

### Historical Thinking and Anti-Historians

For nearly 100 years, extreme conservatives have criticized and condemned public education and particularly the methods and content of social studies and U.S. history.

Each new framework for U.S. history is met with verbally violent outbursts from conservative extremists who seek to re-write America's story to serve their ideological purposes.

Author Fritz Fischer ("Student Protest, Historical Thinking and Anti-Historians: Some Context on the Jeffco APUSH Debate," October 2015) has written an informed, thoughtful, and enlightening report depicting the latest account of this very old story.

This reader, and perhaps others, would welcome additional articles concerning the continuing attacks and controversies that have enveloped our profession since the 1920s.

— Tedd Levy  
former NCSS President  
Old Saybrook, Conn.

### Eugene V. Debs, Woodrow Wilson, and the Election of 1912

The main point of Deborah Thomas's essay (*Sources and Strategies*, November/December 2015) on the presidential election of 1912 is to help students identify bias and viewpoint in political cartoons and editorials, and she does that admirably.

However, it is unfortunate that Thomas has erased from her presentation on this election the fourth important candidate in the race, Eugene Debs of the Socialist Party. Debs received 900,000 votes, or 6% of the total. To be sure, he did not win any electoral votes, but William Howard Taft—the incumbent!—only won two states, Utah and Vermont, for a meager total of eight electoral votes.

There are several reasons why Debs's presence in the 1912 election should be included in any discussion in social studies classes. First and most obviously, Debs out-pollled Taft in seven states, including California, where the Socialist received 20 times more votes than the Republican. Moreover, the Socialist Party claimed over 100 office-holders in 1912, spread over 33 states, and including members of Congress.

Second, while Thomas correctly states that issues of class and inequality were key to the election, she points only to Woodrow Wilson as supportive of workers' rights. Surely the Socialist Debs, who had led the American Railway Union during its dramatic strike of 1894, was more representative than Wilson of the "labor advocates" that Thomas identifies as increasingly prominent in this era. Moreover, Wilson's success in the election had as much to do with the split among Republicans as it did with the former Princeton professor's popularity among industrial workers and their allies. Wilson's election also depended upon the exclusion of African American voters in the Southern states, where the Democratic

Party was strongly identified with Jim Crow and other racist laws, and where it swept the electoral vote, a point unmentioned in Thomas's essay.

Third, Debs would go on to figure in one of the most important incidents in the denial of free speech in our nation, with his arrest in 1918 for his vocal opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I. The fact that a presidential candidate receiving 900,000 votes in 1912 could be thrown in jail just six years later simply for making a speech—by Woodrow Wilson's administration, no less!—demonstrates the fragility at that time of what we now consider to be basic constitutional rights. It also demonstrates the divisions between two groups who claimed to support labor unions and workers' rights, divisions which helped lead to the end of the Progressive Era. (Of course, *Social Education* carried an excellent article in the very same issue—Christopher Zarr's "The Art of Sedition"—on the suppression of *The Masses* for its graphic opposition to World War I.)

Fourth, it is ironic that Thomas in her essay ignores Debs's vision of democratic socialism in 1912 just as it is once again a live issue in U.S. politics with the long-shot candidacy of Sen. Bernie Sanders for president in 2016. Of course, Sanders is running within the Democratic primaries and would not run an independent campaign, as Debs did in 1912, but surely our students deserve to know that socialism has an important, even if not overwhelmingly successful, history in the United States. If we are serious about preparing students for citizenship, then our discussion of our nation's history should alert them to ideas that are being talked about today.

By the way, given continuing controversies over race in U.S. history and today, any presentation to students about the 1912 election should note not only the restrictions on voting rights—in the South by race and in most states by gender—but Wilson's determination to expand racism and segregation. As student protests at Princeton this fall remind us, Wilson discouraged African Americans from attending that university, and, as president, he demoted and marginalized African Americans who worked for the federal government. His racism also emerged in the 1915 U.S. invasion and occupation of Haiti, as Jennifer Bauduy noted in her important October 2015 *Social Education* article on that topic. Simply to understand what their near-contemporaries in colleges are talking about, our secondary students must engage with a more nuanced version of Progressive Era reformers than most high schools presented in the past.

Of course, one article on using primary sources to discuss a single election cannot cover everything. But surely an essay whose focus is to help students identify bias and viewpoints in 1912 should be more inclusive about the viewpoints that were, in fact, being discussed and debated in our nation during that important election. 🌍

—Robert Shaffer  
Professor of History  
Shippensburg University, Penn.

*Deborah Thomas and Lee Ann Potter Respond:*

Thank you very much for your thoughtful comments. You are correct, “one article on using primary sources to discuss a single election cannot cover everything.” But, fortunately, your letter is not only filling in some of the blanks, but it is also providing us with a great opportunity to alert *Social Education* readers to even more *Chronicling America* resources related to the Election of 1912—resources that highlight the involvement of Eugene Debs—and others such as Eugene W. Chafin, who ran representing the Prohibition Party, and Arthur E. Reimer, who ran representing the Socialist-Labor Party.

One such resource that mentioned the complete slate was *The Times Dispatch* of Richmond, Virginia, in its election coverage on November 6, 1912. Other

publications that gave extensive coverage specifically to Debs well before and after the election included *The Day Book* and *Labor World*. Alerting students to—or inviting them to discover such resources on their own—can further help them identify bias and viewpoint.

As with most of the digitized newspapers available through *Chronicling America*, historical background and more information about both of these newspapers is available on the site (on the full page newspaper view, select “About [the title]” to learn more about that newspaper).

*The Day Book*, published in Chicago, Illinois, from 1911–1917, was tailored to “the interests of workers, with extensive coverage of working conditions, wages, union organizing, and labor unrest.” (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045487/>) *Labor World*, published in Duluth, Minnesota, began in 1896

after its founding editor heard Debs speak and was inspired to create a newspaper that would focus on labor issues. (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn78000395/>)

To find more information about the origins, audiences served, political slant, or issues covered for any of the newspapers in *Chronicling America*, go to <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, and select the “All Digitized Newspapers, 1836–1922” tab. You can narrow your search by State (of news coverage) or Ethnicity, as well as Language. ●

–Deborah Thomas and  
Lee Ann Potter  
Library of Congress  
Washington, D.C.

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK *from page 3*

Sarah Wolf. On the basis of their shared experience, they outline some key components of leadership training that they recommend should be incorporated into school programs.

At the NCSS annual conference in New Orleans last November, C. Frederick Risinger attended outstanding sessions and exhibits, and his Internet column recommends a selection of exemplary websites operated by presenters and exhibitors. Teachers seeking resources on slavery, the C3 Framework, history education, and controversial issues will find valuable suggestions—and Risinger promises more to come in future columns.

The opening feature of this issue of *Social Education* is based on the presidential address delivered at the NCSS annual conference in New Orleans, in which NCSS President Kim O'Neil discussed the challenges facing social studies. In her judgment,

although social studies has spent a long time on the back burner, some positive signs of increased vitality have emerged, and the C3 Framework is helping to re-establish social studies as a core subject. She calls on NCSS members to “walk the talk,” and to provide students with opportunities to engage in informed civic action.

As always, the editors of *Social Education* welcome the comments of readers on any of the contributions to this issue at [socialed@ncss.org](mailto:socialed@ncss.org). ●

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