Fighting Bob’s 1904 Campaign:

An Analysis of Robert La Follette’s Success in a Turbulent Wisconsin Gubernatorial Election

By: Michael Truax

An honors thesis submitted to the History Department of Rutgers University
Written under the supervision of Professor Richard McCormick
and Second Reader Professor Thomas Figueira

Rutgers University
School of Arts and Sciences
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1) Introduction

The Progressive Era was one of the most pivotal times in the history of the United States. The results of runaway capitalism, political corruption, increased inequality of wealth, horrendous working conditions, and wide-spread demographic changes led to vocal and powerful social reform movements, which cumulated in a spate of progressive legislation in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This legislation represented a change in the way Americans viewed how their government should work.

Robert La Follette Sr. was one of the prominent figures of the Progressive Era, seen by many as being a crusader for the common citizen. His remarkable career in public office saw the enactment of many reforms of which we take advantage of today. Some of his important legislative accomplishments include the creation of the direct primary system for elected officials, \textit{ad valorem} tax reform for the powerful railroad companies, and a strong railroad regulatory commission. He also was a vocal supporter of direct election of senators, women’s suffrage, environmental conservation, progressive taxation, recall elections, referendums and initiatives, child labor laws, and government transparency. Nor were his accomplishments limited to legislative reform, as he was also a key figure during World War I, as vocal opponent of Woodrow Wilson and his policies, and he led the investigation of the Teapot Dome Scandal, which tarnished President Warren G. Harding’s reputation.

Spending over thirty years as a public servant allowed La Follette to make his name. He is also remembered, however, because his political career was almost cut short in the Wisconsin gubernatorial election of 1904. After two contentious terms as governor of Wisconsin, La Follette was able to see his campaign promises being fulfilled. His
direct primary law was placed on the ballot for voter approval, and his railroad reforms were rapidly proceeding in the Wisconsin legislature, with only a few votes needed to pass for his approval. Recognizing that all of his reforms would become law if La Follette were reelected, the conservative Stalwart faction of the Republican Party tried everything in their power to prevent him from winning office again. Their tactics included running a Stalwart candidate against La Follette for the Republican nomination, spreading deceitful rumors about him in a majority of the state’s popular newspapers, buying votes, and threatening the jobs of voters if they voted for La Follette. Their most notorious tactic was bolting from the Republican Nomination Convention. The bolt of the Stalwart faction created a national spectacle that was perceived as crucial to the future direction of the Republican Party. This division brought national attention to La Follette and his ideas, with a number of progressive governors pledging to take up his ideas within their own states. Progressive and populist leaders from both parties pledged support to La Follette, while a number of influential muckraking journalists, most notably Lincoln Steffens, published favorable articles describing the issues in Wisconsin and how La Follette had worked for the citizens, not the bosses.

With all the support and praise La Follette received from within the state and across the country, he still came dangerously close to losing reelection, winning just 50.5% of the vote. This tight contest can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including, but not limited to, a strong anti-third term feeling across the state, resentment of the political patronage that surrounded La Follette, accusations of higher taxes with an increase in the state’s debt, displeasure with the methods La Follette used during his
campaign\(^1\), and, President Theodore Roosevelt’s decision not to endorse La Follette either publicly or privately. A majority of these attacks were stirred up by the key political bosses in Wisconsin, with their strong railroad and industrial supporters financing their fight. These accusations and their effects on La Follette’s campaign form the focus of my research. While La Follette only received 50.5% of the vote in the election of 1904, his direct primary bill received over 60% approval from the voters. It is the gap between his reelection and his ideology which I will attempt to explain. I will also discuss why such a popular figure as La Follette came so close to losing reelection, while his policies were overwhelmingly popular among the citizens of Wisconsin.

While the election of 1904 was important for the continued success of the progressive movement, it was vital to the success of La Follette’s political career. If La Follette had lost the election, he would have not been able to nominate himself for the Wisconsin’s vacant seat in the United States Senate in 1905, and his successful senate career would have never taken place.

\(^1\) Which included campaigning for Progressive state officials for their own election, using an automobile to travel across the more rural regions of the state, and his use of reading the opponents voting record, called the roll-call campaign
2) Early Life and Career of La Follette

Robert La Follette was born June 14, 1855 to Josiah La Follette and Mary Ferguson in Primrose, Wisconsin. When he was eight months, his father died, leaving a void that Robert would attempt to fill throughout the remainder of his life. When Robert was eight, his mother remarried to a wealthy merchant named John Saxton. At first, the relationship was amicable between the two, with Saxton becoming a husband at the age of seventy and Robert being given a father figure. The relationship began to sour, with Saxton becoming ill with old age, and eventually having to put Robert in charge of his family farm. Robert was only fifteen years old when he was put in charge of running the farm, but he was already up to the challenge. (Thelen, 1-3)

La Follette was successful in running the business, exemplifying the cultural attitudes of the Midwest, which held that hard work would lead to greater opportunities. La Follette was able to sustain the business all the while learning how to socialize with the neighbors and customers. He became a leading community figure in his teenage years because of his outgoing personality. Teaching himself to speak Norwegian, he was able to effectively engage with his neighbors. This proficiency may have taught La Follette to understand the background of others, giving him an accepting personality for those who were different from himself. Getting to know his neighbors acquainted Robert with the Republican Party and opened his eyes to the world of politics. Seeing the hard work and success of her son, his mother sold portions of the farm land to allow Robert to get a formal education. His family would eventually sell the farm to move to Madison, Wisconsin, where Robert enrolled in the University of Wisconsin. (Thelen, 3-5)
He became extremely close to the college president, John Bascon, whom he considered the person closest to filling the void left by his father. La Follette said of Bascon that he was “the guiding spirit of my time” (Unger, 35). Bascon taught La Follette to think for himself, and to turn those thoughts into actions. Bascon tried to train his students to use their knowledge to help the public, since, to Bascon, everyone owed the citizens of the state a debt of service.

While still in college, Robert became a popular figure within Wisconsin. As a member of the university’s Athenian Literary Society, La Follette was able to perform on a platform, in front of his peers, and gain practice giving speeches and debates in front of large crowds. He saw the spotlight that speaking provided, and he believed that becoming a great actor was what future had in store for him. As La Follette gave more speeches, his popularity grew, along with the confidence that he was destined for something great. The crowning moment of La Follette’s career up to that point was when he won first place in the Interstate Oratorical Contest, beating out nearly 10,000 college students across the Midwest. His winning speech was an interpretation of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”, in which La Follette presented himself as similar to the main character. Hamlet’s father’s death, mother’s remarriage, and internal suffering were the points La Follette emphasized, and used them to explain that as soon as all the secrets withheld from him and his family are revealed, the entire world changes for the protagonist. While Hamlet’s life experiences a drastic change from his attempts to guard his father’s legacy, and protect his mother from her remarriage, for La Follette the change would be for the better. (Thelen, 5)
3) Wisconsin Politics, and the 1904 election

The aspirations of La Follette to act as a public servant were present almost immediately after he graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1879. In the summer of 1880, he decided the best way he could accomplish this goal was to run for Dane County district attorney. (Autobiography, 3) Although he was only 25, the friendships he had made at the University, and the reputation he had gained from his “Iago” speech made him a worthy candidate for the post. The only thing that La Follette lacked, was his connection to the Republican Party machine. Colonel E.W. Keyes, the postmaster of Madison, was the Republican boss of Dane County, and any potential candidate for any public office had to earn his blessing to be placed on the ballot. As La Follette described Keyes, “He was a good representative of old time politics: the politics of force and secret management. He was an absolute dictator in his own territory; he could make candidates, and he could unmake political office holders.” (Autobiography, 6)

With La Follette’s reputation, and his fast-moving bid for the district attorney post, it was only a matter of time before Keyes heard of his attempt to win the office. The two finally came face-to-face one day, when La Follette went to the post office to pick up his mail. La Follette, claimed Keyes burst out on him, yelling, “you are fooling away your time sir! …[La Follette] was wasting [his] money, that he had better go to work. I know who the next district attorney of Dane County will be, and it was not [La Follette].” (Autobiography, 6)

La Follette claimed that this encounter ignited the spark to fight against the Republican Party bosses, saying, “It stirred all the fight I had in me.” (Autobiography, 6).

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2 Although a majority of the citations in this chapter rely on La Follette’s own account in his autobiography, there are numerous secondary sources that agree with his narrative, such as his two most famous biographies written by David Thelen, and Nancy Unger.
He did not think it was anyone’s business who would be nominated to represent the citizens of Dane County, except the citizens themselves. Even after winning the position of Dane County district attorney, the idea that no man should have the authority to decide who will be able to run for public office, stayed with La Follette and helped to shape his political positions thereafter.

Winning the position of Dane County district attorney, by a majority of over 2,000 votes, was a great accomplishment for La Follette. At the young age of twenty-five, and fresh out of university, he was already elected as a public servant. He said in his autobiography that he did not feel the pressure of the bosses preside over him because he was successful at defying their wishes, having already won the District Attorney office without the support of Boss Keyes. La Follette desired to serve the citizens whom he represented at a higher position, one that held more power than a county district attorney. After two terms at this post, acting on a suggestion from a college friend, Samuel A. Harper, he decided to run for the United States House of Representatives. It was Harper who promoted La Follette’s interest in a promising political career. He advised La Follette of his ability to win the district without the help of any political bosses, mentioning to La Follette in their correspondence, “There are five counties in this district… the two big counties, Dane and Grant, outnumber all the others in voting population. Now I live in Grant and you live in Dane. I will carry Grant for you and you carry Dane for yourself. [Dane and Grant Counties] will control the [nomination] convention, and you go to congress.” (Autobiography, 20). With the help of Harper, La Follette was able to win the nomination and the election as a federal representative.
During his bid for a seat in congress, La Follette observed the full power of the political machine and the Republican bosses. Besides Keyes, a number of the other more powerful Republican figures tried to prevent La Follette from winning election without their blessing and consent. Former Mayor of Madison, Phil Spooner, Wisconsin Senator, John C. Spooner, U.S. Marshal from Dane County, Frank Oakley, and a member of the state legislature, Willet Main, all visited Dane County to discourage La Follette from seeking a higher office. Phil Spooner came to La Follette during his pre-campaign in order to bark at him, and remind Bob “…there hasn’t been a Congressman nominated for fifteen years who hasn’t had our support.” (Autobiography, 21). Spooner asked La Follette why he did not come to them for consulting, and said that they could help him win the congressional seat if he had came to the Republican party leaders for support. La Follette barked back at Spooner, saying, “I know of no reason why I should consult you. I’ve been out in the country consulting the people, and I am going to consult a good many more.” Spooner’s only remark was “[La Follette] can’t go to Congress”. La Follette was able to go on to win enough delegates in the nomination convention to secure his nomination on the Republican ticket, but with a foreshadowing of future events, the party machine urged voters to support the Democratic choice for the House of Representatives. La Follette withstood the betrayal of the Republican bosses and won election by 400 votes. (Autobiography, 21-22)

From 1885, until 1891, La Follette served Wisconsin’s 3rd district. He claimed himself to be unprepared for national politics, and unable to fully grasp the reality of national issues. He was essentially forced to form relationships with the old, venal political bosses in order to further his career in Washington. He became familiar with the
two powerful Wisconsin Senators, Philetus Sawyer, and Henry C. Payne, both influential men in Washington, and in the Republican Party as a whole, and both of whom would play influential roles in Theodore Roosevelt’s cabinet. The party bosses in Congress did not fear La Follette disturbing the status quo since they were able to assign him to an insignificant position at the Committee of Indian Affairs. Being reduced to this role made La Follette realize the only way to accomplish anything productive that would benefit the citizens would be to destroy the political machines in Washington D.C., and in each state. (Unger, 90-91). He claimed that he did not see the need for patronage in politics to ensure the passage of important legislation; rather, he claimed “If you are going directly to the people, you have no need of patronage. Moreover, you have no need of organization in the complicated way in which politics has been organized in the past, nor of the use of large sums of money.” (Autobiography, 31) Ironically, La Follette would depend on both patronage and a large organization to win his reelection as governor in 1904.

La Follette spent his time as a member of the Committee of Indian Affairs as productively as he could. Although initially disappointed in being on such a committee lacking prestige, he went on to become a champion of Native Americans, where he prevented as many relocation acts as he could, and in some circumstances, he found more land for the Native American reservations. (Autobiography, 32) He began to see how corrupt the railroad industry was, and how it was able to gain as much land as the companies desired, and as inexpensively as they wanted, all the while charging rates as high a price they could get away with. When reviewing a bill that would have sold 11,000,000 acres of Sioux Indian Reservation land in the Dakota Territory, he saw the railroad companies attempting to purchase more land than was needed to construct their
railways. When La Follette questioned the amount of land within his committee, he was told by a committee member sitting to his right, “not to worry about it, and to agree to the land distributions because the railroad companies were home corporations” (Autobiography, 32). La Follette then realized that a number of the railroad companies included in purchasing the land were from Wisconsin, and that the Wisconsin, Northwestern, and St. Paul Railroads all stood to acquire a lot of land from the passage of the bill. The committee tried to encourage La Follette to accept the proposal because of the benefits it would bring to his state. However, he did not see how it made a difference where the companies were located, since the amount of land given to the companies was still unreasonable. For this reason, La Follette continued to refuse to provide the vote needed to move the proposed bill out of committee for a floor vote. This move upset senators Payne and Sawyer, who both made personal visits to La Follette in an attempt to change his mind. These visits, and their ability to force the bill’s passage out of committee, with a few minor amendments, which were made by La Follette to protect the Sioux lands, pushed La Follette to the breaking point with the Republican Party leaders. In his autobiography, La Follette stated “I felt even then, and learned far better afterward, what it meant to oppose my own party organization; but when party leaders work for corporations and railroad control, when they do not represent the people, what other course is open for a man who believes in democratic government? I believe then, as I believe now, that the only salvation for the Republican Party lies in purging itself wholly from the influence of financial interest.” (Autobiography, 34)

The remainder of La Follette’s tenure in Congress was marked by legislative blunders of the Republican Party, at the state and federal level. The federal government
passed the McKinley Tariff of 1890, which caused the average rate of import duties to raise almost 50%, which was intended to protect domestic industries from cheaper, foreign products. This law was blamed by most Americans for causing the price for many important goods to increase sharply. In Wisconsin, the Republican-led legislature passed the Bennett law of 1889, which angered many German Lutheran and Roman Catholic voters in the state. The law forced schools to teach English as the main language of all public and private schools throughout the state. Even though this law was repealed in 1891, Wisconsin Democrats used the law to attack Republicans across the state. A combination of the McKinley tariff and La Follette’s over-confidence, caused him to lose reelection in 1891, at the same time as the Republican party lost control of Wisconsin politics. (Autobiography, 58)

For the first time since he graduated college La Follette was out of holding a public office. He almost immediately began searching for ways to help the citizens of Wisconsin. With a three-year break from electoral politics, he decided to attempt to rid the state of the bosses of both parties and saw control of the governorship as being the only way this would be possible. Not feeling as though he was yet up to the campaign for the position, he recruited his friend from Congress, Nils P. Haugen, to run for the Republican nomination for governor in 1894. Haugen proved to be unable to get the amount of votes to take control of the nomination convention from the party machine, which gave the party machine at least another two years in control of the state.

As the 1896 gubernatorial election approached, La Follette announced himself as the anti-machine candidate for the Republican Party nomination for governor. He was able to win a number of influential supporters, mainly former-Governor W.D. Hoard,
with Hoard saying during a campaign speech, “The time is near at hand when the Republican voters must assemble in their respective caucuses and choose delegates to their assembly conventions. In our opinion, it is of the highest importance that a people’s man be chosen as such candidate. There was never a time when such a man was more needed for the important office of chief executive of Wisconsin than now. Will the people take their own work in their own hands, or will they allow, as they have too often done, a ring of shrewd bosses to select their candidates for them?” (Autobiography, 83).

La Follette was able to make great strides in his campaign, but he was ultimately unable to overcome the money and influence of Sawyer, Spooner, Payne, and the wealthy financier, Charles Pfister. These four men, along with other powerful Republicans, were able to buy off enough La Follette delegates to ensure he would be unable to win the nomination at the Republican Convention. (Lovejoy, 28)

The corruption La Follette faced caused him to look through all the laws concerning conventions and caucuses, in order to form an attack against the machine bosses and their unethical tactics. While conducting his research he began to develop his beliefs in the direct nominating system, using the Australian ballot as a model. He gave a speech in Chicago, on February 22, 1897, where he introduced the public to his radical new idea. In his speech, “The Menace of the Political Machine”, he explained the evils of the caucus and convention systems, since they were ways to “continue…the service of corrupt organization.” (Burgardt, 175). He went on further to state, “Go back to the first principles of democracy; go back to the people. Substitute for both the caucus and

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3 Australia developed the first secret ballot in 1856. The ballot hid the identity of the voter, allowing him to vote for whoever he wanted without fear of facing repercussions from his boss or a political machine. Prior to this, the voter could be asked to publicly announce his vote in front of a group of people, which coerced a number of men to vote for a candidate they did not agree with.
the convention a primary election – held under the sanctions of law which prevail at the general elections – where the citizen may cast his vote directly to nominate the candidate of the party with which he affiliates and have it canvassed and returned just as he cast it. The voter will not require to be persuaded that he has an interest in the election, he will know he has [an interest]. The nominations of the party will not be the result of “compromise” or impulse, or evil design, and the machine, but the candidates of the majority honestly and fairly nominated” (Burgardt, 182-183).

At the same time, he began advocating the direct primary, La Follette began thinking about how to rein in the powerful railroad industry, which he thought controlled the state’s economic and political system. The railroads were able to pick and choose which manufacturers and farmers were to succeed in the state, with their ability to provide lower shipping rates on the goods of those preferred over those of their unfavored competition. This method helped to ensure that those who accepted these favors would vote in support of the party machine. Any refusal would mean a hike in the fare rate, creating the risk that a competitor would agree to support the machine.

La Follette had the help of A.R. Hall, an assemblyman from Dunn county, who, for nearly two decades, had led the campaign to reduce the rail industry’s power in the State by changing the method of taxation from a property valuation tax based on a license fee, to an \textit{ad valorem} tax, and by outlawing passes on fares given to political and industrial leaders. A railroad would offer important shippers, politicians and any other man they deemed vital to their business, a discounted or free rate, or “pass”. The pass created a mutually beneficial relationship, with the railroad increasing its influence with powerful men and the receiver of the pass given financial incentive to continue to ship
with the railroad company, or fight for favorable legislation for the railroad industry. These passes forced an obligation on those who accepted them to help the railroads work for their goals, with any refusal having blowback that would cause ruin for the person’s career.

During La Follette’s eight-year career in the House of Representatives, he was offered multiple railroad passes, which he always declined, in order not to become obligated to the industry. After hearing about Hall’s attempts to rein in these tactics, La Follette became a vocal supporter of his efforts. He declared his intention to win the state’s chief executive position in 1896, and campaigned on preventing passes from being issued under his administration. (Autobiography, 93) Even though he campaigned on these increasingly popular measures, La Follette was unable to win enough delegates to secure his nomination as the Republican gubernatorial candidate.

The movement to enact this legislation was brought to the public’s attention again during the 1898 election, when it was found that then current governor Edward Scofield had received passes to ship an abundance of agricultural and manufactured goods from the northern part of the state to the southern end of the state for free. When it was found that this did not violate any laws, the public became outraged and forced the legislature to take action to prevent these abuses from happening again. The legislature of 1899 attempted to create a law to ensure passes were not handed out for political or personal favors, but, without the party machine’s backing, the bill was destined to fail unless a reform government was elected as a majority.

After another setback in not winning the Republican nomination for governor for himself in 1898, La Follette made an attempt for the office in 1900, this time feeling that
he had as much momentum as he needed from the previous campaigns in order to win his nomination for the Republican ticket. With all the progress he made in gaining support in the 1896 and 1898 elections, perhaps the most important support came from his old rivals.

The position of United States Senator for Wisconsin was up for election by the legislature in 1899, with Isaac Stephenson and Joseph Babcock, both former members of the House of Representatives, thinking that their time had come to be elected to the post. They both saw their opportunity to be rewarded for supporting the machine’s policies, and that reward should be the senate seat. When this seat was instead given to Joseph V. Quarles, both men, feeling betrayed by the machine, offered support to La Follette in order to take down the power and influence of Senator J. C. Spooner and Wisconsin Republican boss, Philetus Sawyer. Stephenson was able to provide La Follette with the funding needed to fight against the public attacks made by the machine in the newspapers, while also financing his campaign tours across the state. Babcock, and his friend Emanuel L. Phillipp, were capable enough to provide strong encouragement for La Follette, convincing business owners that he was not a radical and that his reforms would benefit the business community more than the machine’s policies would. The men offered their support in part for revenge, and also because they now felt the machine’s power was growing out of control, and the only way to fight against it was to elect a non-machine candidate. (Autobiography, 99-100)

With the support of the two former members of the machine, Stephenson and Babcock, La Follette was able to win nomination as the Republican candidate for

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4 Until the passage of the 17th Amendment in 1913, the state legislatures were responsible for appointing the Senator. A member of the state legislature would nominate a candidate to be voted on to fill the seat.
Governor. Wanting to encourage party loyalty, and hopeful for support for their policies, even the machine encouraged voters to support La Follette in the general election. Even after La Follette publicly stated his platform positions, which introduced the need for railroad regulation and a reaffirmation of the need for a direct primary, support from the bosses did not disappear. The support for La Follette was not because they had a sudden change of heart concerning his policies, but because the Republican bosses believed the public’s favor was moving decisively in favor of La Follette and his ideas. They did not want to ruin their own chances of reelection, or ruin the rebuilding of the Republican party within Wisconsin.\(^5\) (Phillip, 28-29)

Railroad regulation became important to La Follette after he became aware how privileged the industry was under the prevailing system of taxation, and in light of its ability to overcharge customers for shipping goods across the state. The railroads in the state paid taxes in the form of license fees levied upon their gross earnings. The license fee was paid by the railroad company to the state’s tax commission, the cost of which depended on how much the company reported their earnings to be. A company claiming to have made $5,000 per mile yearly would have been charged a fee of 1.19% of their gross earnings, while a company claiming to make $4,000 per mile yearly would be charged a fee of 1.05%. The issue that surrounded the license fee system was the ability for the railroad companies to lie to the tax commission, and report lower earnings. By reporting lower earnings, they were charged a lower tax rate than they should have been, with the railroad industry average being license fee rate of 0.53%. (Philipp, 143-144) The 0.53% rate was less than half of what farmers, manufacturers, homeowners, and other

\(^5\) Republicans were able to win back control of both houses of the state legislature and a majority of the seats in the United States House of Representatives in 1896, after the Democrats won control of the state in the 1891 elections.
citizens in the state paid on their profits. Feeling that the railroad companies were avoiding paying their fair share of taxes to a state that allowed them to thrive, La Follette endorsed the idea that a physical valuation be placed on the industry, and have them taxed by an \textit{ad valorem} basis.\textsuperscript{6} The physical valuation would be conducted by the state’s tax commission board, which could be trusted more than a company assessing its own value. (Autobiography, 105-6) In a speech given during his successful 1900 gubernatorial election, he asked the citizens of Wisconsin, “One of the questions you will have to determine in dealing with this subject is whether railway companies shall be taxed directly by assessment upon the value of their property, or whether they shall continue to pay under the license system a certain percentage upon their gross earnings.” (Philipp, 149) The public showed La Follette that they agreed with this sentiment by coming to listen to his public speeches in droves, and began supporting a revised tax structure that would compel the railroads to their fair share of the taxes to the state.

With a platform aimed at enacting a direct primary system, an end to the party machines, an \textit{ad valorem} tax system for railroads, and an anti-pass measure, La Follette was able to win the 1900 election for governor with 59.75% of the vote, the largest percentage ever given to a gubernatorial candidate in Wisconsin, compared to only 36.44% for the Democratic nominee, Louis Bomrich. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1901)

The harmony between La Follette and the Stalwarts withered almost immediately after his successful election. Their relationship deteriorated because of La Follette’s increasingly progressive rhetoric and the Stalwarts’ resistance to implement his desired policies. The Stalwarts “a term the machine bosses gave to themselves after the election”

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{ad valorem} taxation would have the tax paid during each transaction, instead of the railroad company conducting their own revenue report made at the end of the year.
began to attack La Follette’s policies and informed him that no reforms would take place since they controlled the State Senate chamber. This event marked the beginning of the civil war within the Wisconsin Republican party, with the populist, progressive reformers, along with a number of opportunists, pledging support to La Follette and his ideas, while the conservative, corporate, and powerful members sided with the Stalwarts.

To assert his belief that the public elected him to curb the corruption, La Follette personally read his inaugural message to the state legislature, which was previously always read by the governors’ reading clerk. He reiterated the importance of passing the three policies on which he had campaigned, with the direct primary being his most important goal. (Autobiography, 105)

By the time, his first term as governor was over, none of his goals were fulfilled. A second-rate direct primary bill was sent to La Follette’s desk, leading him to veto the bill since, in La Follette’s words, “no bread is often better than half a loaf.” (Autobiography, 115). The proposed direct primary was known as the *Hagemeister Bill*, and applied the direct primary principles only to county offices within the state. The Stalwarts claimed to have passed this bill in an attempt to try out the direct primary at a smaller level, and if successful, they proposed to pass it eventually state wide. With the *Hagemeister Bill* only affecting county offices, La Follette was certain that the convention, caucus and party boss systems would continue to grow stronger and fight against his ideas, which is why he decided to veto the bill.

In regards to the railroad taxation and regulation, the Stalwart faction was able to buy enough progressive representatives within the General Assembly to prevent a meaningful bill from reaching the Senate. One of La Follette’s major political supporters,
and Speaker of the Assembly in Wisconsin, Irvine Lenroot, wrote to the governor, “From the first day of the session the railroad lobbyists were on the ground in force, offering courtesies and entertainments of various kinds to the [Assembly] member. Any member favoring [railroad tax reform and a regulatory agency bill] could better his financial condition if he was willing to vote against it.” (Steffens, 108) If Assembly members did not agree to vote against the proposed bills, the railroads would threaten to ruin their businesses. One member, who remained anonymous, explains in an interview, how he felt he was at the mercy of the railroad companies. The man said he was afraid to vote in favor of the new taxation system and increased regulation because the companies could ruin his business by “advancing his rates” if it was found he voted for the bills.(Steffens, 108-109)

By the time of the 1902 campaign, La Follette was back to campaigning across the state, using the same platform pledges he had emphasized during the previous campaign. This election proved to be more difficult for La Follette, since he was fighting against the Stalwart-supported, Democratic nominee, Mayor David S. Rose of Milwaukee. Even with a split in the Republican Party, La Follette was still able to win 56% of the vote, with 193,417 votes in his favor, a 47,599 plurality over the Democratic candidate Rose. The number of votes La Follette received, and the percentage he won were a record for an non-presidential year election in Wisconsin, but the Stalwarts still attacked La Follette for losing votes compared to the 1900 election. Compared to the 1902 election, La Follette lost 71,002 votes, which the Stalwarts pointed out as a sign his policies were not popular. (Lorenz, 62) They conveniently did not mention in their attacks of the lower voter turnout for off-year elections. The 1900 election was a
Presidential election, and had 440,897 voters cast a ballot, while the 1902, a non-presidential election, had the voter turnout drop to 365,676. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1901, 1903)

While happy he succeeded in winning reelection, La Follette was happier to find that he had a majority of supporters in the General Assembly, composed of Republican and Democrat reformers, along with a perceived, slight majority in the Senate. Again, he gave his message to the legislature directly, instead of using a surrogate speaker. He spoke of the importance of a direct primary law and a new tax system for the railroad industry. He also spoke of the need for a comprehensive railroad regulation committee, by explaining to the citizens the rates that Wisconsin shippers had to pay in order for them to have their merchandise transported across the state, while comparing the rates to those of the neighboring states of Iowa and Illinois. He showed the legislature and the media present at the session that Wisconsin citizens had to pay 20% to 69% more than shippers in these states for the same weight and distance (Autobiography, 123). He issued these statistics to show the importance and urgency of acting on the problem, instead of debating the issue.

With a noteworthy majority in the General Assembly, and the slight majority in the Senate, La Follette was able to accomplish two of his three goals in his second term as governor. Instead of fighting for one goal at a time, as he did in his first term, he decided to have the General Assembly debate railroad taxation reform and the direct primary at the same time. This method was to make it so that any resistance by the Stalwarts could not be attributed to anything but their own stonewalling. With both topics up for debate, and not wanting to be viewed as being the bought, corrupt politicians La
Follette was accusing them of being, the Stalwarts were forced to agree to pass the establishment of a stronger railroad tax commission. The commission would be responsible for appraising the value of the railroad companies for the purpose of the ad valorem tax. They were also in charge of issuing a recommended tax rate for the State legislature to consider, and review rates in neighboring states, and comparing these rates to Wisconsin’s. (Philipp, 163-164) The tax commission was able to increase the taxes of the railroads by about $1,000,000, but did not believe they could do anything to prevent the railroads from raising their rates to recover the tax increases. This belief was not without merit, with a leading lobbyist for the industry stating, “You cannot pass any law which will compel the railroad companies to pay a dollar in taxes additional to the amount they are now paying. All that it is necessary for us to do to meet your tax legislation is to increase our freight rates and take every dollar of it out of the people” (Aug. 1903, Eleventh Story League Speech, Milwaukee, Microfilm, Reel 68). This statement, and accompanying ones similar in tone, forced La Follette to pledge a bill that would give the railway commission the authority to restrict shipping rate increases, unless it reviewed the need for an increase first. This authority was passed by the General Assembly, but died within the Stalwart controlled Senate, giving a greater incentive to La Follette to campaign for friendly Senate candidates in the next election. (Bella Case, 156-157)

The Stalwarts were also forced to approve a comprehensive direct primary bill, which allowed for a primary for any elected office in the State, from the county elections to the states federal representatives. A Stalwart state senator, Senator Gaveney, was able to add an amendment to the bill, which forced a referendum on the issue, bringing the
issue to a direct vote by the citizens of the state in the 1904 election. (Philipp, 67) The Stalwarts approved these measures on account of pressure from the citizens to have a more efficient government, because they were fearful of another session of unproductive government could cause more support for the progressive wave that had rolled on through the previous two elections. The Stalwarts decided to use the primary bill as the main issue in the coming election of 1904, believing themselves to be able to convince the public that it was an unwise measure that they ought to vote against in the election. (Philipp, 73)

To La Follette, the campaign of 1904 was the very “crux of the whole progressive movement.” (Autobiography, 137) Knowing that a win by the Stalwarts would mean a reversal of any progressive legislation passed in the past four years, La Follette made sure that he was well prepared for the fight which he knew the Stalwarts would give him. As early as December 1903, La Follette got into his regular campaign form. He prepared over 1.5 million copies of ten different pamphlets, and spread them across the state through the mail. These pamphlets contained a variety of information useful for the voters. Some contained comparative tables, detailing the shipping rates which Wisconsin railroads charged its citizens, compared to the shipping rates of Iowa and Illinois. Other pamphlets explained the benefits these states received from having a state-run railroad commission and showed how their rates had decreased in the years since the commissions were introduced. The pamphlet also explained how the proposed Wisconsin Railway Commission could be set up in order to provide even better benefits than these other states. While the main point of the pamphlets was to gather enough support to elect a state legislature who would pass a rate regulation and railroad commission bill, La
Follette also focused on the benefits of the direct primary and on how the state would be able to fund the proposed commission with the recently passed *ad valorem* taxation on the railroads. (Autobiography, 138-9)

In order to fund his campaign, La Follette went on to give 57 speeches during his famous Chautauqua speaking tour⁷, which spanned the Midwestern states to New York, which earned him $10,000 to go towards his reelection campaign. From June 23, until September 2, 1903, La Follette made speaking appearances along the route of the Chautauqua tour spreading the ideas of progressive legislation, and explaining how close Wisconsin was to fulfilling the promises that he made to his fellow citizens. He described his direct primary law, and how with its passage in the coming election he would ensure the end to the party bosses’ power in the state of Wisconsin, and help elect representatives who would represent the people, not the large corporations. By far his most popular speech, “Representative Government Restored”, was described by the *Colorado Springs Gazette* as, “The New Declaration of Independence” (*Colorado Springs Gazette*, August 8, 1903, Microfilm, Reel 165), with La Follette claiming “Taxation without representation was as much a crime against the just and equal government in 1903 as it was in 1776…the gravest menace to our democratic institutions was… the overbalancing control of city, state and national legislatures by the wealth and power of the public service corporations.” (Belle Case, 167) These were direct attacks against the railroad industry, since he believed that they were taking advantage of the

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⁷ The Chautauqua speaking tour was a famous educational movement in the early 20th century. The tour gained its name from its first location in Chautauqua Lake, New York. The tour eventually became large and popular enough to make stops in almost every state through the country. It provided viewers with cultural entertainment, from musicals to political speeches. Some of the most famous speakers to make stops along the tour were William Jennings Bryan, Robert La Follette, and numerous other progressive minded governors and politicians throughout the country.
citizens and creating an oligopoly within the state, forcing the citizens to suffer through their price setting. La Follette always pointed out near the end of his speeches about the railroads and their price manipulation, and the real cost which they put on the state’s citizens. He illustrated the evils of the railroad industry by explaining that the citizens of Wisconsin were paying $20,000,000 in taxes for state, county, and municipal purposes, while the railroads were charging the citizens over $47,000,000 a year for shipping. By detailing the facts regarding how much the citizens were being charged by the railroads, La Follette was able to prove that, instead of tyranny by the government, the citizens were facing tyranny by the private industries. (Bella Case, 169)

By the time La Follette was finished with his ten-week speaking tour, he had been informed of the Stalwarts’ attempts to nominate a candidate favorable to their interests to replace him at the next year’s gubernatorial nomination convention. Two former personal friends of La Follette, Judge Emil Baensch, and Samuel A. Cook⁸, were chosen by the Stalwarts to run as “non-fictional” candidates, hoping to gain the support both of Republicans still on the fence and of the conservative faction, to win enough delegates to nominate their own candidate at the nomination convention. By this time, Payne, Spooner, Quarles, Pfister, who now owned the state’s most influential newspaper, the Milwaukee Sentinel, and enemies - turned friends - turned enemies again, Babcock and Philipp, were leading the Stalwart battle. (Bella Case, 167) They had control over an estimated nine out of every ten newspapers in the state, along with powerful friends at the national level, forcing La Follette to overcome a formidable amount of power, money, and prestige. (Bella Case, 168) The only way La Follette believed he could win this battle

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⁸ Cook would be chosen as the Stalwart nominee for governor in the 1904 election, until he decided to drop out of the race less than a month before Election Day, at which time former governor, Edward Scofield was chosen to replace Cook’s place.
was to put the Stalwarts on the defensive for not supporting the measures the citizens wanted. (Bella Case, 169)
4) The Wisconsin Republican Nomination Convention

It seemed fitting that the major obstacle preventing La Follette from securing his reelection, and achieve the passage of his reforms, was the Wisconsin Republican Nomination Convention held on May 18, 1904. If successful in his reelection and ballot initiative, the May convention would be the last one held in the state. This put immense pressure on both La Follette, and the Stalwarts, to ensure they would be the victors of the convention, and go into the general election as favorites for winning the governorship.

After building his national reputation, and earning sufficient funds for his election during the Chautauqua speaking tour, La Follette formally announced his candidacy for a third term as governor in the fall of 1903. He went straight from the Chautauqua circuit to a tour around Wisconsin’s county fairs, where he gave speeches concerning the freight rates of the state as compared to that of Illinois and Iowa, and making a pledge to support the local dairy farmers, and lumbermen, who relied on the lower rates for the success of their businesses, to ensure the next legislature passes a railroad regulation bill to control these rates. (Bella Case, 168)

Realizing how popular La Follette was and how much influence his speeches carried with him, the Stalwarts developed a campaign strategy that would focus on the governor’s “trouble-making”, which meant his rhetoric and speeches that were splitting the Wisconsin Republican party into two factions, and his liberal spending of the state treasury. (Milwaukee Sentinel, April 5 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68) However, the Stalwarts also made sure they would have enough delegates to win the nomination convention, using fear and money as their main weapons.
Understanding how difficult it would be to win enough delegates, the Stalwarts went to competitive districts and bribed, or simply threatened the citizens to vote for the Stalwart delegate or risk losing their jobs and livelihood. To do this, the Stalwarts went to towns whose workers were most dependent on the railroad companies, or to the towns whose manufacturing and lumber industries had good relations with the railroads. (W.D. Connor to H.W. Chynoweth, April 28, 1904, Microfilm Reel 68)

There were numerous instances of a company threatening an employee’s job if he were to vote for a La Follette delegate. Without the proposed Australian ballot, which would have protected the secrecy of the vote, the employees were forced to either not vote, or vote for the Stalwart delegates to the state’s Republican Nomination Convention.

One such case typified the treatment of employees working for the state’s railroad, and manufacturing companies. Although only four men came forward, it is believed this treatment was widespread in these companies, with many threatened in the same way. Charles Togstad, William Prout, a man who simply went by “J.P”, and Thomas Lyons each gave a descriptive statement to the Wisconsin Secretary of State explaining threats made by their bosses if they were found to support La Follette delegates to the convention. (Statement of Railroad Workers to the Wisconsin Secretary of State, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68)

Charles Togstad, an employee of the Plow Grinding Department Company claimed his boss, Mr. Highman, talked to the local shops about voting against La Follette delegates. Togstad made the claim that Highman said, “It was for the company’s interest not to have a commission to regulate the freight business; that it was better to let the railroads run it as they pleased. We want to beat the La Follette delegates.” (Statement of
Charles Togstad, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68). He then instructed his company foremen to talk to the employees separately and instructed them on the “correct” way to vote on the ticket.

William Prout who had been an employee of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad Company for thirty years, and reported similar threats as those told by Charles Togstad. His boss, Mr. Eldridge, came in to the office on April 13th at 1:10 p.m. and gave a speech, saying, “Gentlemen: I am out on a political tour, I don’t know your politics; I don’t know how many men are democrats and how many are republicans, but I am here to ask you to vote against Governor La Follette, for the railroad company, for Bob has done much harm to the company, and has made it his boast that he would do more. We ask you, gentlemen, to vote with us to down him, and we are bound to down him. I have voted for La Follette once, but I won’t vote for him again. (Statement of William Prout, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68). Employees then began to hear higher officials report that any employee of the railroad company who would work for the interest of Governor La Follette would be discharged sooner or later.

Another man, simply referred to as J.P, who was an engineer for the St. Paul Railroad, had almost exactly the same story as William Prout. He claimed on April 13th, his boss, Mr. Eldridge came in and stated, “The company wants you to work to beat La Follette. We do not care how it is done, but we want it done, and propose to have it done. It is a matter of a good deal of money to the company. We have decided to come out openly as long as La Follette and the Press are after us.” (Statement of J.P. April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68). J.P. then stated that Mr. Eldridge told him to take the names of all the men he talked to, and whether they were for the company, against, or doubtful, and
report the names. He said he was forced to do this task against his will, and even though he was a supporter of La Follette, he had to vote against his delegates for if he refused, he would get the “worst of it and lose [his] job”. (Statement of J.P. April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68)

The final employee statement came from Thomas Lyons, a baggage man at the East Madison Depot, who planned on being a delegate from the 8th ward of the city of Madison for La Follette at the convention. When his boss heard about him being on the ballot, he was told “You are earning your bread and butter here… always look out for yourself first, and others afterwards…. if you are a delegate for Governor La Follette, you will lose your job.” (Statement of Thomas Lyons, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68). He was later told that if La Follette were to be reelected, the Fuller and Johnson Company would have to remove their plant from Madison, blaming the move on the proposed rate commission being established. Lyons told his interviewers that he felt as if “I was coerced and forced off the ticket.” (Statement of Thomas Lyons, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68) Lyons withdrew from the La Follette slate of delegates, viewing his job at the railroad company as more important to him and his family than being a delegate for La Follette in the State’s Republican Nomination Convention.

These were not isolated claims from random La Follette supporters. Multiple voting districts across the state reported similar stories. In Baraboo, a city in Sauk County, it was said by men being investigated by the Secretary of State over reports of voter fraud, that men were literally driven to the polls by the superintendents of the various departments in the city and given tickets to vote against La Follette. (Affidavit of Non-Registered Elector, From Electors, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68) There were also
reports of the Ringling Brothers Circus being a front for the Stalwart political machine, preventing some men from voting, along with a reported 40 men from the Baraboo 2nd ward being brought in from out of state to vote against La Follette. The men who were reported to have voted in the caucuses are believed to have been from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian line, and from the Atlantic and Pacific coast. (Affidavit of Non-Registered Elector, April 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68) One man who was brought in to vote by the Ringling Brothers gave the name of Len Blackburn. When challenged by the local election official, Edward Dithmar, he claimed he had lived in Wisconsin for thirty-five days. Although he was not registered to vote, he did have an affidavit of non-registered elector. To see if these men really did live in the area they claimed to be from, the election clerks made them describe the local region in which they claimed to live, with many failing to describe it correctly. This led La Follette and the election clerks to believe the Stalwarts were trying to steal the convention from La Follette. (R.G. Hutchinson to R.M. La Follette, April 30, 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68)

The Stalwarts also began contesting wards that were extremely competitive with the hope that they could persuade some citizens to change their vote in their favor. In the town of Gillett, for instance, the votes for delegates were placed into a hat, and after the votes came back in favor of La Follette, a railroad man and Stalwart supporter, argued with the chairman to suggest the method of voting was not legal. It is not clear why he alleged the votes to be illegal, but after making a loud fuss over the situation, the chairman agreed to reread the votes. The chairman had the votes placed on a table, reading them each out loud, one at a time. The new results had the delegates at a tie, and forced the chairman of the polls to open them for a second vote, with the new results
going in favor of the Stalwarts. (R.G. Hutchinson to R.M. La Follette, April 30, 1904, Microfilm Reel 68) These methods caused a number of wards to be contested in court battles to see who the rightful delegates were, with a majority of these wards later being awarded to La Follette, because it was found that the Stalwants had issued their own ballots to railroad employees. In order to make sure the railroad employees were voting against La Follette, they were given cream ballots, compared to the regular, white ballots. Wisconsin had passed a law in 1899 that normalized the ballots throughout the state to cut back on election fraud, with one important method being to create a standard ballot, from the size to the color. This ballot manipulation lead to further suspicion of the Stalwants and in particular their tactics regarding the election. (Alonzo F. Kellogg to H.W. Chynoweth, April 28, 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68)

The most treacherous stunt pulled by the Stalwants to ensure they won the nomination convention was forging ballots and tickets to the convention. La Follette got word that the Stalwants were printing their own badges and delegate tickets, exactly matching the official badges and tickets. To do this, the Stalwants demanded that the State Central Committee, which was in charge of normalizing the election, print out the convention materials before the Stalwants turned in their ballots. They refused to turn in their ballots by claiming certain wards were under investigation for fraud, even though they were the ones being investigated, and since they were being investigated, the ballots could not yet be officially turned over. When the official convention material came out, the Stalwants began copying the materials, size, and color, to create badges for their own delegates who were in the contested wards, knowing they were most likely going to lose
those wards and go into the convention with not enough support to beat La Follette. (H.L. Halated, Notary Public Report, April 16, 1904, Microfilm, Reel 68)

The Stalwarts also claimed they won more delegates than they really had in some wards, with many concerned citizens writing directly to La Follette to get his attention on the activities. In Ozarkee County, a citizen wrote to La Follette saying, “The Stalwarts claim more [delegates] as they have. They claim Ozarkee County, but you have the most there, that is my home county where I am closer to the public’s sentiment towards you, and this weak one of the “elected” Stalwart delegates was not elected at all.” (A.J. Buiton to La Follette, May 14, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69). Supporters of the governor attempted to make the Stalwarts claims of winning more delegates than La Follette into a positive for him. W.D. Hoard wrote to La Follette to encourage him to believe that the voters were smarter and more aware of the situation than the Stalwarts gave them credit for. Hoard wrote, “A Stalwart can claim that Dodge, Grant or delegates from some other district were squarely elected… but I believe that thousands and thousands of voters are being by these reports turned or at least forced into the doubtful column.” (W.D. Hoard to La Follette, May 24, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69). La Follette would end up not needing to convince the public of the Stalwarts deceptive methods to win delegates to the convention, with reports in the days leading up to the convention showing a comfortable majority of delegates in La Follette’s favor.

After accepting the imminent loss in the voting at the nominating convention, with La Follette having won 574 of the 1,065 delegates, the Stalwarts’ leadership, Babcock, Pfister, Philipp, Spooner, and Quarles, all agreed that they would ‘win’ the convention by other means no matter how many delegates they had. (Lovejoy, 85)
May 9, 1904, newspapers across the state reported the Stalwarts were planning to bolt the nomination convention, in order to form their own “rump” convention to nominate their own candidates. Headlines across the state read “Wisconsin Stalwars will Bolt La Follette: Governor Overwhelmingly Defeats his Opponents in the Pre-convention Campaign and They Now Plan to Hold a Rump Convention-La Follette’s Renomination is Conceded by the Anti-Administration Faction-Split in Republican Party Means Democratic Victory” (Old Dane, May 9, 1904, Microfilm Reel 68). This bolt was not their primary goal, however, as word was spreading across the state that the Stalwarts would attempt to seat the contested, illegal delegates, and try to steal the convention. If this plan were to fail, they then would bolt to their own convention, to be held at the Fuller Oprah House in Madison.

As soon as La Follette heard about the Stalwarts’ plan, and fearing that they would cause a riot in order to steal the convention, he immediately moved to ensure security at the convention. To prevent them from seating their own contested delegates, La Follette and his supporters marked every badge and ticket with the recipients’ initials the night before the convention, meaning any counterfeit ticket could be spotted by not having these markings. He also went on to hire the University of Wisconsin’s football team to stand as security and prevent anyone from getting in that was not supposed to.9

(Autobiography, 139)

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9 La Follette continued to maintain a close relationship with the University of Wisconsin in the years following his graduation. His close friend, and mentor, John Bascon, the president of the university while La Follette was enrolled, was still an influential figure at the school, and encouraged La Follette to work with professors and students of the university to develop beneficial policies. This cooperation became known as the Wisconsin Idea, which holds that the state and its higher education system should embrace each other to develop policies and programs that benefit society. The collaboration between La Follette and the University of Wisconsin helped develop many of La Follette’s political goals, from the primary election idea, and railroad regulation, to early proposals for the direct election of senators and progressive taxation at the federal level. (Myers, R. David (Fall 1991).
The convention was held at the university gymnasium on May 18th, but according to the Stalwarts, it was as if it were held in the state prison (Philipp, 76). All the entrances into the building were locked besides one at the front of the gymnasium. This entrance was guarded by four football players, who made sure no one snuck past the single file, barbed wire fencing. These four players were responsible for checking the tickets and badges for the initials, with any delegate not having these markings told to enter through the citizens viewing section, or leave.

When the convention began, both factions were waiting for the other side to attack them. The chairman of the convention, Irvine Luther Lenroot, opened with a speech praising La Follette, and endorsing the progressive faction’s party platform, which supported all of La Follette’s campaign pledges. Word spread throughout the convention of a specific moment that would trigger the Stalwarts’ attempt to take over the convention. The moment was believed to be when Lenroot was finished giving his speech. A Stalwart, assumed to be M.B. Rosenberry, would go up to the podium and steal the gavel and give the convention to the Stalwarts. Rosenberry was a member of the State Central Committee and a Stalwart member of the Republican Party. When Rosenberry moved to his seat on the stage next to the podium, three of La Follette’s football security guards came and prevented him from moving forward. Seeing Rosenberry being refused a position on the stage, the Stalwarts signaled to each other to bolt the convention and meet for a new one at the Fuller Opera house that same night. (Philipp, 77-79)

The bolting of the Stalwarts from the state nomination convention marked the official split within the Republican Party in Wisconsin, and caused the nation to take notice of the growing progressive movement. Although the split took place at a state
event, national political interests were also affected. With Wisconsin’s four delegates to
the Republican National Convention held in Chicago also nominated at the state
convention, and both factions nominating their own delegates, a battle for national
recognition ensued. A federal investigation, headed by the Committee on Credentials, had
to come to settle the conflict over which faction would be allowed to seat their delegates
at the National Republican Nomination Convention. The federal investigation was not
responsible for deciding which state convention was the official convention, and which
nominee, La Follette or the Stalwart, S.A. Cook, was to be on the gubernatorial ballot.
They were only responsible for the four delegates to the National Republican Nomination
Convention. While the La Follette convention had La Follette, Isaac Stephenson, J.H.
Stout, and W.D. Connor as their delegates, the Stalwart convention selected the two
Wisconsin Federal Senators, J.C. Spooner and J.V. Quarles, Congressman J.W. Babcock,
and Emil Baesch. (Philipp, 79-80)

Having the Committee on Credentials decide in either faction’s favor meant a
huge boost for the winner by providing the public with an unofficial but seemingly
legitimate ruling on which faction, the Stalwarts or La Follette, should be the official
Republican candidate for the gubernatorial election in the fall. The Stalwarts were not
worried about their chances of securing a favorable ruling, since the Committee on
Credentials was composed of a majority of Stalwart sympathizers, even having
Wisconsin Senator Spooner and Congressman Babcock as members, with a previous
Senator, now Postmaster General for President Theodore Roosevelt, Payne as the
presiding officer. (Belle Case, 179) In a lackluster attempt to make the committee seem
impartial, Payne stepped down as presiding officer, and in this place West Virginia
Senator, Nathan B. Scott, was appointed as acting presiding officer. (Autobiography, 141) Realizing the importance of this ruling, La Follette, and his lawyers prepared for an uphill battle, knowing the odds of him coming out of the hearings victorious were not good. W.D. Hoard, a powerful La Follette ally, confirmed the fears of the influence the Stalwarts on the committee, saying in a letter to a prominent lawyer from Dane County, Alfred Rogers, “I am somewhat apprehensive about the outcome of the Convention. I cannot believe that this bolt was the result of any impulsive work of the moment. I very much fear that Spooner and Babcock have had a definite understanding with the National Committee and that they will be able to seat their delegation. If they come back to Wisconsin from Chicago [where the hearings took place] with the prestige that will be attached to their being recognized by the National Convention it will put our fellows in rather a bad light. Of course it is going to be a pretty tough proposition to get the National Committee to turn down two U.S. Senators and the Chairman of the Republican National Campaign Committee at this time.” (Hoard to Alfred T. Rogers, May 20 1904, Microfilm, Reel 70). La Follette and his supporters knew they had an important task ahead of them, because the ruling by the Committee on Credential regarding the National Republican Nomination Convention had the ability to give legitimacy to the Stalwart’s movement. He also knew he would have a harder task on proving his delegates’ validity to the Committee, because the Stalwart’s had more influence at the national level than he.
5) No Help from Roosevelt

Each side recognized the importance of being deemed the valid ticket for the Republican National Convention. Accordingly, both sides made desperate appeals to the popular President, Theodore Roosevelt, believing that whoever received his backing would be seen by the public as the rightful convention delegation. Little did either faction know, however, that Roosevelt wanted nothing to do with any sign of division within the Republican Party, especially during a Presidential election year, when Roosevelt himself was up for reelection. La Follette would remark about the situation years later in his autobiography, “One little word of encouragement, publicly spoken by President Roosevelt, one act of friendly recognition, however slight, would have been as new wine to our battered forces fighting in the gray dawn of this Progressive movement.” (Autobiography, 310) This “new wine”, as La Follette called it, however, went in favor of his opposition, with Roosevelt, whether intentionally or not, providing support for the Stalwarts and causing a great deal of resentment between the two popular men. The public believed that the progressive Roosevelt would overwhelmingly support the progressive La Follette, but they were not aware of the rocky relationship between the two public heroes, each of whom claiming the other was a traitor to the movement.

Immediately after the Stalwarts’ alternative convention selected their delegates to be sent to the national convention in Chicago, La Follette began drafting his defense, which would attempt to prove the original convention held at the University gymnasium was the official one. His supporters urged him to reach out to Roosevelt to ensure the proceedings would go in his favor. However, as stated above, Roosevelt was surrounded by Stalwarts and their supporters in Washington, and he was informed of the bolting
convention by the Stalwarts, receiving his first impression on the issue that a reckless La Follette was causing trouble for the national party to suit his own personal goals.

The Stalwarts’ advantage over La Follette lay in their ability to reach the President almost immediately. Since almost no letters written by the Stalwarts directed to Roosevelt are now available, they seem to have simply made their way to him to speak personally about the issue. With the two Wisconsin Senators, Spooner and Quarles, the Postmaster General H.C. Payne, and Congressman Babcock all being in Washington D.C., they were able to tell their side of the story to Roosevelt personally, without any delay in corresponding through letters.

Upon hearing of the Stalwarts’ quick attempt to win over Roosevelt, La Follette’s campaign staff hurriedly sent out letters to win over Roosevelt. Isaac Stephenson, the wealthy financier, and close friend of La Follette, wrote a letter to the President urging him to support La Follette and to recognize that the Stalwarts were lying about him. “I understand that you have been told that Gov. La Follette is a socialist, this is absolutely incorrect. Wisconsin has made two platforms and the people responded with 100,000 majority in 1900. In 1902, when the self-styled stalwarts and most of our congressmen and senators and a large majority of the federal office-holders and all of the public service corporations defeated the measures that the platform demanded, La Follette carried the state by about 50,000 majority, though I am convinced that a great many of the Stalwarts and bolters voted against him.” (Stephenson to Roosevelt, May 26, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69). Stephenson did not sound too encouraged when he replied to La Follette on the President’s decision. He attempted to show Roosevelt in the same position as La Follette was, but with Roosevelt attempting to compromise with the machine. He
wrote to La Follette, “In my judgment, the President is in the same boat with you between
the devil and the deep sea.” (Isaac Stephenson to R.M. La Follette, May 16, 1904,
Microfilm Reel 69) La Follette did not share the same sentiment as Stephenson though,
he instead saw Roosevelt as a opportunist, whose progressive rhetoric was only in his
words and not his actions, an opinion that would be shared by number of other important
figures. (Autobiography, 310)

In addition to Stephenson’s letter to the President, La Follette sent a group of men
to speak personally to Roosevelt in the hope persuading him to support the progressive
faction. These supporters were I.L. Lenroot, H.P. Myrick (the editor of the pro-La
Follette Milwaukee Free Press), Secretary of State Walter L. Houser, C.C. Gittings, and
W.D. Connor, a wealthy businessman who recently came to the aid of La Follette. After
presenting the details to Roosevelt, and explaining to him how La Follette won 574 5/6
delegates to the Stalwarts’ 485 1/6, and that the Stalwarts had 43 contested delegates to
the convention because of their illegal and unethical actions that were used leading up to
the convention, Roosevelt simply explained he did not want to be involved in the issue at
all. He claimed it would be “improper” to get involved in a state affair. Instead of
responding to the La Follette campaign calls for support, Roosevelt took the path that
supported the Stalwarts by doing nothing at all. (Bella Case, 179)

It is important to describe Theodore Roosevelt in the eyes of prominent
Progressives during the era before explaining how he handled the calls for support for
both factions. One of the most popular journalists of his era, and a constant interviewer of
Roosevelt, Lincoln Steffens, who would later provide the important support La Follette
needed, explained Roosevelt perfectly in his autobiography. He wrote of Roosevelt
thoroughly enjoying being President, and wanting nothing else but to continue filling the role he sought his whole life to gain. In order to stay in control of the office he desired so strongly, Roosevelt understood that he needed to appease the corporatists and corrupt politicians in Washington. As Steffens simply put it, “T.R. was a politician much more than he was a reformer…he was a careerist, an opportunist with no deep insight into issues” (Steffens Autobiography, 506) Steffens saw how Roosevelt appointed known corrupt politicians to important positions, such as appointing Payne to Postmaster General, while he also made harmful compromises with the same politicians on important “reform” bills. Steffens explained one night to Roosevelt the harm he was doing to the progressive cause by continuing to work for these anti-reformers, but Roosevelt quickly barked back at Steffens, justifying these appointments as a way to gain support for his measures, telling Steffens, “If they’ll vote for my measures I’ll appoint their nominees to Federal jobs…. I’ll trade.” (Steffens Autobiography, 505) In a way, it can be argued that no matter how popular, and enlightened Roosevelt was on the issues, he was less sensitive to the methods the anti-reformers were using to ensure any progressive, populist bill would not succeed in its goals. Roosevelt believed that by working with the ‘Stalwarts’ in the federal Senate and House of Representatives he would be able to get his reforms through in a give and take way. To Steffens and La Follette, this was not possible, with Steffens understanding the any-means-necessary approach the anti-reformer politicians were using across the nation, and La Follette seeing it first hand in Wisconsin. Steffens summed up Roosevelt by explaining, “He was not fighting [the system] but trying to work with them. He was not a reformer in the White House; he was a careerist on the people’s side, but working to wangle some concessions from the
powers that be and make them do some things for the country at large.” (Steffens Autobiography, 514)

With this understanding of the type of “reformer” Roosevelt was, one understands why he and La Follette did not get along. While Roosevelt was looking for compromises, hoping to get the “bigger dish” in every deal made with the machine, La Follette and his refusal to compromise caused a great discomfort for Roosevelt. La Follette viewed compromises with the Stalwarts as a betrayal of the campaign pledges he gave to the voters, and saw any betrayal as harmful to the image he built with the citizens. La Follette knew of Roosevelt’s bitterness towards him, and did not expect much help from the beloved president in ensuring a fair hearing would be allowed for him during the committee’s investigation.

The first sign of Roosevelt’s betrayal of La Follette was the President’s appointment of Henry C. Payne as Postmaster General. La Follette assumed Roosevelt would understand how dangerous a man Payne was in any position of political power, going as far as to describing Payne as Wisconsin’s Mark Hanna, the Ohio senator who was Roosevelt’s known pro-big business nemesis in the senate. (Autobiography, 310) La Follette considered this appointment one of the “biggest blows” to the progressive movement within Wisconsin, since the most powerful lobbyist in the state was now given a seat next to the most powerful man in the country, effectively giving the impression that Payne was an honest, favorable man. (Autobiography, 311)

The second sign that Roosevelt favored the Stalwarts over La Follette was the support he gave to the Stalwart Congressman, Joseph Babcock during the 1902, and 1904 elections. In 1902, Babcock had already switched back over to the Stalwarts’ side,
forgiving them for overlooking him for the Senate seat in 1900. By the time of the 1902 elections, Babcock became a key figure for the Stalwarts in Wisconsin, giving approval, or disapproval for any measure he felt needed his influence. He opposed almost every bit of progressive legislation proposed at the time, and campaigned heavily against the direct primary referendum on the 1904 ticket. With Babcock’s actions being known to the public, La Follette was left to only wonder why Roosevelt would write to praise Babcock after he won his reelection in 1902. Roosevelt wrote, “I feel that you and your colleagues, are entitled to the hearty thanks of every good Republican. I wish to express my appreciation of all that you have done, my delight at the way we have been able to work together.” (Autobiography, 312).

By the time the 1904 campaign was ramping up, Babcock was in serious jeopardy of losing his congressional seat in the heavily progressive 3rd district. The key factor contributing to Babcock being able to overcome the progressive attack upon his seat was the above-mentioned letter written by Roosevelt. The letter gave the public the same impression which they were to have of H.C. Payne, that he was a man who had the trust of the popular Roosevelt, and as long as Roosevelt trusted him, the public believed they should too. Although the progressive movement fought hard to replace Babcock, the Stalwart faction was able to use a large influx of campaign money and Roosevelt’s letter to secure his reelection by a mere 326 votes. It is interesting to note, however, that in the 1906 election Babcock would lose his seat to a progressive candidate, even with the support of Roosevelt. (Autobiography, 312)

Both of these actions taken by Roosevelt did not directly harm La Follette’s image; they just helped the image of the two Stalwart figures. What did harm La Follette,
nonetheless, was Roosevelt’s reluctance to publicly endorse the progressive-led Wisconsin Republican Nomination Convention as the true regular one. Roosevelt feared the events taking place in Wisconsin would harm his own reelection; he wrote to many of his closest aides to advise that they not show any favoritism towards either faction. He wrote to George Cortelyou, a member of his cabinet, holding a variety of positions during Roosevelt’s administration, “I am concerned at the feeling of the La Follette people about the speakers from the National Committee. Our speakers are to not recognize either faction, or go under the auspices of either faction. I am by no means easy as to the Wisconsin situation even yet” (Roosevelt to Cortelyou October 5, 1904), Writings of Roosevelt Volume 4, page 971). Roosevelt explained to his friend, Columbia University President Nicholas Butler, how desperate he was to avoid being involved in the issue. He told Butler, “The Wisconsin situation is very, very ugly. I am at my wits end how to keep out of it. In my judgment you read La Follette exactly right when you compare him to [Hazen] Pingree\(^{10}\).” (Roosevelt to Butler, May 21, 1904, Writings of Roosevelt Volume 4 #3071). The comparison to Pingree, mayor of Detroit and Michigan governor, was made by Butler considering the path Pingree took to securing office and the corporation-unfriendly policies he advocated to be similar to that of La Follette’s current career and actions. By not giving any support to the La Follette delegates to the Republican National Convention, the Stalwart, loaded Republican National Committee was able to claim the Stalwart’s Convention nominated the rightful delegates to the RNC on June 17.

\(^{10}\) Hazen Pingree was the progressive Mayor of Detroit (1889-1897) and Governor of Michigan (1897-1901). He became a popular figure for the progressive movement because of his powerful attacks against corruption within Detroit, and for attacking privately owned monopolies. He fought for similar policies as La Follette, including railroad regulations, progressive taxation, direct primaries, and better working conditions for the employees within the state.
The Stalwarts wrote harmful stories claiming that La Follette disliked the way the Committee on Credentials was handling the issue. To prove to Roosevelt that La Follette was a trouble-brewer, and was even a ‘madman’, the Stalwarts wrote in the Wisconsin State Journal about La Follette threatening to remove his support from Roosevelt and give it to the Democrat presidential candidate, Alton Parker. The Milwaukee Sentinel claimed, that La Follette threatened to turn the state over to the Democratic Party, from the congressional representatives in Washington to the state’s thirteen electoral votes. (Wisconsin State Journal, May 22, Microfilm Reel 70) Roosevelt, already unhappy with the chaotic fight in Wisconsin, refused to fall for the rumored threat by La Follette. La Follette did not deny the accusations of threatening to throw his support to the Democrat party, instead he simply claimed that he was the regular candidate for the Republican party, and hoped to have the party’s support in the election. (Free Press, May 30, 1904, Microfilm Reel 70) Roosevelt continued to stay publicly away from the Wisconsin issue, and to hope for a quick and quiet resolution to the two factions’ fighting.

Supporters of La Follette from other states across the nation informed him of the Stalwarts’ attempts to silence him during the hearings. They told La Follette that a message was spreading around the committee to urge the members to “see to it that… under no circumstances should [the] Wisconsin movement be allowed to spread; that La Follette was a dangerous man, and that unless he could be stopped right there, he would break up the Republican party in the nation as he had broken it up in Wisconsin.” (Autobiography, 141). When La Follette became aware of the situation in the committee, and felt he had no real opportunity for a fair hearing, he decided to forgo giving his defense in person, and instead he drafted a statement presenting his defense and sent it to
the committee before their decision. La Follette claimed that the committee’s investigation was a “grotesque farce” (Belle Case, 180), with the members of the committee showing no interest in listening to the evidence that supported his case during the reading of his defense. When the committee’s investigation was completed, they immediately ruled in favor of the Stalwarts, allowing them to take their seats at the Republican Nomination Convention. La Follette refused to appeal the case, knowing any appeal would receive the same treatment that the previous hearing had faced. Instead, La Follette vowed to go to the public to win their support, and secure the victory that mattered: the Wisconsin Supreme Court was hearing the case involving which Republican candidate for governor was to be on the ticket on Election Day. (Belle Case, 180) After knowing he would be unable to have his delegates sit at the Chicago Republican National Convention, La Follette’s focus went straight to the Wisconsin Supreme Court Case “State EX REL. Cook et al. v. Houser, Secretary of State” which was responsible for deciding which convention was the official one in regards to who would be on the ticket for Governor under the Republican name.
6) Stalwarts Build Their Attack

While anticipating the decision of the Wisconsin Supreme Court on the selection of the rightful Republican nominee for governor, La Follette or the Stalwart, Samuel Cook, the Stalwarts were forced to continue to defend themselves against the increasing public support for La Follette. While La Follette’s campaign goal was to keep them on the defensive, the Stalwarts were forced to attack La Follette aggressively on any possible failing they could find, even fabricating a few stories to change the public’s attitude towards La Follette. The Stalwarts hoped to be able to secure enough support for Cook and his campaign, but their main focused was to harm La Follette’s image and decrease the amount of backing he had throughout the state.

The Stalwarts’ goal was to report the failures of La Follette’s policies and criticize how he handled himself as governor in his first two terms. The quality of the direct primary law was castigated thoroughly, with the attacks focusing on the ability to fix what La Follette wanted. They attacked the railroad regulations as being socialist, and said that they caused the rates to spike after he introduced his intention to restrict the companies. La Follette was blamed for raising taxes and increasing spending within the state more than any of his predecessors, with the proposed railroad taxes being attacked more than other tax increases. The Stalwarts also blamed La Follette’s liberal increases in the number of Fish and Game wardens throughout the state, and his excessive spending in other areas of the state; all of these were used to accuse him of building up his own political machine.

The Stalwarts launched a strong campaign against the direct primary referendum by claiming it would harm the state and political party. Emanuel Lorenz Philipp, a
prominent Stalwart, and future Governor of Wisconsin, wrote a scathing pamphlet
detailing all the harms the direct primary would pose to Wisconsin if its passage was
successful. He used historical examples of the usage of the direct primary in local
elections as proof the law would be a failure, with the examples showing much harm
being done against the localities that enacted such measures. One of his attacks claimed
the quality of representatives would not be improved, because the only citizens able to
run for election would be those who were willing to be corrupt for gaining funding of
their campaign. He claimed, “Poor men and men of moderate means cannot become
candidates for office under the primary election law when there are contests, except for
two conditions. They must face ruin or accept money from others to defray their
necessary expenses. If they accept financial aid they assume obligations no public servant
should incur.” (Philipp, 98). With the increase in money expect to fund campaigns, the
public morals were expect to decline, instead of being elevated. Since money would now
dictate who would get to run for the office, and who would win, it seemed as though the
law would bring about more corruption, and less honestly.

Philipp also explained that the direct primary would endanger the party system
within the state, and in effect, ruin the state’s reputation across the nation. Philipp feared
the primary would allow members of the opposing party to vote for the opposing party’s
worst candidate to give a great chance for their party’s nominee to win the election. He
went on to claim, “Members of the minority party invariably vote in the primaries of the
majority party. Republican candidates with personal machines make trades with
Democrats and socialists for votes in republican primaries.” (Philipp, 98) Even if the
parties were able to ensure that only their own members were to vote for selected
candidates, he believed the law would lead to a destruction of the party system. What the primary law did was remove all nomination conventions, which according to the Stalwarts, was a way to get party members to come together from different regions of the state and share their differing views on how the party should govern. The conventions were essentially “schools of politics” (Philipp, 99) allowing for the advantages of free intercourse and exchange of ideas and information, something that ensures good government. The conventions were also responsible for the agreement on a party platform, which granted the opportunity for the candidates to better represent the state and their constituent as a whole. Without a convention, or a party platform, the parties would essentially be made up of the individual candidates, pitting one district’s Republican against another district’s Republican about the way the party should be run.

What Emanuel Philipp explained was a real issue with the law, even though La Follette’s intentions for ensuring better government was the main reason why the law was passed, the law still left a number of issues still unresolved, while also creating new problems that needed to be solved. To Philipp, and the rest of the Stalwart leaders, the direct primary was destined to be a failure since it allowed more corruption, and anytime the risk of more corruption presented itself, the quality of the law must be reexamined.

To make matters worse, Philipp went on to attack La Follette and his refusal to compromise by allowing this issue to be corrected before it was placed on the ballot. He claimed that the Stalwarts were willing to compromise with the La Follette faction in order to resolve the issues in the bill, but La Follette was unwilling to budge on any part of the bill. Any amendment offered to fix the failures of the bill was wholly refused by the Committee of Privileges and Election in the General Assembly, and State Senate.
Proposed amendments included making the circulation of campaign materials by any
appointed state, county, or city officer illegal, exempting state officers, giving voters the
ability to write in the names of their choice for U.S. Senators on a blank line, and an
amendment which would have moved the date for the primary from September to April.
(Philipp, 66)

The Stalwarts also focused their attacks on La Follette’s proposal for a powerful,
state funded tax commission, whose responsibility would be to place a real value on the
industries property and enforce the tax code.

In 1899, prior to La Follette becoming governor, the Wisconsin legislature,
controlled by the Stalwart politicians, passed a law establishing a permanent tax
commission. The commission’s only source of funding was through voluntary
contributions from taxpayers, which left it severely under-funded and left the commission
lacking any real power besides the ability send reports to the state legislature on the
current tax system. Since the creation of the commission, the annual reports sent to the
state legislature called for changes of the tax system, where it placed heavy focus on the
railroads avoiding reporting their true earning, but placed a preference keeping the
license fee system in place instead of the *ad valorem* proposals. The Stalwarts were
willing to allow this commission to continue operating as long as it held no real power,
and no funding was given to it by the state. (Philipp, 147) When La Follette began
calling for a more powerful tax commission though, the Stalwarts immediately began
attacking the commission and attempted to pass laws taking away the ability for citizens
to contribute to it.
La Follette’s plans included giving the commission more power and authority concerning the state’s tax system. First, he wanted to provide the commission with a steady source of guaranteed revenue to allow it to conduct its investigations more thoroughly. La Follette also believed the biggest contributions to the commission came from the railroad companies, which allowed them to influence the commission’s reports and suggestions. Since the commission was so dependent on the donations for its operations, it would be willing to suggest lower tax rates for the railroads.

(Autobiography, 122-123) To defend themselves against such a claim, the railroad companies, led by the Chicago, Milwaukee, North-Western and St. Paul railroads, argued that they were paying much higher rates to the state than any other tax payer. They also claimed that they supported tax reform, but only if it had all the citizens and companies paying an equal rate, without any bias as to how much an individual or company earned.

(Milwaukee Sentinel, June 13, 1904, Microfilm Reel 71) They encouraged La Follette to have the tax commission focus more on the private property owners throughout the state, who they claimed avoided more than “hundreds of millions of dollars” in taxation annually. (Philipp, 153)

The Stalwarts sided completely with the railroads’ articles, and fought to ensure any new tax code would not see the industry’s rates rise. They encouraged La Follette to adopt a new license fee system of taxation, which was almost exactly the same as the current system the state had in place, but with an option of increasing the percentage paid on the companies gross earnings. The railroads were still responsible for reporting their own revenues, with the tax commission given no power to look at any revenue documents that were not available to the public. (Philipp, 165)
By 1903, La Follette was able to replace certain members of the tax commission with people he personally knew at the University of Wisconsin. These appointments brought a change in opinion to the commission, and had the commission recommend an *ad valorem* tax system to the 1903 legislature. The Stalwart members of the legislature were “pressured” to accept the commission’s proposals, believing that La Follette intentionally had both, the direct primary, and taxation reform, brought to a vote in the months leading up to the election to force the Stalwarts to vote for them. The Stalwart candidates did not want to have the appearance of preventing every bill from passing, since they believed La Follette would use this as a way to convince the public they did not have their interest in mind. When the legislature voted for the direct primary law, they were able to attach a referendum clause to the bill, which gave the Stalwarts the opportunity to convince the public to vote against it. With the taxation bill, La Follette refused to allow any changes to the tax commission’s recommendation, stating, “There is no compromise. Equal and just taxation is a fundamental principle of republican government. I recommend that the bill formulated by the tax commission in accordance with their report, pursuant to the law creating that body, and presented by them to the legislature, be passed promptly.” (La Follette Message to the Legislature, January 5, 1904, Microfilm Reel 142)

La Follette’s refusal to compromise led the Stalwarts to accuse him of attempting to dictate to the legislature to force his ideas through to become law. They saw no need, or reason why the tax commission was in a position to force the legislature to accept any of its conclusions as “final”, and believed it was their job to take the ideas formulated in the proposal and adapt them. (Philipp, 169-170)
The tax commission’s proposal suggested a 6% tax on the railroads. The tax would be collected on each transaction made by the company, which made it much harder for them to evade their earnings, and also gave the commission the authority to audit the companies in order to look for any hidden revenue. These suggestions were believed to add approximately $1,000,000 annually to the railroad’s tax liability. This addition made the industry’s total tax contributions represent nearly 1/11 of the total state’s revenue, a figure that none of the companies saw reasonable. President Earling of the Milwaukee Railroad argued that the company did not own 1/11 of the state’s property, so being forced to pay 1/11 of the state’s taxes was anything but the equal taxation that La Follette claimed he was fighting for. (Philipp, 171)

Along with a reluctance to see La Follette’s tax reforms become law, the Stalwarts fought his attempts to regulate the industry. La Follette knew that any attempt to tax the railroads more than what they were already paying would result in an increase in fare rates for the citizens who relied on the industry to ship their products to the market. To prevent the railroads from transferring the tax burden from themselves to their customers, La Follette proposed a railroad commission, which would have the power to review any rate increases, to see if they were legitimately needed to ensure the business was seeing sustainable profits, or if the rise in rates was just an attempt to have the customers pay their tax increases. (Aug. 1903, Eleventh Story League Speech, Milwaukee, Microfilm, Reel 68)

Although no bill to regulate the industry was able to make it out of committee for a floor debate prior to the 1904 election, the Stalwarts knew that it was only a matter of time before La Follette would be able to see the idea become law. With the taxation
reform signed into law, the logical next step for the Governor was to encourage the legislature to enact a strong regulatory commission that would work together with the tax commission to ensure that the railroads no longer could dominate the state.

With no bill to attack, the Stalwarts alternatively turned to attack the governor’s rhetoric concerning regulating the industry. They professed that the proposed commission would take management authority away from the stockholders’ elected officers and give it to a board of commissioners appointed by the governor. (Wisconsin State Journal, January 15, 1904) This would result not only in lowering the rates to unsustainable levels for the companies to remain profitable, but also in disrupting the “carefully scheduled” train arrival and departures, which were responsible for “fostering and building up the manufacturing and agricultural industries of the state” (Eleventh Story League Speech, June, 1904, Microfilm Reel 70). With the railroads losing revenue as a result of the commission’s mandate to lower rates, the companies would be forced to reduce the number of trains going through the state, which would result in fewer agriculture and manufactured products being transported.

On April 29, 1904, a group of businessmen representing the manufacturer, merchant, and shipper sectors met at Madison to protest the regulatory commission’s proposals. They claimed La Follette was stirring the public opinion towards wanting the regulatory commission on false accusations. The protesters accused La Follette, who was giving speeches across the state that provided the rates paid by Wisconsin customers to ship their goods, to those who shipped them across other states, particularly Wisconsin’s neighbors, Iowa and Illinois. The protesters claimed La Follette’s numbers were biased, and were picked to make his point seem more legitimate than it actually was. During his
speech, La Follette would state that Wisconsin customers were charged anywhere between 2% and 6% more than their neighbors in other states, for the same distance and weight. The protesters at Madison claimed these statements were false, with La Follette selecting the highest rates in Wisconsin and comparing them to the lowest rates in the other states. They also accused the governor of comparing statistics that did not include the same factors. For Wisconsin, they accused La Follette of presenting the total cost of shipping based on distance and load weight, but for Iowa and Illinois, he was said to have only used the cost to ship a piece of merchandise. This resulted in the rates for Wisconsin to appear to be more than the other states, but only because the comparison did not include the distance rate or load weight fee. (Philipp, 221-222)

The protest in Madison was unable to sway enough citizens against the regulatory agency, and their loss forced the Stalwarts to find other ways to attack the idea of allowing the governor to regulate the important industry. They began a campaign that focused on La Follette and his attempt to win over voters by claiming to be able to lower farmer’s living expenses. They printed articles in the Wisconsin State Journal, claiming that La Follette was promising to lower each farmer’s annual living expense by $39 by reducing the freight charges they were forced to pay on anything they consumed. (Philipp, 228) This type of attack on La Follette’s character was not out of the ordinary, with the Stalwarts also attacking the Governor over how he handled himself with other scandals, including one that became known as “The Game Warden Scandal”.

The Game Warden Scandal, as it would be reported in the state’s newspapers, was one of the most harmful attacks used by the Stalwarts to convince the public to side with them. The accusations charged that La Follette was building his own personal “political
army” by appointing more Game and Fish wardens along with oil inspectors throughout the state. The wardens were accused of being soldiers for La Follette, responsible for traveling across their districts and spreading pro-La Follette propaganda to encourage voters to support him. With the wardens being paid by the state, the Stalwarts accused La Follette of using taxpayer money to increase his own power across the state. The fact that the appointments of game wardens and oil inspectors grew during his administration was not the only basis for the attack, but the Stalwarts wanted to emphasize how much this growth had cost the state.

Although La Follette did increase the number of wardens and inspectors across the state, he did so more out of political patronage for what the men did for his previous campaigns, not for his future campaign. If a man wrote to La Follette asking for a game warden position in their local town, and claimed to have handed out campaign literature that supported his campaign, La Follette was more than inclined to give them the post they desired. He felt that since the men supported him when he needed them the most, he would reward the man with a much needed job. He did not explicitly give the new appointee any more responsibilities than the job required, and at no time was he found to have encouraged the wardens to go around the state and encourage citizens to support him.

In order to attack La Follette’s liberal appointment of the game wardens, the Stalwarts used their best resource, the state’s newspapers, to publish articles detailing La Follette’s use of the game wardens and other posts. In an article published in the Milwaukee Sentinel, the Stalwarts claimed, “The Game Warden Scandal has become a stench in the nostrils of all decent citizens. The prostitution of the service to political ends
has become so notorious during the last three years that the legislature will be asked to abolish the present system and substitute one that can’t be used by the administration as a personal political machine.” *(Milwaukee Sentinel, April 25, 1904, Reel 69)* For the fiscal year ending on June 30, 1903, it was alleged La Follette had almost doubled the cost for the Game and Fish Warden positions from any proceeding year, with a cost of $85,000. *(Milwaukee Sentinel, April 25, 1904, Reel 69)* The most that this department cost the state prior to the 1903 fiscal year was roughly $47,000, also under La Follette, for the 1902 fiscal year. *(Milwaukee Sentinel, April 25, 1904 Reel 69)*

Besides the large amount of taxpayer dollars going to support the Game Wardens across the state, the Stalwarts claimed they did not sufficiently perform their duties to justify the amount of resources being allocated to them. “The worst features about all this game warden matter is that many of the wardens themselves do not seem to think there is anything dishonorable in making affidavit to a salary and expense account for which they have rendered little or no service to the State…. The chief loss to the State is not measured by the thousands of dollars drawn from the State Treasury dishonestly, but in the debauching of the State employees to such a degree that many of them have come to think of public service only as private “graft”. *(Milwaukee Sentinel, April 25, 1904, Reel 69)* To prove their point, the Stalwarts printed monthly average salaries, and expenses for the multiple game wardens in each county throughout the state, while they focused more heavily on the competitive districts. In Trembesleman county for instance, the game wardens had an average summer salary of $66, with July and August being the most expensive with a $75 average salary per game warden. Although the monthly salary seemed like a decent, average living, the Stalwarts made sure to show the newspaper
readers that the warden’s frivolous expenses were usually reimbursed to them. The average reimbursement was nearly $43 per month, which the Stalwarts claimed made the average salary for the game wardens for the summer months close to $109 per employee. For Jackson county, and La Crosse county, the total monthly cost per game warden, salary and reimbursements, were not too different, with a monthly cost of nearly $102 for Jackson, and nearly $125 for La Crosse county. (Milwaukee Sentinel, April 25, 1904, Reel 69) A pamphlet published by the Stalwarts in Price County claimed a single warden, Kleinsterber of Ashland County, made $1,476.20 in a single year, excluding any reimbursements that employee most likely received, with the employee claiming to have worked 334 days during the year, a claim which they said could be refuted by citizens of Ashland County, saying they hardly ever saw the man on the job. The same claim was made about Mat Christianson, another warden for Ashland County. He was said to have been paid $1,512.34 for the year, while working 363 days, taking off only two holidays and working every Sunday. (Wisconsin State Journal, To the Voters of Price County, May 15, Microfilm Reel 69)

It might be tempting to see the attacks against La Follette’s increase in game and fish wardens, across the state simply as just petty, political banter, but voters who supported La Follette saw truth in these attacks, with many of them writing La Follette to explain how bad this situation really was. On June 9, 1904, a man from Mukwonago wrote La Follette, telling him the game wardens were causing nothing but trouble for his campaign in the region. He stated, “I am requested by Mr. Crawford…to write you regarding the appointment of Robert J. Barton as game warden…[the town] does not think he is a fit man for the place… we find he would make a better whiskey inspector
than game warden. This game warden business has made us a great deal of trouble in this
town…. From your ever faithful follower, David Johnson”. (Johnson to La Follette, June
9, 1904, Microfilm Reel 71)

One of the most powerful letters concerning the abuses of game wardens was sent
to La Follette by an anonymous supporter on May 3, 1904. The letter substantiates almost
every claim that the Stalwarts made concerning the appointment of wardens in
Wisconsin, from their laziness, absenteeism, and partisan usage to build La Follette’s
image across the state. The letter begins with, “Anonymous letters are not usually
accorded much attention, but interest in the cause for which you are working prompts me
to report on something that I feel is hurting the cause in this locality…. It proves to a
good many that the Stalwart’s literature with which the county is flooded is not without
some foundation, especially with regard to the ‘Game Warden scandal’” (Anonymous to
La Follette, May 3, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69) His reason for not giving his name was his
closeness to the warden in the county, liking him personally, but saw the harm he had
caused to the progressive cause and La Follette’s chances of reelection, saying, “I object
to his way of carrying on the business, and think him more a detriment than a benefit to
the party, unless he can be induced to change his methods.” (Anonymous to La Follette,
May 3, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69). The writer of this letter gave credence to the Stalwarts’
claims that the game wardens were paid for hours thy did not work, by telling La Follette
“the game warden here has drawn his per diem, I believe, for every day this year,
Sundays and other holidays not excepted, besides drawing all the law allows him for
expenses. I think I see him on an average fifteen days out of the month, and I certainly
fail to see how he can have put in one-half, or one-fifth, or one-tenth of his time,
performing the duties for which he was appointed… on a certain day he attended a wedding… spending all day… but I certainly expect to hear that he get his $2.50 for that day as well as others… another day he was in a neighboring village… pertaining to his farming, but he evidently draws the per diem, and presumably $2.00 or $3.00 for driving his own team to town. (Anonymous to La Follette, May 3, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69)

The anonymous supporter wrote to La Follette concerning this issue because “a good many Stalwarts [are] in this village” (Anonymous to La Follette May 3, 1904, Microfilm Reel 69), and he did not want to see La Follette have these men be enabled to turn the entire town against him, knowing any and all support was needed for his campaign. He specifically claimed the warden was losing votes for La Follette, and in order to pose a fight against corruption, as he claimed to be doing against the Stalwarts, he needed to make sure he had no signs of corruption trailing him.

This anonymous supporter was not the only friend of La Follette who urged him to fix the issues with the wardens before they ruined his campaign, but he was the most detailed in his information on how poorly some wardens were performing their jobs. Other letters explained to La Follette how the wardens were not doing a good enough job to justify their compensation, with a man from Delavan writing to his local Game Warden Deputy concerning the local fish warden that “[allowing] illegal fishing… there has been more than usual…” (Henry W Weed to Mr. C.D. Nelson Deputy State Game Warden, Madison, Wisconsin, July 26, 1904, Microfilm Reel 72)

To make matters worse for La Follette, evidence was found that made the Stalwarts’ claim that the Governor was building a political machine with the appointment of game wardens appear true. Letters were written to La Follette asking for appointments
to a position game or fish warden, or the post of oil inspector in return for the support
given to him during his previous campaigns, and that made the charge of his liberal use
of political patronage hold truth. (Anonymous To R.M. La Follette, from Mauston
County, Anonymous, Microfilm Reel 70) Letters also show that La Follette’s campaign
used the wardens to gain voters across the state. A letter from the director of Gaslyn
Counties Fish and Game Warden department shows how they were reluctant to lay-off
any of the “large force of wardens” (Henry Overbeck To G.L.Miller, May 27, 1904,
Microfilm Reel 69), even while they had to deal with diminishing funding. No letters
were found showing La Follette was responsible for these actions though, with the likely
probability of the county directors taking it upon themselves to issue these orders.

The Stalwarts also made a variety of claims attacking the increase in the state’s
spending under La Follette. They published numerous articles throughout the state’s
newspapers attacking the way La Follette handled the state’s finances. In an article
written in the Milwaukee Sentinel, the Stalwarts emphasized the “gross extravagance” in
the state’s expenses under La Follette since he became Governor in 1900. While the years
between 1894 and 1901 had the state’s net expenditures ranging from $3,014,645.12 in
1894 to $4,086,997.99 in 1900, under La Follette the range was from $4,223,385.90 in
his first term to $5,510,314.00 in 1903. The Stalwarts continued to criticize La Follette
for this increase in the state’s spending, claiming a majority of it was for his own
enjoyment and promotion. While the decade prior to La Follette’s holding office only had
two years of spending more than four million dollars, the three complete years of La
Follette’s holding office were under five million only once. He had an increase of
$1,300,000 in his last two years, which the Stalwarts claimed was a 71% increase, while the population growth was only 20%. (Milwaukee Sentinel, April 5 1904 Reel 68)

The Stalwarts asserted the increase in spending would not have been a problem if the spending was on honest, sound investments, rather than an increase in game and fish wardens, and other expenditures that La Follette promoted. What irritated the Stalwarts was the hypocrisy of La Follette in his spending. While La Follette defended himself by saying he was investing the money honestly, and for the betterment of the state, the Stalwarts claimed La Follette just increased the payrolls of the state departments. Including the increase in game and fish wardens, which was alleged to cost the state $85,000 in 1903 (Wisconsin State Journal, April 5, 1904, Reel 68), in their minds La Follette also caused the state to lose money when the Capital Building was burnt down in an accidental fire. Although this was a great expense for the state, the Stalwarts used it to attack La Follette, claiming he mismanaged the state’s money by not signing a sufficient insurance policy to pay for the construction of the new building. A further increase in the state’s spending would be expected too if La Follette was able to get his railroad commission established with regulatory and taxation power. They did not mention a specific number by which the commission would increase spending, but they did insist La Follette was responsible for an already high, seven-dollar tax increase on every voter, in addition to taxes on other goods and services. (Milwaukee Sentinel, April 5 1904 Reel 68)

Another article attacked La Follette’s handling of the State’s finances even more intensely than the attacks concerning his handling of the capital fire. During the Civil War, Wisconsin, along with all the other Union states, loaned money to the federal government to pay for the war. By the time La Follette won his first term to governor, the
federal government was responsible for paying the state back $1,027,000 at a 7% interest rate. The interest on the remaining amount the federal government owed Wisconsin amounted to nearly $32,000 a year, which was used to build the state’s trust fund to go towards the state’s public education system and internal improvements. For a reason La Follette did not answer, he settled with the federal government for a single lump sum payment of $458,000 to pay off the loan. Instead of investing this payment into the trust fund, La Follette used it to pay for the current budget, giving a one-time tax break to the state’s citizens. The misuse of this payment caused the Stalwarts to accuse La Follette of using the states money to gain political capital for the upcoming election, giving more legitimacy to their claims of building his own political machine. (Wisconsin State Journal, April 5, 1904, Reel 68)

The Stalwarts compared La Follette’s political machine to Andrew Jackson’s use of the spoils system. Any supporter of his campaign, they said would be promised a job working for the state. In articles published throughout the Stalwart state papers, La Follette was simply called the “Spoilsman” on the basis of the claim that he surpassed every previous governor in appointing campaign supporters to public positions. It was not just the number of appointments that the Stalwarts attacked, it was how poorly the men performed their jobs that caused the biggest problems for La Follette. As mentioned earlier, a number of the game wardens appointed by La Follette were said to be deficient at performing their tasks. Even supporters of La Follette wrote to him complaining that these criticisms were true. La Follette’s appointments for administrative positions at the state level caused the Stalwarts to label him and his administration as the “least efficient business administration in the history of the state” (Wisconsin State Journal, April 2,
1904, Reel 68). This accusation concerned the way in which La Follette appointed men to replace employees who were to be employed for multiple administrations, such as the state tax commission and board of control. La Follette replaced all the members of the Board of Control with those who had supported his campaign, and replaced a number of members of the tax commission with his own supporters. These two bureaus were supposed to be non-partisan, but the Stalwarts accused La Follette of making them into a branch of his administration that was to support his ideologies. His appointments affected the University of Wisconsin, State Board of Health, and the Normal School of Regents to a similar degree. However, these groups were already known supporters of La Follette, and were believed to be ready to work with him without his making any changes to their membership. (Wisconsin State Journal, April 2, 1904, Reel 68) It was not just La Follette’s excessive hiring of his own supporters that irked the Stalwarts, but his favoritism to Dane County men that they really cried against. They pointed out, in replacing past government employees with his current picks, the number of state employees from Dane County rose from 12 under former Governor Scofield to 27 under La Follette. Dane County, La Follette’s home since attending college at the University of Wisconsin, was known to be one of the most progressive counties in the state. (Wisconsin State Journal, April 2, 1904, Reel 68)

Describing La Follette’s methods of removing qualified, experienced employees of the state’s bureaus and offices as “tyrannical”, the paper was attempting to make La Follette appear to be exactly what he was claiming to fight against. The papers claimed that because La Follette constantly accused the Stalwarts of corruption, the public was becoming “hardened to [the corruption].” They went on further to remark that, “Incidents
that would have under former administrations created a tremendous sensation, are now
frequently winked at as necessary evils.” (Wisconsin State Journal, April 2, 1904, Reel
68) Having loudly criticized the Stalwarts’ abuses, La Follette was now being accused of
just hiding his corruption, or pinning it on the Stalwarts.

Finally, the Stalwarts made the strident, yet ultimately absurd claim that La
Follette was building his political machine to a greater extent than any other politician
through his attempt at winning his third term as governor. Similar to the de facto two-
term limit accepted for the U.S. presidency until the 22nd Amendment, the two-term limit
in Wisconsin was a self-imposed limitation on how many terms a governor could serve in
office. Although two previous governors did serve three complete terms, (Lucius
Fairchild, the 10th governor and Jeremiah McLain Rusk, the 15th governor), the tradition
was still an important issue for a number of Republican voters who wrote to La Follette
expressing their dislike of his running for a third term. They claimed to support all of his
measures, but felt that any good representative of the people should follow George
Washington and voluntarily allow another candidate the opportunity to win the office.
(Milwaukee Sentinel, April, 1904, Microfilm Reel, 68)

It seemed as though the Stalwarts were against the third term not so much because
of tradition, but more as a means to attack La Follette to running again. The Stalwarts
pointed out all of La Follette’s great campaign promises and pledges, with the direct
primary and railroad reform having been achieved, or soon would be. With the ad
valorem signed into law, and the direct primary being up for a vote by the citizens, the
Stalwarts claimed there was no reason for La Follette to run for another term. The only
reason to desire another term was to continue building his own political machine, and to remove all the other opposition in power. (*Wisconsin State Journal*, Reel 72)

After reading and hearing all the attacks made by the Stalwarts, La Follette was not going to allow the Stalwarts’ assertions go undisputed, and he immediately went forward to refute the claims of irresponsible spending and the harm supposedly caused by his policies. He relied as much on himself as he did on his powerful supporters to ensure a victory in both the Wisconsin Supreme Court, and in the November General Election.
7) Steffens Aids La Follette

La Follette did not seem to focus predominately on his own reelection, but tended to campaign for progressive candidates that would support his legislative goals. With the direct primary bill placed on the ballot for the voters to approve, he did not spend much time throughout the campaign season discussing the issue, since he trusted the citizens would want to give themselves a bigger role in the state’s political process.

(Autobiography, 137-142)

His goals were rather to win support for his railroad regulation measures to prevent the shippers from increasing their rates in response to a heavier tax burden. In order to win this support, La Follette campaigned for local legislative candidates, Republican or Democrat, who pledged to support his party pledge. Those who claimed to support the Republican Party platform, but voted against the measures were forced to deal with La Follette’s new campaign weapon, reading the roll call. Any candidate who had campaigned in support of La Follette, but then violated the campaign pledges once in office was forced to watch as La Follette gave speeches in his district and read to the large crowds the voting record of the so-called reformer incumbent. While many citizens were concerned, and in a way, disapproved of the way La Follette used the roll call, he justified its use by claiming, “A party platform is of the highest importance to the individual voter. When it has been formulated by the party and promulgated as its declaration of principles, as its pledge to do certain things, to administer government in a certain way, to enact certain legislation, the citizen is then placed in a position where he can easily determine whether he desires to support the party promising that kind of government…the promulgation of a platform of declared principles upon which voters
are asked to entrust a political party conscience as though it were the sealed bond of every individual member of the party.” (Platform Promises Outline, Microfilm Reel 140). The pledge was an obligation, and according to La Follette, the representative who campaigned on that promise was bound by their oath of office to see those promises fulfilled as fully as possible. When candidates make a promise to the public and then once in office does not keep that promise, they are essentially lying to win the position, and cannot be trusted to hold a public office.

While some citizens realized that they were lied to by the fake La Follette-men, they did not appreciate the method of the roll call, especially when La Follette would use it while sharing the stage with the disgraced incumbent. Before giving a speech, the local supporters would urge him not to read their representatives’ roll call, saying “people knew the stalwart candidate had voted wrong in the last legislature and didn’t intend on voting for him, but that he was personally well-liked, and publicly humiliating him by reading his record could only create sympathy; it would hurt the cause more than it would help.” (Bella Case, 172) La Follette did not listen to the pleas, however, and insisted the citizens had the right to know who was fulfilling their pledge obligation, and who were taking advantage of the public’s trust. He said of these candidates who betrayed their constituents, “No party can retain and no party deserves to retain the confidence and support of the citizen if it knowingly entraps him to vote for candidates who repudiate its pledge obligation…” (Autobiography, 142). By believing this statement, La Follette would have been betraying the citizens of the state if he were to have not informed them of the lies told to them by their representative.
Instead of hurting La Follette as some of his supporters feared, the power and conviction of his speeches swayed people to shout at the speechless Stalwart on the stage. La Follette would close every speech with the words, “Put the men who have betrayed you on the retired list” (Bella Case, 172), and left the audience to take in the voting record of their representative. The listeners were found to go back to their local towns and spread information about the roll call among those who were not present, which caused a number of loyal Democrat supporters to write in support of La Follette. Letters came in the hundreds from life-long Democrats saying they were going to vote for a reform Republican for the first time in their life. After witnessing the campaign methods which the Stalwarts were undertaking, Democrats flocked to La Follette after realizing his honesty and dedication to helping the common citizen instead of the wealthy and corrupt businessman. A letter from New Richmond, a reliable Democratic area in St. Croix County showed La Follette that his popularity was crossing party lines. The man wrote, “My father, who has voted the Democratic ticket for thirty-three years…will vote his first Republican ballot this fall.” (Anonymous to La Follette, May 23, 1904 Microfilm Reel 69). A similar letter was received from the Socialist/Democratic Milwaukee County. James Palmer, a lifetime loyal Democrat, wrote to La Follette pledging his support and committing to rally support for the progressive fighter, “I am a Democrat and have been all my life. Never voted a Republican ticket. I feel it is my duty to vote for you for governor at the fall election…and will do all in my power to honorably influence my Democratic friends to also cast their votes for you.” (James Palmer to La Follette, June 25 1904, Microfilm Reel 71)
The letter from James Palmer was a significant opportunity for La Follette, with a reliance on Democrats encouraging other Democrats to vote for him, La Follette was certain to make up for the votes lost to the Stalwarts bolting the party. It was not just progressive and populist-minded Democrats who decided to vote for La Follette, but conservative, reform minded Democrats too. A man from Racine County named W.D. McChersew wrote to the Governor which showed his popularity influencing conservative Democrats, he explained, “As a conservative Democrat allow me…to offer a word of counsel…[Democrats] will stand by you…no Democrat who stood by you in the caucus will go back on you at the ballot.” (W.D. McChersew to La Follette, June 20, 1904, Microfilm Reel 71).

La Follette was all but assured a sizable portion of the Democratic vote when he received notice that the two-time Democratic Presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan, offered to pledge his support for the Governor. Word of support came from a support from Jim Falls in Chippewa County, from a man claiming to be writing neither as a “Republican, nor Democrat, nor Populist, but as a fellow American citizen wishing for good government no matter from what source it may come.” (H.N. Ware to La Follette, June 6, 1904, Microfilm Reel 71). He informed La Follette of Mr. Bryan giving speeches across the Midwest that favored La Follette and his policies. He said, “Mr. Bryan is advocating many of the reforms that you are striving for…. He championed the causes of the common people and supports you advocating reforms that without party prejudice nearly all the common people would stand for.” (H.N. Ware to La Follette, June 6, 1904, Microfilm Reel 71).
William Jennings Bryan eventually made direct contact with La Follette, and informed him that the popular progressive magazine, *The Commoner*, was supporting his cause. Bryan told La Follette of the Democrats attempting to get him to come to the state to campaign for their cause, which Bryan refused, justifying his refusal by, “not wanting to solidify the Democratic party against [La Follette’s] work…. I wanted you to have all the Democratic support you could get to take the place of the corporation Republicans who were attacking you.” (Autobiography, 148) Bryan assured La Follette of sizable Democratic support in the state in regards to favoring the direct primary referendum, railroad and other corporate taxation, the regulation of railway rates and services, and almost every other reform championed by the governor. The only reason why the Wisconsin Democratic Party did not present a party pledge similar to the one La Follette supported was because the progressive element of the party was not a strong enough faction to force the party to adopt the platform. However, the faction was strong enough to influence the election in the favor of La Follette, if he was able to appeal to their other needs too. (Autobiography, 148)

While the progressive, and reform faction of the Democrat Party was all but assured of supporting La Follette, he still had to focus on winning over the undecided Republicans in order to clinch his reelection. The best way he could think of convincing this faction to support him was by refuting the Stalwarts claims that he was financially irresponsible, and unfit to lead. As to the claim of his railroad policies causing more harm to the state than good, La Follette had his supporters publish a pamphlet, which he called his “*Voters Handbook*”, detailing all the “facts: concerning the prices of Wisconsin’s rates and taxes compared to its neighboring states”. The paper opened with a stirring
statement of support for La Follette and asserted how the governor has, and always has had the citizen’s best interest in mind when promoting policies. The opening sentences, “The business or affairs of the state during Governor La Follette’s term have been administered in the interest of the people, and in a wise and economical manner. During his administration there have been no extravagances of any form…. [All the policies] propose[d] have increased the general welfare and left the state and the people better off than before.” (Old Dane, July, 1904, Microfilm Reel 72). The document then went directly into the facts, the first subject concerning the state’s total disbursements per capita, which showed Wisconsin ($1.98) having the lowest cost per capita, compared to Minnesota ($4.40), Michigan ($3.33), Indiana ($3.25), and Ohio ($1.98) in 1903. It was shown that Wisconsin only had a $0.03 increase in the per capita disbursements since 1900, with every other state showing an increase of at least $0.13 (Ohio). These figures attempted to prove to those who were influenced by the Stalwarts’ attacks on La Follette and his administration that his administration was able to provide more goods for the state at a lower cost compared to their neighbors. The figures also showed that the Stalwarts’ claims of La Follette’s gross extravagance were untrue. (Old Dane, July, 1904, Microfilm Reel 72)

La Follette was also able to display that although he was responsible for an increase in the state’s expenses, the percentage increase seen under him was less than that of his predecessors. In the former Governor Scofield’s two terms in office, there was an increase to the state’s expenses of 20.21% in 1897-8 and 8.09% in 1899-1900, under La Follette, the increase was only 11.69% in 1901-2 and 4.49% in 1903-4. It was important to present the difference in the percentage increase because Scofield was a member of the
Stalwart faction, and during his tenure no Stalwart made claims of his being unable to manage the states money, or his raising the states taxes too much. With La Follette showing his ability to limit the state’s expenses by spending on solid investments such as education and public health, while also imposing reasonable taxation of companies who had been able to avoid the tax, he attempted to present himself as more fiscally conservative than the ones who attacked him for his lavish spending. (July, 1904, Microfilm Reel 72)

La Follette also printed a small pamphlet entitled “Record of an Able, Honest, Fearless Governor” which listed, and explained every action La Follette took in his four years of holding the Governor’s office, including his increasing of railroad taxes by $1,000,000 a year, increasing the state’s treasury from $4,125.94 to $952,000.00 in three years, ridding the state of corrupt lobbying practices, and being a strong proponent of the growing conservation movement which protected the state’s heavily deforested lands. (Record of an Able, Honest, Fearless Governor, Microfilm Reel 73) It also informed voters who were unsure of exactly what La Follette accomplished during his tenure, since the Stalwarts were constantly accusing him of only fighting for the direct primary and railroad reform. With this long list of his achievements available to the public, La Follette went on a campaign tour around the state explaining exactly what his policies meant to the citizens and the state.

Although his roll call speeches, campaign materials, and support from William Jennings Bryan were all critical to his campaign, there was one person without whom his entire campaign might not have been as successful. Even though La Follette’s popularity was gaining national attention, there were still doubts as to why La Follette was so
passionate about seeing his reforms succeed. To some, La Follette was just like any other politician who takes advantage of the current political environment to be elected to promote his own image. Others believed the Stalwart claims that La Follette attacked the old party boss system to build his own political machine. A majority of these beliefs were calmed after Lincoln Steffens, the influential muckraking journalist, came to investigate La Follette and the Wisconsin situation.¹¹

Almost immediately after the Republican National Convention refused to recognize La Follette’s allies as the rightful delegates to the convention, word came to Wisconsin that Steffens would come to Madison to write a story on La Follette. When word reached La Follette, his wife was “moved to tears” (Bella Case, 181). The emotions that caused his wife to grow so excited were derived from the powerful forces that La Follette and his campaign had to fight continuously, forces that grew from the Stalwarts’ media control in the state. La Follette and his supporters were greatly outnumbered by the Stalwarts when it came to control of the newspapers and magazines, with La Follette’s wife claiming her husband was outnumbered by the Stalwart papers by 9:1. (Bella Case 168) Besides La Follette’s own Free Press and the small, but popular, Dairyman, La Follette was attacked in the state’s media outlets, the Milwaukee Sentinel and Wisconsin State Journal were the two most popular papers in the state, and they were controlled by the Stalwarts supporters, allowing their campaign material and attacks against La Follette

¹¹ Lincoln Steffens was one of, if not the most influential muckraking journalist of the Progressive Era. While working for McClure’s Magazine, he focused his writings on political corruption and investigating local governments. His most famous work, The Shame of the Cities (1904), was a collection of investigative stories revealing the corruption within some of the country’s most corrupt states and cities. The work propelled Steffens towards national fame, which gave him a sense of honesty and trust. Citizens would read his articles, and trust what he wrote to be an honest portrayal of what was really happening in their state or cities government.
to reach every corner of the state. With Steffens coming to write about La Follette, the campaign was finally able to compete with the Stalwarts’ media attack.

The La Follette campaign’s satisfaction with Steffens arrival to write about him might have been a bit premature however, since Steffens claimed the reason why he came to Wisconsin was “To call on the men who were to display the goods on that demagogue, Governor Bob La Follette.” (Lincoln Steffens Autobiography, 454). Steffens claimed to be certain La Follette was the man the Stalwarts claimed he was, believing him to be a “Charlatan and a crook” (Lincoln Steffens Autobiography, 454). Knowing of Steffens’ initial beliefs about La Follette, the Milwaukee Sentinel celebrated the muckraker’s arrival in the state, hailing the man as a writer whose “evident purpose always has been to speak the truth on all occasions” (Milwaukee Sentinel, June 28, 1904) Steffens first made a stop in Milwaukee to speak to a few Stalwart men in the city to get an understanding of the man who was “making his own State heard all over the country” (Lincoln Steffens Autobiography, 454), but what he found was not claims in support of his corruption or his self-promotion, but just a general dislike of the man. He told the Stalwarts he could not write about rage or a plain dislike of the man, but needed facts and evidence of him being a corrupt man himself. The men claimed that he was a hypocrite for attacking the current bosses to build his own machine, and that he was an “agitator…who spread discontent, is a menace to law, property business, and all American institutions.” (Lincoln Steffens Autobiography, 455). But even with these attacks, the Stalwart speakers still explained to Steffens that La Follette was far from being a dishonest man, but simply, “On the contrary, the man is dangerous precisely because he is so sincere. He’s a fanatic.” (Lincoln Steffens Autobiography, 455). This is the moment when Steffens
realized that La Follette was actually for the citizens, and better government and that the attacks made by the Stalwarts were just a way to maintain the status quo.

Steffens went to Madison to meet personally with La Follette and to interview the Governor in order to understand the attacks against him. La Follette provided Steffens with his life story, and offered that the reporter come along with him during his speaking tour on St. Louis Fair. After the getting everything he needed from La Follette, Steffens then went to speak with the Stalwart leaders, such as Senator Spooner, to get a more complete story surrounding La Follette and his history of fighting the Stalwarts. (Bella Case, 182-83)

By the time Steffens published his article in McClure’s Magazine in the last week of September 1904, the Wisconsin Supreme Court was within a week of issuing its ruling on what faction had the rightful claim the Republican candidacy for governor on the November ballot. Although the Supreme Court’s ruling was written before the article was on the shelves for the citizens to buy, Steffens was given credit for placing the public fully on La Follette’s side, and in a way, giving legitimacy to the La Follette convention as the rightful one. In his article “Wisconsin: Representative Government Restored: The Story of La Follette’s War on the Railroads that Ruled His State”, published in McClure’s Magazine, Steffens provided a detailed account of the struggle La Follette had to endure in order to secure his reforms against the powerful Stalwarts, and the honest, inspiring ways in which the Governor was able to secure the passage of his great measures. He proved to the public La Follette was not like any other politician. He was a real fighter for the citizens, and attacked big business not out of his own dislike for the corporations, but because he understood, the need to attack them to ensure the public was
protected. He concluded his article by writing, “For no matter how men may differ about Governor La Follette otherwise, his long, hard fight has developed citizens in Wisconsin – honest, reasonable, intelligent citizenship. And that is better than “business”; that is what business and government are for – men” (The Struggle for Self-Government, 118-119)

When word of Steffens’ visit to Wisconsin spread across the country, more muckraking magazines and writers came to Wisconsin to tell the story, hoping to be as successful as Steffens, and to help La Follette in one of the most vicious campaigns they have ever witnessed. Almost every one of these journalists wrote favorable reviews of La Follette. They published many articles in widely-read publications such as Collier’s Weekly, Outlook, Harper’s Weekly, and Review of Reviews. These stories not only brought Wisconsin over to La Follette’s side, but also the entire nation, with the Stalwart papers now trying to find ways to claim these journalist had been greatly misled by the progressive leader. (Bella Case, 185)

With the public’s opinion now moving back to favor La Follette, the only remaining obstacle to his reelection was the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling on the State Ex Rel. Cook et al v Houser, Secretary of State case. On October 5, 1904, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of La Follette, claiming the rightful convention was the one that was endorsed by the Secretary of State, who was Mr. Houser. Since Mr. Houser signed the original convention proceedings, the bolter convention had no legal grounds to claim to be the regular convention. The court did make a point that the Republican National Committees ruling on the RNC delegates was not taken into consideration, and the
Wisconsin Court had no legal authority to decide which delegates were to sit at the National Convention. (*State Ex Rel. Cook et al v Houser, Secretary of State*)

This ruling all but assured La Follette of his reelection, with the Stalwarts now scrambling to figure out how to prevent La Follette from winning again. Most Stalwarts decided the only way possible to beat La Follette was to vote for George W. Peck, the Democratic candidate, while others chose to continue to run former governor, Edward Scofield, the Stalwart candidate as a third-party option after their previous choice, S.A. Cook decided to withdraw from the race. Most Stalwarts knew that this vote had no chance of winning, and campaigned for the Democrat candidate George Peck, the former Mayor of Milwaukee. (Philipp, 75)
8) The Election, Achievements, and Failures

With the Stalwarts rushing to find a way to defeat La Follette, the Governor continued to give speeches across the state right up to Election Day. He did not change his speeches to reflect the Supreme Court’s decision, nor the support he received from the muckrakers’ articles, but instead he continued to campaign for loyal state senators and representatives, knowing that he would need a majority to secure the passage of his railroad regulation reforms. (Speeches October 1-November 7, Microfilm Reel 148)

Throughout his campaign La Follette had made trips to every corner of the state, from the German populated Northern section to the Norwegian, lumber industry of the Western section. He attempted to get the Lutheran Germans to understand his policies, and show he was not a socialist candidate, because their immigration to the United States may in part have been based on a desire to distance themselves from socialist trends in their home country. He attempted to appeal to the voters in Milwaukee sympathetic to socialism, without making the Norwegians resent his appealing to the radicals in the big city. He tried to get the railroad employees to trust him when he made claims on behalf of his railroad regulation that it did not endanger their jobs, and to prove to the Green Bay dairyman that, even though he drove a car around the state, he still understood what hardships the blue collar farmer had to face with in the rural farmlands of Wisconsin.

Although La Follette was worried about his own reelection, he also was concerned about the success of the direct primary bill, and about securing victories across the state legislative districts in order to go into the next legislative session with a majority of reform candidates to finish what he started.
The results of the election were bittersweet for La Follette. He won reelection as governor, and the voters approved the direct primary referendum. However, La Follette and his supporters were disappointed in the amount of support both he, and the direct primary received.

His direct primary referendum succeeded in passing, with 130,699 votes in favor of the law, compared to only 80,192 against. All but fifteen of the states seventy-one counties voted in favor of the referendum. The two counties that heavily opposed the law, Dodge and Jefferson, were Conservative Democratic strongholds, with both refusing the referendum by nearly 1,500 votes, while the other thirteen counties were at most 200 votes from going in the primary’s favor. The largest demographic that opposed the direct primary referendum was the large Lutheran German population in the northern region of the state. (Rogan, 69) They saw the direct primary as a threat to their personal liberties, and believed the Stalwart argument regarding a loss of party communication. The Germans believed that the current convention system allowed their voice to be heard, and feared that the direct primary would make the candidates rely more heavily on the southern region of the state, and the densely populated cities. They also feared the very real threat of anti-German attacks from the heavily English, Scandinavian, and Catholic population in the state, similar to the attacks to their way of life they faced in the early 1890’s with the school language law. (Anonymous in Marathon County to La Follette, August 1904, Microfilm Reel, 75)

What was surprising, however, was that only 210,891 votes were cast regarding the direct primary, while the total voter turnout was 449,560. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1905) It is unknown why nearly half of the voters declined to cast a vote for or against
the referendum, but the speculation by the La Follette campaign was that Stalwart and Big Business coercion made some employees fear a vote in favor would become known to their bosses, and so decided to not vote at all. (Hoard to La Follette, November 15, 1904, Microfilm Reel 77) However, the direct primary referendum proved to be a major benefit for La Follette, with there being a strong correlation (0.88) between votes for the direct primary and for La Follette. (Rogin, 69)

Although La Follette was all but certain of his reelection, he was unsure of how much support he would have. With the split in the Republican party, La Follette was not just going against the Democrat party machine, but also the former machine leaders of his own party. The 1904 election showed La Follette of just how much damage the party’s civil war caused his campaign, with the results presenting a much closer outcome than he would have liked. Although he still had 227,253 (50.5%) votes in his favor, compared to just 176,301 (39.2%) for the Democrat, Peck, and 12,136 (2.7%) for the Stalwart, Scofield, with the remaining 7.5% being split between numerous other candidate who represented socialist and prohibitionist causes, La Follette saw a decline in the plurality of his votes from 102,745 in the 1900 election (the last presidential election year), to a plurality of only 50,952 in 1904. While his plurality declined, the total amount of votes cast in the election increased from 440,897 in 1900 to 449,560, making the decrease in the proportion of his votes seem as though his popularity was not as high as it once was. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1905)

Another surprise for La Follette was the number of votes that he received compared to the Republican President, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt received 280,164 (64%) votes in Wisconsin, having won all but two of the state’s seventy-one counties, the
two being Dodge and Jefferson, with Jefferson only giving the Democratic Presidential candidate, Alton Parker, who received a total of 124,107 (28%) votes, a 139 vote plurality, and Dodge giving him a 757 plurality. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1905)

Roosevelt’s ability to win nearly every county, while La Follette lost ten, was blamed by the *Free Press* on the Stalwarts supporting Roosevelt, but opposing La Follette. The Stalwarts were believed to have been able to sway enough support from La Follette in the counties of Crawford, Manitowoc, and Winnebago, where La Follette was able to win in 1902, but lost in 1904. Manitowoc was the biggest loss for La Follette, in 1902, he had a 1,380 plurality, but in 1904, the voters gave the Democrat Peck a 712 plurality. (*Free Press*, November 15, 1904, Microfilm Reel 77)

While he lost ten counties throughout the state in 1904, six of the ten counties had supported the Democrat candidate in the 1902 election, with Dodge and Jefferson being the two Democrat strongholds, and among the most conservative counties in the state, he also lost Washington, Kewaunee, Fond du Lac, Door, and Calumet counties. The majority of his losses came from the conservative catholic, dairy reliant region in the Mid-Eastern section of the state. These dairy farmers depended on the railroad industry for transporting their products across the nation, and feared any changes to the way the system ran. La Follette campaigned heavily in this region, but his use of the automobile to travel caused him harm, since the dairy farmers viewing the automobile as a rich, city man’s means of transportation. With La Follette traveling along the wagon roads using a car, the farmers were led to believe the Stalwarts’ claims of his gross extravagance and believed the proposed railroad regulations would cause their taxes to rise in order to fund the city roadway improvements. (*Janesville Daily Gazette*, November 15, 1904)
Although he only lost ten of the state’s seventy-one counties, he saw that the large shifts in votes that went to him in the 1902 election, now swing to the Democratic candidate in 1904. In eight counties, La Follette saw his plurality decrease to a fraction of the margin he received in 1902. Columbia, Walworth, Grant, Green, La Crosse, Rock, and Sauk all saw his support decline by nearly a thousand votes each. All of these counties were located in the southern and Southwestern region of the state, where employment consisted mainly of agricultural jobs that depended on the railroads for the shipping of their goods. They were also the oldest settled regions of the state, and thus had a long political history that gave the Stalwarts their power. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1905) These counties composed the districts responsible for voting into the state legislature the candidates who promised to support the La Follette Republican Party pledge, but once in office turned away from their pledge. This is the region of the state where the use of his roll call strategy hurt La Follette the most. A number of the Stalwarts were well liked in these districts, and by personally attacking them, many voters believed La Follette was attempting to replace the Stalwart candidate with his own political machine. (Free Press, November 21, 1904, Microfilm Reel 77)

With the decline in support throughout the state by his own party, La Follette was able to survive with support from Populist Democrats throughout the state, being able to win over two counties, while also increasing his plurality in several others. Langlade and Taylor County were two German, and agrarian, heavily Democratic counties in the Northern region of the state. La Follette’s gains in these regions was attributed to his ability to convince enough of the German labor population he was not a socialist, nor was
he associated with the xenophobic Republicans who voted for the 1890 law which outlawed German-speaking education in the State. (Wisconsin Blue Book, 1905)

It was not just La Follette’s ability to win Democratic counties that secured his victory, however, as he was also able to increase his majority in a number of Republican counties by a large margin, with reform-minded Democrats responsible for the increase in his numbers. Similar to the ability to win the two Democratic counties, the increase in votes came from the large poor, agrarian support, who trusted La Follette and his calls for regulating the railroad industry, which would decrease their cost of shipping their products. (Rogin, 89)

More than just succeeding in being reelected, La Follette was finally able to secure a majority for reform in the legislature, which was able to pass the important railroad regulation in the 1905 legislative session. By having a reform-majority legislature, La Follette received on his desk one of the strongest regulatory bills in the nation. The bill gave the newly commissioned Railroad Regulatory Commission the power not only to control the rates of shipping, which were capped at a 6% profit limit, but also gave the commission the ability to control services and to make a complete physical valuation of all the railroad property within the state. (Autobiography, 146)

Within the first year of its operation, the Railroad Commission was able to reduce transportation charges by over $2,000,000. The commission did not just decrease the rates throughout the state, but by researching and comparing the cost and routes used by the railroads, they found that some regions of the state were not being charged enough, and decided to raise the cost of shipping in some locations to ensure a profit for the railroad companies. By adjusting the rates to make them equal, the commission was able
to increase the profits of the industries net earnings by 18.41%. (Wisconsin Central Railway Commission Report, Microfilm Reel 77) This increase in earnings was shown to be attributed directly to the reduction in rates, which caused a nearly 20% increase in the amount of shipping passes bought by ship farmers and manufacturers products. (Autobiography, 150-51)

La Follette was most proud of the commission’s ability to restrict the use of rate rebates by the railroads to businesses and politicians who could benefit their companies. The committee’s research showed the state’s railroads paid in a total of $5,992,731.58 in rebates over the years of 1898 to 1903, amounting to nearly $1,000,000 a year in “lost” revenue for the companies. La Follette gave speeches after the commission’s discovery of the total cost of rebates, and used the cost to show why the committee was so important to the state, and describe the real reasons why the Stalwarts and industry were against the creation of such commission. (Wisconsin Central Railway Commission Report, Microfilm Reel 77)

In addition to the railroad regulation, La Follette was able to secure the passage of a variety of other progressive bills in the 1905 legislative session, including increasing the state’s forest reserves to the levels of New York and Pennsylvania. Conservation was not a major issue during his campaigns, but La Follette knew the state needed to protect the heavily deforested regions from a situation where all the state’s lumber resources would be completely used up. Fearing that the lumber industry which was relied heavily upon might be forced out of the state, La Follette believed that, by restricting the amount of trees harvested each year, he would allow the state to maintain a sustainable industry for years to come. (Autobiography, 155)
Other important reforms, enacted in 1905 by La Follette were the program of construction of numerous power dams across the state, reorganizing the state banks to prevent collapses from taking place, enacting civil service reforms which allowed men and women equal footing for careers, and strengthening the state’s insurance industry, which prevented fraud and increasing premiums from harming the citizens.

(Autobiography, 155-56)

Throughout the entire 1904 campaign, La Follette showed the public his honesty and commitment to its own welfare. Even with all of the Stalwart attacks, La Follette was still able to overcome the wealth and power of the corrupt political machine and enact some of the most successful legislation the nation has ever seen. However, La Follette was only able to overcome these attacks with the help of powerful, respected politicians and the growing muckraking journalist movement, in addition to his own vigorous campaigning and speaking tours. Without his dedication and his refusal to settle for any compromise bill that would put the interests of the political machines and big businesses before the citizens, the entire Progressive movement might have been stalled at its beginning. La Follette proved to the nation that it was possible for an honest person to succeed in a powerful public office, and that as long as the candidate can overcome the powerful forces attempting to prevent reforms, the public will would be able to succeed.

Without his successful reelection in 1904, La Follette’s political career might have been over before he had the opportunity to serve the citizens of the United States. By winning the governorship again in 1904, La Follette was put in the position to nominate himself to fill the empty junior senate seat vacated by Senator Joseph Quarrels in 1904. However, if he had lost the election, that seat would have been filled by a
machine politician, selected by either the Stalwarts, or the Democrats choice, and La Follette would have had to find another way to propel himself into national politics.
9) Conclusion

A month after being sworn into his third term as governor, La Follette announced his intentions to fill the empty senate seat vacated by Senator Quarrels. The State legislature quickly elected him to the post, but La Follette refused to take the seat until all of his reforms were enacted. He waited until the 1906 session began to resign his post as governor and take the senate seat in Washington, where he would remain for the rest of his life. He encouraged his Lieutenant Governor, James Davidson, to succeed him, with the condition that Davidson would continue to fight for the citizens of the state. (Unger, 151)

In the Senate, La Follette became the leader of the Progressive cause. This momentum brought him to make the decision to run for president in the 1912 election. Believing that the election had no true Progressive voice in Taft, Roosevelt, or the candidates running for the Democratic nominee, La Follette began campaigning as the voice of the citizens. The entrance of Theodore Roosevelt into the race ruined La Follette’s chance of winning the presidency, and dimmed his reputation for a few years. However, he would rebuild his influence in the senate by attacking President Wilson and his war policies, and by leading the investigation into President Harding and his corrupt administration, popularly known as the Teapot Dome Scandal. (Thelen, 159, 168)

With his reputation at an all-time high, La Follette attempted another shot at the Presidency in 1924. Although he showed a strong performance, being the third most successful 3rd-party candidate for president in the United States history, receiving 16.65 of the popular vote, and winning Wisconsin’s 13 electoral college votes, but he ultimately lost to the Republican incumbent, Calvin Coolidge, who received 54.05 of the popular
vote, and Democrat nominee, John Davis, who received 28.8% of the popular vote. The strain of a vigorous campaign is believed to have caused his health to deteriorate quickly after the election, and La Follette passed away on June 18, 1925. Although the nation lost a great hero that day, his influence is still felt even now. While the Progressive Era brought a complete change in the way the public expected the government to perform its duties, La Follette also brought a shift in the way the public expected their representatives to govern. A man who brought honesty and passion to public life was responsible for a number of things of which we take advantage to this day, from the idea of a progressive Tax system to the ability to select our own candidate in the general election, so that the reforms of La Follette have been immensely successful. However, without his success in gaining reelection and securing the passage of these reforms in 1904 and 1905, the name of Robert La Follette might have been just another minor figure for the history books.
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