

**TEACHER GUIDE**

# 1904 DOC. #2: Debs “Socialist Party” Poster

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There have been six major parties whose candidates have been elected to the presidency since the first election of George Washington in 1789. They are, in order of emergence, Federalists, Democratic-Republicans, National Republicans, Whigs, Democrats, and Republicans. There have also been more than two dozen important third parties from the Anti-Mason Party in 1828 to the Green Party in the 1990s. Third parties often express strong ideas about a single issue or a mix of issues that some voters may feel are not well represented by either major party. In the beginning of the modern era of campaigns a well-known third party candidate was Eugene Debs.

Debs ran for President on the Socialist Party ticket five times between 1900 and 1920. He had become well known as a labor leader because he headed the first industrial union in the U.S., the American Railway Union. He edited the Socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, which had several hundred thousand subscribers.

The Socialist Party had its strongest appeal in the United States between 1900 and 1914. It was a time when some felt that deep changes were needed in the political and economic institutions of the country. Much of the Socialist platform in 1904 was similar to that of the Populist Party platform of 12 years earlier. Although most Socialists agreed on the necessity of structural changes in the economy, they were divided about the nature of that change and the tactics required to bring it about.

> **Project the document.**

**QUESTION** What are the main messages being communicated by this poster? What is your evidence?

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** Working men should vote for their own interests and select the Socialist Party.

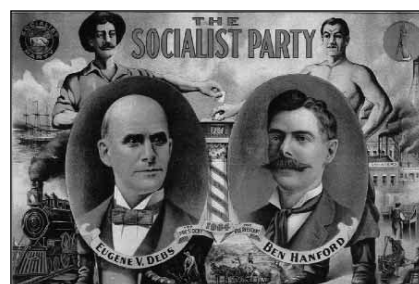
**EVIDENCE** the figures behind the candidates are laborers who are casting their votes into a ballot box that says “Workingmen of all countries unite” and stands between the Socialist Party candidates

**QUESTION** Who’s the target audience for this poster and why?

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** Laborers, industrial workers, transport workers, and farmers are the target audience

**EVIDENCE** images of a miner, a farmer, a mill worker, a typesetter; the standing men are clearly workers; the factories, railroad car, and ship; Socialist message of oppressed workers rising to power in the Debs speech quoted above

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**PowerPoint Slide**

QUESTION **What is the Socialist Party message on international relations? Why do you think so?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Workers of all nations should unite.

EVIDENCE the ballot pole message of "Workingmen of all countries unite" and the hands clasped across the globe in the Socialist Party emblem above left

**SEE NOTE** →

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

Why do you think the Socialist message was most popular during this time period? Are there socialist candidates running in contemporary elections? What are their positions?

What role have third party candidates played in American elections?

Some people have argued for a change to a proportional representation system where even small parties have a voice in government based on their share of the popular vote. Would this be a good idea for the United States? Why or why not?

Should opponents of war be punished in times of national crisis? Why or why not?

**NOTE**

The words on the pole read: Workingmen of all countries unite.

**ADDITIONAL INFO**

In June, 1918 in the midst of World War I, Debs made an antiwar speech in which he said: "Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder...The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles...Yes, in good time we are going to sweep into power in this nation and throughout the world. We are going to destroy all enslaving and degrading capitalist institutions and re-create them as free and humanizing institutions" (Zinn 367).

Following this speech Debs was arrested for violating the Espionage Act by speaking in such a way as to "obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service." He was serving a ten-year sentence on those charges when he made his final run for President in 1920. He lost the election but received nearly a million votes while sitting in his prison cell. He was pardoned on Christmas Day, 1921 by President Warren Harding.

**CONNECTIONS**

(see thematic listing)

**Class/Labor**

**Target Audience** (industrial laborers) See two other documents from third party candidates: George Wallace (1968 doc. #7) and Ralph Nader (2000 doc. #3c).