

La Follette and the Progressive Machine in Wisconsin

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To most people interested in history or government the study of political machines has held a peculiar fascination. Since the days of Lincoln Steffens and his fellow "Muck-rakers" the word "machine" has connoted sordid politics, graft, and the clever political manipulations of a "Boss" William M. Tweed or Mayor Frank Hague. In contrast, most reform movements have been amateurish and unstable efforts which usually broke up in failure after one or two elections. On those rare occasions when successful reform organizations have been welded together they have developed techniques of political astuteness, leadership, and discipline not unlike the traditional machines. Such organizations have, in truth, been political machines, but with the difference that they operated in the public interest and for the public good.

Certainly one of the most successful and dramatic of such state political reform organizations in recent history was that of Robert M. La Follette, Sr. and his fellow Progressives in Wisconsin during the years from 1900 to 1914. Here the Progressives developed a powerful political machine, dominated state elections for a dozen years, and enacted a series of sweeping political, economic, and social reforms which attracted the attention of the entire nation and were widely copied. The personal success of La Follette, himself, was even more spectacular. From 1900 until his death in 1925 the voters of Wisconsin bestowed upon him every office that he sought:—three terms as governor, four terms as United States Senator, and on two occasions, the vote of the state for president.

Such continuing success was not the result of accident. It was the product of a close-knit organization, adequate financing, a popular program, and dynamic leadership. In short, the Progressive reforms in Wisconsin were made possible by the functioning of a well-oiled machine under the direction of "Fighting Bob" La Follette.¹ A somewhat detailed analysis of

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¹ See Lincoln Steffens, "Wisconsin: A State Where the People Have Restored Representative Government—The Story of Governor La Follette," in *McClure's Magazine* (62 vols., New York, 1893-1929), XXIII (1904), 564-79.

the composition and functioning of this Progressive machine should prove rewarding.

The Republican combination which had elected La Follette to the governorship in 1900 was neither a progressive nor a reform organization. In addition to La Follette and his personal supporters it included the remnants of the old Philetus Sawyer machine in Milwaukee and the local organizations of most of the conservative Republican congressmen.² The campaign of 1900 had been in marked contrast with La Follette's earlier efforts where his speeches bristled with denunciations of bosses and their methods and he had identified himself as an "antimachine" candidate.³ But such campaigns twice had been badly beaten and a realization that he must have wider organized support and at least a truce with the old party bosses led to the formation of the coalition which waged the successful "harmony campaign" in 1900. But this "harmony" coalition broke apart almost as soon as the new legislature convened and each group bitterly charged the other with double dealing and lack of good faith. As he saw his entire legislative program collapse, La Follette began to draw the administration forces into a close corporation. These became known as the "half-breeds" and formed the nucleus for the organization which later developed into the powerful Progressive Republican party.⁴ This Progressive combination presented a mosaic of many groups and individuals with varying demands and interests. Although there were significant defections in later years, the party endured and functioned as a disciplined reform force for more than a decade.

The central figure in the Progressive organization was La Follette. "Little Bob" was a born campaigner. He possessed that magnetic quality which inspired devotion on the part of his admirers. Few men were neutral in regard to La Follette; one was either a faithful follower or a bitter opponent. "Fighting Bob" was a dynamic orator. He had the dramatic intuition which enabled him to gain and hold the sympathy of his audi-

² Granville D. Jones to James A. Stone, July 6, 1900, Stone Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; also see Robert S. Maxwell, "La Follette and the Election of 1900," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Madison, 1917-), XXXV (1951), 23-29, 68-71.

³ Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, February 23, 1897.

⁴ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography, A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1913), 244-45; Emanuel Philipp, *Political Reform in Wisconsin* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1910), 31-33, 41-42.

ence. In discussing issues, La Follette's characteristic method was to reduce every question to its simplest terms and to consider problems as black or white:—they were either right or wrong. He also refused to scatter his oratorical dynamite over a multiplicity of issues, but would concentrate on one or two proposals. These he would present with a driving, crusading zeal that completely captured his audiences. Although his speeches were long, they were seldom, if ever dull. La Follette combined logical arguments, statistical evidence, emotional appeal, and occasional humorous asides in such proportions that people would drive for miles and stay all day to hear "Our Bob" speak.⁵

La Follette was also a vigorous party organizer. In all aspects of political life he was a strict disciplinarian, who demanded complete loyalty from his supporters. He, in turn, would strongly promote the cause of his true friends and did not hesitate to drive himself to the very verge of collapse in their behalf. Against opponents, he was equally energetic. Many of the stalwarts charged that he campaigned against them ruthlessly, in every season, until he at last had "hung their hides on the wall."⁶

In every essential, La Follette was a "reform boss." He believed unquestioningly in himself and his cause, and above all, in the ultimate triumph of right and justice. As he learned the tricks of the political trade, his machinations became as professionally astute as those of any of the old-line politicians. This only added to their hatred of La Follette and his "Bobollettes."

Closely associated with La Follette and his reform efforts were Albert R. Hall and the remnants of the old Populist forces which had fought unsuccessfully for control of the state during the 1890's. Hall was known as a former Granger, an Alliance man, and a railroad baiter. He had been the author of the "Anti-Pass" Act of 1899. His followers came largely from the less prosperous rural regions in central and northwestern Wisconsin. They were embattled, bitter, and pessimistic. This group had been long-time La Follette supporters and formed one wing of the Progressive organization.⁷

⁵ Personal interview with William T. Evjue, Madison, Wisconsin, June 15, 1948; personal interview with John M. Nelson, Madison, June 16, 1948.

⁶ E. W. Keyes to Marvin Hughitt, October 2, 1904, Keyes Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

⁷ Albert R. Hall to Nils P. Haugen, May 7, 1900, La Follette to Haugen, May 11, 1900, Haugen Papers, Wisconsin State Historical So-

The Progressive Republicans of Wisconsin also had an intellectual base. La Follette was a graduate and an active alumnus of the state university. He was a classmate and close personal friend of Charles R. Van Hise, president of the university from 1903 to 1918. In contrast to the traditional "ivory tower" attitude in academic institutions the university professors became active participants in the initiation and administration of many of the Progressive reforms in Wisconsin. Inevitably, the university became closely identified with the Progressive Republican administration and the personal program of Robert La Follette. Among the prominent Progressives were many nationally known scholars, among them Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, and Edward A. Ross. The Saturday Lunch Club, a weekly event during the legislative sessions at Madison, provided an opportunity for a regular informal exchange of ideas between the state administration and the professors.⁸ The list of faculty members who served on the various boards and commissions of the state during the Progressive era was long and impressive. No less than forty-six were serving both the university and the state in 1911.⁹ This use of "experts" in government was a basic part of the political philosophy of both La Follette and Van Hise. In consequence the number of university graduates in state positions steadily increased and the opportunity for college-trained young men to enter useful public service tended to become identified with the Progressive cause.

There was strong support for the Progressive Republicans in the ranks of organized labor in all of the urban centers of the state. La Follette's initial appeal to these groups was an individual one based on reform, democracy, and good citizenship. Especially friendly to La Follette were the members of the railway brotherhoods and other railroad workers who saw in the Progressive program the promise of greater security for themselves and the enforcement of greater responsibility for their well-being upon the employers. In Milwaukee, the chief industrial center of the state, the Progressives had to battle not only the stalwarts, but also the strongly entrenched Democratic machine and the rising Social Democrats. Yet by

⁸ M. A. Lien to James O. Davidson, August 27, 1900, Davidson Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; *La Follette's Autobiography*, 32.

⁹ Charles McCarthy, *The Wisconsin Idea* (New York, 1912), 313-17.

means of vigorous organization, personal contacts, and concentrated appeals to workingmen as voters and citizens, La Follette and his successors were able to ensure for themselves at least a proportionate share of the Milwaukee vote.¹⁰ Progressive support came not only from the middle class areas of the city but also from the traditional workingmen's wards where the chief competition came from the Social Democrats under Emil Seidel and Victor Berger. Eventually labor, both organized and unorganized, benefited enormously as the Progressive program expanded to include employers' liability laws, safety legislation, workman's compensation, state employment officers, and the industrial commission. La Follette's known sympathy to the cause of labor and his efforts on both the state and national levels to improve working conditions throughout all industries made the Progressive cause popular among the workingmen throughout the state.

Among the widely diversified ethnic groups that reside in Wisconsin, the Norwegians, and to a lesser extent the Swedes, have been notable for their interest in public affairs. The Progressives industriously cultivated this potential source of votes and many Norwegians became prominent members of the reform movement. La Follette, himself, had lived in a Norwegian neighborhood as a boy and spoke the language to some extent. "Our Bob" was a great favorite among them and he spared no effort to retain their friendship and affection.

The list of Scandinavians who played a notable part in the rise of Progressivism in Wisconsin provides a significant key to their contribution. Doubtless, the first in point of service was Nils P. Haugen whose work with the tax commission constituted one of the greatest accomplishments of the Progressive era. A prominent political figure himself, Haugen was a long-time supporter of La Follette and had been largely responsible for his success in the Scandinavian areas in the election of 1900.¹¹ He had great influence with his fellow Norwegians and that influence was turned into votes for La Follette. Even the staunchest stalwarts conceded that this region offered "quite a barren soil on which to sow anti-La Follette

¹⁰ *La Follette's Autobiography*, 270; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, February 11 and March 14, 1902; *The Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1901, p. 301; 1903, p. 420; 1905, p. 338.

¹¹ La Follette to Haugen, May 7, 11, 12, 16, and 25, 1900; F. W. Walker to Haugen, October 16, 1900, Haugen Papers.

seed."¹² Also prominent among the early supporters of La Follette was Norwegian-born James O. Davidson. "Yim" Davidson counted himself an original La Follette man who had "fought, bled and died for Bob" for two campaigns before 1900.¹³ Davidson, seemingly a perennial officeholder, was state treasurer in 1900 and later served as lieutenant-governor and succeeded La Follette as governor.

Among the younger Scandinavians who campaigned vigorously to deliver the vote to La Follette were Herman L. Ekern, Irving L. Lenroot, and John M. Nelson. All of them were promoted to important state and federal positions as the Progressives completed their sweep to power.¹⁴ In spite of individual defections the Norwegians in Wisconsin represented an almost solid bloc of votes for the Progressives in each of their campaigns. The careful tending of this potential election crop was one of the important functions of La Follette's new Progressive machine. The harvest was seldom disappointing.

Unlike the Scandinavians, the Germans of Wisconsin, numerically the state's largest ethnic group, were individualistic in politics. Although quite idealistic about representative government, most of the citizens of German origin were equally conservative and appeared to lack the political solidarity that characterized other groups such as the Norwegians.¹⁵ Yet both Progressives and stalwarts wooed the German vote in each campaign with varying success. Individually, many citizens of German ancestry held important posts in the Progressive organization. At least one prominent German name appeared on every Progressive ticket during the entire period. Among the persons of German descent who played a significant part in the Progressive reforms were Insurance Commissioner Zeno M. Host, Republican State Secretary Henry Cochems, and Normal School Regent, Theodore Kronshage.

The powerful and rapidly growing dairy interests of Wisconsin also provided strong support for the new Progressive machine. Former Governor William D. Hoard, President of

¹² John C. Gaveney to E. W. Keyes, June 20, 1901, Keyes Papers.

¹³ James O. Davidson to T. W. Buell, November 15, 1900, Davidson Papers.

¹⁴ Davidson to P. A. Monason, February 12, 1903, Davidson Papers.

¹⁵ Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1948), 262-63.

the Wisconsin Dairyman's Association and Editor of the weekly *Hoard's Dairyman*, had been a close friend and adviser of the young La Follette. Because of La Follette's own farm background, his known interest in scientific farming, and his vigorous support of the Agriculture College, he had many loyal friends and workers among the farmers in every section of the state. In turn, the general advance of scientific farming methods, including the lucrative dairy industry, was little short of phenomenal. It, perhaps, is significant that dairy farming became the dominant industry in the state during the years of Progressive ascendancy. In any case, La Follette could count on a loyal and powerful following among the forward-looking dairy farmers of Wisconsin.¹⁶

And finally, there was the Progressives' angel, Isaac Stephenson. "Uncle Ike," with his vast timber holdings and numerous business and manufacturing interests, could provide the funds necessary to offset the resources of the stalwarts. Stephenson long had been influential in the Republican party and was a heavy contributor to the party war chest. He had served in the assembly and in the national House of Representatives, and on three occasions, had been a delegate to the Republican National Convention. It was no secret that Stephenson wished to climax his career with a term in the United States Senate. His prominence and generosity to the party entitled him, he felt, to this honor. He was disillusioned and indignant when in 1899 his supposed friends in the legislature gave the plum to Joseph V. Quarles.¹⁷

But it was not simply pique that caused Isaac Stephenson to desert the stalwarts and come over to the reform group. He felt that the "ring" was controlling the state entirely in its own narrowly selfish interest. He thought that the railroads exercised too large a control over the political life of the state. An old frontiersman himself, Stephenson had sympathy for the underdog and had early admired Bob La Follette's plucky fight against the stalwarts.¹⁸ Instead of being the sole cause

¹⁶ *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1940*, pp. 185-96; for a laudatory account of the relation of the Progressives and farmers in Wisconsin see Frederic C. Howe, *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* (New York, 1912), 174 f.

¹⁷ Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life, 1829-1915* (Chicago, 1915), 190 ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 214-15.

of "Uncle Ike's" disaffection, the election of Quarles to the Senate was simply the final determining incident which caused Stephenson to seek at least a moderate reform in the state government.

According to Stephenson, La Follette had been reluctant to attempt the campaign in 1900. He had protested that "his health was impaired, that he had no money to defray the expenses of a campaign and that the time was not propitious . . . for a concerted effort." However, when a plan of campaign was drawn up and Stephenson had advanced twenty-five hundred dollars towards initial expenses, Bob's reluctance, he recalled, vanished. The next year Stephenson provided the party with an effective and much needed Progressive paper when he established the Milwaukee *Free Press* as a large, metropolitan, morning daily which was capable of combating the attacks of the stalwart owned Milwaukee *Sentinel*.¹⁹ The *Free Press* probably was never a profitable venture, but it became a valiant crusader for the Progressive cause. La Follette praised the *Free Press*, according to Stephenson, as the "incorruptible advocate of the kind of government that Lincoln proclaimed on the field of Gettysburg." He referred to the paper as "Mr. Stephenson's best monument" and called his continuing support of it "an act of patriotism."²⁰

Throughout the entire period of "Fighting Bob's" governorship, Stephenson was a heavy contributor to every campaign. His personal influence was not inconsiderable but it was his financial backing which made his support vital to the Progressive's cause. Not only did he help defray the expenses of the state-wide campaigns, but Stephenson was also ready to give for district and local races. The Stephenson checkbook was, in large part, responsible for the widespread distribution of literature and thorough canvass of voters that was a characteristic of La Follette's campaigns. "Uncle Ike" estimated that he had spent over five hundred thousand dollars to forward the Progressive cause and to secure the elections of La Follette and many of his lieutenants. "Without me," he commented, "the history of this achievement would have been a blank page."²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 215-19; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Free Press*, June 18, 1901.

²⁰ Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life*, 237, 239.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

All political machines are said to "run" on patronage. La Follette's organization was no exception. A large number of party workers found their ways into profitable jobs in the state administration. Clerks, oil inspectors, and factory inspectors performed dual service during the campaign season. Even the lists of temporary personnel, like state fair guards and ticket sellers, were culled in order to provide the greatest possible number of jobs for Progressive workers.²²

But by far the largest single group of part-time political workers for the Progressive cause were the state game wardens. So notorious became the activities of these so-called conservationists that their functions were a standing joke in the state press. For example, the Rice Lake *Leader* noted that the game wardens were "strolling around the state . . . hunting for men who will vote for La Follette at the next state convention." The *Grant County Witness* observed that the "game wardens are out on the road—for La Follette." The Hudson *Star-Times* quipped that "there should be a closed season" on the class of game that the wardens were seeking.²³

At election time the deputy wardens were especially active. The distribution of pamphlets, posters, and sample ballots became part of their function. In districts where close contests were expected, several deputies would work as a team, calling on the party members, getting out the vote, and even providing vehicles to take citizens to the polls.²⁴ As was to be expected, the stalwarts denounced the zeal of the game wardens as evidence of the corruption of the Progressive administration. The *Sentinel* charged that there were fifty to sixty deputy game wardens and thirty-five oil inspectors in the state, all engaged in political activity.²⁵

In truth the expenses of the game wardens and oil inspectors did climb rapidly during La Follette's three administrations. According to the state treasurer such costs more than tripled between 1900 and 1905. At the same time receipts also

²² John L. Fisher to Davidson, August 9, 1902; Davidson to H. A. Johnson, August 21, 1905, Davidson Papers; La Follette to Arthur Pugh, June 4, 1900, Pugh Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

²³ Rice Lake, Wisconsin, *Leader* (Barron County), January 16, 1902; *The Grant County Witness* (Platteville, Wisconsin), March 12, 1902; Hudson, Wisconsin, *Star-Times*, January 30, 1903.

²⁴ J. S. Johnson to Keyes, August 18, 1902; Hiram D. Fisher to Keyes, April 4, 1909, Keyes Papers.

²⁵ Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, January 29, 1902.

grew rapidly, almost equaling the increased expenditures.²⁶ Both the political activity and the expenses of the game wardens declined after La Follette was elected to the Senate. The Civil Service Act, passed that same year, partially curbed them but they remained a solid corps of administration supporters during the entire Progressive era. The increased efficiency of the enforcement of the game laws should not be overlooked. The large corps of wardens largely paid their own way through fines and licenses. Years afterward, in recalling the controversy over the game wardens during La Follette's governorship, former Congressman John M. Nelson smilingly admitted that the Progressives had used everybody and every device they could find in the scramble for votes,—“just as the stalwarts were doing.”²⁷

The Progressives also sought the support of “fair-minded” Democrats in all of their campaigns. The party nominating machinery, under both the convention and primary systems, was open to all interested persons and numerous Democrats participated in behalf of La Follette and the Progressive slate. It was estimated that the vote of such “fair-minded” Democrats offset the losses caused by bolting stalwarts.²⁸

These various elements of the Progressive organization were drawn together slowly during the years from 1901 to 1904. Although La Follette easily won a second term in the state election of 1902 against the stalwarts' “Eleventh Story League” and the conservative Democrats, it was recognized that this was only the preliminary struggle.²⁹ The decisive battle was yet to be fought, and both La Follette and the whole Progressive program would be the objects of an all-out attack in 1904.

The state election of 1904 provides an excellent example of La Follette's campaign techniques. This triumph proved to

²⁶ From \$125, in 1899 and \$37,000, in 1900 the disbursements for game wardens salaries and expenses rose to \$85,000 in 1904 and \$94,024.90 in 1905. *Biennial Report of the State Treasurer, 1900*, p. 49; 1902, p. 59; 1904, p. 64; *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1907*, pp. 671-72.

²⁷ Personal interview with John M. Nelson, June 16, 1948.

²⁸ *La Follette's Autobiography*, 343-47; Philipp, *Political Reform in Wisconsin*, 62.

²⁹ Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, November 5, 1902; *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1903*, pp. 447-65.

be the key victory in the Progressives' rise to power and provided a rather dramatic illustration of the machine in action.

The maneuvers for the control of the next Republican convention began as soon as the legislative session of 1903 was over. The "shock troops" of the Progressive army carefully canvassed every county, saw every voter and mended the political fences with the local party workers. The clerical staff prepared and distributed over sixteen hundred thousand separate pieces of mail to the voters throughout the state.³⁰ La Follette himself, campaigned through the summer on the Chatauqua platform, at county fairs, and on holiday occasions. Candidates were groomed in the several districts to unseat stalwart incumbents in the local offices and state legislature. Stalwart members of Congress, including erstwhile ally Joseph Babcock, were the objects of an all-out purge effort.³¹

La Follette left no stone unturned to ensure victory. He feared that if an anti-Progressive candidate was elected, all of the gains of the previous legislature would be lost. The referendum on the direct primary, to be submitted to the people in the general election, might be defeated. With the approval of Stephenson, Hoard, Hall and others, he agreed to become a candidate for a third term and plunged into the campaign with his usual vigor, personally appearing in every county possible.³²

The contest for delegates was sharp and bitter, for the stalwarts were united in their opposition to the "Madison Dictator." In many counties, disputed elections and two rival delegations resulted. Even such a veteran machine manipulator as former boss Elisha Keyes was astonished at the resources and competence of the administration forces. In the scramble for delegates, no effort was spared, no delegation was conceded, no contest was abandoned by either side in their efforts to build up a majority at the convention. Both Progressives and stalwarts used all means and measures at hand to ensure the success of their cause.³³

³⁰ Philipp, *Political Reform in Wisconsin*, 55; *La Follette's Autobiography*, 321.

³¹ Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, January 20, 1903; J. W. Babcock to Keyes, February 23, 1904, Keyes Papers.

³² Madison, *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 12, 1904; Keyes to John C. Spooner, March 13, 1904, Keyes Papers.

³³ Keyes to H. A. Taylor, April 21, 1904, Keyes Papers; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, May 6, 1904; Madison, *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 14, 1904.

As the state convention approached, the rival newspapers claimed victory for their candidates. The partisans on each side denounced the opposition for not yielding gracefully. The *Sentinel* charged that the La Follette supporters would attempt to "steal the convention." The *Free Press* made a similar charge against the stalwarts.³⁴

The La Follette genius for organization was nowhere better displayed than at the "Gymnasium Convention" of 1904. It was evident that the stalwarts would make a bitter, last-ditch, no-quarter fight to control the organization of the convention. As neither side had a clear, undisputed majority this control hinged on the decisions concerning the disputed delegations. The state central committee, however, would have to make a preliminary ruling on each case in order to organize the convention on a temporary basis. As the state central committee had a majority of Progressives and was headed by General George E. Bryant, State Superintendent of Public Property and long-time friend of La Follette, this temporary organization was conceded to favor the Governor. The whole Progressive machine was determined that this temporary organization would become the permanent one and the stalwarts would not be permitted to seize the convention by any trick, parliamentary stratagem, or force. The area for delegates was carefully fenced off. Special guards were employed, consisting of former university football players, professional athletes, state prison guards, and other husky characters. A barbed-wire fence was erected outside the building to force the delegates to enter single file. Special delegates' badges were printed and countersigned to prevent any but the committee approved delegates from appearing on the floor of the convention. The entire procedure for conducting the crucial first session of the convention was typed for the convenience of the seventy-two-year-old Bryant, whose duty it was to call the session to order. The administration left nothing to chance. All nominating and seconding speeches were assigned, and all persons to make motions were designated. The committee on contests (to be appointed by the chair) was listed, and even a special committee on emergencies was named. The old Civil

³⁴ Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, May 11 and 16, 1904; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Free Press*, May 15, 1904.

War veteran could keep the convention proceeding according to plan without even taking his eyes from his memorandum.³⁵

The stalwarts could expect to be voted down and counted out. Their effort to march on the university gymnasium with a band of strong-armed guards of their own was frustrated and they saw the convention organized with a Progressive majority, their own minority report voted down, and Irving Lenroot, an extreme La Follette partisan, installed as temporary chairman. The resulting "bolt" was anticipated by all factions. The stalwarts retired to the city opera house and, after rousing speeches by senators John C. Spooner and Quarles, nominated a whole slate of state officers including Samuel A. Cook for governor. This convention adjourned proclaiming itself the true Republican party in Wisconsin and denouncing La Follette and his machine.³⁶

After the withdrawal of the "bolters," the "Gymnasium Convention" proceeded to renominate La Follette and the other state officers with dispatch. The primary election law, to be voted upon in the November election, was recommended and the proposed railroad commission was endorsed. They adjourned after a crusading speech by "Fighting Bob" calling upon the party to complete the return of the state to the people and stand firm on the pledges of the platform.³⁷

The stalwarts took their case to the state supreme court in an effort to force the listing of their ticket as the regular Republican party in Wisconsin. The Progressives took their case to the people. The entire organization from the governor down to the youngest deputy game warden stumped the state and beat the bushes from the Mississippi to Marinette. In every county La Follette preached primary elections, a railroad commission, and the necessity for completing the job of reform. In many sections he would examine the records of the local state legislators by means of the "roll call" which had become famous as a La Follette campaign device. In La

³⁵ "Memorandum of General George E. Bryant," Bryant Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Madison, *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 18 and 19, 1904; *La Follette's Autobiography*, 323-26; Philipp, *Political Reform in Wisconsin*, 75.

³⁶ Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, May 20, 1904; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Free Press*, May 20, 1904; Keyes to Taylor, May 19, 1904, Keyes Papers.

³⁷ Madison, *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 20, 1904.

Crosse, for example, he denounced both Assembly Speaker George H. Ray and State Senator John C. Gaveney for their records in the past sessions of the legislature. These men, he contended, had been elected by the people to vote for them; instead they had voted for the railroads.³⁸ The Progressive campaign was not merely a fight for the governorship. The organization supported the efforts of all Progressive candidates down to and including the local offices. Soon even the staunchest stalwarts conceded that their party was unlikely to defeat La Follette and acknowledged that their only hope was to have Cook declared the regular Republican candidate. Elisha Keyes gloomily confided that everything depended on the court decision, but confessed that he had little hope. "Bob," he conceded, was the biggest campaigner ever developed in the Western country. He was "touring the country in a red devil of an automobile" like a whirlwind and his lieutenants were working night and day to get out the vote for the Progressive ticket.³⁹

The briefs for the disputed "Gymnasium Convention" case included scores of affidavits, the testimony of numerous witnesses, and the comprehensive arguments of the respective counsels. This mass of material threatened to swamp the court under a mountain of conflicting claims. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court of Wisconsin accepted jurisdiction over the case and hastened to reach a decision before the November election rendered its findings of historical interest only. At last, just a month before the election, the high court handed down a decision in favor of the defendant and dismissed the suit. In effect, the majority of the court determined that the state central committee was exercising its proper powers when it determined which delegations to seat in the convention and Secretary of State Walter Houser was within his authority when he declined to certify the contesting delegation as the Republican party in Wisconsin.⁴⁰

Candidate Cook at once withdrew from the race and the

³⁸ Keyes to Hughitt, October 2, 1904, Keyes Papers; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Sentinel*, September 28, 1904. Both Ray and Gaveney were "purged" in the ensuing election.

³⁹ Taylor to Keyes, July 6 and August 15, 1904; Keyes to Taylor, September 13, 1904, Keyes Papers.

⁴⁰ *Wisconsin ex rel. Cook et al. v. Walter L. Houser*, 122 Wisconsin, 534; 100 *North Western Reports*, 864 (1904).

stalwarts were forced to substitute former Governor Edward Scofield in his place. The party was placed on the ballot as the "National Republican Party" but the organization of the "Opera House" group collapsed so completely that they privately urged their supporters to vote for the Democratic candidates as the most likely way to defeat La Follette.⁴¹

The resulting election was close. In a presidential year when the Republican national ticket swept to a one hundred fifty thousand landslide majority in Wisconsin, La Follette polled a plurality of a bare fifty thousand. He lost fourteen of the state's seventy-one counties and ran behind the rest of his ticket by forty to fifty thousand votes. Nevertheless, it was a great victory. The primary election law was approved by more than sixty per cent of the voters and La Follette supporters won complete control of the incoming legislature. The Scofield ticket polled only twelve thousand votes.⁴² "Fighting Bob" La Follette had at last broken the stalwart opposition. So completely did they disintegrate that they did not reappear as a force in Wisconsin politics for a decade.

The Progressive machine in Wisconsin had been built from many diverse elements. Old Populists, idealistic crusaders, university intellectuals, Scandinavian and farming groups, urban workers, professional officeholders, ambitious youngsters, and a disgruntled multimillionaire had combined to rout the old political forces and take over the entire machinery of the state. The way was now open for the enactment of the comprehensive body of political, social, and economic reforms which have since become identified with the "Wisconsin Idea." This union of soil, shop, and seminar was cemented by the magnetic personality and inspiration of "Fighting Bob" La Follette. Under him the organization became a powerful cohesive force so that behind the idealism and popular appeal of the "Wisconsin Idea" lay the solid fact of a well-knit, efficient and at times ruthless political machine which was capable of controlling and disciplining its members, of producing impressive majorities at the polls, and of enacting its program into law. In spite of conflicting ambitions and personalities, this

⁴¹ Taylor to Keyes, October 8, 1904, Keyes Papers; Henry Casson to Henry C. Adams, October 22, 1904, Adams Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

⁴² *Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1905, pp. 366-82, 549.

machine continued for a dozen years to operate for reform in the public interest. Such was the Progressive Republican party of Wisconsin under the direction and leadership of Robert M. La Follette.