomination as “among the most encouraging events in American history,” Wilson’s dry acceptance speech was not the triumph its gubernatorial counterpart was.71 It did, however, somewhat clarify Wilson’s conception of the political tasks ahead. While endorsing his party’s platform generally, he outlined no specific economic policies, asserting instead that each party’s platform was but a stab at answering “great questions of right
and of justice” pertaining to “the development of character and of standards of action no less than of a better business system.” The salient question was, “How do we expect to handle the great matters that must be taken up by the next Congress and the next administration?” It was a question of means more than ends; or rather, one of means as ends. For years, “great matters” had been “handled in private conference” by “men who undertook to speak for the whole nation.” Some had done so “very honestly it may be, but very ignorantly sometimes, and very shortsightedly, too.” The point was that no matter how honest the men or large-spirited the objects, government by the few would always be “a poor substitute for genuine common counsel.”

Thus it was an idea, the idea that “common counsel” was the best method of government, that—if Wilson had anything to do with it—would be voted on in November; an idea, he hoped, that would distinguish the Democrats from the rivals they so resembled: the Progressive Party of Theodore Roosevelt. “No group of directors, economic or political, can speak for a people,” Wilson declared, alluding to the “paternalistic” methods he attributed to the Progressives. “They have neither the point of view nor the knowledge.” Wilson proposed, in effect, to apply the pragmatic method to politics by broadening the national deliberative discourse. But declaring “common counsel” as “the meaning of representative government” was a far cry from describing how it worked. Wilson needed a policy hook, an example of how common counsel might look in action, to catch the public’s attention; but tariff reform, the oldest weapon in the Democratic armory, turned to rust in his hands. For the first three weeks of the campaign, there was no blade in Wilson’s rhetorical scabbard—a mortal disadvantage against the oratorical onslaughts of a Roosevelt.

Brandeis armed Wilson with “principles” to parry “personalities.” Theirs was a meeting of like minds. “I am for Wilson because I found him in complete sympathy with my fundamental convictions,” Brandeis told reporters. Wilson, meanwhile, found his hook: “Both of us,” he told the press with novel clarity, “have as an object the prevention of monopoly.” Brandeis briefly outlined that object. “We must undertake to regulate competition instead of monopoly,” he said, alluding to Roosevelt’s proposal to place trusts under government control, “for our industrial freedom and our civic freedom go hand in hand and there is no such thing as civic freedom in a state of industrial absolutism.” Along with a motto—“To Regulate Competition Instead of Monopoly”—both men found renewed purpose at Sea Girt. Brandeis left determined to garner Wilson the vote of every reform-minded journalist, editor, social worker, businessman, and politician he knew—a considerable number. Wilson immediately hurled the fruits of his encounter with
Brandeis at Roosevelt, lauding his rival’s social goals but dissenting from his “central method”—the paternal. The Progressives, he alleged, had determined upon “acting as a Providence” for the people, as if understanding their needs implicitly. “I have never known any body of men, any small body of men, that understood the United States,” Wilson countered. “And the only way the United States is ever going to be taken care of is by having the voices of all the men in it constantly clamorous for recognition of what is justice as they see the light.”

Wilson’s biggest breakthrough came in a letter from Brandeis dated September 30, 1912, indicating both the specific antitrust measures Wilson’s party should promote and the principles of social analysis and political experimentation inspiring them. Simply put, the Democrats must propose to learn from experience—including failure. The social harm sustained by the Sherman Antitrust Act’s failure, while revealing the statute’s “defects,” also “established the soundness of the economic policy which it embodies.” Effectively implementing that policy required examining the economic experience of the whole nation, legislating accordingly, and institutionalizing the process, making future legislation an empirical exercise. “Experience,” Brandeis wrote, had revealed many forms of economic combination that suppressed competition to an “unreasonable” degree. It was time “to utilize that experience and to embody its dictates in rules of positive law” preventing such combinations. However, experience also showed that any means of dominating markets “otherwise than through efficiency” were unreasonable, making it necessary to protect against anticompetitive methods yet unknown. Thus “an administrative Board” was needed, with “broad powers” of investigation and legislative initiative to be “increased from time to time as we learn from experience.”

Wilson’s initial intention to publish the letter is obvious from his many emendations, and it demonstrates the degree to which he internalized Brandeis’s arguments. However, the emendations also reveal subtle but important differences in their thinking. Where Brandeis wrote of measures “by which existing trusts might be effectively disintegrated,” Wilson crossed out the last word and substituted the phrase “deprived of their domination and illicit power.” He also deleted a paragraph proposing retroactive punishment of combinations that, though declared illegal by the courts, had not had to pay reparations. Clearly, Wilson never believed as deeply in the intrinsic superiority of a small-producer economy as did Brandeis, or in the need to wreak vengeance upon the trusts. But he was sufficiently convinced of the inherent dangers of concentrated economic power to fear both trust- and government-dominated industry as graveyards of material and social growth. Wilson’s dog-eared and underscored copy
of Brandeis’s *Scientific Management and Railroads*, which he read around this time, also evinces the degree to which he embraced Brandeis’s basic logic: Competition bred experimentation; experimentation, efficiency; efficiency, prosperity; and prosperity, the opportunities for personal development that self-governing citizens required. If competition flagged, government must restore it, find a substitute, or risk its own stagnation.81

Brandeis did more for Wilson than point his lance at the soft underbelly of Progressive trust policy. Brandeis articulated a pragmatic method for preserving self-government in perpetuity and not merely for restoring it in 1912. That Wilson came during his presidency to find Brandeis’s proscriptions of bigness increasingly simplistic shows how thoroughly he appropriated Brandeis’s method, and hints perhaps at the wider range of facts to which he applied it.82

In any case, anchoring the issues in Brandeis’s social and economic empiricism gave Wilson’s campaign messages the intellectual coherence and political substance they had lacked. “We talk, and we talk in very plausible phrases, indeed, about returning the government of this country to the people of this country,” he told an Indianapolis audience three days after reading Brandeis’s letter. But *how*? Not simply by voting for a “Progressive.” Roosevelt had tolerated “the very conditions we are trying to alter” while president, and still sought to “assuage” rather than change them by placing monopolies under government stewardship. Wilson claimed that both Roosevelt and Taft sought to simultaneously preserve monopoly power and restore lost freedoms, an impossible denial of “what the whole country knows to be true”—that economic freedom and monopoly power had proved incommensurable, and that to restore lost freedoms required a “new freedom” from the power of the trusts, no matter where it resided.83

More than just the New Freedom’s central policy promise, breaking the power of the trusts was a symbolic first step in reconstituting representative government along the lines Wilson had imagined since the 1880s: responsive to the people’s will and efficient in carrying it out. Restoring government to the people meant restoring prosperity to the mass of them, giving them time and energy to participate in public life; and restoring prosperity meant opening the economic laboratory to as many enterprising souls as possible.84 Herein lay the real difference between Wilsonian and Rooseveltian progressivism. As Wilson realized, the immediate objects of each candidate, similar or dissimilar, were less important than the “engineering principles of liberty” each applied to politics.85 Whereas Roosevelt’s emphasis on national unity as the repository of national strength led him to define citizenship as self-sacrifice, and leadership as the ability to elicit such sacrifices, Wilson defined citizenship as self-government, in
which self-sacrifice and enlightened self-interest played equally important roles. The task of a leader was to encourage the examination of interests that revealed convergent goals, facilitate the discussions that determined the sacrifices required to attain them, and translate the conclusions into policies embodying them—to promote, in short, “a common understanding and a free action all together.” Ultimately Wilson’s was a vision of democracy a plurality of Americans shared on election day in 1912.

“Liberal in Purpose, and Effective in Action”

Once president, Wilson continued to believe in an empiricist, pragmatic approach to politics, and in the paramountcy of widely participatory deliberative discourse in an interdependent society. In 1913 and 1914, Wilson pushed the entire New Freedom program through the Sixty-Third Congress, rationalizing the tariff, establishing the Federal Reserve, and restricting the powers of trusts, attempting at each step to mitigate the possible stultifying effects of his statutory measures by creating flexible investigatory commissions with constructive powers. Seeking a balance between private initiative and public supervision of the economy, Wilson attempted to loosen the stranglehold of vested interests on American trade, credit, consumer prices, and the labor market, to allow Americans at least a little more latitude in the use of their dollars and hours, and thus more control over their role in national life. This Herculean effort to clean and rebuild the Augean stables of the American economy was succeeded by a cascade of social justice measures beginning in 1915. Rural credits, child labor restrictions, a government worker’s compensation act, and a redistributive income tax were all passed or in passage before the Democrats unveiled their 1916 platform—a platform pledging to fulfill every remaining social justice promise of the Progressive Party in 1912. Just as effective in convincing social justice progressives of Wilson’s zeal for the “ethical republic” was his nomination of Brandeis to the Supreme Court in January 1916, followed by a giant and successful presidential push for confirmation. To the pragmatist Walter Lippmann of The New Republic, these efforts evinced the commitment to an “Integrated America” that progressives once looked for in Roosevelt. It also demonstrated surprising adaptability. “Wilson,” wrote Lippmann in October, “is evolving under experience and remaking his philosophy in the light of it,” thus “temporarily at least creating, out of the reactionary, parochial fragments of the Democracy, the only party which at this moment is national in scope, liberal in purpose, and effective in action.”
It has not been the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate the “influence” of pragmatism on Wilson's thinking. Wilson never cited James or Dewey in any letter or speech, though he had met both and was aware of their ideas through James's essays and Dewey's prominence in reform circles. Moreover, self-consciously pragmatist progressives like Herbert Croly for years thought Wilson of a wholly different species, if not outside the progressive genus altogether. When Wilson, after his epic legislative victories in the Sixty-Third Congress, began talking as if his program of economic reorganization might alone usher in the post–Progressive Era in America, Croly wrote in The New Republic that such “extravagant claims” only showed how grossly the president “misconceived the meaning and the task of American progressivism.” Yet within two years, Croly was supporting Wilson's reelection in 1916. Prompted by his coeditor Lippmann, Croly came to realize that Wilson's agenda as president bespoke an intellectual orientation strikingly congruent with their own pragmatic progressivism, which emphasized that society was a growing thing, that the state must grow and change with it, and that the political, economic, and social spheres were as interdependent as the individuals inhabiting them.

In 1916 yet another pragmatist progressive, John Dewey, contended in The New Republic that Wilson had abandoned the atomistic dogma of Democratic tradition for what could justly be termed a pragmatic approach: “He has appreciated the moving forces of present industrial life and has not permitted the traditional philosophy to stand in the way of doing things that need to be done.” As Wilson himself explained in a folksier way in 1916, he believed the central challenge of politics could be expressed “in the formula, ‘get together.’ Try to understand what the common task is and all take part in it in the same spirit.” Ultimately, “politics” was “nothing but a systematic attempt to keep the law adjusted to the real facts” of society—and “you cannot understand society unless you understand the component parts.” Here, as throughout his career, Wilson underscored the clear philosophy of social interdependence, communal inquiry, and political experimentation encapsulated in his concept of “common counsel.” In other words, he articulated a pragmatic progressivism, one that by 1917 had transformed politics in America and was soon to do the same beyond its borders.

Notes


5. Definitions of “progressivism” proliferate. Almost all who adopted the label, however, rejected the laissez-faire approach to politics and economics they thought dominated yet enervated public life in America and agreed on the basic responsibility of the state to create conditions of economic and social justice. What such conditions were and how to realize them were questions that different participants in the progressive movement answered in various and sometimes contradictory ways; what distinguished “pragmatist progressives” such as John Dewey, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann was their conscious willingness to exploit the fecundity of the progressive critique by interrogating its myriad hypotheses, experimenting with many, and avoiding dogmatic adherence to any.


8. Ibid., 30, 31, 195.


10. Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1889), 576; Woodrow Wilson, “The Modern Democratic State,” 1885, in *PWW*, vol. 5, 90, 92. “The Modern Democratic State” was never published; its brevity suggests it was a kind of memorandum on democratic theory to which Wilson expected to refer in later years, and in fact it did anticipate themes to
which he returned throughout his academic and political career. See the editorial note in ibid., 54–58.

11. Woodrow Wilson, “Socialism and Democracy” (unpublished, 1887), in *PWW*, vol. 5, 561–62. There is no satisfactory explanation as to why this essay was never published. For the timing of its composition, see the editorial note following its transcription in ibid., 563. Wilson’s copy of *The Labor Movement in America* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1886) is preserved in his personal library at the Library of Congress (hereafter, WL LC), along with a copy of Ely’s *French and German Socialism in Modern Times* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883). This last Wilson read multiple times, at least once while writing *The State*. The book is signed and dated “Woodrow Wilson, 1883” and inscribed on p. 262: “Oct. 24th, 1883 / November 9th, 1883 / May 29th, 1888.”


13. Wilson, *The State*, 634–36; the quotations are on 633, 631–32. Here, and unless noted, the emphasis was in the original.

14. “Edmund Burke: The Man and His Times,” c. August 31, 1893, in *PWW*, vol. 8, 341, 342. Wilson reread Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in the early 1890s and came to appreciate the wisdom it offered Americans in the midst of their own social and political turmoil; see the long editorial note in *PWW*, vol. 8, 313–18. Burke’s belief in a slowly but steadily evolving body of law as the most rational agent of legal change also absorbed Wilson’s interest, as is clear from his detailed lecture notes for July 2–10, 1894, in ibid., 597–99; and his notes for lectures on public law from ca. September 22, 1894–January 20, 1895, in *PWW*, vol. 9, 5–106.


17. Motter, *Leaders of Men*, 45. In this passage, Wilson approvingly quoted Burke’s adage that “to follow, not to force, the public inclination—to give a direction, a technical dress, and a specific sanction, to the general sense of the community, is the true end of legislation.” This is indeed the crux of Wilson’s message in “Leaders of Men,” and
his criticism of Burke is largely confined to the latter's failure to put his philosophy into practice. The quotation from Burke is marked in Wilson's personal copy of Burke's *Works*, vol. 2, 225, in Burke's "Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol." The original quotation reads “. . . the true end of legislature.”

18. Motter, *Leaders of Men*, 27, 28–29; “Burke: The Man and His Times,” in *PWW*, vol. 8, 340. Wilson is known to have delivered “Leaders of Men” on January 20, 1898, at a benefit held in the University Place Church at Princeton, and again on May 24, 1898, at the University School in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He may well have recycled the address on other occasions throughout the decade. See Motter, “Introduction,” in *Leaders of Men*, 4, 9.

19. The descriptor “anti-ideological,” referring to Burke’s politics as understood by Wilson, is borrowed from Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*, 53. A particularly vehement argument for the fundamental conservatism of Wilson’s political science is Vincent Ostrom, *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), claiming specifically that Wilson’s “theory of administration was no less than a counter-revolutionary doctrine” (133). For most of the past fifty years, more nuanced arguments for Wilson’s conservatism have prevailed, though the literature is contradictory. In *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), Richard Hofstadter made Wilson the archetypal “conservative as liberal,” admitting that Wilson’s philosophy left “room . . . for reform” but was fundamentally “Manchesterian” in its acceptance of “conventional laissez-faire” (239–41). In contrast, the most recent comprehensive analysis of Wilson’s thought stressing his political conservatism—Niels Aage Thorsen, *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988)—emphasizes Wilson’s admiration for Burke and Hamilton in concluding that Wilson’s political science replaced “the majoritarian idea of ‘the people’ as the principle of legitimacy with an idea of the nation,” and that his most important legacy was “the creation of reasoning, metaphors, and concepts that support[ed] . . . the systematic accumulation of power” by the state (218, 233). Certainly, Wilson preferred reform over revolution in politics and economics, admired Hamilton’s efforts to consolidate federal power in the early republic, and thought the populist Jefferson “a great man, but not a great American,” as he wrote in 1893. Conversely, Wilson concluded in the same essay that Hamilton’s scorn for democracy was un-American, and during the campaign of 1912 compared what he considered Hamilton’s plutocratic tendencies to contemporary obstacles preventing the mass of “the people” from participating in government. See Woodrow Wilson, “A Calendar of Great Americans,” c. September 15, 1893, in *PWW*, vol. 8, 374, 369; and Woodrow Wilson, “A News Report of a Campaign Address in Baltimore,” April 30, 1912, in *PWW*, vol. 24, 374.

20. Woodrow Wilson, “The Lawyer and the Community,” August 31, 1910, in *PWW*, vol. 21, 81. The address was delivered in Chattanooga.

from 1875 to 1910; on his Princeton presidency, see 269–384. Cooper’s more favorable evaluation of Wilson’s reforms and the efficacy of his leadership is, however, a compelling riposte to Bragdon’s charges of antimodernism and intransigence, respectively; see Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*, chap. 7, esp. 89–90, 97–101.


24. Woodrow Wilson, “An Address on the South and the Democratic Party,” November 30, 1904, in *PWW*, vol. 15, 548. This address was delivered at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City to the Society of the Virginians.

25. Wilson is quoted in Link, *Road to the White House*, 96.


27. See Wilson’s speeches at New Rochelle, N.Y., February 27, 1905; Detroit, March 31, 1905; and New York, April 16, 1906—all in *PWW*, vol. 16, as cited below.


33. Wilson suffered a series of strokes from 1896 on, including a moderately severe one in 1906. Wilson’s emphasis on “the transformed, renewed, morally purified” individual after his 1906 stroke is analyzed by John M. Mulder, *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 240–44; the quotation is on 240. Though noting Wilson’s rejection of laissez-faire government, Mulder overemphasizes Wilson’s individualist views, especially in his brief analysis of *Constitutional Government*. Though the extent of Wilson’s commitment to individual responsibility and fear of overregulation is fully demonstrated in Mulder’s survey of Wilson’s speeches and writings from this period, his belief in social interdependence and the ultimate supremacy of the federal government over the states persists, and *Constitutional Government* is a clear harbinger of their return to prominence in his thought. The effects of all Wilson’s strokes on his character and thinking, including the crippling one he suffered in 1919 at the height of his fight with the Senate over the Treaty of Versailles, are analyzed extensively by Edwin A. Weinstein, *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

34. See, e.g., Woodrow Wilson, “Politics,” July 31, 1907, in *PWW*, vol. 17, 309–25, a reprisal of an earlier critique of “State Rights,” reprinted December 20, 1899, in *PWW*, vol. 11, 303–48. Wilson, to be sure, was still playing seesaw; see his conservative “Credo” of 1907, cited in note 26 above.


36. Ibid., 18, 25, 30.

37. Ibid., 23–24; see also 14.

38. Ibid., 4–5.


40. Ibid., 20, 57; emphasis added.

41. According to Richard Hofstadter, Sumner’s thinking was Darwinian in conceiving “rights” as “evolving folkways crystallized in laws” and in recognizing that in “other times and places other mores have prevailed, and still others will emerge in the future.” Yet Hofstadter also notes that the “geological tempo” at which Sumner believed this emergence occurred resulted in a “scorn for all forms of meliorism and voluntarism” that prevented him from being a “consistent evolutionist,” prepared to accept the “decline of laissez-faire . . . as a new trend in the development of the mores.” Wilson’s Darwinian politics, in contrast, evinced the “pragmatic bias” Hofstadter and others attribute to Lester Frank Ward’s sociology, which distinguished “between physical, or animal, purposeless evolution and mental, human evolution decisively modified by purposive action,” and thus “replaced an older passive determinism with a positive body of social theory adaptable to the uses of reform.” Hofstadter’s view of Sumner has

43. Ibid., 170–71, 178.
44. Ibid., 54–81; the quotations here are on 54, 59, 68, 81.
45. Ibid., 106. Arthur Link, stressing what he claims was Wilson’s “plea for dynamic state [as opposed to federal] action,” specifically contrasts the ideas in *Constitutional Government* with “the Herbert Croly type of progressive thought,” ignoring the book’s emphasis on active adaptation of institutional forms to sociopolitical circumstances. Link, *Road to the White House*, 109–10.
46. See Wilson’s speech in New York, December 9, 1908, in *PWW*, vol. 18; his speeches in Chicago, February 12, 1909, and Baltimore, February 19, 1909, in ibid., vol. 19; and again in New York, January 18, 1910, in ibid., vol. 20.
47. For a thoughtful analysis of the relative weight of intellectual temperament and personal advantage in Wilson’s embrace of progressivism (giving greatest weight to the former), see Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*, 122–27. For more on the change in progressives’ fortunes and its effect on Wilson, see Link, *Road to the White House*, 122–23.
48. See the selection from William O. Inglis, “Helping to Make a President” in *Woodrow Wilson: Reform Governor*, ed. David W. Hirst (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1965), 7–9. Inglis was a writer hired by Harvey to help publicize Wilson’s candidacy; his account appeared during Wilson’s second presidential campaign in three issues of *Collier’s Weekly* in October 1916. For Wilson’s impressions, which corroborate Inglis’s account, see his letters to David B. Jones and Edward W. Sheldon on June 27 and July 11, 1910, in *PWW*, vol. 20, 543–45, 572–73. Wilson responded to the only “conditions” of Boss Smith’s support with devious ambiguity: “I would be perfectly willing to assure Mr. Smith that I would not, if elected governor, set about ‘fighting and breaking down the existing Democratic organization and replacing it with one of my own.’ The last thing I should think of would be building up a machine of my own”; Wilson to John Harlan, June 23, 1910, in ibid., 540 (emphasis added).

51. On the convention, see Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*, 164–65; and Link, *Road to the White House*, 155–66.


54. Joseph P. Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson as I Know Him* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1921), 21–22. Tumulty was a dissident Democrat who had opposed Wilson’s nomination but changed his mind immediately upon hearing Wilson speak. Tumulty later became Wilson’s personal secretary in the White House and a close friend.


56. Record thought the letter clinched the campaign, as did many old-guard Republicans. It clearly swayed New Jersey’s independents and New Idea Republicans: On November 8, Wilson won a plurality of almost 50,000 and carried fifteen of twenty-one counties, many of which went Democratic for the first time. Hirst, *Woodrow Wilson*, 106, 113.

57. This analysis closely follows that of Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*, 172.


60. As Arthur Link put it, Wilson “was truly a prime minister in the state.” Link, *Road to the White House*, 249.


62. Ellen Wilson’s efforts in the spring of 1911 to reconcile Bryan and Wilson are described in Link, *Road to the White House*, 317–18. For Wilson’s growing appeal to Bryan’s supporters, the increasing closeness between the two politicians, and Bryan’s role in securing Wilson’s nomination, see ibid., 318–26, 352–57, 433–62.

63. William Howard Taft, “The Judiciary and Progress: Address of Hon. William H. Taft at Toledo, Ohio, Friday Evening, March 8, 1912,” Washington, G.O.P., 1912, 3. Despite his genuine belief in popular government, the thrust of Taft’s message was to condemn Roosevelt’s proposal for a process of judicial recall, on grounds that the courts were responsible to the law rather than to public opinion.


65. On Wilson’s prenomination campaign and presidential campaign before August 28, see Link, *Road to the White House*, 309–488; Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*. 

66. Brandeis’s wife, Alice Goldmark Brandeis, was the sister of James’s longtime friend Pauline Goldmark, and both Louis and Alice were extremely close friends with Elizabeth Evans, the widow of Glendower Evans, both of whom had long ago formed close ties with the Jamesses. In 1897, Evans invited both the philosopher and the people’s attorney to her home on Otis Place in Boston, and after the Spanish-American War, Evans recruited Brandeis to join the PIS. See William James to Elizabeth G. Evans, July 29, 1897, and James to Pauline Goldmark, April 18, 1899, in The Correspondence of William James, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, 12 vols. (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1992–2004), vol. 8, 288, 515. On the Brandeises and Evenses, and the latter couple’s ties to the Jamesses, see Allon Gal, Brandeis of Boston (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 10, 150. Brandeis may also have come into contact with James through the Filene’s department store’s Filene Cooperative Association, a pioneering workers’ insurance and co-management organization for which both Brandeis and James were enlisted as occasional speakers; Gal, ibid., 60–61. For a more detailed examination of the relationship between James and Brandeis, see Throntveit, “Related States.”

67. See William James to Pauline Goldmark, November 17, 1903, in Correspondence of William James, ed. Skrupskelis and Berkeley, vol. 10, 330; James to Goldmark, June 30, 1904, in ibid., 426; and James to Alice Howe Gibbens James, August 30, 1906, and to Margaret Mary James, September 1, 1906, in ibid., vol. 11, 263–64.


71. New York Times, July 11, 1912. The “solemn note” and “few cheers” that greeted Wilson’s speech were noted by the Times on the front page of the August 8, 1912 edition.  


73. Ibid., 7. On the tariff issue’s failure to enthuse the electorate, see Chace, 1912, 192.

74. Wilson characterized the contest between him and Roosevelt in these terms, in a conversation with his daughter Eleanor during the campaign; see Eleanor Wilson


76. See, e.g., Brandeis to Theodore Wehle, Dickinson S. Miller, and Arthur K. Stone, all September 4, 1912; Sen. Moses E. Clapp (Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Committee) to Brandeis, September 7, 1912, and Brandeis to Clapp, September 11, 1912; Edward T. Hartman (Secretary of the Massachusetts Civic League) to Brandeis, September 12, 1912; Brandeis to Brand Whitlock (Mayor of Toledo, Ohio), September 28, 1912—all in the Louis Dembitz Brandeis papers, University of Louisville microfilm edition (hereafter, LDB UL), reel 29. Brandeis’s important articles were “Trusts, Efficiency and the New Party” and “Trusts, the Export Trade, and the New Party,” Collier’s Weekly, September 14, 1912, 14–15, and September 21, 1912, 10–11; and two essays titled “Concentration” and “Trusts and the Interstate Commerce Commission,” printed as editorials in Norman Hapgood’s column, Collier’s Weekly, October 5, 1912, 8–9. On Brandeis’s authorship of the Collier’s editorials, see Hapgood to Brandeis, August 29, 1912, LDB UL, reel 29.


79. See ibid., and editorial note 1. In the event, Wilson did not publish the letter, perhaps deciding against issuing another’s words under his own name. Kendrick A. Clements, in his fine short biography of Wilson, downplays the influence of Brandeis’s letter on Wilson’s thinking, noting that his Princeton colleague David B. Jones had offered similar suggestions in earlier correspondence. The quote from Wilson by which Clements substantiates Jones’s influence, however, is from the Buffalo address quoted above, delivered September 2—just days after Wilson met Brandeis at Sea Girt. Furthermore, while Brandeis’s influence on Wilson was indeed most apparent in the latter’s “approach to reform,” Clements’s claim that Wilson paid little attention to the actual measures proposed in Brandeis’s letter ignores Wilson’s numerous emendations and the later policy initiatives that reflected this cross-fertilization. E.g., after Wilson proposed a Federal Trade Commission in 1914, Brandeis wrote to his brother that Wilson had “paved the way for about all I have asked & some of the provisions specifically are what I got into his mind at my first interview.” See Kendrick A. Clements, Woodrow Wilson: World Statesman (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 81–82, 82 n. 20, 85; and Brandeis, quoted in Strum, Beyond Progressivism, 87.


81. See Wilson’s copy of Brandeis, Scientific Management and Railroads (New York: Engineering Magazine, 1912), WL LC. Scientific Management comprised selections from what was originally a brief presented by Brandeis on January 3, 1911, to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), and it consisted of Brandeis’s commentary along with transcriptions of hearings in front of the ICC from roughly June 1910 to January 1911. The hearings were ordered by the ICC after a group of railroads east of
the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River jointly raised freight rates. Brandeis represented the Traffic Committee of the Trade Organizations of the Atlantic Seaboard in the public investigation ordered by the ICC. About half the brief, the half making up the book, was devoted to the argument that scientific management of railroads would produce efficiencies obviating the need for rate hikes. Because, unlike the passenger service and manufacturing sectors, freight service was relatively uncompetitive, Brandeis argued that scientific management would have to serve as an equivalent force producing the efficiency that competition naturally induces. Brandeis built his case upon empirical observation of other industries that had adopted such management techniques, which indicated that scientific management made higher profits and lower rates, as well as higher wages and safer working conditions, possibly at the same time.

82. In this rare instance, I disagree with Cooper, who gives due credit to Brandeis’s importance in the campaign but explains it solely in terms of “furnishing a tactical opening and live ammunition” by suggesting the trusts be Wilson’s focus. Though I concur with Cooper’s statements that Wilson “did not share Brandeis’ belief that big-ness was itself an economic evil” nor his “preference for decentralized government,” I find his claim one page later of much greater significance: “In short, [Wilson proclaimed that] democratic government must remain self-government, no matter how complex the economic and social problems became. That was the point Brandeis had helped Wilson to grasp and with which he flayed Roosevelt for much of the 1912 campaign.” Cooper, Warrior and the Priest, 194–95.


87. Detailed accounts of Wilson’s three major New Freedom initiatives are given by Arthur S. Link, Wilson: The New Freedom (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), chaps. 6, 7, 13. The fact that the United States began moving toward a war economy not long after the passage of the New Freedom reforms makes it difficult to assess their efficacy. Certainly, the vaunted antitrust measures—the Clayton Act of 1913 and the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914—failed to restructure the American economy as Wilson had predicted, though they did curb abuses that had proliferated under the Sherman Act, restrict injunctions against striking unions, and provide regulatory and investigative tools put to even greater use by later administrations. Meanwhile, Wilson was criticized for appointing prominent businessmen to the Federal Reserve Board and thus “Legalizing the ‘Money Power,’” as Senator Robert M. La Follette wrote in La Follette’s Weekly, December 27, 1913, 1. Yet the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 was one of twentieth-century America’s most important pieces of construc-
tive legislation, abolishing the private monopoly over credit in America, extending benefits to farmers and other Americans far from Northeastern financial centers, and providing, especially after overhauls in the 1930s, an elastic yet stable currency for a growing and changing economy. Finally, to recoup revenue, the Underwood-Simmons Tariff of 1913 instituted the first graduated income tax in American history and paved the way for the more sharply progressive income tax provision of the Revenue Act of 1916.


91. Wilson met James when the latter was awarded an honorary degree at the Princeton Sesquicentennial in 1896. “The Will to Believe” had been published in June of that year (in the New World, vol. 5, 327–47), giving Wilson ample time to read James’s cultural bombshell before meeting him at the Princeton festivities beginning October 20.
The case that Wilson did in fact read James in 1896 and again in 1915 is beyond the scope of the present argument but is demonstrated in Throntveit, “Related States.” For Princeton’s Sesquicentennial Celebration, see the newspaper reports reprinted in *PWW*, vol. 10, 9–11, and the extensive collection of archival materials relating to the event in the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University. As for Dewey, he and Wilson attended Johns Hopkins together, and Dewey is among a group of mutual “J.H.U. friends” mentioned in Albert Shaw to Wilson, May 23, 1887, in *PWW*, vol. 5, 507.

Wilson not only terminated many Black civil servants working in Washington D.C., he instituted many of segregation policies in the
capital that...

How was Woodrow Wilson's progressivism limited?