Campaign Tactics of Eugene Debs in the 1912 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

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es for rsity. In 1912 Eugene Debs ran for U.S. president against two ex-presidents in William Taft and Teddy Roosevelt and a would-be president in Woodrow Wilson and yet still garnered six percent of the popular vote. This made Debs the most successful Socialist candidate in U.S. history and one of only three third party candidates in the last century to receive more than five percent of the popular vote. One reason Debs was successful, I propose, was because he used what we consider "modern" campaign practices to overcome the unique constraints faced by third party candidates in the U.S. In this paper I will discuss the context Debs faced, both as a third party candidate and as a presidential candidate in the 1912 election, and the campaign tactics he used to succeed in those difficult environments.

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Eugene V. Debs ran as the Socialist's nominee for president five times in the early twentieth century. As a third party candidate for president, he was faced with constraints not confronted by the major party candidates. Because of this, the successes of Debs' and all other third party candidates for president are judged relative to the performance of other third party candidates rather than to their opponents. In the 1912 election for president, Debs gained almost a million votes and garnered six percent of the popular vote in an election where the winner only received forty-one percent. This made him the most successful Socialist candidate in U.S. history and one of only three third party candidates in the last century to receive more than five percent of the vote. Debs' 1912 candidacy therefore, is compelling to study, both because of the context from which it took place and because of the success Debs was able to achieve. One reason Debs was successful, I propose, was because he used what we consider "modern" campaign practices to overcome the unique constraints faced by third party candidates in the U.S. In this paper I will discuss the context Debs faced, both as a third party candidate and as a presidential candidate in the 1912 election, and the campaign tactics he used to succeed in those difficult environments.

The Third Party Context

When studying the candidacy of Eugene Debs, it is important to first understand the context faced by third parties in America and why some are successful while most are not. There has been significant research into "when" and "why" third party candidates succeed in U.S. presidential elections. Much of this research focuses on the constraints third parties face in the United States. There are six major constraints faced by third parties. First, the constitutional constraints of single member districts and the Electoral College do not allow third parties to make incremental advances within the political system. Electoral votes and House and Senate seats are difficult to come by in this system, so that the public has little idea if third parties are making progress. Second, differentiating state ballot access restrictions make it difficult for minor parties to get on the ballot, therefore they must spend valuable resources on gaining ballot access rather than campaigning. Third, fundraising is difficult, partially because of campaign financing laws which have placed special requirements for third parties in order for them to receive the federal matching funds major parties receive automatically. Fourth, there is a lack of quality, qualified candidates for third parties to choose from because major parties dominate all levels of politics, including the lower, local levels. It is these local levels where major party candidate obtain respect and notoriety as possible national candidates, where as possible third party candidates have rare opportunity to prove themselves to the public. Fifth, a negative attitude towards third parties exists in America because the twoparty system is such a part of American tradition. Therefore third parties are often not respected and typically viewed as radical and incendiary. Finally, there is also exists a fear of the "wasted" vote. Voters fear that a vote for the third party will be a vote for their "last choice" candidate. It is only the successful third party candidate, however, who is able to overcome at least some of these constraints. By doing so, the candidate

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determines, at least in part, the political environment from which they will run a campaign²

The Election of 1912

The presidential election of 1912 had several remarkable features, each making the election even more difficult for Debs', the third party candidate, to achieve any level of success. First, there were four candidates with legitimate chances at receiving more than a million votes, William Taft the incumbent Republican, Teddy Roosevelt the expresident and leader of the Bull Moose Party, Woodrow Wilson the Democrat, and Eugene Debs of the Socialist Party. Taft, although the incumbent, was not only out of contention weeks before the election, but was figured to finish third in the race and made very few appearances during the campaign³. Roosevelt was running as a progressive, even though he had served seven years as a Republican president. Wilson, sensing the popularity and power of the progressive movement responded to Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" with a rivaling approach to solving the problems of monopolies with his "New Freedom". And finally, even with Wilson and Roosevelt draining "off the muddle-headed members of the dying middle class advocates of government ownership" the Socialist Party received six percent of the vote – votes which the socialist viewed as revolutionary rather than reformist. 6

The campaign also saw a variety of campaign strategies on display. Taft as mentioned earlier decided soon after the Republican Convention that he would not actively campaign⁷ and most of his public appearances were when the press followed him to the golf course.8 Roosevelt, on the other hand, traveled ten thousand miles during his campaign, speaking to people in thirty-four states. Roosevelt attracted large crowds wherever he went, especially in the west. At times the campaign resembled a farewell tour rather than a campaign centered on electoral strategy. Roosevelt, however, spent much of his time in the west and in the "solid" democratic south, when realistically much of his support would need to come from the Northeast and Northern Midwest. 9 Even though much of the excitement of the campaign was centered around Roosevelt; Wilson had two advantages in the election. One was his background as an academic which allowed him to understand politics while "staying above the political fray." 10 His eloquence and intelligence gave him gravitas when discussing the economic matters involved in the monopoly issues of the day. 11 The second advantage Wilson had as the Democratic nominee was the split amongst Republicans. Although he was facing two expresidents, the split within the opposing party gave Wilson a much larger base than either Taft or Roosevelt could claim. With his Democratic base secure, he was able to go after the large progressive vote, using his "New Freedom" to take the wind from Roosevelt's sails. In the end, it is more accurate to say progressivism one the election. Wilson won with just over forty-one percent of the vote while Roosevelt gained twenty-seven percent and Taft with only twenty-three percent.

The election of 1912 created a lot of noise that distracted voters from understanding the true message of the candidates. For Debs, competing against two ex-

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presidents and what would be the next president, his message could not merely be one of change. It could not be one that blended in with his opponents varying methods to fix the current system. In order for Debs to have success he had to have a message that was uniquely sculpted to his core constituency, the working people of America.

Deb's Use of "Modern" Campaign Tactics

By the election of 1912 Debs was somewhat of an election veteran. This was his fourth presidential election and he had been campaigning for over a decade. At this point in his political career he and the Socialist Party had built a successful campaign strategy that included many of the campaign tactics and strategies we associate with modern campaigns. By effectively developing his message and communicating that message through the use of targeting, specialized media and his speaking tours Debs was able to find relative success in an extremely tough political environment.

Message Development

Debs had the simple notion that "the only reason that all workingmen are not socialists is that they do not know what it means" ¹² It was this thought that was the basis from which he developed his campaign message. A campaign's message, or otherwise known as the theme, is a central part of any campaign's strategy and is in fact "the public face of the campaign". ¹³ The message is a perception of the candidate that the campaign is hoping to pass along to voters. Determining and crafting the message is therefore an essential element of the campaign. The development of a campaign message and the subsequent communication of that message is considered by consultants and managers to be a key factor in a campaigns success or failure.

There are six ways to judge an effective campaign message. The message must be clear and easy to communicate. It is important that the voters can understand the message with only limited exposure to it. It does not need to be "dumbed down", but the candidate should be able to express it using language that will appeal to the common sense of the voters. The message must be concise. Going into details will be necessary at certain parts of the campaign, but the message should be concise enough so that the candidate can communicate it in a very short amount of time and still make all necessary points. The message must also appeal to the voters. It must make a compelling argument that creates a sense of emotional urgency so that the voter feels voting for the candidate is a necessity. In addition, the message must also connect to the needs of the voter. It should be constructed with the needs of the constituency in mind, so that when the voters hear the message they identify with it. Furthermore, the candidate must also differentiate their message from the message of the opponent. "It goes to the heart of how you reach out to voters and how you position your candidacy relative to the other contenders in your race." ¹⁴This is accomplished by creating a contrasting perception of what the candidates will do once in office. Finally, the message delivered by the campaign must be credible. Both the content of the message and the person delivering the message must be

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ates ble. believable to the public. If the voter determines that either part is unbelievable, then communicating the message is futile. 15

Debs' message was based on the great socialist and Marxist thinkers. He began developing his message after being arrested during the Pullman Strike. During his time in prison Debs was visited by Victor Berger, an Austrian immigrant, who had begun the Social Democracy Society after he had read the writings of Julius Wayland, a journalist who was determined to "yankeefy" American Marxism. Berger provided Debs with much of his reading material while in prison, introducing him to the basics of socialism, from Marx and Engel to the German socialist Karl Kautsky. Debs however, developed his message slightly different than many American socialist that had come before him. He purposely made his message as clear and simple as possible: Socialism was the system that would best benefit the individual working man.

He was successful in spreading this message in the United States, when others were not, because he was able to use the compelling message of socialism in a way that connected to his American voters. He was able to translate the Marxist idea of socialism into traditional American language; he used Lockean language as a tool to explain to common Americans socialist thought. First Debs used the idea of reason and natural law as justification for the socialist state. He believed it was natural for men to excel and desire the recognition of their peers, for men to want to reap the benefits of their labor.

The higher law of righteousness, of love and labor will prevail. It is a law which commends itself to reasoning men, a primal law which in its operations will level humanity upward until men, redeemed from greed and every debasing ambition, shall obey its mandates and glory in its triumph. ¹⁸

His message paints capitalism as an unholy, unnatural situation where man's most precious possession, his labor, is being exploited by the owning class saying, "In the capitalist system profit is prior to and more important than the life or liberty of the workingman." Secondly Debs wanted his message to raise class consciousness in order to show the people how their natural rights were being denied by the capitalistic state. He believed that once workers understood that they were being exploited by the owning class - that they were being denied the rights that were guaranteed by the founders of our country - that they would rise above the current system and,

.....put themselves in possession and control of the means of production, that they may have steady employment without consulting a capitalist employer, large or small, and that they may get the wealth their labor produces, all of it, and enjoy with their families the fruits of their industry in a comfortable and happy homes, abundant and wholesome food, proper clothing and all other things necessary to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."²⁰

Finally, Debs' message translated Marx's principle of class domination into a Lockean majority rule system. Debs believed that once the class consciousness was raised, a simple majority rule would eliminate the current class domination.

Socialism is first of all a political movement of the working class, clearly defined and uncompromising, which aims at the overthrow of the prevailing capitalist system by securing control of the national government and by the exercise of the public powers, supplanting the existing capitalist class government with Socialist administration- that is to say, changing a republic in name into a republic in fact.²¹

This is Debs' social democracy where, once the proletariat realizes the destructive nature of capitalism, they will democratically change their economic system into socialism. At this point "Lockean politics would result in socialist substance, because individual and state, civil society and political society, were coming into historical harmony." This is Locke's majority rule combined with Marx's economic determinism. What was best for the collective society was also best for the majority of American individuals.

Much of Debs' message is a definite adaptation of Marxist theory. The role of the individual and free will was more apparent in Debs' socialist theory than that of Marx. Marx believed that the revolution of the proletariat had to happen, that capitalism was going to force this revolution. Debs spoke more of the individual's need to choose the socialist state. He states that the workers must lead themselves into the promise land saying "Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he will never come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again."23 Debs had to confront a great disconnect of the American people that Marx did not foresee. Although the conditions of the working class was often objectively exploitive, the workers either settled for small immediate union gains or dreamt of a day when they would rise above the class they were currently in. This is possibly the reason why socialism never succeeded in America. Both the adaptive nature of our republic, which allowed for incremental progressive changes. and the richness of our land which allowed for social mobility created a notion that even the most downtrodden could pull themselves up by the bootstraps. The American dream allowed for people to believe they could make it to the owning class while the progressive movement kept those left in the working class from facing extreme conditions. Debs was then faced with the difficult assignment of convincing the American working class that they deserved more,

You do not need the capitalist. He could not exist an instant without you. You would just begin to live without him. You do everything and he has everything; and some of you imagine that if it were not for him you would have no work. As a matter of fact, he does not employ you at all; you employ him to take from you what you produce, and he faithfully sticks to his task. If you can stand it, he can; and if you don't change this relation, I

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This unique culture that faced Debs and other socialist allowed for him to justify adapting Marxist thought. He says, "The workers of a certain country must of necessity adapt themselves to the methods and manners of that country, and out of their own national psychology build toward an international purpose." He brought to many an American his message of the individual benefits of social organization and ownership; a message that was rooted in liberal as well as Marxist traditions. The extent to which Eugene V. Debs was successful was due in part to the development of a simple campaign message that connected with the average working American.

Message Communication

The development of Debs' message was successfully implemented by skillful, "modern" communication practices. Although it is true that Debs and the socialists had many handicapping factors, they had several advantages that the Debs campaign was able to benefit from. The first advantage Debs had been his speaking ability. He was able to keep the attention of large crowds throughout his career, allowing for his message to be communicated thoroughly. When Debs arrived in a town, he was viewed as a form of entertainment, something people would be willing to and did pay for. The Socialist Party and labor unions also provided an active organization from which the Debs campaign benefited greatly. They had large memberships, multiple publications and significant funding, allowing Debs an advantage many other third party candidates have not had. The final advantage Debs and the Socialist had was the defined nature of their core constituency. Socialists make it explicitly clear who their message is aimed at: the working class. Because of this, Debs knew the basic demographic make up of his target audience without doing any public opinion research. He knew where his potential voters worked; they worked at the factory, at the mill and in the field.

In recent years, specialized media has been used increasingly in elections because it's ability to target specific groups. ²⁶ Specialized media is a group of media outlets that include union newsletters, community papers and television, trade publications and other forms of media that are produced for small and narrow groups of people. These outlets cater to very specific demographics, and typically the producers know exactly what kind of people subscribe to their publication. This has attracted campaigns because they often know, due to detailed public opinion polling, which groups are most receptive to their message and which groups are most like to donate money to their cause. This allows for the campaigns to be very efficient with their advertising and paid media budgets. They can target groups where they have the highest chances of receiving votes and/or funds and not spend money on the people who are either already supporting the campaign or never going to support the campaign. A successful modern campaign will use special media as one aspect of their communication and advertising strategy.

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During the 1912 election Debs was able to effectively use socialist and union publications as specialized media. At this time there were 323 English and foreign-language socialist publications in the United States with a total circulation totaling around two million by 1913²⁷. Appeal to Reason, the largest publication had a circulation with 761,747²⁸ and International Socialist Review with 40,000 ²⁹ were the two largest and therefore the most influential. Although none of the large publications were owned or managed by the Socialist Party, the publications were still central to the specialized media communication of Debs' campaign message. "The main purpose of the prewar Socialist press was to reach and convert the masses, to bring the message of socialism to the greatest number of people." ³⁰ Debs himself was published in these publications on a regular basis. ³¹ Giving him the chance to persuade and energize a large base for free with regularity. Along with his writing, other socialist who supported Debs and staff writers regularly contributed the communication of the campaign's message. ³²

Along with the socialist publications, many major labor unions apart of the American Federation of Labor had publications that communicated with their members. Although the socialist publications were much more sympathetic to Debs' message, labor publications targeted the exact audience Debs was hoping to appeal to. The Socialist Party viewed unions as chances to educate workers on the importance of voting socialist. ³³ Union membership was obviously a much larger pool for Debs to work from than just readers of the socialist press, and also probably more closely represented the undecided group that would be the most receptive to the campaign's message.

In any campaign there are three basic groups of voters. One group that supports the campaign, a group that supports the opposition and one that is undecided. Targeting in a political campaign refers to candidates finding where different constituency groups are located and how to reach them. The modern way to target voters is to conduct public opinion surveys. By compiling a list of common demographic information, such as age, income, education, address, sex and race and then also asking several questions on political or social issue the candidate can determine which demographic groups have what political views. These surveys are done almost entirely by consultants or specialty polling firms. Campaigns spend a lot of money on targeting, and therefore it is considered to be one of the trademarks of the modern and post-modern campaigns.³⁴

There are three main purposes to targeting. One is to find the most persuasive campaign message. By surveying the opinion of the constituency, campaigns can develop and adjust their campaign rhetoric in order to connect as closely as possible with voters. The second purpose is to identify key target groups within that constituency that will be the most receptive to the candidate's message. By doing this the campaign can decide how and where to spend their money on communications. The final purpose of targeting is for the campaign staff to understand the perception the public has of the candidate. This can be critical – if the staff misinterprets the candidate's public perception, many of their decisions may be detrimental because of this foundational mistake. ³⁵

Through his use of targeting, Debs almost always communicated to his core constituency. When he gave speeches it was the old factory worker or the young mechanic that would show up to listen. His message appealed to the working class, and it

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spoke carrie he wa a diffi hower admitt any of admitt someo reporte party f campa the one campa was the working class who would show up when he spoke.³⁶ The press he received was mostly from small union or socialist papers that might have only had a small circulation³⁷ compared with the New York Times or the Chicago Tribune, but the ones who read the articles written both by and about him were the voters he was most capable of converting. Debs did not have to conduct opinion polls to know this. The socialist message is targeted at a specific group, the working class, and thanks to the unions and the socialist parties, these groups were already well organized by this time. 38 It was not just that his message was developed so well and communicated so eloquently to the groups he spoke to, but due to his "modern" use of targeting in is campaign when he spoke the "analysis Debs presented echoed their own daily experience. A rampant industrial capitalism, aggressively in search of ever greater profits, was ultimately responsible" for the success Debs was able to achieve.³⁹

Raising money is a necessity for campaigns. Money provides the means for communicating, and the more money you have, the easier it is to spread your message to the voters. Candidates are therefore forced to spend a large portion of their time raising money. There are five realities to this effort that campaign managers have found to be true. First, a campaign has never spent too much time raising money. Money is something campaigns can always use, and having too much of it has never cost a candidate an election. Second, the inverse is true; many campaigns have lost because they have not raised enough money. The third reality of fundraising is that the candidate is always the most effective fundraiser within the campaign. In fact, "candidates in most elections bear the brunt of fundraising". 40 Fourth, sources providing money outside of personal solicitation should not be depended. Although money might eventually come from these sources, campaigns should never rely on that money as a main source of campaign funding. And finally, the real measure of a candidate's dedication to his campaign is his willingness to ask for financial support. 41 It is a successful campaign that understands these realities and is able to implement this knowledge into their campaign.

Throughout his political career, Debs was able to draw large crowds wherever he spoke. During his campaigns he traveled in the "Red Special" a train car that at times carried a band to his rallies across the country. The demand to see him was so high that he was able to charge admittance to his political speeches. For third parties, fundraising is a difficult task because no one wants to contribute money to a loosing cause. For Debs, however, because of the magnetic draw he possessed, was able to raise money through admittance to his political speeches. During 1912, it was not unusual for him to out draw any of the other candidates, even the sitting president, when they were not charging admittance to their rallies. Debs was viewed as a celebrity by many in the working class; someone who not only excited and entertained them, but also cared for them. He has been reported to admit "they love me because they know I love them." Although much of the party funds came through dues, in the 1912 campaign he raised almost a quarter of his campaign funds through admissions and contributions collected at his rallies. 43 Debs was the one most capable of raising money for the campaign, and because of this he campaigned tirelessly, proving in modern campaign terms that he was dedicated to his

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cause. Therefore, Debs was able to accomplish two important campaign goals at once: raising funds and communication his message.

Much of Eugene V. Debs' success as a third party candidate in the 1912 election was due to his use of "modern" campaign practices in his 1912 presidential campaign. By using Lockean language in developing a socialist message, Debs crafted a clear and simple appeal to the American worker. Even in a difficult environment, Debs was able to communicate this message by employing tactics that are now considered trademarks of modern campaigns.

¹ Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus. <u>Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure</u>. Princeton University Press. 1984, revised in 1996.

² Jeffery Koch. "The Perot Candidacy and Attitudes Towards Government and Politics. <u>Political Research Quarterly</u>. March 1998. And Lacy and Burden. "Vote Steeling and Turnout Effects of Ross Perot in the 1992 Presidential Election. <u>American Journal of Political Science</u>. Jan. 1999.

³ Mowry, George. <u>Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Movement</u>. New York: Hill and Wang. 1960. First Edition University of Wisconsin Press. 1946. Pg. 274.

⁴ Chase, James. 1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2004. Pg.192. Flehinger, Brett. The 1912 Election and the Power of Progressivism. Boston: Bedford Press. 2003. Pg. 41. Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" stressed a clean up of corporate American by government regulation of monopolies and was considered pro-corporate while Wilson's "New Freedom" stressed breaking up monopolies and making the Sherman Anti-trust law a "controlling force" (Correspondence from Louis Brandies to Wilson, Sept. 30, 1912)

⁵ International Socialist Review "The Election" Nov. 1912

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Mowry, 274

⁸ Chase 200

⁹ Chase 201

¹⁰ Flehinger 16

¹¹ Chase 217

¹² Debs, from *Appeal to Reason*, 1904. Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs. Hermitage Press, Inc.: New York. 1948. Page 114.

¹³ Baer, Denise. "Strategy and Tactics for Campaign Fundraising" In <u>Campaigns and Elections American Style</u>.Eds. Candice Nelson and James Thurber. Boulder: Westview Press. 1995. Pg 51

⁴ Faucheux, Ron. Running for Office. New York: M. Evans & Company. 2002. Pg. 65

¹⁵ Bradshaw, Joel.Contemporary "Strategy and Agenda Setting." Campaigns and Elections pg 43

¹⁶ Kipnis, Ira. The American Socialist Movement. Columbia University Press: New York. 1952. Pg. 44.

¹⁷ This idea and its forthcoming explanation is derived from Kann, Mark. "Challenging Lockean Liberalism in America: The Case of Debs and Hillquit". *Political Theory*, Vol 8, No. 2 (1980).

¹⁸ Debs speech in New York City, March 21, 1899. Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs. Hermitage Press, Inc.: New York. 1948. Page 33.

¹⁹ Debs, from *Appeal to Reason*, 1904. Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs. Hermitage Press, Inc.: New York. 1948. Page 116.

²⁰ Debs from the Septmeber 1900 issue of the *International Socialist Review*. <u>Eugene V. Debs Speaks</u>. Tussey, Jean, Ed. Pathfinder Press: New York. 1970. Page 65.

²¹ Debs, from *Appeal to Reason*, 1904. Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs. Hermitage Press, Inc.: New York, 1948. Page 114.

²² Kann, Mark. "Challenging Lockean Liberalism in America: The Case of Debs and Hillquit". *Political Theory*, Vol 8, No. 2 (1980) Page 210

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²³ Debs' speech in New York City, December 10, 1905. Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs. Hermitage Press, Inc.: New York. 1948. Page 225.

²⁴ Debs' speech in New York City, December 10, 1905. Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs. Hermitage Press, Inc.: New York. 1948. Page 225-226.

²⁵ Debs as quoted by Kann, Mark. "Challenging Lockean Liberalism in America: The Case of Debs and Hillquit". Political Theory, Vol 8, No. 2 (1980) Page 213.

²⁶ Norris, Pippa. A Virtuous Circle, Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2000. Pg.138.

²⁷ Weinstien, James. The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925. New York: Monthly Review Press. Pgs. 84-85.

²⁸ Weinstien 84-85

²⁹ Kipnis, 294

³⁰ Weinstien 85

³¹ Table of Contents from Writing and Speeches and International Socialist Review 1912

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33 Kipnis 194

³⁴ Norris 138.

35 Wolfinger, Raymond. "The Ethics of Political Campaigns" in Campaigns and Elections American Style.Eds. Candice Nelson and James Thurber. Boulder: Westview Press. 1995. Pg 182

36 Salvatore, Nick. Eugene V. Debs Citizen and Socialist. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1982. Pg.

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38 Schlesinger, Arthur. "Political Aspects of the Labor Party" in Political and Social History of the United States: 1829-1925. New York: MacMillan Company. 1925. pg. 385.

³⁹ Salvatore 233

⁴⁰ Faucheux 98.

⁴¹ David Himes 'Strategy and Tactics for Campaign Fund-Raising' pg 62 in Campaigns and Elections.

⁴² Salvatore 232

43 Kipnis 365 \$15,000 of \$66,000