

The Contributions of Robert La Follette's 1924 Presidential Campaign to the New Deal

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“Robert M. La Follette, Progressive Presidential Candidate, Standing in an Automobile,” American Memory, Library of Congress, n.d., <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mdbquery.html>> (11 Apr. 2004).

Throughout its history, the American political system has seen the emergence of numerous third parties—from the Liberty Party of the 1840s to the People’s Party of the 1890s to the Socialist Party of the early twentieth century to the Green Party of the present day. One of the most significant American third-party candidates was Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette, a courageous politician and stalwart reformer who ran on the Progressive Party ticket in the presidential election of 1924. His campaign was surprisingly successful in view of the daunting obstacles it faced. And although La Follette failed to win the presidency, his effort was not in vain, as it laid the groundwork for the later implementation of several of his reform proposals as components of the New Deal.

Fighting Bob’s 1924 campaign was the culmination of decades of public service and a lifetime of political commitment. Robert Marion La Follette was born in Primrose, Wisconsin, on 14 June 1855.¹ He graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1879 and earned a law degree by 1880.² After serving four years as the district attorney of Dane County, Wisconsin, La Follette was elected as a Republican to the United States House of Representatives in 1884, where he served three terms. La Follette ran for governor of Wisconsin in 1896 and 1898, but not until 1900 did he finally succeed.³

During his six years as governor, La Follette proved prodigiously successful in implementing a whole series of progressive reforms that collectively came to be called the “Wisconsin Idea.”⁴ He instituted open direct primaries to curb the power of political bosses and

¹ Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 7.

² “Robert M. La Follette,” [u-s-history.com](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h988.html), 2002, <<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h988.html>> (8 Apr. 2004).

³ “Robert.”

⁴ F. E. Haynes, “La Follette and La Follettism,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Oct. 1924.

“big money.”⁵ He reformed the civil-service system.⁶ He imposed controls on lobbying activities.⁷ He won regulation of banks, insurance companies, utilities, and railroads, while doubling taxes on the last.⁸ La Follette protected forestland, secured the rights of workers, battled monopolies, and aided small farmers.⁹ He created “brain trusts”—groups of academic professionals assigned the task of utilizing their own intellectual expertise in the design of rational public policies.¹⁰ By having experts set tax rates and engineer sanitation measures, La Follette hoped to limit the corrupting influence of special interests.¹¹

After election to the United States Senate in 1906, La Follette continued to fight for progressive reforms, though his success was more limited.¹² He did, however, support strengthened railroad regulation and the rights of labor unions.¹³ He was one of the few Republicans in the Senate to vote against the 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act, and he filibustered the 1908 Aldrich-Vreeland bill, which altered the nation’s banking system, on the grounds that it would only serve to enrich the bankers themselves.¹⁴ By 1911, Fighting Bob had become “the

⁵ Bernard A. Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote? A Historian Reflects on the La Follette Candidacy,” TomPaine.com, 18 Oct. 2000, <<http://www.tompaine.com/feature2.cfm/ID/3766>> (15 Apr. 2004).

⁶ “Robert.”

⁷ John Nichols, “Portrait of the Founder, Fighting Bob La Follette,” The Progressive, Jan. 1999.

⁸ Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote?”; Nichols.

⁹ Nichols.

¹⁰ Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote?”

¹¹ Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote?”; Haynes; “Robert.”

¹² Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote?”

¹³ “Robert.”

¹⁴ Haynes; “Robert.”

acknowledged Congressional leader of the progressive wing of the Republican Party.”¹⁵ He was seen as a possible candidate for the 1912 Republican presidential nomination, but he was ultimately rejected by progressives in favor of Theodore Roosevelt, who was considered more likely to beat William Howard Taft.¹⁶ La Follette excoriated Roosevelt throughout the remainder of the campaign, claiming that the Bull-Moose candidate was abusing genuine progressive ideals in the pursuit of his own political ends.¹⁷ Wherefore, even though La Follette agreed with most of the principles contained in Roosevelt’s platform, he privately supported the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson.¹⁸

Yet La Follette soon became disillusioned with Wilson also, as the Wisconsin senator’s unpopular stance on US entry into World War I illustrates.¹⁹ Denouncing the war as a pretext for the enrichment of corporations on the backs of the poor soldiers forced to fight, La Follette led opposition to American involvement.²⁰ During the debate over the issue, La Follette proposed a nationwide referendum to let the people have the final say, and when the actual declaration of war came before Congress, Fighting Bob single-handedly delayed it by 24 hours.²¹ La Follette’s antiwar stance provoked outrage in the establishment press: the *Boston Evening Transcript* proclaimed him “the Man without a Country,” while the cover of *Life* magazine pictured him

¹⁵ “Robert.”

¹⁶ Nichols; Haynes.

¹⁷ J. David Gillespie, Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 87.

¹⁸ Gillespie, 87; Haynes.

¹⁹ “Robert.”

²⁰ Nichols.

²¹ “Robert”; Nichols.

unflatteringly next to the German Kaiser.²² His situation was not improved by his attacks on war profiteers and his defense of incarcerated dissidents.²³ Many claimed that Fighting Bob had permanently destroyed any chances of his reelection, but the Senatorial race of 1922—in which La Follette won more than seventy percent of the vote—proved otherwise.²⁴

La Follette's unwavering opposition to World War I revealed much about his beliefs. Inspired by Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Chief Justice Edward Ryan of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, Fighting Bob inveighed against what he saw as imperialism and monopolistic corporate power, declaring that "Free men of every generation must combat renewed efforts of organized force and greed to destroy liberty."²⁵ He often placed moral conviction above political pragmatism, believing that an enlightened American people would prefer radical change to moderate compromise.²⁶ It was with this philosophy and background that La Follette declared his intention to enter the presidential race of 1924.

La Follette was driven by the widespread hardships for laborers and farmers that he felt lurked below the supposed prosperity of the 1920s. While Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon promoted tax cuts for the wealthy, labor unions faced waning membership and defeat after defeat.²⁷ Farm prices had declined by one-third between 1920 and early 1924.²⁸ Moreover, the secretary of agriculture reported at the time that since 1920 in just fifteen chief wheat-growing states, 108,000 farmers had lost their land to bankruptcy or foreclosure, 122,000 had

²² Qtd. in Nichols.

²³ Nichols.

²⁴ Nichols.

²⁵ Qtd. in Nichols.

²⁶ Nichols.

²⁷ Unger, 288.

given up their land without legal compulsion, and 375,000 had held on to their land only because their creditors had been lenient; these 600,000 farmers amounted to 26 percent of the total.²⁹

Yet, neither major party offered an alternative to the status quo; indeed, President Calvin Coolidge—famous for his statement that “The chief business of America is business”—stood as the quintessential symbol of contentment with the existing order.³⁰ Progressivism, however, was not dead, La Follette maintained; it was merely in need of rejuvenation through intensified political activity, in particular, a progressive presidential bid.³¹ An April 1924 article in the *Philadelphia North American* identified one of the senator’s motives: “He is sixty-eight years old and not in robust health; lacking faith in the Republican party as now managed, he realizes that if it gains a lease of power for another four years his legislative program will be deferred until he is no longer able to fight for it.”³²

After Wisconsin Republicans chose La Follette as their presidential nominee (as they had done every four years since 1908), the senator sent delegates to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in June 1924.³³ Though La Follette captured only 34 votes to Coolidge’s 1,165, the Wisconsin delegation took the opportunity to present La Follette’s platform as a minority report that would be heard by radio listeners across the country.³⁴ The

²⁸ Unger, 288.

²⁹ Norman P. Desmarais and James H. McGovern, comp, “La Follette’s Platform of 1924,” Essential Documents in American History.

³⁰ Qtd. in Unger, 286.

³¹ Unger, 286.

³² Qtd. in Unger, 287, 347.

³³ Qtd. in Unger, 288.

³⁴ Unger, 288; Bernard A. Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 266.

Democratic convention at Madison Square Garden saw a vicious stalemate between Alfred E. Smith and William G. McAdoo that went on for 103 ballots, until a compromise candidate was chosen: John W. Davis, a lawyer with a Wall-Street firm whose clients included the J. P. Morgan Company.³⁵

The protracted battle in New York overshadowed another convention meeting on 4 July 1924 in Cleveland: that of the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA).³⁶ The CPPA was originally formed in February 1922 in Chicago by members of farm and labor groups, liberal Christian organizations, and other progressives dedicated to election reform and opposition to monopoly power.³⁷ Though it eschewed the label of a party organization, 140 members of the Congress elected in November 1922 either enjoyed official CPPA endorsement or at least backed its platform.³⁸ By 1924, the CPPA had resolved to nominate a presidential candidate of its own if neither of the two major parties selected a progressive.³⁹

Meeting in Cleveland's Public Hall, the CPPA convention included representatives from labor organizations, farm cooperatives, women's groups, college political clubs, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Food Reform Society of America; in all, there were 1,200 delegates and 9,000 onlookers.⁴⁰ What the convention lacked in funds it made up for with its wealth of prominent progressive speakers: Andrew Furuseth,

³⁵ Unger, 288.

³⁶ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 266-267.

³⁷ Gillespie, 88; Unger, 288.

³⁸ Gillespie, 88; Unger, 288.

³⁹ Unger, 288.

⁴⁰ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 267; Unger, 290.

Edwin Markham, Peter Witt, Fiorello La Guardia, William Pickens of the NAACP, and Jacob Coxey of Coxey's Army.⁴¹

Robert M. La Follette ("Old Bob") did not attend the convention; he stayed in Washington while his eldest son, Bobbie La Follette ("Young Bob"), delivered his father's speech and presented his father's platform.⁴² Denouncing both the Democratic and Republican conventions as conservative opponents of progressive reform, La Follette's statement proclaimed that "[t]he time has come for a militant political movement, independent of the two old party organizations, and responsive to the needs and sentiments of the common people."⁴³ On 5 July 1924, the convention nominated Old Bob as its presidential candidate; it was decided that the national committee would select the vice president.⁴⁴ After Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis declined the position, La Follette settled on Democratic Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, who had played a key role in the revelation of the scandals of the Warren G. Harding administration.⁴⁵ Wheeler urged his fellow Democrats to follow his lead by rejecting both the "reactionary standpat policies" of the Republicans and the "Wall Street Democrat" who represented "the House of Morgan" in favor of the only candidate with "fidelity to the interest of the people."⁴⁶

When the Wisconsin delegation had propounded La Follette's platform to the Republican convention in June, it had been vociferously defeated; when Young Bob presented the same

⁴¹ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 267-268.

⁴² Unger, 288.

⁴³ Qtd. in Unger, 288-289.

⁴⁴ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 268.

⁴⁵ Unger, 348; Gillespie, 89.

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Unger, 290-291.

platform to the CPPA convention in July, it was wholeheartedly embraced.⁴⁷ The platform opened by outlining La Follette's view on the current state of the nation:

The great issue before the American people today is the control of government and industry by private monopoly. [...]

The people know they cannot yield to any group the control of the economic life of the nation and preserve their political liberties. They know monopoly has its representatives in the halls of Congress, on the Federal bench, and in the executive departments; that these servile agents barter away the nation's natural resources, nullify acts of Congress by judicial veto and administrative favor, invade the people's rights by unlawful arrests and unconstitutional searches and seizures, direct our foreign policy in the interests of predatory wealth, and make wars and conscript the sons of the common people to fight them.⁴⁸

“In order to destroy the economic and political power of monopoly, which has come between the people and their government,” the platform set forth twelve “principles and policies.”⁴⁹ First, it demanded “a complete housecleaning” of executive-branch departments, particularly the Department of Justice and the Department of the Interior. Second, it called for the “recovery of the navy’s oil reserves and all other parts of the public domain which have been fraudulently or illegally leased, or otherwise wrongfully transferred, to the control of private interests,” as well as “vigorous prosecution” of those responsible. Third, it demanded that railroad rates be set according to “actual, prudent investment and cost of service.” Furthermore, it supported eventual nationalization of railroads “as the only final solution of the transportation problem.” While condemning Mellon’s tax cuts for the rich, the fourth plank demanded tax relief for “moderate incomes” and “legitimate business” through the reduction of such federal expenditures as “the eight hundred million dollars now annually extended for the army and navy

⁴⁷ Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin*, 266; Unger, 289, 290.

⁴⁸ Desmarais and McGovern.

⁴⁹ Desmarais and McGovern.

in preparation for future wars” and through expanded taxation of inherited estates and “excess profits.”⁵⁰

The fifth, and probably most controversial, plank favored a Constitutional amendment allowing Congress to override judicial-branch decisions, as well as the direct popular election of all federal judges.⁵¹ This demand was a reaction to the repeated reversal by the Supreme Court of progressive legislation passed by Congress, such as in the 1922 case of *Bailey v. Drexel Furniture Company*, which invalidated the Child Labor Tax Law.⁵² La Follette’s platform regarded “the present exercise of legislative power by the federal courts” as “a plain violation of the Constitution,” because “[t]he Constitution specifically vests all legislative power in the Congress [...]”⁵³ Fighting Bob summarized his rationale succinctly in a statement made on the floor of the Senate: “Which is supreme, the will of the people or the will of the few men who have been appointed to life positions on the Federal bench?”⁵⁴

The sixth plank of La Follette’s platform called for agricultural relief in the form of “drastic” cuts to the “exorbitant” Fordney-McCumber tariff and the reduction by the Interstate Commerce Commission of freight rates on farm commodities and agricultural equipment.⁵⁵ The seventh plank defended the right of farmers and laborers to organize and deplored the use of injunctions against union activity, while the eighth supported S. 1898, a “postal salary adjustment measure,” because “a prompt and dependable postal service is essential to the social

⁵⁰ Desmarais and McGovern.

⁵¹ Unger, 289; Desmarais and McGovern.

⁵² Unger, 289-290.

⁵³ Desmarais and McGovern.

⁵⁴ Unger, 290.

⁵⁵ Desmarais and McGovern.

and economic welfare of the nation.” The platform’s ninth component demanded “adjusted compensation” for the veterans of World War I, “not as charity, but as a matter of right,” and its tenth advocated the creation of “a deep waterway from the Great Lakes to the sea” that would allow for the easy shipment of cargo from “the northwestern states” to the ocean. The eleventh plank affirmed the possession of ultimate power by the people: “Over and above constitutions and statutes and greater than all, is the supreme sovereignty of the people, and with them should rest the final decision of all great questions of national policy.” Concretely, it called for the direct popular election of the president, the institution of initiatives and referenda on a national level, and a requirement for a plebiscite before any future wars, “except in cases of actual invasion.” The final paragraph of the platform fulminated against “the mercenary system of foreign policy,” by which “financial imperialists, oil monopolists, and international bankers” seize control of the State Department to take actions “contrary to the will of the American people, destructive of domestic development, and provocative of war.” In addition to calling for the revision of the Treaty of Versailles “in accordance with the terms of the armistice,” the twelfth plank supported sound international agreements to “drastically reduce land, air, and naval armaments” and to “outlaw wars.”⁵⁶

The overwhelming approval by the CPPA of La Follette and his platform may have been helpful to the Wisconsinite, inasmuch as it seemed a united alternative to the division of the Democrats.⁵⁷ Fighting Bob’s personal charm and energy, too, stood in positive contrast to his bland opponents.⁵⁸ Additionally, the Progressive campaign enjoyed the fervent support of a long

⁵⁶ Desmarais and McGovern.

⁵⁷ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 267.

⁵⁸ Unger, 290.

list of famous reformers: Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, John Dewey, Helen Keller, Ernest Gruening, Frederic Howe, Norman Thomas, Morris Hillquit, Arthur Garfield Hays, Oswald G. Villard, John Haynes Holmes, and Felix Frankfurter.⁵⁹ Female activists from Zona Gale to Harriet Stanton Blatch exhorted women to apply their newly acquired voting power to the worthwhile cause.⁶⁰ Even though La Follette did not specifically target black support, he was endorsed by W. E. B. Du Bois and the African Methodist Episcopal Church's Bishop Hurst, as well as by Colonel Roscoe Conklin Simmons, who called Old Bob "the hope of the Negro race."⁶¹ In fact, so many African Americans volunteered that campaign managers were unable to effectively organize their assistance.⁶² Progressive Republican Harold Ickes, meanwhile, became so disgusted with Coolidge that he became La Follette's campaign manager for the Midwest.⁶³ Fighting Bob was the first independent presidential candidate endorsed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL); however, Samuel Gompers confided that he had only been "forced to turn to La Follette" because of the utter worthlessness of the other two candidates.⁶⁴ Similarly, the American Socialist Party's official endorsement of La Follette marked the first and only time it has ever fused with another presidential campaign.⁶⁵ Old Bob—whose admiration for academic expertise extended as far back as his Wisconsin brain trusts—was also backed by

⁵⁹ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 268.

⁶⁰ Unger, 291.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Unger, 291.

⁶² Unger, 291.

⁶³ Unger, 292.

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Unger, 299.

⁶⁵ Gillespie, 89.

63 economics and sociology professors and 150 professors of agriculture, anthropology, history, language, law, literature, psychology, and religion.⁶⁶

In addition to prodigious support from prominent progressives, La Follette benefited from his own oratorical mastery. Having delivered thousands of talks at lyceums and Chautauquas throughout his career, Fighting Bob was widely considered one of the nation's most powerful elocutionists.⁶⁷ La Follette could speak for almost fifteen hours every single day for two months at a time during his campaigns. Accustomed to large crowds, La Follette spoke with a passionately stentorian voice and moved in a vivaciously theatrical manner.⁶⁸ Old Bob was usually advised to speak for no more than an hour, but he enjoyed the ebullient support of his audiences so much that he often went on for two or more.⁶⁹

La Follette's extraordinary oratorical style was seen across the country when De Forest Phonofilm, utilizing new sound-film technologies, recorded brief speeches of the three main presidential candidates in August 1924.⁷⁰ Fighting Bob's address, "On Responsible Government," warned of "an impending crisis" that threatened "the representative character of the government itself."⁷¹ Big business, asseverated La Follette, violates the law with impunity from the courts, demolishes "equality of opportunity," crushes "the pursuit of happiness," and

⁶⁶ Unger, 293.

⁶⁷ "Fightin' Bob' LaFollette," PBS, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches/timeline/r_lafollette_b.html> (8 Apr. 2004).

⁶⁸ "Fightin' Bob' LaFollette."

⁶⁹ Unger, 295.

⁷⁰ Unger, 293.

⁷¹ Unger, 293; "Senator Robert LaFollette Warns of the Perils of 'Passive Citizenship,' during the First Sound-Film Recording, Washington, D.C., August 11, 1924," PBS, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches/timeline/r_lafollette_s.html> (8 Apr. 2004).

corrupts and manipulates the very “government that guards and protects its rights.”⁷² This crisis, La Follette declared, “does not sound a call to arms,” but rather “a call to patriotism” in the form of “higher ideals in citizenship.” La Follette concluded with a ringing affirmation of civic duty:

Mere passive citizenship is not enough. Men must be aggressive for what is right if government is to be saved from those who are aggressive for what is wrong. [...] There's work for everyone. The field is large. It is a glorious service, this service for the country. The call comes to every citizen. It is an unending struggle to make and keep government representative. Each one should [count it] a patriotic duty to build at least a part of his life into the life of his country, to do his share in the making of America according to the plan of the fathers.⁷³

While film was able to capture much of La Follette’s passionate energy, another medium of mass communication could not: the radio. The early microphones of the time allowed La Follette neither to raise his voice nor to walk back and forth.⁷⁴ The rigid timing of radio broadcasting clashed with the length and spontaneity of La Follette’s delivery.⁷⁵ And, in the absence of a visible audience, La Follette was unable to address the specific concerns of his listeners. What was more, the primarily middle- and upper-class consumers able to afford a radio were probably the least likely people to welcome the Wisconsin senator’s message.⁷⁶

Yet, the constraints of radio were the least of the Progressive candidate’s concerns. The third-party movement had no broad, established base of organizers as the Democrats and Republicans did; indeed, La Follette’s best campaign assistants were his two sons, Young Bob and Phil.⁷⁷ Nor did it have the funds. La Follette had a budget of only \$240,000, in contrast to

⁷² “Senator Robert LaFollette.”

⁷³ “Senator Robert LaFollette.”

⁷⁴ Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin*, 269.

⁷⁵ Unger, 293.

⁷⁶ Unger, 293.

⁷⁷ Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote?”

Davis's \$820,000 and Coolidge's \$4.3 million—in part because the AFL donated less than one percent of the \$3 million it had promised.⁷⁸ At some speeches, the old senator had to charge money for seats and even pass around a hat for the collection of enough pocket change to enable him to make it to one more stop.⁷⁹ Although Fighting Bob campaigned extensively in the East and Midwest—from Boston to St. Louis—he was unable to make it farther west than Minneapolis, Des Moines, and Omaha; he delivered speeches in only twenty states.⁸⁰

To make matters worse, La Follette—like all third-party candidates since the inauguration of the secret Australian vote—was forced to expend substantial campaign funds toward the collection of petition signatures and other complicated requirements to appear on state ballots.⁸¹ He succeeded, miraculously, in each of the 48 states except Louisiana, though his name appeared next to one of four different parties—Progressive, Socialist, Farm-Labor, and Independent.⁸²

Not only did the campaign suffer from its own lack of resources, but it also faced brutal attacks from numerous opponents. Socialist Party support may have helped to organize voters and get on the ballot, but it also opened the campaign up to “red baiting”—claims of association with dangerously far-left radicalism.⁸³ La Follette openly repudiated communism; his public letter refusing nomination by a 17 June 1924 Farmer-Labor meeting, on the grounds that communists would be present, had declared the goal of “a dictatorship of the proletariat” to be

⁷⁸ Unger, 299; Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 269.

⁷⁹ Weisberger, “A Wasted Vote?”

⁸⁰ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 269; Unger, 295.

⁸¹ Unger, 292.

⁸² Unger, 292.

⁸³ Unger, 299; Gillespie, 89, 314.

“absolutely repugnant to democratic ideals.”⁸⁴ Even so, some mainstream reformers were turned off by La Follette’s Socialist endorsement.⁸⁵

The Progressive campaign also faced criticism from much of the establishment press on a number of fronts. Some newspapers condemned the fifth plank of La Follette’s platform as an assault on the Supreme Court and brought up his alleged disloyalty during World War I.⁸⁶ Others claimed that La Follette could not view situations objectively and that his policies would never work.⁸⁷ *The Outlook* charged that La Follette was too provincial to tackle national problems, that he was too mired in insignificant details to be able to see the larger issues.⁸⁸ A writer for the *Fairmont (Minn.) Independent*, meanwhile, mocked Fighting Bob’s entire presidential bid as an impossible dream: “How in the name of the pink-toed prophet can an intelligent person expect La Follette to succeed where Roosevelt failed [as a third-party candidate]?”⁸⁹

However, there were some who thought that La Follette might succeed. The *Philadelphia North American* suggested that if the Wisconsin senator could carry enough states in the Northwest, neither major-party candidate would win a majority of electoral votes.⁹⁰ In such a case, the election of the vice president would go to the Senate and the election of the president would go to the House of Representatives, where anything might happen.⁹¹ The

⁸⁴ Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin*, 266.

⁸⁵ Unger, 299.

⁸⁶ Unger, 296.

⁸⁷ Unger, 296.

⁸⁸ Qtd. in Unger, 296.

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Unger, 292.

⁹⁰ Qtd. in Unger, 286-287.

⁹¹ Unger, 296.

Republicans alleged that such an outcome would rack the nation with so much nervous anticipation that the economy might fall to pieces; the choice was “Coolidge or Chaos,” they claimed.⁹² The Democrats, meanwhile, argued that since only Davis had a real chance of beating the incumbent, a vote for La Follette would be tantamount to a vote for Coolidge.⁹³

In the weeks before the election, several adscititious factors further militated against the La Follette campaign and led to a sharp decline for La Follette in the polls. One was a typical symptom that afflicts most minor-party candidates: some voters toyed with the idea of supporting the third party throughout most of the election, but when last-minute pressures made the race seem a choice between the only two candidates who stood a chance of winning, those voters cast their ballots for one of the major parties.⁹⁴ Another was a marked increase in agricultural prices resulting from bad harvests in other countries, including Canada, and recovery from the postwar depression.⁹⁵ A few Americans were genuinely supportive of the status quo; they were glad that the progressive reforms of the first two decades of the twentieth century had curtailed the worst of the corporate abuses, but they were now content to watch business flourish without further restraint.⁹⁶

In view of all of these obstacles, it is indeed surprising how successful the Progressive campaign actually was. Approximately 28,649,709 votes were cast in the presidential election of 1924, in which barely more than fifty percent of eligible voters participated.⁹⁷ La Follette won

⁹² Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 271.

⁹³ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 271.

⁹⁴ Unger, 297.

⁹⁵ Unger, 297.

⁹⁶ Unger, 299.

⁹⁷ Unger, 297.

4,822,319 votes, or 16.8 percent of the total; more of these came at the expense of Davis than at the expense of Coolidge.⁹⁸ Fighting Bob only received Wisconsin's 13 electoral votes, while Davis garnered 136 and Coolidge took 382.⁹⁹ But Old Bob placed second, ahead of Davis, in seven states in the West and four states in the Midwest; this is particularly impressive considering his inability to campaign further west than Nebraska.¹⁰⁰ La Follette's popular vote averaged 30 percent in the Pacific and Mountain states and 24 percent in the nation's ten largest cities.¹⁰¹ Half of La Follette's voters were farmers, one-fifth were union members, and one-fifth were socialists.¹⁰² Some of Fighting Bob's strongest support came from Germans and Scandinavians; he also did well in working-class Jewish and Italian sections of New York City.¹⁰³ Yet, even though many prominent blacks had endorsed La Follette, most African Americans ultimately voted for their usual parties.¹⁰⁴

La Follette earned more than five times as many votes as any previous candidate endorsed by the Socialist Party.¹⁰⁵ It is on this basis that some consider Fighting Bob's 1924 bid "the most successful leftwing Presidential campaign in American history."¹⁰⁶ And since 1924,

⁹⁸ Unger, 297.

⁹⁹ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 271.

¹⁰⁰ Gillespie, 89; Weisberger, "A Wasted Vote?"

¹⁰¹ Unger, 297-298.

¹⁰² Unger, 297.

¹⁰³ Unger, 298; Nichols.

¹⁰⁴ Unger, 298.

¹⁰⁵ Nichols.

¹⁰⁶ Nichols.

only one presidential candidate outside of the Democratic and Republican parties has ever exceeded La Follette's popular-vote percentage: Ross Perot, who took 18.8 percent in 1992.¹⁰⁷

The magnitude of this electoral achievement is even more evident when viewed from the perspective of campaign spending. La Follette's budget of \$236,963 amounted to 9.2 percent of the average spending by the two major parties, yet he earned 40.5 percent of the average number of votes taken by the two major parties.¹⁰⁸ Dividing his campaign funds by his vote total, La Follette spent 4.9 cents per vote. In the 1912 election, by contrast, Roosevelt's budget of \$665,420 amounted to 60.3 percent of the average spending by the two major parties. Roosevelt received 84.2 percent of the average number of votes garnered by the two major parties, and he spent 16.2 cents per vote.¹⁰⁹ In fact, according to the standard of votes earned per dollar, Fighting Bob in 1924 surpassed every other third-party candidate of the twentieth century, including Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond in 1948, George Wallace in 1968, John Anderson in 1980, and Ross Perot in 1992.¹¹⁰

Old Bob may not have won the presidency, but he was as determined as ever to keep fighting. In a November 1924 editorial for *La Follette's Magazine* entitled "Forward Progressives for Campaign of 1926," Fighting Bob affirmed that "the Progressives will close ranks for the next battle."¹¹¹ He intended to build his party up to the national level by starting at the state level in Wisconsin.¹¹² Unfortunately, his failing health interfered. In spring 1925, La

¹⁰⁷ Weisberger, "A Wasted Vote?"

¹⁰⁸ Unger, 299.

¹⁰⁹ Unger, 299.

¹¹⁰ Unger, 299, 349.

¹¹¹ Qtd. in Unger, 300, 349.

¹¹² Unger, 300.

Follette endured a series of severe heart attacks; by June 1925, the family gathered to see him in his final days.¹¹³ On 18 June 1925, just four days after his seventieth birthday, Fighting Bob reached his end.¹¹⁴

Old Bob may have died, but the legacy of his 1924 campaign lived on to influence policies a decade later. Most third parties in American history have succeeded not in winning elections but, instead, in laying the groundwork for later reforms by raising new issues, by energizing political activists, and by forcing the entrenched parties to grant concessions to voters they had previously been able to take for granted. The Progressive movement of 1924 was no exception, as Republican Senator James Watson noted twelve years later in his 1936 memoir:

If one will take the trouble to examine the platform of 1924 on which Robert M. La Follette ran [...] one] will find very many of the identical propositions embodied that are now being put into execution by the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and, furthermore, a closer examination will reveal the fact that many of the very men who are now engaged in aiding President Roosevelt were in Wisconsin at that time helping La Follette.¹¹⁵

Following La Follette's death, many of his formerly Republican supporters went to the Democratic Party.¹¹⁶ One of them was Harold Ickes, Sr., Fighting Bob's midwestern campaign manager.¹¹⁷ As secretary of the interior from 1933 to 1946, Ickes worked energetically toward the same goal that La Follette had set forth in plank two of his 1924 platform: "permanent conservation of all the nation's resources [...] in the interest of the people."¹¹⁸ Ickes supported

¹¹³ Unger, 303.

¹¹⁴ Unger, 303.

¹¹⁵ Qtd. in Unger, 307.

¹¹⁶ Unger, 307.

¹¹⁷ Unger, 292, 307.

¹¹⁸ "Harold Leclair Ickes," Texas A&M University, Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Sciences, n.d., <<http://www.rpts.tamu.edu/pugsley/Ickes.htm>> (29 May 2004); Desmarais and McGovern.

the expansion of National Park Service lands from 8.2 million acres in 1933 to more than 20 million acres in 1941, and he attempted—unsuccessfully—to change the Department of the Interior into a Department of Conservation that would take over the Forest Service from the Department of Agriculture.¹¹⁹

In addition to conservation, the second plank of the 1924 platform had supported “public ownership of the nation’s water power and the creation and development of a national super-water-power system, including Muscle Shoals, to supply at actual cost light and power for the people and nitrate for the farmers.”¹²⁰ Nine years later, the Tennessee Valley Authority Act, passed by Congress on 18 May 1933, did just that.¹²¹ The basin of the Tennessee River had long been one of the most backward and impoverished regions of the country.¹²² Crop yields there suffered from soil exhaustion and erosion, and the best timber had already been harvested.¹²³ The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) sought to change the situation. It replanted trees, controlled forest fires, reduced malaria, and improved habitats for fish and wildlife. It attenuated erosion, created fertilizer, and taught farmers how to make their farms more productive.¹²⁴ And, most importantly, TVA built hydroelectric dams to provide cheap electricity, and it completed the federal electric power plant at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, which had lain dormant since the

¹¹⁹ “Harold Leclair Ickes.”

¹²⁰ Desmarais and McGovern.

¹²¹ “A Short History of TVA: From the New Deal to a New Century,” Tennessee Valley Authority, n.d., <<http://www.tva.gov/abouttva/history.htm>> (13 Apr. 2004).

¹²² Lewis Lord, “One Nation, Divided by Electricity,” U.S. News & World Report, 26 May 2003, 12.

¹²³ “A Short History of TVA.”

¹²⁴ “A Short History of TVA.”

end of World War I.¹²⁵ In 1933, only two percent of farm families in the Tennessee Valley had access to electricity; by 1945, with the intervention of the TVA, that figure had grown to 75 percent.¹²⁶ This not only made life easier for farmers, but it also enabled industry, and hence new types of jobs, to move into the region.¹²⁷ In addition to generating power, the TVA's dams minimized flooding and facilitated river transportation. The TVA Act was introduced by Republican Nebraska Senator George W. Norris—known as the “Father of TVA”—after whom Norris Dam was named.¹²⁸ Like Ickes, Norris had endorsed Fighting Bob's third-party bid in 1924.¹²⁹

Norris was joined by Republican New York Representative Fiorello La Guardia—who had also backed La Follette in 1924—in the fulfillment of another portion of the Progressive Party platform: plank seven, which had demanded “abolition of the use of injunctions in labor disputes [...]”¹³⁰ The Norris-La Guardia Act, passed by Congress on 23 March 1932, forbid courts to issue injunctions in response to conflicts with workers, except under certain conditions.¹³¹ The act also prevented national courts from enforcing “yellow-dog contracts”—agreements compelling employees not to join labor unions.¹³² This second portion of the law, too, was consistent with the seventh plank of La Follette's platform, which had also “declare[d]

¹²⁵ Lord; Edward Conrad Smith and Arnold John Zucher, eds., Dictionary of American Politics (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 252.

¹²⁶ Lord.

¹²⁷ “A Short History of TVA.”

¹²⁸ “A Short History of TVA.”

¹²⁹ “George W. Norris,” Britannica Biography Collection.

¹³⁰ Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 268; Desmarais and McGovern.

¹³¹ Smith and Zucher, 266-267.

¹³² Smith and Zucher, 411.

for complete protection of the right of farmers and industrial workers to organize, bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and conduct without hindrance cooperative enterprises.”¹³³

Such language was astoundingly similar to that of another worker-related law, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), commonly known as the Wagner Act.¹³⁴ Sponsored by New York Senator Robert R. Wagner and passed by Congress on 5 July 1935, the act affirmed “the right [of employees] to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.”¹³⁵ Enforcement of these rights was the duty of the five-member National Labor Relations Board, which served as an arbitrator of labor-management disputes when negotiations stalled and which supervised elections for the determination of union representation.¹³⁶ It also punished employers or unions engaging in unfair labor practices, such as obstruction of employee self-organization and collective bargaining, discrimination against workers for involvement in unions, exorbitant or discriminatory union fees, and the refusal of either side to bargain collectively.¹³⁷ The 1937 United States Supreme Court case of *National Labor Relations Board v. Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp.* upheld the NLRA as a Constitutionally acceptable exercise of Congress’s authority

¹³³ Desmarais and McGovern.

¹³⁴ “National Labor Relations Act (1935),” Our Documents, n.d., <<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=67>> (13 Apr. 2004).

¹³⁵ Qtd. in “National Labor Relations Act.”

¹³⁶ “National Labor Relations Act.”

¹³⁷ Smith and Zurcher, 256-257.

to preclude interference with interstate and foreign commerce.¹³⁸ The NLRA expanded the political and economic clout of unions and increased participation therein.¹³⁹ Part of that growth was a surge in female membership: between 1929 and the late 1930s, the number of women in unions tripled to 800,000.¹⁴⁰

The final component of the seventh plank of La Follette's platform had demanded the abolition of child labor: "We favor prompt ratification of the Child Labor amendment and subsequent enactment of a Federal law to protect children in industry."¹⁴¹ That "Federal law" took the form of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)—also called the Wagner-Connery Wages and Hours Act—which was passed by Congress on 25 June 1938.¹⁴² The act defined "oppressive child-labor" as the employment of any person under the age of sixteen years in any job by any employer other than his or her own parents or guardians, though exceptions were made for child actors and for farm helpers laboring when school was not mandatorily in session.¹⁴³ The FLSA made it illegal to "ship or deliver for shipment in commerce" products made within the United States from factories that employed oppressive child labor within the last thirty days.¹⁴⁴ In addition, the FLSA required all industries involved in interstate commerce to pay a minimum hourly wage of forty cents and to employ no workers for more than forty hours a week.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁸ Smith and Zurcher, 257.

¹³⁹ "National Labor Relations Act."

¹⁴⁰ "National Labor Relations Act."

¹⁴¹ Desmarais and McGovern.

¹⁴² Smith and Zurcher, 396; "Fair Labor Standards Act (1938)," University of Denver College of Law, n.d., <http://www.law.du.edu/sterling/Content/ALH/Fair_Labor.pdf> (13 Apr. 2004), 1.

¹⁴³ "Fair Labor Standards Act," 1, 4.

¹⁴⁴ "Fair Labor Standards Act," 3.

¹⁴⁵ Smith and Zurcher, 146.

Even La Follette's tax proposals were implemented to some degree. Both his fourth and ninth planks had advocated progressive income taxes—which, in the words of the platform, are “taxes laid upon wealth in proportion to the ability to pay [...]”¹⁴⁶ In other words, those with higher incomes pay a greater percentage in taxes than those with lower incomes.¹⁴⁷ The Revenue Act of 1935 created the Wealth Tax, a highly progressive tax that required those with annual earnings of more than \$5 million to pay rates of up to 75 percent. In addition, the Revenue Act of 1937 was passed in an effort to curtail tax evasion.¹⁴⁸

Some elements of La Follette's platform never came to fruition, among them, restrictions on the power of the Supreme Court and the extension of the initiative and referendum to the national level. But a substantial number of them did: efforts to conserve the nation's natural resources, public generation of hydroelectric power, recognition of the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively, the abolition of child labor, and the enactment of a highly progressive tax on large incomes—all during the period of the New Deal alone. This was a remarkable success for a campaign that enjoyed no established base of voters or party organizers, that suffered from a severe shortage of funding, that was forced to overcome an array of ballot-access hurdles, and that faced excoriating charges of communist sympathy and regionalistic myopia from much of the press, not to mention condemnation by both major parties. The same resolve that Fighting Bob had demonstrated in his indefatigable efforts to reform Wisconsin and in his staunch opposition to World War I were revealed more strongly than ever in his

¹⁴⁶ Desmarais and McGovern.

¹⁴⁷ “Theme 2: Taxes in U.S. History: Lesson 5: The Wealth Tax of 1935 and the Victory Tax of 1942,” Internal Revenue Service, Department of the Treasury, n.d., <<http://www.irs.gov/app/understandingTaxes/jsp/whys/lp/IWT2L5lp.jsp#background>> (13 Apr. 2004).

¹⁴⁸ “Theme 2.”

determination to compete in the 1924 election in spite of these daunting obstacles and his own failing health. And although La Follette died less than a year after his final campaign, the progressive reformers it inspired and the political pressure it imposed on the established parties contributed to legislative achievements whose impacts endure to this day.

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