

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (USA)

By [Ross Kennedy](#)

Summary

This essay analyzes domestic politics in the United States during World War I, focusing chiefly on the Wilson administration's relations with Congress and on electoral politics from 1914 to 1918. Throughout this period, war-related issues became intertwined with ongoing political struggles related to progressive reform and shifts in the political strength of the Democrats and Republicans that began in 1910.

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Introduction

Domestic politics in the United States during World War I were unusually rancorous, featuring closely fought elections and intense legislative battles over the direction of U.S. foreign policy and wartime mobilization. The bitterness of these disputes in large part derived from pre-existing political disputes over progressivism, a predominantly middle-class reform movement promoting democracy, civic virtue over unrestrained individualism, and government intervention in the economy to enhance economic equality. After the [United States](#) entered the war in April 1917, issues related to the conflict became intertwined with ongoing policy debates and political shifts generated by progressive reform. The result was acrimony between and within the Democratic and Republican parties on a scale not seen in

decades.¹

Neutrality

Politics and Parties, 1914

When the war broke out in August 1914, progressive reform agitation had dominated American politics for around ten years. It divided Republican ranks and damaged the majority party status Republicans had enjoyed since the 1860s. This was most apparent in 1912, when conservatives denied ex-president [Theodore Roosevelt \(1858-1919\)](#) the presidential nomination, and Roosevelt, supported by most Republican progressives, ran for president on his own, as the nominee of a new Progressive party. Roosevelt lost in 1912 and the Progressive party largely collapsed after a poor showing in the 1914 congressional elections. A weakened group of Midwestern and Western “insurgents” returned to Republican ranks, as did Roosevelt, but tensions remained between them and the conservatives who dominated the party. In contrast, Democrats after 1904 became increasingly united in support of progressive reform. This allowed them to make electoral gains outside their traditional base in the South and in the urban centers of the North. In 1910 the Democrats won a majority of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1892. Two years later, the Democrats took control of the Senate as well and Democrat [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) won the presidency. They retained complete control of Congress in 1914, although their majority in the House declined during the 1914 mid-term elections.²

Neutrality and Defense Issues, 1914-1917

President Wilson’s ability to impose his will on his party in Congress was the most politically notable aspect of war-related legislative battles from 1914 to 1917. In early 1915, lawmakers primarily from Midwestern states with large [German-American populations](#) introduced resolutions to embargo the sale of munitions to nations involved in the war. Wilson opposed this measure because he considered it a breach of [neutrality](#) in favor of [Germany](#) and because arms sales by neutrals were consistent with [international law](#). These arguments swayed Southern Democrats who otherwise might have supported the embargo as a way to stay out of the war. Along with pro-British Eastern Republicans, they provided the votes to defeat the embargo in February 1915.³

Wilson’s dexterity in leading his party continued the following year. Early in 1916, with the memory of the [Lusitania](#) sinking still fresh, Democratic Representative [Jeff McLemore \(1857-1929\)](#) of Texas introduced a resolution warning Americans against travelling on armed belligerent ships. This proposal reflected widespread fears among Democrats that German

[submarine attacks](#) upon such ships could kill Americans and so lead to war with Germany. After the *Lusitania* sinking, Wilson had rejected the advice of Secretary of State [William Jennings Bryan \(1860-1925\)](#) to issue such a ban, and Bryan had resigned in protest. Instead, he had forced Germany to accept the rights of Americans to travel freely. Wilson now viewed the McLemore resolution as a direct challenge to his authority over foreign policy, especially since Bryan supported the measure, and worried that it would ruin his diplomatic credibility with Germany and [Britain](#). He made defeating the resolution a test of party loyalty and of his leadership and threatened to withhold patronage from Democrats who opposed him. In the key House vote on the resolution, Wilson prevailed by 276 to 142, with only 33 Democrats opposing him.⁴

The president also dominated his party on military “preparedness” issues. Especially after Germany’s attack on the passenger liner *Lusitania* in May 1915, conservative Republicans called for sharp increases in the army and navy. Most Democrats opposed preparedness, seeing it as unnecessary for U.S. security and as a plot by munitions makers, Wall Street bankers, and reactionaries to derail progressive reform. Wilson sympathized with these views to some degree. But he also wanted to take the issue away from the Republicans and thought a limited expansion of the armed forces would help to deter Germany from resuming its campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. He therefore put forward a preparedness program of his own in late 1915. When leading Democrats in the House demanded modifications in the army bill, Wilson compromised with them, agreeing to strengthen the National Guard rather than create a new federal reserve force; on the navy bill he held out successfully for a larger program than the House Democrats wanted. Together with his defeat of the McLemore resolution, the enactment of Wilson’s preparedness program demonstrated his mastery over his party on issues related to the war.⁵

The Presidential Election of 1916

In 1916, Woodrow Wilson became the first Democratic president to be re-elected to consecutive terms since [Andrew Jackson \(1767-1845\)](#) in 1828 and 1832. Wilson accomplished this feat by running as the candidate of progressivism and peace. He based this appeal on the extensive list of progressive reform legislation passed by the Democratic-controlled Congresses of 1913-1916 and on his success in keeping the United States out of war, both in Mexico and in Europe. His message resonated especially in western states, allowing the president to pick up support from progressive and anti-war farmers, workers, and women, including many who had voted for Roosevelt or the Socialist party in 1912. The Republican presidential nominee, on the other hand, ex-Supreme Court [Justice Charles Evans Hughes \(1862-1948\)](#), failed to reach out to Republican progressives and opposed a federally

mandated eight-hour day for railroad workers, which helped him win donations from big business but hurt him with organized [labor](#). Hughes did benefit from Wilson's underperformance with normally staunchly Democratic Irish Catholics, who thought Wilson's neutrality policies favored Britain. In the end, Wilson's new coalition of the South and the West, plus significant labor support in Ohio, allowed him to garner about 9.1 million votes to Hughes's 8.5 million and to win the electoral college with a vote of 277 to 254. The Democrats also retained control of both houses of Congress.⁶

The War Declaration Debate

On 31 January 1917, Germany announced a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, setting in motion the chain of events leading to America's entry into the war. Wilson broke diplomatic relations with Berlin and, in mid-February, began to move toward arming American merchants so they could protect themselves, a policy of "armed neutrality." Despite public furor over Germany's attempt to enlist Mexico as an ally against the U.S. if war came, revealed in the [Zimmermann Telegram](#), a Senate filibuster prevented congressional authorization of this step. On 9 March Wilson ordered the implementation of armed neutrality anyway, claiming existing statutes gave him the power to do so. Between 16 and 18 March, German submarines attacked without warning three American merchant ships, sinking all three of them and killing several Americans. This was the last straw for Wilson: on 2 April, he went before a joint session of Congress and asked it to recognize that a state of war existed between Germany and the United States.⁷

Within a few days of Wilson's speech, the Senate voted 82 to 6 for war; the House followed with a pro-war vote of 373 to 50. There is much evidence to suggest that anti-war sentiment was more widespread than these votes indicated. Certainly large numbers of Americans in the South and Midwest remained opposed to entering the conflict, as did most leftist progressives in the labor movement and social welfare community. Echoing their arguments against preparedness, they asserted that belligerency was an unjustified response to German actions that were aimed at Britain, not the United States; entering the war would ruin whatever chance America had to mediate an end to the war; and mobilizing for war would destroy America's free way of life at home. Anti-war lawmakers added that intervention would entangle the United States with the imperialistic war aims of the Allies. Rooted in progressive anti-militarism and traditional American indifference to European politics, these arguments had traction in Congress. At a minimum, four senators and some fifty House members indicated that they opposed intervention but voted for the war resolution out of a desire to foster national unity. Private polls of senators and representatives indicated that up to half of them opposed war. One public indication of this anti-war strength came in a House

vote to prohibit arming merchant ships carrying munitions. This measure lost 293-125. The 125 representatives who voted for this measure probably represent the minimum number of genuine anti-war members in the House – almost 30 percent of the chamber.⁸

Conservative eastern Republicans led the pro-war forces in Congress, but the votes that gave the president his lopsided victory came from Democrats. Many of them supported Wilson out of party loyalty. Significantly, though, support for the president's decision to fight did not automatically extend to his stated war aim of creating a new international order "safe for democracy" based on a league of nations. Few of those who spoke in favor of the war resolution mentioned that objective. No one argued that intervention was necessary to save the Allies from defeat either. As was the case since late 1914, U.S. leaders in early 1917 assumed that the Allies were likely to win the war. Instead of citing Wilson's war aims or any security or economic interest in fighting, most supporters of the war resolution argued that America had to defend its maritime rights and its national honor against German attacks. They went to war, they said, to preserve America's self-respect and reputation.⁹

Wilson and the War Congress, 1917-1918

During the nineteen months that the United States directly participated in the war, Wilson had a stormy relationship with Congress. One dimension of this tension involved the president's problems with his own party. First, Democrats failed to support Wilson's unpopular proposal to give the administration the power to [censor](#) the [press](#), which resulted in the measure's defeat. At the same time, Wilson had difficulty convincing Democrats to raise an American army through conscription. Southern Democrats in particular tended to oppose the draft because they believed it would favor the wealthy and the interests of corporations. They also feared arming African Americans. Loyalty to Wilson eventually trumped such concerns, especially after Republicans tried to include a provision in the draft bill to allow Theodore Roosevelt to raise his own division of volunteers. Seeing this as a political threat to the president, most Democrats dropped their opposition to conscription. On a third issue, financing the war, the administration and congressional Democrats at first agreed that 50 percent of war revenue should be raised through taxes on the wealthy and corporate profits and 50 percent through loans. Republicans blocked this approach in the Senate. To break the deadlock, the administration agreed to raise only around 25 percent of its needed new revenue through taxation. Wilson's retreat on the tax issue irritated progressive Democrats; in 1918, when Wilson had to ask Congress for more funding for the war, they dragged their feet on enacting anything.¹⁰

[Woman's suffrage](#) and the administration's policy on agricultural price controls also frayed

Wilson's relationship with congressional Democrats. Many southern and border-state Democrats opposed a constitutional amendment to enact woman's suffrage despite Wilson's pleas from January 1918 onward to pass the measure, and it failed to pass the Senate in September 1918. More ominously for Wilson, western Democrats simultaneously became enraged over the administration's refusal to raise the federally guaranteed price of wheat from \$2.20 to \$2.40 a bushel. Wilson believed the increase would stoke inflation and force the British to borrow more money from the United States to pay for food imports. This argument failed to convince western wheat farmers given that their costs for fertilizer and machinery had risen sharply. Even more aggravating to the West, the administration failed to control cotton prices despite their four-fold increase after April 1917. Cotton was not subject to excess war profits taxes either. Wilson refused to change course on his cotton policy in the summer of 1918 because he needed southern votes in Congress to get the 1918 war revenue bill. To westerners, though, it appeared that Wilson was simply favoring his native South over other regions of the country.¹¹

If the war opened up fractures between Wilson and congressional Democrats, it intensified acrimony between the president and Republicans. Embittered by election defeats since 1910 and despising Wilson's progressive policies increasing regulation of business, conservative congressional leaders such as [Henry Cabot Lodge \(1850-1924\)](#) were determined not to allow the war to enhance the standing of Wilson or the Democratic party. In 1917 they repeatedly tried to create a congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War that would have unlimited powers to investigate the administration's management of the war. Wilson had to rely on his Democratic majority to quash the proposal. When multiple problems became apparent in the manpower and economic mobilization effort in the winter of 1917-1918, Republican leaders attacked the administration as hopelessly incompetent. On the defensive, Democrats had to allow various Senate committees to launch investigations into the administration's performance. The most serious inquiry was pursued by the Senate Military Affairs Committee under the chairmanship of rogue Democratic Senator [George E. Chamberlain \(1854-1928\)](#). He called for creation of a "War Cabinet" that would effectively undermine Wilson's power to run the war effort. An impressive defense of the administration's record before Chamberlain's committee by Secretary of War [Newton D. Baker \(1871-1937\)](#) helped Wilson to fend off these challenges, and he persuaded Congress that the best way to improve management of war production was to let him reorganize executive agencies on his own. Allied and [U.S. military successes](#) on the [Western Front](#) beginning in late summer 1918, significantly diminished Republican attempts to wrest control of the war effort from Wilson's hands.¹²

The Congressional Elections of 1918

In the 1918 elections, the Republicans won control of both houses of Congress for the first time in ten years. President Wilson's refusal to raise the guaranteed price of wheat from \$2.20 a bushel badly hurt Democrats in the West. In the ten leading wheat producing states, the Republicans gained twenty one House seats, two-thirds of the total number of seats they picked up in the election. Wilson also hurt his prestige by intervening in a special Senate election in Wisconsin. Viewing the contest as vital to holding the Democratic majority in the Senate, Wilson suggested that the Republican candidate failed the "acid test" of "true loyalty and genuine Americanism" by voting against the administration on several neutrality issues, including the McLeMORE resolution, prior to the U.S.'s entry into the war. This charge outraged Republicans. They were further provoked when Wilson, just days before the election, explicitly appealed to voters to support his peace program by returning a Democratic Congress, despite having proclaimed in late May that politics was "adjourned" because of the war. Both of these episodes probably helped to drive up Republican turn-out to the polls. More significantly, Wilson demoralized his own progressive base after April 1917 by failing to promote his vision of a league of nations and by ruthlessly repressing anti-war leftists and socialists.¹³

Conversely, the Republicans, unlike in 1916, ran an efficient and effective campaign. They exploited the controversy over the administration's wheat price and its lack of price controls on cotton to portray the Democrats as a southern-dominated party unfit to govern in the interest of the whole nation – a damaging charge in a country only fifty years removed from the Civil War. They appealed to business interests by stressing that Wilson's wartime mobilization programs amounted to socialism and pro-labor radicalism, and warned that a Democratic victory would extend such tyrannical policies into the post-war period. Led by Roosevelt and Lodge, Republicans also advocated for the unconditional surrender of Germany and attacked Wilson's peace program, centered on establishing a league of nations, as a betrayal of American nationalism. Along with the delayed signing of armistice, which occurred six days after voting took place, this argument probably blunted whatever benefit Democrats might have gotten from presiding over a victorious end to the war.¹⁴

The Fight Over the Versailles Treaty

The climactic political battle in the United States during World War I involved President Wilson's battle to attain Senate ratification of the [Versailles Treaty](#). The controversy over the treaty was highly partisan, with all but one Republican opposed to unreserved ratification. Sixteen senators opposed the treaty completely. Some of these "irreconcilables," such as [Robert M. La Follette \(1855-1925\)](#) and [William E. Borah \(1865-1940\)](#), saw the terms of the

treaty imposed upon Germany as an expression of Allied imperialism and the [League of Nations](#) as a victor's alliance designed to protect the spoils of conquest. Others, including some irreconcilables, had little trouble with the peace terms for Germany but objected to the League of Nations. They focused in particular on the obligation under Article X "to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League." Their arguments concerning this provision formed the core of the Republican case against the treaty and followed those made by Lodge. Under Article X, Lodge predicted, the United States would find itself involved in international disputes having nothing to do with its interests and could end up in wars without congressional approval. Rather than reject the treaty, Lodge favored ratifying it with "strong reservations," including most importantly one declaring that the United States assumed "no obligation" under Article X. Another group of Republicans, around ten "mild reservationists," had somewhat more faith in the League's ideal of collective security than Lodge. But they also worried about the article's implications for the power that the U.S. Constitution gave to Congress to declare war, and so, like Lodge, wanted reservations attached to the treaty.¹⁵

Wilson's best chance for ratifying the treaty lay in negotiating with the mild reservationists to keep the wording of the reservations as narrowly focused on Congress's war powers as possible. The president's talks with senators in the summer of 1919 went nowhere, however, as he would only consider "interpretive" reservations, meaning reservations outside the actual ratification vote. In September, Wilson went on an extended speaking tour across the country to whip up public pressure on the Senate to approve the treaty. Delivering forty speeches over twenty-one days, his health deteriorated, and he collapsed on September 26. After returning to Washington, Wilson suffered a massive stroke. He recovered somewhat by November but his political judgment was impaired. He rejected advice to accept reservations written by Lodge and the mild reservationists even though that was the only way to get the treaty ratified. Most Democrats loyally followed Wilson's lead, which doomed the treaty to defeat in ratification votes taken in November 1919 and March 1920.¹⁶

Conclusion

World War I was a watershed event in American political history. As historian David Sarasohn has shown, the Democratic party, by embracing progressive reform, was on its way to building an enduring, dominant electoral majority with its victories in the 1910 and 1912 elections. This trend was confirmed with the Democratic victory in 1916. Political disputes after America's entry into the war, though, shattered the Democratic coalition and revived Republican fortunes. Wilson's wartime policies provoked fierce opposition from Republicans

and allowed them to portray the Democrats as a sectional party bent on executive tyranny. At the same time, Wilson alienated the West and repressed socialists and progressives who opposed the war. The results of this dynamic became clear in the 1918 Republican victory. Wilson's postwar focus on the League fight and his physical collapse then exacerbated the Democrats' decline. They lost the 1920 elections in a massive landslide. Progressivism did not disappear in the 1920s, but, because of the war, it lost its primary electoral vehicle, the presidency. The Democrats would not be able to move the progressive agenda forward until Franklin D. Roosevelt became president during the Great Depression.¹⁷

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Notes

1. On progressivism, see Thompson, John A.: *Reformers and War. American Progressive Publicists and the First World War*, New York 1987, pp. 1-7, 33-82; Dawley, Alan: *Changing the World. American Progressives in War and Revolution*, Princeton 2003, pp. 1-10, 41-71. ↑
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7. Doenecke, Nothing Less 2011, pp. 250-90. ↑
8. Link, Campaigns 1965, pp. 415-19, 429; Doenecke, Nothing Less 2011, pp. 270-72, 284-85, 287-88, 292-97; Kennedy, Ross A.: The Will to Believe. Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security, Kent, Ohio 2009, pp. 171-72. ↑
9. Doenecke, Nothing Less 2011, pp. 290-94; Thompson, John A.: A Sense of Power. The Roots of America's Global Role, Ithaca, New York 2015, pp. 79-82, 87. ↑
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11. Cooper, Wilson 2009, pp. 171, 411-14; Kennedy, Over Here 1980, pp. 242-44; Livermore, Politics 1966, pp. 48-52, 169-76, 181-83, 242-45. ↑
12. Kennedy, Over Here 1980, pp. 19, 96-97, 123-26, 233-36; Livermore, Politics 1966, pp. 4-5, 15-16, 39, 53-57, 62-103, 125-134. ↑
13. Burner, Provincialism 1967, 1986, pp. 34-40; Livermore, Politics 1966, pp. 118, 135, 113-21, 169-76, 206-09; Kennedy, Over Here 1980, pp. 236-45; Knock, Thomas J.: To End All Wars. Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order, New York 1992, pp. 148-66, 178-81, 184-88. ↑
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Citation

Ross Kennedy: Governments, Parliaments and Parties (USA), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-06-21. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11113](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11113)

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- [Keene, Jennifer D.: Why World War I Matters in American History, in: The American Historian, February 2015 \(Organization of American Historians\) \(Article\)](#)
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- [Pease, Lute: Woodrow Wilson and the New Order, ca. 1916 \(Library of Congress\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Preparedness Movement \(Encyclopædia Britannica\) \(Article\)](#)
- [President Wilson's great speeches and other history making documents, Chicago 1919 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Theodore Roosevelt Blames Woodrow Wilson for the Sinking of the Lusitania, Killing 1,198 people in May, 1915, 21 June 1915 \(Shapell Manuscript Foundation\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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Author Keywords

Progressivism; Republican Party; Democratic Party; presidential elections; United States Congress

GND Subject Headings

[USA ; Politisches System ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\]](#)

LC Subject Headings

[United States--Politics and government--1913-1921 ; World War, 1914-1918--United States](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[États-Unis -- Politique et gouvernement -- 1913-1921](#)

Key Person(s)

[Roosevelt, Theodore](#); [Hughes, Charles Evans](#); [Borah, William E.](#); [Follette, Robert M. La](#); [McLemore, Jeff](#); [Jackson, Andrew](#); [Chamberlain, George E.](#); [Wilson, Woodrow](#); [Lodge, Henry Cabot](#); [Baker, Newton D.](#); [Bryan, William Jennings](#)

Key Location(s)

Title

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (USA)

Author(s)

[Ross Kennedy](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Regional Thematic Article

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