

TEACHER GUIDE

1908 DOC. #2: Commoner vs. Plutocrat Postcard

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Has your family ever received a mailing from a political candidate, encouraging your vote on Election Day? Direct mail as a political strategy had its origins in the first modern elections of the 20th century. Penny postcards were used as a quick and inexpensive means to reach voters. In 1908 several hundred varieties of these postcards were created by both parties.

> Project the document.

QUESTION What are the messages in this postcard, and which candidate does it support? Give evidence to back up your answers.

SUGGESTED ANSWER This postcard supports Bryan. He is shown as a worker, a man like the common folk, and like Abe Lincoln. He will help working people.

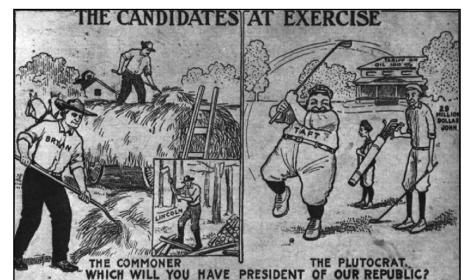
EVIDENCE Bryan is depicted pitching hay; labeled "The Commoner"; Abe Lincoln is pictured splitting rails (doing common labor like Bryan)

SUGGESTED ANSWER This postcard is anti-Taft. Taft is depicted as an aristocrat who is friends with the rich elite and spends his free time on games like golf rather than hard work like Bryan.

EVIDENCE Taft is shown golfing, a game associated with aristocrats and wealth; he is partnered with "28 million dollar John" D. Rockefeller; the words on top of the clubhouse, "tariff on oil 100%," suggest that Taft will do favors for the oil industry in exchange for support; text: "plutocrat" associated with Taft

SEE NOTE →

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PowerPoint Slide

NOTE

A Plutocrat is someone who has political power due to wealth. John D. Rockefeller was the head of Standard Oil and one of the wealthiest men in the world at that time.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Why might issues of class have been so important in the early 20th century? How do class issues appear in contemporary campaigns?

Which kinds of sports or exercise are seen as befitting a President today and which are not? Should it matter?

Most contemporary Presidents are shown playing golf. This is generally portrayed in a positive light, compared to the negative connotation it had for Taft in 1908. What has changed and why?

ADDITIONAL INFO

William Jennings Bryan was running for President on the Democratic ticket for the third time. He had gotten the nickname the “Great Commoner” from his weekly newspaper called *The Commoner* that he had founded in 1901 to keep his ideas before his supporters. Bryan continued to run on a platform of reform. He suggested that the government had become controlled by powerful corporations. In speeches he called the Republicans the “aristocratic party.”

This postcard shows Taft playing golf, one of his favorite pastimes. Roosevelt had warned Taft about playing golf in front of the camera. “Photographs on horseback, yes, tennis, no, and golf is fatal” (qtd. in Boller 189).

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Class/Labor

“Commoner”

Reaching Voters (postcard)