# **POLITICS IN THE 1920S**

## **The End of Wilsonianism**

The Republican politics of the 1920s sprung from the repudiation of Woodrow Wilson, the only Democrat elected to the presidency between 1892 and 1932. Wilson had never governed with the support of a majority of voters, winning office in 1912 only because two Republicans (popular ex-President Teddy Roosevelt and incumbent William Howard Taft) split the vote by running against each other, then barely retaining the presidency with less than half the popular vote in 1916. Despite his dubious mandate, Wilson pursued aggressive reforms at home and abroad, culminating in the virtual nationalization of the economy during World War I and the ambitious internationalism of the League of Nations after the armistice.

## **Warren G. Harding's Pro-Business "Normalcy"**

By the war's end, however, the American people supported neither Wilson's international commitments nor his domestic interventions into the economy and society. In 1920, they elected to the presidency, by a landslide, Republican Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio. Harding, who might best be described as an affable simpleton, campaigned on the simple promise of a "return to normalcy." Normalcy, under the Harding administration, meant a government that was pro-business, anti-tax, and anti-regulation.

Harding's Treasury Secretary, financier Andrew Mellon, cut income tax rates for the wealthiest Americans from 73% to 25%. The capital thus liberated fueled the skyrocketing stock market and helped the Jay Gatsbys of the world to achieve an unprecedented level of material affluence, but it also exacerbated the maldistribution of wealth between rich and poor—by 1929, the richest one-tenth of one percent of Americans owned as much wealth as the bottom 42%[9](http://www.shmoop.com/1920s/citations.html#9)—and may have created an unsustainable financial bubble that led directly to the Great Depression.

## **Harding's Corruption: Worst President Ever?**

Harding, hostile to the government regulation of business instituted under the Progressive administrations of Teddy Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, stocked the federal regulatory agencies with officials plucked from the industries meant to be regulated. Many of these anti-regulation regulators proved to be not merely philosophically opposed to government regulation but also deeply corrupt. Under Harding's administration, scandal tainted many departments of the government, with the corrupt looting of public property costing taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. In the most infamous incident, the memorably-named Teapot Dome scandal, Harding's anti-conservationist Interior Secretary accepted bribes of nearly half a million dollars from cronies in the oil industry in exchange for giving away drilling rights in the invaluable federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California.

Due to endemic corruption such as that of Teapot Dome, historians today usually consider Warren G. Harding to be a leading candidate for the dubious title of "worst president ever." Fortuitously, perhaps, Harding himself did not live to receive this judgment; he died of a stroke while on a speaking tour of the country after less than three years in office, before the worst revelations of corruption in his administration were widely publicized.

## **Silent Cal Coolidge**

Harding's replacement, stern New Englander Calvin Coolidge, shared Harding's economic conservatism but not his stench of impropriety. "Silent Cal" Coolidge exhibited zero personal charisma, but his strong reputation for personal respectability helped the Republicans to avoid electoral consequences for Harding's indiscretions. Coolidge—most famous for declaring that "the business of America is business"—easily won election for a second term in 1924, ensuring that the pro-business, free-market policies of Andrew Mellon, whom Coolidge retained as Treasury Secretary, would define the political economy of the entire decade. The result was "Coolidge Prosperity," half a decade of robust economic growth and widespread affluence.

## **Herbert Hoover's Promise: "Triumph Over Poverty"**

In 1928, Coolidge retired to civilian life, leaving office as a highly popular figure among the American people. Coolidge's Republican successor in the White House was Herbert Hoover, a former mining engineer, war-relief administrator, and Secretary of Commerce considered by many to be the greatest man of his generation. Raised in rural Iowa and Oregon, Hoover was a self-made millionaire but no rigid adherent of laissez-faire. Hoover might be considered the last Progressive, a believer in the potential of the private market to achieve beneficial results through voluntary cooperation encouraged (but not enforced) by the government. As Commerce Secretary in 1920, Hoover had helped to stave off a postwar depression by successfully encouraging leading businessmen voluntarily to pursue policies of growth rather than retrenchment. As a presidential candidate in 1928, Hoover confidently declared, "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land... we shall soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation." Hoover won more electoral votes than any previous presidential candidate in American history, but his optimistic vision of a future of universal affluence was soon shattered. In October 1929, just months after Hoover assumed office, the stock market collapsed, ushering in the Great Depression, the worst economic crisis in American history, which Hoover's policies of voluntary cooperation proved utterly unable to solve.

## **Dysfunctional Democrats**

Swamped by the decade-long ascendancy of pro-business Republicanism were the Democratic Party and the scattered remnants of progressive and radical alternatives to the prevailing economic order. The Democrats of the 1920s were a completely dysfunctional coalition of conservative, native-born white Protestants in the South and urban ethnics (often Catholic or Jewish) in the North. On the burning issues of the day—economic policy, immigration, Prohibition—the Democratic Party was a house divided. The results were congressional minorities and disastrous presidential candidates—in 1924, Democrats nominated Wall Street lawyer John W. Davis, a man just as conservative as Calvin Coolidge but much less popular; in 1928, they nominated anti-Prohibitionist New York Governor Al Smith, the first Catholic presidential candidate, who became the first Democrat since the Civil War to lose multiple states of the old Confederacy.

## **Scattered Remnants of the Red Scare: Socialists and Progressives**

Left-wing, third-party alternatives to Republican dominance and Democratic dysfunction appeared on the ballot in 1920 and 1924. In 1920—even as the country was wracked by a postwar Red Scare that led to a crackdown against radicals, socialists, communists, anarchists, foreigners, and trade unionists—Socialist Party candidate Eugene Debs polled more than 900,000 votes, the most ever to date for a third-party presidential candidate. Debs's showing was especially remarkable since he spent the campaign locked up in the Atlanta federal penitentiary, convicted in 1918 of subversive activities under the draconian wartime Espionage Act, which virtually criminalized criticism of the government. In 1924, liberals opposed to Coolidge and disgusted with the Democrats' nomination of Wall Street lawyer John W. Davis tried to organize a new farmer-labor party behind septuagenarian Senator Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette, standard-bearer of the Progressive movement since the turn of the century. La Follette's campaign for Progressive revival won a very respectable 4.8 million votes nationwide, but the Senator carried only his home state of Wisconsin to become an also-ran in the electoral college.

Republican dominance of national politics would be broken only with the collapse of the American economy after 1929.

**Close Reading Strategies**

1. Read through the article, and circle any words that are unfamiliar to you. Define the words in the margin.
2. Re-read the article, and highlight the main ideas of each section.
3. Annotate the reading on the final reading, write four questions you have down below.
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