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## Article Title: Postcard Politics: The 1908 Presidential Campaign

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Article Summary: Large numbers of political postcards circulated during the 1908 Bryan/Taft campaign. Some featured authentic or altered photographs. Cartoons promoting or making fun of a candidate appeared on other cards.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: William Jennings Bryan, William Howard Taft, Theodore Roosevelt

Nebraska Place Names: Lincoln

Keywords: William Jennings Bryan, William Howard Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, *The Commoner*, Chautauqua

Photographs / Images: (Fig 1) Bryan identified with working class, Taft identified with industrialists; (Figs 2-3) Bryan at O'Neill, May 30, 1908; (Figs 4-5) nonpartisan cards with likenesses of Taft and Bryan; (Figs 6-7) cards superimposing wig and clothing of George Washington on Bryan; (Figs 8-9) cards based on the fact that Bryan was from Lincoln; (Fig 10) embossed likeness of Bryan; (Fig 11) Bryan identified with agricultural bounty; (Fig 12) Bryan identified with Democratic Party; (Fig 13) the two candidates' stances on the direct election of US Senators; (Figs 14-15) Bryan campaign themes; (Fig 16) the "Bryanization" of the Democratic Party; (Figs 17-18) Bryan's repeated runs for the presidency; (Figs 19-20) the GOP victorious; (Fig 21) Taft identified with Theodore Roosevelt

# Postcard Politics

## THE 1908

### PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By John E. Carter

The 1908 presidential election contest between William Jennings Bryan and William Howard Taft had little to rouse voters' passions. For some, perhaps many, voters, the candidates were distinguished as much by personality as by issue or policy. But what the campaign may have lacked in zest, it made up for with humor, particularly in the form of political and personal caricature — an aspect that took the form of a flood of political postcards, greater in volume and variety than in any other presidential election.<sup>1</sup>

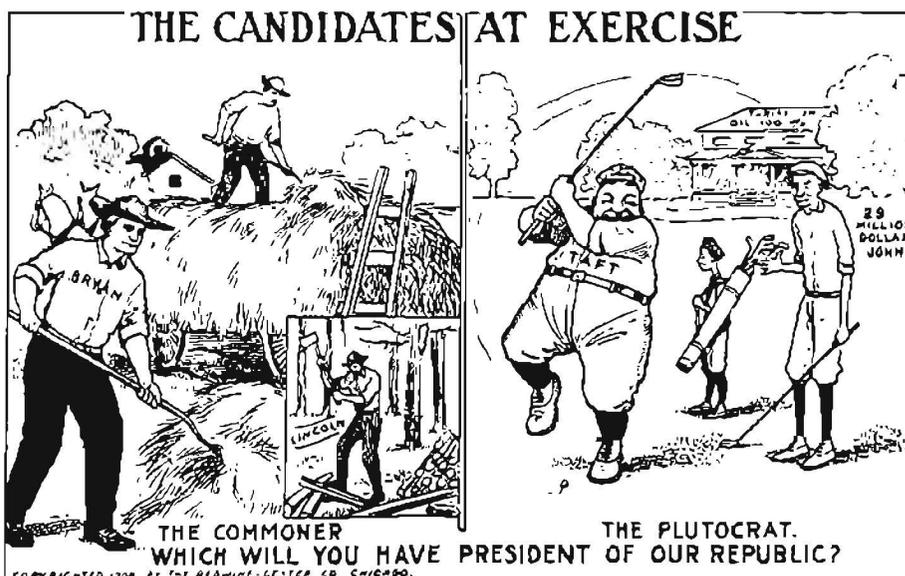
The Republicans nominated William Howard Taft primarily because of his endorsement by the incumbent president, Theodore Roosevelt, who was still riding the crest of a wave of popularity arising from his embrace of trust-busting and conservation and his bold foreign policy initiatives. Most Republican convention delegates had pledged their hearts to Teddy and they would gladly have given him another nomination had he sought it; instead, they gave him the right to name his successor.

Taft, whose ample girth required a specially built car and bathub, drew support not just from traditional Republicans but also from some who identified with the vaguely defined and still evolving progressive movement. Though the Ohioan had never before sought elective office, he had served in prominent appointive positions, notably American civil governor of the Philippines from 1901 to 1904, and secretary of war from 1904 to 1908.

The Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, had the advantage of being better known than Taft, through both his newspaper, *The Commoner*, and his speech-making across the nation. He had twice before sought the presidency, in 1896 and 1900, and in 1908 he was at the height of his popularity as a Chautauqua speaker. Every year, Bryan left his home in Lincoln, Nebraska, to travel the lecture circuit, holding forth in tents and open air pavilions in the summer and in lyceum halls and at Democratic Party dinners in the winter. William Gibbs McAdoo once asserted that Bryan had more personal friends than anyone else in the country as a result of his many years as a traveling orator, and McAdoo may well have been right.

Bryan was more closely identified than Taft with elements in the emerging progressive movement, having based his earlier presidential campaigns upon opposition to Wall Street and "the trusts," a designation that embraced most large corporations. Years of eating in railroad dining cars and at party banquets had left him paunchy, although he was no match for Taft in the contest of waistlines.

Voters thus had to choose between two portly candidates, both nicknamed Bill and both claiming the mantle of progressivism. Given Roosevelt's high level of popularity, Taft did his best to identify with his sponsor and to make the election a referendum on the previous seven years of strenuous activity. Through the slogan "Shall the People



<sup>1</sup>John E. Carter is curator of photographs at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Fig. 1 NSHS Collections-7956-6104

Rule?" Bryan tried to identify with the people and tie Taft and the Republicans to big business and its corrupting influence in politics, although Bryan had backed off from his proposal two years earlier to nationalize the railroads. As the two Bills wooed the voters, their campaigns struck a contemporary note by employing the relatively new and widely popular penny postcard. While private mailing cards — printed advertising cards — had been recognized by the United States Post Office in 1898, the postcard as we know it was not enfranchised until 1902.<sup>2</sup> Its success was immediate, and by 1905 postcards were common in American society.

The period between 1905 and 1915 is considered the golden age of the postcard in America. Their one-penny price made them an attractive medium for communication, and the myriad of subjects they embraced made them collectable. Moreover, the photographic postcard allowed for production of cards with local or special interest subject matter. In fact, it was common for individuals to have their family snapshots printed on postcard stock. The picture on the card, therefore, could be as personal as the message on the back.

Postcards have a curious public/private character. They are private in that they are mail sent from one person to another, a personal communication. But they are public because without an envelope, the sender expects that the cards will be read by others. This dual nature makes them an excellent vehicle for political discourse.

Because these cards were intended for the political market they were, for the most part, mass produced. And their message, though brief, was a highly distilled one and easily recognizable, almost on a visceral level. The issues dealt with in the cards were those to which a large number of people responded. That is the public side.

But many of these cards were purchased to send from one person to another, and for that reason take on yet another political nuance.<sup>3</sup> The sender



Fig. 2. NSHS-PC0802



Fig. 3. NSHS-PC0802

knows the intended recipient, and can predict the response: If the recipient agrees with the sender's political point of view, the card becomes a point of solidarity and camaraderie. If the recipient holds a divergent point of view, the card, particularly those with a humorous bent, becomes a needle. In either case, the delight of the sender is predictable.

Thus the exchange of cards becomes

an exchange of ideas and reveals the issues that the electorate, not the politicians or pundits, feels are important. There is a peculiarly democratizing effect that these cards have. They are, in their own right, little soap boxes from which ordinary citizens speak their minds. The sender surely anticipates that the postal carrier will at least look at the picture, if not read the message

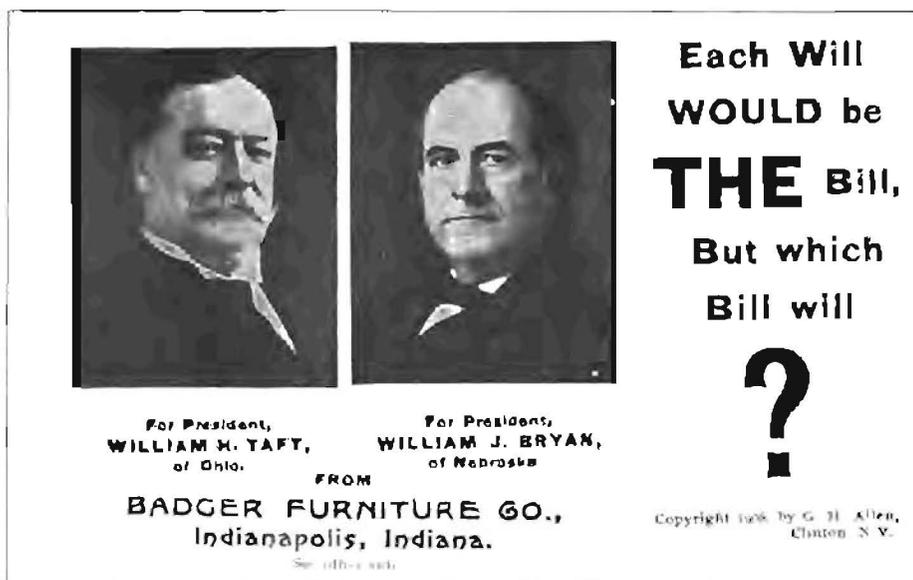


Fig. 4. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6101

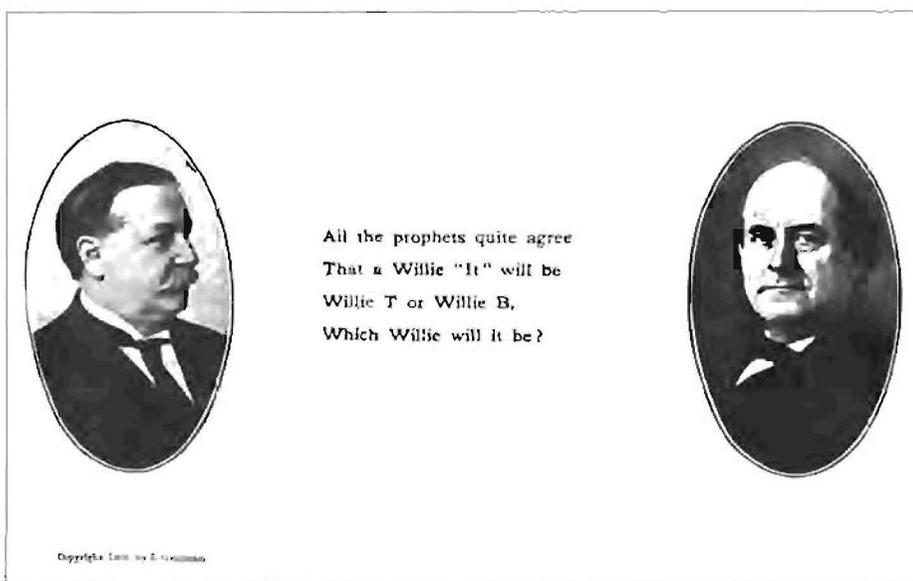


Fig. 5. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6087

penned on the back. Once delivered, the sender also expects the recipient to share the card and its message with others. This sharing is not unlike the way visual jokes circulate within modern offices via photocopy, and outside of them via the fax. It is not surprising, then, that such a large number and rich variety of cards were produced for the 1908 campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Nineteenth-century political campaigns had two major characteristics: they focused heavily on party organizations rather than on individual candidates, and they were oriented more to mobilizing preexisting loyalties than to making converts. Political campaigns were exciting events, characterized by torchlight parades, barbecues, and rallies, all designed to reinforce existing

loyalties and to activate organizational commitments. Parties were highly organized, with a corps of workers in every precinct and township devoted to identifying the party's adherents and getting them to the polls on election day. In the politics of organization and mobilization, party leaders provided the faithful with a wide variety of everyday objects to demonstrate their loyalties. Bandannas, walking sticks, hats, cups, and plates all carried party symbols and slogans, giving voters opportunities to proclaim their party ties to their friends and neighbors. Such devices were not intended to persuade or convert, but instead to reward party loyalists and announce fealty. Campaigns based on mass organization and mobilization achieved amazingly high rates of voter turnout — sometimes as high as ninety-five percent of the eligible voters.

At the turn of the century, changes in campaign practices were already underway. Reformers were systematically reducing the role of party organizations by such means as the secret (Australian) ballot, the direct primary, and the merit system in civil service. The concurrent development of modern advertising provided an alternate approach to campaigning. Instead of mobilizing voters, political leaders turned increasingly to advertising candidates. As advertising replaced mobilizing, the politics of party loyalties. Voters heeded the message and came to speak with pride of voting "for the man, not the party," an attitude that their grandfathers would have considered anathema. As mass organization atrophied and party loyalties weakened, voter mobilization campaigns were no longer possible. Without massive mobilization campaigns, voter turnout rates steadily declined, to as little as half the eligible voters by 1920.

The postcard politics of 1908 represent one brief stage of this process of transition, when campaign organizers seized upon a newly popular device and used it to its fullest potential as a political advertising medium. No other presi-

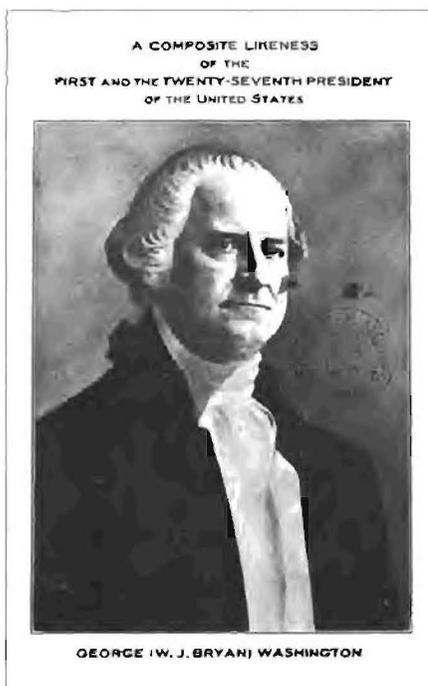


Fig. 6. NSHS Museum Coll.-7956-6053

dential campaign witnessed such a deluge of postcards. By 1912 politicians had begun to experiment with the potential of motion pictures; in the 1920s they turned to radio. The day of the thirty-second television spot and of "Tellon" candidates was more than a half-century distant, but the political postcards of 1908 forecast at least two of the characteristics of later patterns of political advertising: the avoidance or simplification of complex issues and a focus instead on the personalities of the candidates.

To be effective, the postcard must be clever and the iconography skillfully crafted. Take for example figure 1, a card entitled "The Candidates at Exercise." In the blink of an eye Bryan is associated with the moral working class and Taft with the corrupt industrialists. Moreover, the card's linking of Bryan with Lincoln, and Taft with John D. Rockefeller, is none too subtle. There is an infusion of message here that would make the modern masters of the thirty-second sound bite envious!

The year 1908, too, was the zenith of the era of humorous postcards. In his

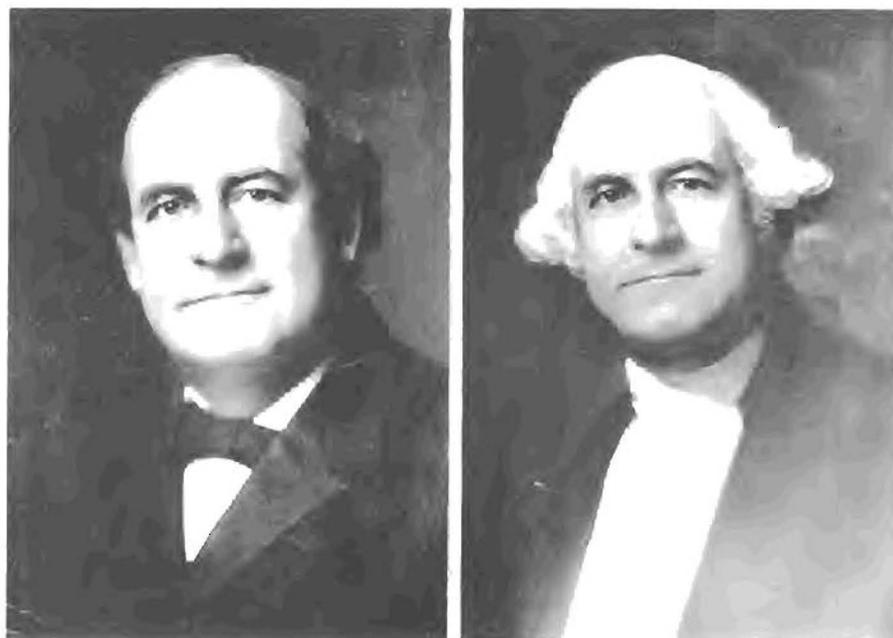


Fig. 7. NSHS-PC0802

book *Tall-Tale Postcards: A Pictorial History*, Roger Welsch reported that his study of the postmark and copyright dates of more than 1,000 cards showed a dramatic rise in the number of humorous cards between 1905 and 1909, followed by an equally dramatic decline between 1910 and 1914.

Postcards from the 1908 campaign can be divided into two types based on technology. The first consists of photographs of candidates campaigning or posing for the camera, with a minimum of retouching or alteration of the camera's record. Most of this type in the collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society are of the Bryan campaign. Figures 2 and 3 provide examples. The political content of the photographs is subdued or nonexistent; instead the focus is on the appearance of the candidate or the size of the crowd he attracted.

The second type of postcard consists of cartoons or of combinations of photographs and other graphics. All of the second type carry some message, but in many cases the message is completely nonpartisan. Figure 4 provides an excel-

lent example of a nonpartisan message; clearly the company providing the card was primarily interested in advertising its wares and is using the presidential campaign merely to draw attention to itself. The company had no desire to alienate any potential customer by indicating a preference between the two Bills. A similar approach, intended to be humorous, can be seen in figure 5.

Bryan supporters could choose from a variety of postcards promoting their candidate, ranging from over-simplified cartoons to the relative sophistication of photographic overlays and puns. One popular photographic trick was to superimpose the wig and clothing from the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington onto a photograph of Bryan. Figures 6 and 7 are examples of this device. Another favorite was to play off the name of Bryan's hometown; Figures 8 and 9 are typical of this rather shameless punning.

Some Bryan cards simply presented his embossed likeness (figure 10), while others sought to identify him with agricultural bounty (figure 11) or, more often, with the Democratic Party, as in figure 12.

## Postcard Politics



Fig. 8. NSHS Museum Coll. -7956-6131



Fig. 10. NSHS Museum Coll.-7956-6049



Fig. 11. NSHS Museum Coll. 7956-5468

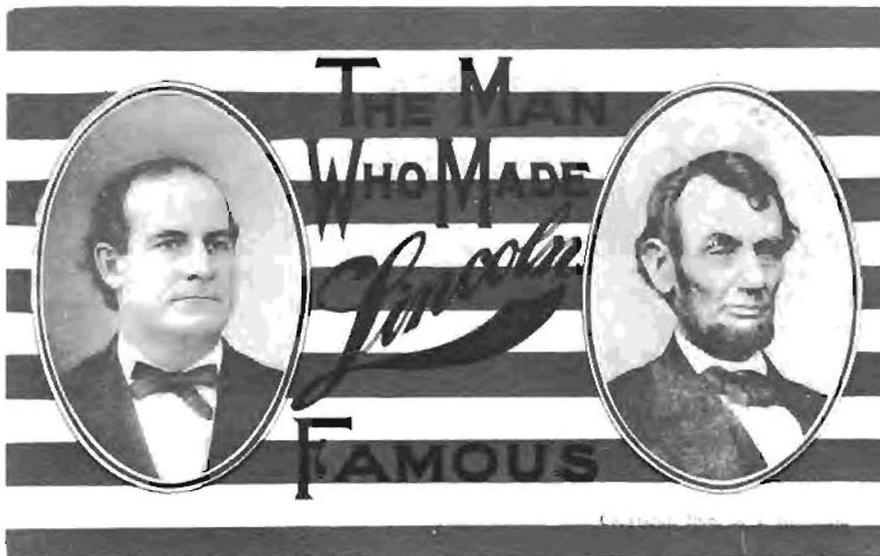


Fig. 9. NSHS Museum Coll.-7956-6128

Only a few cards make political arguments on Bryan's behalf. Figure 13 is a gauche depiction of the two candidates' stances on the direct election of United States Senators, and a clear precursor to the negative advertising commonplace

in contemporary politics. Compare it with figure 1, which elegantly contrasts Bryan's agrarian wholesomeness with Taft's corporate ties, or with figures 14 and 15, which simplify complex themes in the Bryan campaign and present

them in a less than accusatory manner.

Bryan's twelve years in the public eye, from 1896 to 1908, made him a popular target for jibes. Figure 16 suggests that the entire Democratic Party had been Bryanized during those years, hinting as well to a certain amount of inbreeding.

Figures 17 and 18 take a healthy swipe at Bryan for his repeated runs for the presidency. Note the polished humor of figure 17, which represents the "Bills'" denominations in "Pounds," with Taft the obvious winner—a clear homage to the race of the corpulents. Figures 19 and 20 are variations on the theme for Taft supporters. A comparison of these cards with figure 14 shows clearly that the publisher was in the business of selling cards, not advancing political ideology.

Finally, figure 21 graphically depicts Taft's major theme and chief advantage in the campaign of 1908 — his identification with Theodore Roosevelt. Surely its caption may be read: "If I can't have Roosevelt, give me Taft."

Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article began many years ago when long-time Society benefactor Otto Klima donated a major and significant collection of postcards of William Jennings Bryan. Almost all of the cards appearing herein are from that donation. Initially, the article was to be a collaboration between myself and Dr. Robert W. Cherny, but as this special issue of *Nebraska History* evolved, Dr. Cherny's role changed from that of coauthor to editor. That tactical change does not, however, reduce the contribution that he made to this effort, which I want to acknowledge here.

<sup>2</sup> Regulations permitting such cards were issued Dec. 24, 1901. Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 62.

<sup>3</sup> The intention to send the postcard to another person is not a universal one. Collecting cards was also popular at this time.

<sup>4</sup> It is an interesting piece of anecdotal evidence that Bernard L. Greenhouse devotes 30 of the 109 pages of his *Political Postcards, 1908-1980: A Price Guide* (Postcard Press, 1984), to the cards from this campaign.

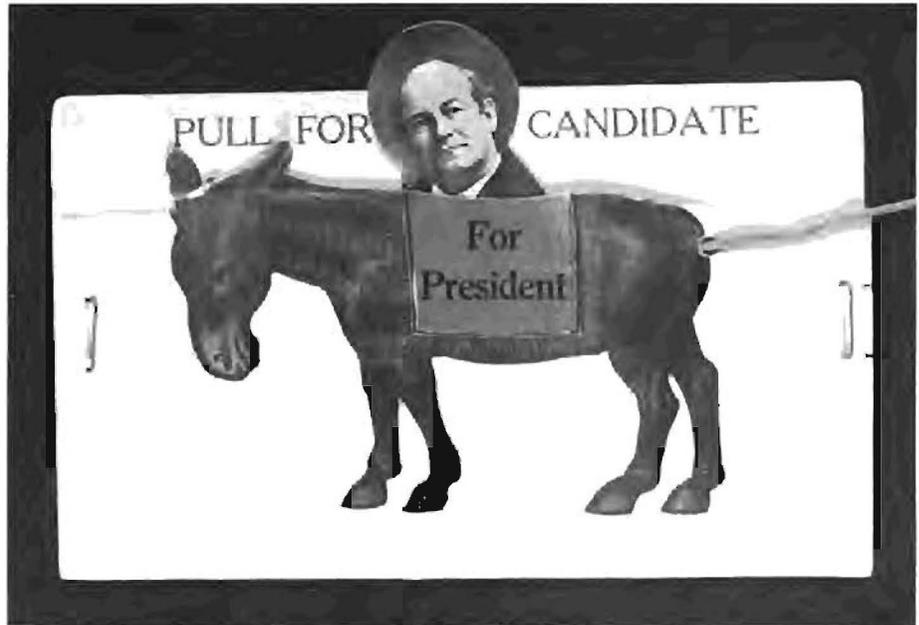


Fig. 12. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6045

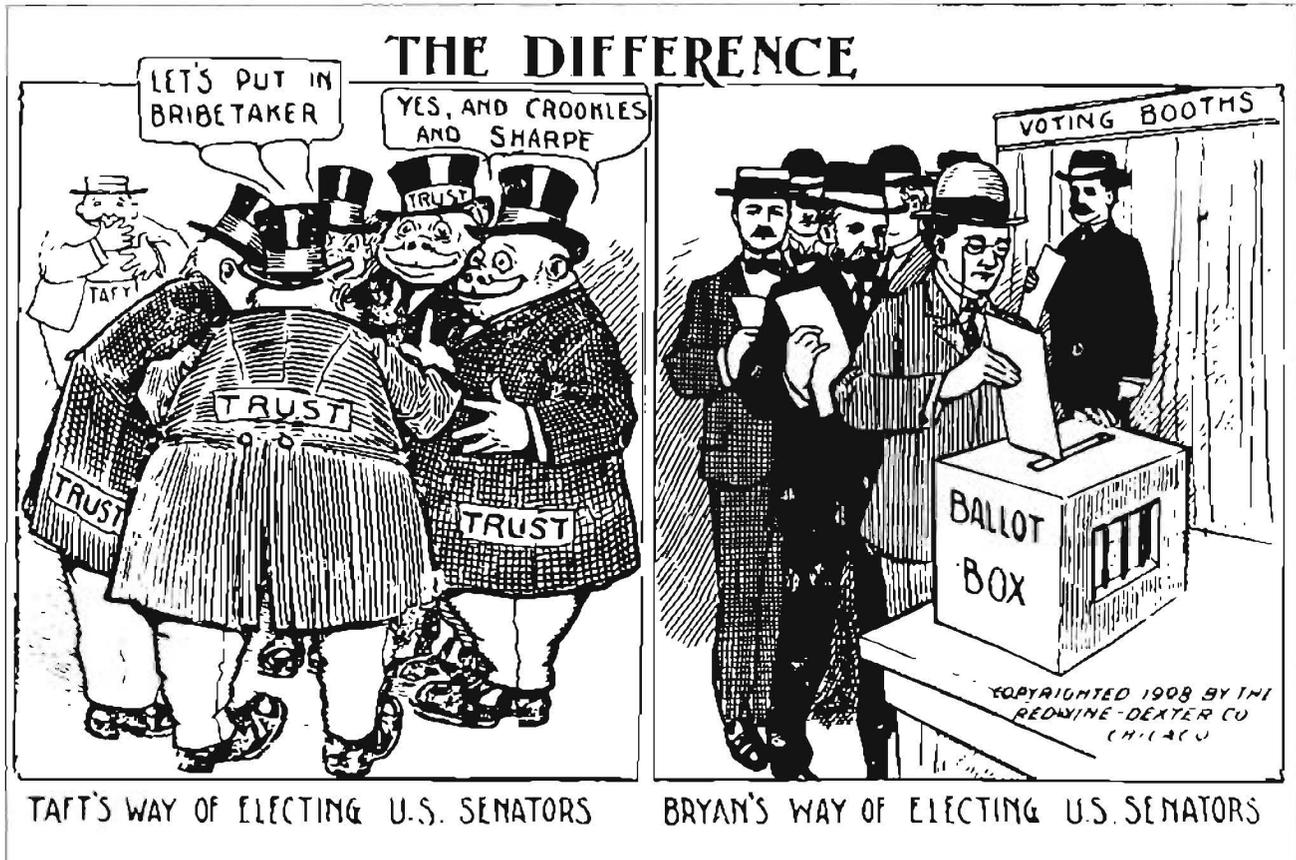


Fig. 13. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6057

Postcard Politics



Fig. 14. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6074

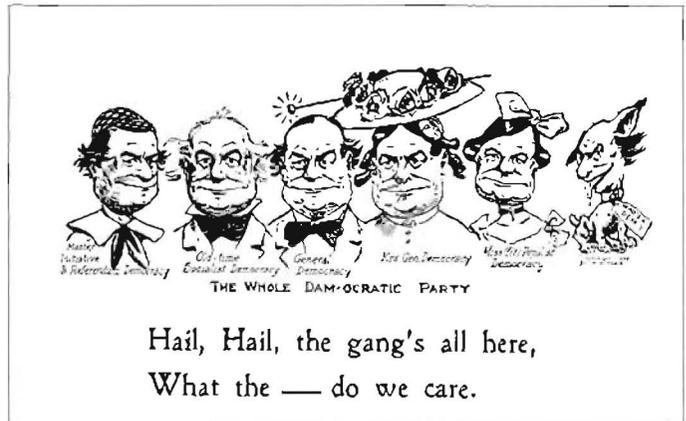


Fig. 16. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6055

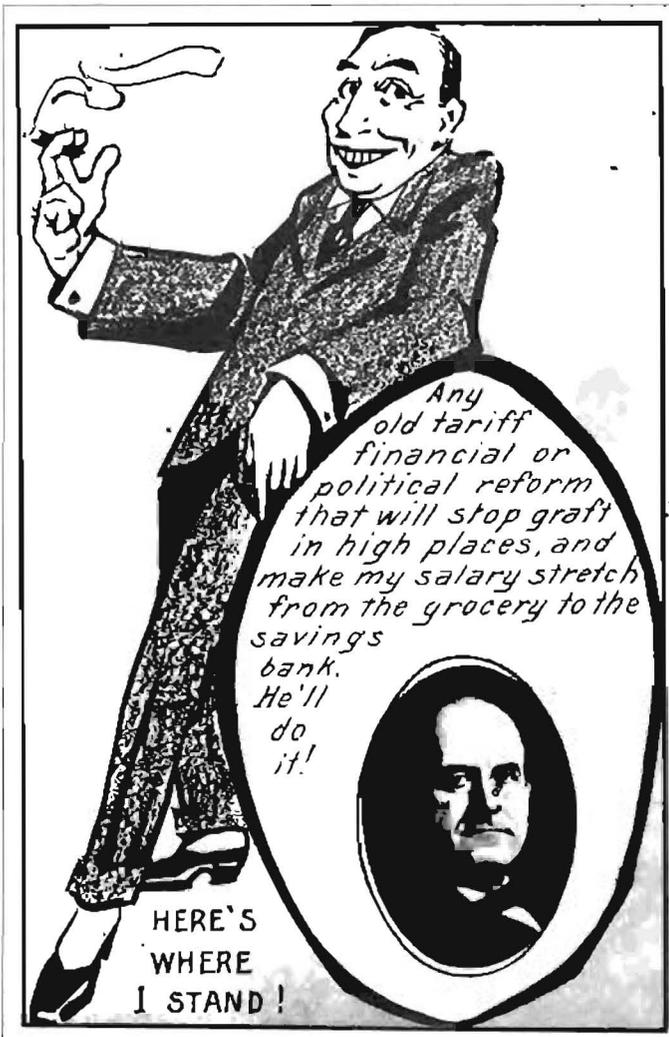


Fig. 15. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6056



Fig. 17. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6100



Fig. 18. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6103



Fig. 19. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6113



Fig. 20. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6062



Fig. 21. NSHS Museum Collections-7956-6116