

Food Prices, Politics, and Policy in the Progressive Era¹

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U.S. food prices surged abruptly higher in 1910–1913, alarming urban consumers, who equated them with the high cost of living, but delighting farmers. Progressive reformers tackled detailed aspects of the food-price problem but had no overarching solution and no effective programs to please both consumers and farmers. A volatile pattern of economic voting resulted, but unlike conventional models, it had countervailing tendencies, setting consumers against food producers. Food prices cost the Republicans heavily in the 1910 election and helped disrupt the party by 1912, ending the Republican “system of 1896.” In power, Democrats pursued primarily a southern-tinged agrarian agenda and narrowly preserved power through 1914 and 1916 but fell victim to interest-group conflicts in 1918 and economic disasters in 1920.

We have just garnered a harvest unexampled in the market value of our agricultural products. The high prices which such products bring mean great prosperity for the farming community, but on the other hand they mean a very considerably increased burden upon those classes . . . whose yearly compensation does not expand with the improvement in business.
—William H. Taft, “First Annual Message,” Dec. 7, 1909

Send me a dollar’s worth of sirloin steak this afternoon. Tell your delivery boy if no one is here when he calls, just to poke the steak through the keyhole.
—Missouri clergyman quoted in Walter E. Clark, *The Cost of Living* (1915)

President Taft concluded his first annual message to Congress in December 1909 by celebrating farm prosperity but warning that high prices burdened many nonfarmers. Fearing trouble, Taft noted defensively that the increased cost of living was worldwide, thereby absolving the Republicans’ high import tariffs of blame.² But he can hardly have anticipated how politically intractable rising food prices would be. In combination with slowed economic growth, they would help to fracture the Republican Party, weaken its urban base, and give Democrats control of the national government after the election of 1912.

Why did food prices become such a hot political issue? Most obviously, food purchases consumed much more of a family’s total spending than today, especially among working-class households. And food prices, which

¹The author wishes to thank Emily Rosenberg, Norman Rosenberg, and the readers for this journal for helpful admonitions and advice, and especially Jungsywan H. Sepanski for vital statistical computation.

²William H. Taft, “First Annual Message,” *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, n.d.), 16:7440.