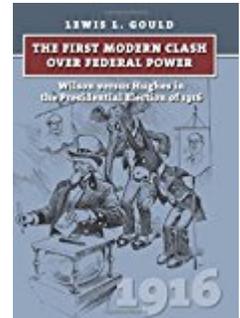


Lewis L. Gould. *The First Modern Clash over Federal Power: Wilson versus Hughes in the Presidential Election of 1916.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. xiv + 178 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2280-1.



Reviewed by Brian Kennedy

Published on H-USA (July, 2017)

Commissioned by Donna Sinclair (Central Michigan University)

Lewis Gould has provided a short, well-written, and enjoyable account of the oft-overlooked presidential campaign of 1916. As World War I raged on, President Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection against Charles Evans Hughes, who resigned as chief justice of the United States Supreme Court to challenge Wilson. A long-time professor at the University of Texas, Gould has written extensively about politics in the Progressive Era, including a previous book on the 1912 presidential campaign. In this book, he brings his expertise to bear on a lesser-known election.

Gould manages to provide a lot of information in just 135 pages. He carefully describes the internecine feuds in the Republican Party, in the aftermath of Teddy Roosevelt's decision to run as a third-party, Progressive candidate in 1912. He reveals the internal tensions within the Democratic Party, particularly over the issue of Prohibition. He succinctly, yet comprehensively, describes how the Republicans came to settle on Hughes as their party's nominee. And he describes the campaign between Hughes and Wilson in detail, capturing

the major events and personalities of the general election.

Gould contextualizes this campaign in a long history of Republican triumphs over the Democratic Party. Republicans had dominated presidential elections in the years since Abraham Lincoln, with Grover Cleveland being the only Democrat to win the presidency during those years. Republicans had become so used to winning that they were genuinely shocked when Wilson won in 1912. Many went so far, Gould describes, as to view Wilson as an "illegitimate usurper" who "was not entitled to the respect that surrounded his office" (p. 8). That attitude was exacerbated by the fact that Wilson had won less than 42 percent of the popular vote in the contentious 1912 campaign. That, combined with the fact that no Democratic president had won reelection since Andrew Jackson, caused many Republicans to feel entirely confident that Wilson would lose his reelection bid.

Gould argues that 1916 was a pivotal moment in American politics, the first modern campaign, which reoriented the two major political parties and set the stage for ideological battles between Democrats and Republicans “ever since” (p. xi). In the past, the Democrats had been proponents of states’ rights while the Republican Party had originally been an advocate of an active federal government, as evidenced by the Homestead Act, railroad expansion, and Reconstruction policies. Teddy Roosevelt had advocated for an even more active role for the federal government while president from 1901 to 1909. Gould suggests that this changed in 1916. In particular, he argues that Wilson committed the Democrats to greater federal action, while Republicans under Hughes argued for a small federal government. Democrats thereby moved in the direction of the New Deal, while Republicans emerged as advocates of limited government, fighting against unions and government regulations.

While thought-provoking, Gould’s argument is underdeveloped and rather unconvincing. In general, the book focuses on providing a narrative, rather than arguing a thesis. While the title implies that the election was an ideological conflict over the role of the federal government, most of the narrative provides evidence to the contrary. Gould describes how divided each party was, with factions unable to agree on much of anything, never mind overarching ideologies. He repeatedly describes the Hughes campaign as aimless, lacking any clear message, at one point quoting a contemporary who said that the Hughes campaign had “no serious issue” (p. 127). These details do not support the idea of a highly ideological battle over the role of the federal government.

Rather than being the first modern campaign, the 1916 election often comes across as the last gasp of nineteenth-century politics. Indeed, Gould describes Hughes as a holdover from the Gilded Age, attempting to reuse the themes of James Blaine and William McKinley. One of the biggest

issues for the Hughes campaign was the tariff, a staple of American politics from the days of Andrew Jackson to the days of William McKinley, but an issue not often talked about in modern campaigns, although it did of course reemerge this past election cycle. Meanwhile, the latter days of the campaign were marked by heated rhetoric regarding the Adamson Act of 1916. That law averted a railroad strike by legislating an eight-hour work day for interstate railway workers. Many on the right lashed out with language more reminiscent of the 1877 and 1894 railroad strikes than anything that we would see in the 1950s and 1960s.

Meanwhile, the shadow of World War I hovered over the entire campaign of 1916, in many ways making the election seem anomalous in American history. Wilson’s proclamation of neutrality and promise to stay out of the war seemed far more important to most voters than his theories about how the Federal Trade Commission should be used. The Republican Party also faced tremendous challenges in regard to campaigning during war. Criticizing the sitting president during wartime was potentially problematic. Moreover, the Republican Party was deeply divided by the war. Gould describes how, when Republican Elihu Root, the former secretary of state and secretary of war, critiqued Wilson and his neutrality policies for being weak, he was challenged by many in his own party who supported neutrality. Likewise, Gould argues that Teddy Roosevelt’s belligerent pronouncements on the war undermined his chance to gain the nomination in 1916. The eventual nominee, Charles Evans Hughes, had to constantly walk a tightrope, appealing to Anglophile Republicans on the East Coast who spoke harshly of the German war effort, while simultaneously placating German Americans and “peace progressives” who were opposed to American intervention. While Gould has produced a smooth narrative that captures this complexity in an accessible way, his emphasis on war-related issues

again undermines the nominal argument about partisan ideologies.

While it remains unclear that the 1916 campaign was the first modern campaign, *The First Modern Clash Over Federal Power* is a good overview of the 1916 election. Gould has created an engaging narrative that a general audience should find entertaining and informative. Moreover, he provides a wealth of details and nuance that should render this book useful to experts interested in presidential politics, Wilson, Roosevelt, Hughes, or the American experience during World War I.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

Citation: Brian Kennedy. Review of Gould, Lewis L. *The First Modern Clash over Federal Power: Wilson versus Hughes in the Presidential Election of 1916*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. July, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47594>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.