Called into being by Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 as a result of the former Republican president’s quarrel with the conservative, Old Guard wing of his party—and then effectively killed by Roosevelt in 1916 when circumstances and priorities had changed—the Progressive Party has usually appeared in historical accounts as an extension of its initiator’s huge ambitions and personality. Still, the party’s strong start in 1912 nurtured hopes that it would become a fixture in American politics. An impressive list of social and political reformers rallied to the Progressives and spent the next several years trying to turn the party into a practical vehicle for reform in the states as well as at the national level. The movement failed to fulfill activists’ hopes for a permanent reform party, but it did prove to be a key episode in the formation of twentieth-century liberal politics and in the shift of the Republican Party toward an identity with conservatism.

Roosevelt and the Progressive Republicans

Reformers had come regularly to label themselves "progressive" by January 1911, when Sen. Robert La Follette (R-WI) organized the National Progressive Republican League. La Follette’s immediate goal was to challenge Old Guard Republicans who dominated the party’s congressional leadership. La Follette also aimed to block Pres. William Howard Taft’s renomination and, with luck, take Taft’s place. Republican progressives saw Taft as having defected to the conservatives after running in 1908 as a moderate reformer. The restless Roosevelt, meanwhile, began to criticize publicly his handpicked successor upon returning from a prolonged foreign trip in mid-1910. A series of eloquent speeches outlining his version of progressivism, the New Nationalism, brought Roosevelt back into the limelight as a probable candidate for 1912. Borrowed from political theorist Herbert Croly’s 1909 pamphlet, The Promise of American Life, the concept of New Nationalism evoked Roosevelt’s commitment to an active role for the federal government in dealing with the social, economic, and environmental challenges posed by the country’s transition into an urban, industrial society with a formidable corporate business sector.

When La Follette’s candidacy for the Republican nomination faltered in February 1912, Roosevelt entered the race. Roosevelt attempted an unprecedented strategy of using victories in states that chose delegates by direct primaries to pressure the party into nominating him. Caucuses controlled by the party hierarchy, however, still chose most convention delegates. When the Republicans held their convention in Chicago in June 1912, Taft claimed a majority even though Roosevelt was clearly the more popular candidate. Taft had used venerable techniques of party management, similar to those Roosevelt himself had employed in locking up renomination in 1904. Still, Roosevelt’s supporters walked out of what they claimed was a stolen convention. In a breakaway meeting, the dissenters decided to establish the National Progressive Party. Roosevelt’s pronouncement, in response to a reporter’s query, that he was "fit as a bull moose," inspired the party’s symbol, which appeared in political cartoons and campaign paraphernalia.
Nearly all of La Follette's close allies among progressive Republicans refused to bolt to the Progressive Party. Relations between La Follette and Roosevelt had long been tense, with La Follette suspecting TR of being an egotist who would divert the progressive movement into serving his ambitions. The major Republican progressives in Congress generally shared their colleague's skepticism. Most kept a low profile that year, though a few supported Roosevelt while staying Republican, especially in states such as Kansas and Nebraska, where progressives controlled the regular Republican organization, thereby lessening pressure to create a separate party. Only two Republican senators, Miles Poindexter of Washington and Joseph M. Dixon of Montana, defected to the Bull Moosers—Dixon lost reelection as a result. Even so loyal a Roosevelt supporter as former Indiana senator Albert Beveridge required considerable persuasion before agreeing to bolt and give the keynote address at the Progressive Party convention.

A Crusade as Much as a Campaign

Having failed to secure a foothold quickly among Republicans in Congress, the Progressives pinned hopes for a breakthrough on the Democrats' nominating a conservative, thereby driving Democratic progressives to the Bull Moose banner. Most progressive Democrats, however, decided that Woodrow Wilson had valid enough reform credentials to merit support. By the time the Progressive convention met in Chicago in early August, even Roosevelt occasionally indicated that the cause was lost in the short run and that the goal was to legitimate progressive reform and perhaps institutionalize the new party. While few professional politicians took the risk, famous activists in social and civic reform committed themselves. Examples of prominent progressives who joined the Bull Moosers include social reformer Jane Addams of Hull-House, juvenile justice advocate Ben Lindsey, conservationist Gifford Pinchot, and journalist Walter Lippmann. Orators depicted their cause as a quasi-religious crusade. Beveridge led the convention in singing "Onward Christian Soldiers," while Roosevelt termed his address a "Confession of Faith" that culminated in his proclaiming, "We Stand at Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord."

The platform, entitled a Covenant with the People, ran the gamut of measures then identified as progressive: woman suffrage; direct primaries; referenda and recall; campaign finance reform; more equitable taxes; abolition of child labor; regulation of wages, hours, and safety conditions for workers; unemployment insurance; and even legislative veto of unpopular court decisions. Despite considerable pressure from advocates for African American rights, the Progressives refused to commit themselves to fighting segregation and lynching. Throughout his career, Roosevelt repeatedly played with a strategy of muting support for blacks in the hope of securing Southern white votes. California governor Hiram Johnson's nomination for vice president signaled the new party's optimism about the West, long a Roosevelt stronghold.

With the brilliant Roosevelt—backed by an impressive collection of public policy and social service experts—emerging as political scientist Wilson's main competitor, the fall saw a rare instance of an American presidential campaign characterized by candidates debating issues in an articulate, thoughtful way. The dramatic canvass culminated in a legendary incident in mid-October. Shot in the chest by a deluded former bartender as he entered the car that would take him to the Milwaukee Auditorium for a speech, Roosevelt (who as a war veteran realized he probably was not mortally wounded, in part because the bullet had slowed when passing through his fifty-page manuscript) showed his bloodstained shirt to the crowd, proclaiming, "It takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose," and delivered a stirring defense of progressive causes.

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Despite the campaign’s eloquence and drama, the Democrats’ unity made Wilson's victory almost a foregone conclusion. Against a divided opposition, Wilson's 44.5 percent of the vote enabled him to gain 435 electoral votes. At the time, Roosevelt’s strong performance vis-à-vis Taft seemed the election's striking feature. The Progressive candidate's 88 electoral votes came from winning 6 states. With 29.1 percent of the total popular vote, TR finished in second place in twenty-three other states. Taft, meanwhile, won only 24.6 percent of the popular vote and two states, for a paltry 8 electoral votes.

Having elected 13 congressmen and some 260 state legislators, the Progressives seemed positioned to challenge the Republicans to become the second national party. Roosevelt's presence on the national ticket had provided openings for the Progressive Party at the state and local levels. While not electing a single governor, Progressive tickets ran well in Northeast states such as Vermont and Pennsylvania, and in Midwest states such as Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana, in addition to the West, where gains had been expected. The party's hasty construction and its roots in faction-fighting among national Republicans, however, created confusing situations even in such promising states as California, where Progressives claimed a legislative majority but depended on support from Republican backers of Governor Johnson. Contemporaries who remembered the last significant third-party movement, the Populists, understood the challenge now facing the Progressives in their efforts to transform immediate gains into permanent strength. In 1892, the Populists made an even more impressive showing in state and local elections only to stagnate over the next four years.

**Progressive Policy or the Progressive Party**

"The Progressive Party has come to stay," pronounced Roosevelt after his defeat in the 1912 election. Despite colleagues’ suspicions about the mercurial former president, Roosevelt devoted much energy to writing, speaking, and organizing for the new party. At a conference in December 1912, activists adopted an innovative party structure drawn up largely by Jane Addams that dedicated the movement to formulating and promoting concrete reforms in addition to managing campaigns and elections. Nevertheless, ambivalence over whether to give priority to the Progressive Party or to progressive causes hampered the party throughout 1913. Roosevelt and other leaders repeatedly had to urge state parties to resist overtures from progressive Republicans for coalitions that would bring immediate benefits at the cost of party identity. Progressives captured mayor's offices in cities such as Syracuse, New York, Akron, Ohio, and Portland, Oregon, but they stagnated or lost ground in that year's statewide, off-year elections.

Indeed, the very effectiveness of the party's educational and policy-formation enterprise in influencing state-level reform legislation undermined the rationale for a separate party. At the national level, Woodrow Wilson's administration proved adept at working with the Democratic majority in Congress to produce measures with progressive appeal such as the Federal Trade Commission Act (1914) and the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914). By early 1914, the Progressives had descended into draining internal fights, many of which surrounded party chairman George W. Perkins, a liberal banker suspect to some Progressives because of his ties to Wall Street. In May 1914, after returning from an Amazon safari that seriously damaged his health, Roosevelt muddied the waters further with statements that now hinted that cooperation with the "honest rank and file of the old parties" was acceptable if it helped achieve Progressive goals at the state level. Split further by volatile issues such as Prohibition, the Progressive Party "came a cropper," as Roosevelt lamented, in the fall 1914 congressional elections. Its total vote of 2 million was about half of what Roosevelt achieved in 1912. The party retained only a half dozen
House seats and came in third in most Senate races, squandering the opportunity offered by the first popular election of senators, a proposal closely identified with progressivism.

The fall 1914 campaign coincided with the outbreak of World War I. The European war reshuffled American politics in a manner detrimental to the Bull Moosers. The Wilson administration's efforts to avoid American involvement won support from neutralist progressives from all parties. The nationalistic Roosevelt's strident backing for preparedness set him at odds with crucial constituencies such as working-class voters of Irish or Central European background and Midwest and Western progressives, who agreed with TR on conservation and other domestic issues but who leaned toward isolationism in foreign affairs. Roosevelt's stance on foreign policy, meanwhile, helped repair ties to conservative Republicans with whom he had parted ways over domestic issues, including his old friend Henry Cabot Lodge.

Already teetering, the Progressive Party made a fatal decision to hold its convention in Chicago in early June, the same time and city as the Republicans. When the Republicans settled on the moderate progressive Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes as nominee, Roosevelt had a pretext for declining the Progressives' proffered renomination, a move that effectively killed the Bull Moose Party. Neither of two later attempts to mount a national Progressive Party ticket—by La Follette in 1924 and by Henry A. Wallace in 1948—had a direct relation to Roosevelt's Bull Moosers.

The Progressive Party achieved its goal of injecting progressive reform issues permanently into national politics, even as it failed to become a permanent reform party. Younger Progressives such as Harold L. Ickes moved into the Democratic Party, ultimately playing a prominent part in the 1930s during the New Deal administration of TR's kinsman, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Bull Moosers who returned to the Republicans either drifted toward conservatism or, like California's Johnson and Pennsylvania's Pinchot, remained an uncomfortable progressive minority in a party where conservatives henceforth held the upper hand. The Progressive Party served, therefore, as an unwitting catalyst for the shifting ideological identities of the two major parties. With the unprecedented mobilization of young activists, professionals, and intellectuals, the Bull Moose episode also accelerated the systematization and professionalization of American public administration and public policy formation.

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