

AN EXAMINATION OF THE LA CROSSE PRESS AND THE
REPUBLICAN PARTY IN THE WISCONSIN ELECTION OF 1904

A Seminar Paper
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Teaching: History-Social Science

by
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May 1972

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN--LA CROSSE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

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I recommend acceptance of this seminar paper to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of this candidate's requirements for the degree Master of Science in Teaching: History-Social Science. The candidate has completed his oral seminar report.

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ABSTRACT

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The year 1904 produced a political battle in the Wisconsin Republican party that would affect the state's future for nearly a decade thereafter. The Republican party in Wisconsin was split into two factions in the late 1890's. Former Congressman Robert M. LaFollette's faction, the "insurgents" or "half-breeds" was opposed by the dominant Republican faction known as the "stalwarts." The 1904 gubernatorial campaign in the state of Wisconsin produced emotional factionalism in the state Republican party which spread into every community.

The purpose of this study is to examine the editorial opinion expressed in three La Crosse, Wisconsin newspapers during the gubernatorial campaign of 1904 and, in so doing, to determine the position taken by each paper concerning the state Republican party strife and the key issues of the campaign. The three newspapers are the La Crosse Chronicle, the La Crosse Leader-Press and the La Crosse Tribune.

A short overview of the 1904 campaign and election is followed by an examination of the editorial content of the

three newspapers during the period from January 14, 1904 to November 9, 1904. The examination revealed several tendencies. First, the Leader-Press maintained a neutral stand on the gubernatorial campaign, but endorsed the primary election law referendum. Second, the Chronicle supported the stalwart candidates and denounced the primary election law referendum. Third, the Tribune initially maintained an independent political opinion but eventually abandoned that position and supported the Democratic Party and its candidates. The Tribune argued that the primary election law referendum was not a political issue in the campaign.

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CHAPTER I

THE STUDY AND METHOD OF RESEARCH

I. THE STUDY

Statement of the purpose. It is the purpose of this study (1) to examine the editorial opinions expressed in the La Crosse Chronicle, the La Crosse Leader-Press, and the La Crosse Tribune from January 14, 1904 to November 9, 1904; (2) to indicate the position taken by each newspaper regarding the state Republican gubernatorial candidates; and (3) to indicate the stand taken by each newspaper concerning the key issues.

Importance of the study. The periodical press is a significant source that the historian has at his command to reconstruct a picture of the past. The editorials assist the historian in analyzing contemporary life and current opinion.¹ This study examines the editorial comment of three La Crosse newspapers during the gubernatorial campaign of 1904 with the purpose of giving the reader insight into political thought of La Crosse County during the 1904 campaign.

¹Lucy Maynard Salmon, The Newspaper and the Historian (New York, 1923), 470.

II. MATERIALS USED

Lucy Maynard Salmon's The Newspaper and the Historian emphasized the validity and methodology of the use of press accounts in historical analysis.

The writer found Herbert Marguillies' The Decline of the Progressive in Wisconsin and Edward N. Doan's The LaFollette's and the Wisconsin Idea useful for gaining an insight into the general atmosphere of the times.

Albert O. Barton's LaFollette's Winning of Wisconsin and Belle and Fola LaFollette's Robert M. LaFollette proved valuable as sources for a political account of the gubernatorial campaign and election of 1904.

For a general account of Wisconsin politics during this time the writer consulted James I. Clark, Robert M. LaFollette and Wisconsin Progressivism and Robert M. LaFollette's, LaFollette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences. Ellen Torelle's Political Philosophy of Robert LaFollette was a valuable source of LaFollette's speeches.

The writer examined microfilm copies of three La Crosse daily newspapers in fulfilling the major purpose of the study. The examination covered news and editorial content in the three newspapers from January 14 to November 9, 1904. The three newspapers were the La Crosse Leader-Press, edited by Roland B. Gellatt, the La Crosse Chronicle, edited by W. E. Barber, and the La Crosse Tribune, edited by Aaron M. Brayton.

III. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The study presents an overview of the gubernatorial campaign and election of 1904 followed by a chronology of the major events of the campaign and election as recorded in the news and editorials of the three La Crosse newspapers. The study is divided into seven sections. The first section covers the events from January 14 to May; the second, May to the end of the month; the third, June to the end of the month; the fourth, June to October; the fifth, October to November 9, 1904; the sixth, election results; the seventh, summary and conclusions.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study does not attempt to cover the presidential campaign of 1904. The major emphasis is placed on the gubernatorial campaign in Wisconsin of 1904.

CHAPTER II

THE 1904 GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN

I. JANUARY TO APRIL: PRE-CONVENTION FIGHT

In the year 1904 Wisconsin and the state's Republican party experienced a political battle that shaped the state's future for nearly a decade thereafter. The Republican party in Wisconsin was split into two factions in the late 1890's. Former Congressman Robert M. LaFollette's faction, the "insurgents" or "half-breeds," was composed of University of Wisconsin graduates, farmers and laborers, and Scandinavian-Americans.¹ They sought to bring about changes by the use of more democratic procedures of government. The dominant Republican faction known as the "stalwarts," contained more business oriented politicians. Philetus Sawyer, a lumber baron and United States Senator, headed the stalwart machine. Henry C. Payne, Secretary of the Republican State Central Committee and a Milwaukee Republican with diverse corporate interests and John C. Spooner, a former railroad attorney helped to advise Sawyer and direct the stalwart faction.

¹Herbert F. Margulies, The Decline of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin (Madison, 1968), 20-29.

The battle for party control between the stalwarts and half-breeds became increasingly bitter and culminated in the election of 1904.²

Robert M. LaFollette was born June 14, 1855, in Primrose township, Dane County.³ He graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1879 and began studying law. Early in 1880 he was admitted to the Dane County Bar,⁴ and during the same year LaFollette campaigned for and won the position of District Attorney of Dane County.

LaFollette ran for Congress in 1884, and with the aid of General George Bryant, became the youngest member elected to the forty-ninth Congress.⁵ Following his defeat for re-nomination to Congress in 1890, LaFollette returned to practice law in Wisconsin from 1890 until 1900. After attacking the stalwart state Republican Party machine and corporate monopolies⁶ he failed in his nomination bid for governor in 1896 and 1898, but finally gained the party nomination in 1900. In the election that year, he won by a plurality of 102,745.⁷

²Ibid., 9-10.

³Belle and Fola LaFollette, Robert M. LaFollette, I, (New York, 1953), 1.

⁴Ibid., 44.

⁵Ibid., 58-65.

⁶Ibid., 106-109.

⁷Ibid., 116-135; Albert O. Barton, LaFollette's Winning of Wisconsin, 1894-1904 (Des Moines, 1922), 155-164.

LaFollette faced great odds in his campaign for the governorship in 1904. The stalwarts made a complete effort to defeat him. Metropolitan as well as small newspapers remained loyal to the stalwarts. The Chicago and Northwestern, and the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul railroads offered financial support to the faction. Finally, the powerful influence of Senators Spooner and Quarles and the thousands of federal employees of the state actively opposed the LaFollette bid.⁸

However, there were two glaring weaknesses in the stalwarts' organization. First, that faction lacked capable leadership.⁹ The stalwarts placed the leadership of their faction in the hands of John Spooner who refused to act because he "never cared to be looked upon as a political leader."¹⁰ Secondly, the stalwarts failed to grasp the power of Governor LaFollette's "grass roots" appeal.¹¹

Many stalwarts were optimistic about their chances early in 1904. "Baench [sic] and Cook are flooding the

⁸Barton, LaFollette's, 295; Gaveney to Cowie, May 20, 1904, Robert S. Cowie mss.

⁹Ibid., 295.

¹⁰Spooner to Benham, July 1, 1904; see also Reed to Spooner, July 20, 1904, Spooner mss.

¹¹James Parker, "Senator John C. Spooner, 1897-1907," Unpublished Dissertation (University of Maryland, 1972), 309.

county with letters," wrote one stalwart. "Unless I am way off in judging public sentiment the spell of LaFolletism [sic] will soon be broken. I know Spooner and Quarles will do everything they can...[to defeat LaFollette.]"¹² The faction's hopes soared when stalwart Congressman Joseph W. Babcock made inroads in his effort for renomination in the Third District in a bitter fight with an insurgent candidate.¹³ "The eyes of the state are centered on the fight in progress in your district" wrote stalwart James Gaveney. "Information that comes to me indicates the decisive defeat of your opponents. If that be the result all republicans [sic] here see in it the Gettysburg of the factional war in Wisconsin."¹⁴ Gaveney predicted a "stampede" of the LaFollette forces. He believed "that his administration will end in scandal and disgrace."¹⁵

Caucuses occurred in counties throughout Wisconsin, with fifteen counties electing delegates on April 18.¹⁶ The

¹²Gaveney to Cowie, January 29, 1904, Cowie mss.

¹³Barton, LaFollette's, 311.

¹⁴Gaveney to Babcock, February 6, 1904, Cowie mss.

¹⁵Gaveney to Cowie, February 23, 1904, Cowie mss.

¹⁶Barton, LaFollette's, 336.

factional battle increased in intensity in the local districts throughout April and early May. La Crosse attorney George G. Gordon wrote that the "stalwarts are considerably stronger than they were two years ago. A number of...active supporters of the governor are working against him."¹⁷

LaFollette failed to gain the support of the La Crosse press during the campaign year. The La Crosse Chronicle attacked the Governor throughout 1904, while the La Crosse Leader-Press attempted to maintain a neutral position.

The La Crosse Chronicle commented in an editorial that "the nomination of Baensch or Cook is desirable. This would end the fight in the Republican Party if either were elected."¹⁸ The Chronicle endorsed Judge Emil Baensch in February because he represented "harmony" and proposed to "reunite the party." His campaign was a "mission of peace."¹⁹

On February 4, Judge Baensch delivered a speech to a small crowd of 500 to 600 people at the La Crosse theatre. The Chronicle stated that the attendance was sparse because the Judge arrived three hours late. The speech concentrated on the operation of civil government and lacked any attack on LaFollette.²⁰ "He was apt, fair and effective, agresive [sic] but conservative, candid but not bitter," commented

¹⁷George G. Gordon to Cowie, April 6, 1904, Cowie mss.

¹⁸La Crosse Chronicle, January 14, 1904. (Hereafter cited as Chronicle with the appropriate date.)

¹⁹Editorial in Chronicle, February 3, 1904.

²⁰Chronicle, February 5, 1904.

the Chronicle editor.²¹

In the early months of 1904 the Chronicle leveled a number of charges against the governor. It stated that LaFollette had usurped his executive power of appointment in order to "assume a dictatorship over Wisconsin politics" and "build a machine of his own."²² The paper accused LaFollette of using funds from the state treasury to finance his campaign. "Under the direction of the state administration...the number of game wardens and various appointive inspectors was increased" and under the pretense of performing their duties, "proceeded to organize the Governor's campaign."²³

The Third District caucus renomination of stalwart Congressman Joseph W. Babcock moved the Chronicle to predict defeat for LaFollette.

Today witnessed the beginning of the end of the LaFollette dictatorship in Wisconsin, when despite the most violent efforts of the state administration to defeat the renomination of Congressman Babcock, the latter carried...[Iowa] county by a decisive majority... The result in Iowa County is accepted, even by the halfbreeds [sic]...that LaFollette cannot win in the state campaign.²⁴

Republican caucuses were held throughout the state from March through May, 1904. Both factions bitterly attacked

²¹Ibid., February 10, 1904.

²²Ibid., January 16, 1904.

²³Ibid., February 11, 1904.

²⁴Ibid., February 17, 1904.

each other during this time.²⁵ The Leader-Press commented on the factional strife during the local caucuses. "This year the feeling is more bitter locally...." In the same issue, the Leader-Press listed a number of incidents that it held were responsible for increased bitterness between the factions.

The personal campaign made by the stalwart paper here against Governor LaFollette,...The Milwaukee Free Press,...The controversy between former Game Warden Schultz and Secretary Houser at the Sparta Convention and various small incidents, each in itself possible of being overlooked but all in the aggregate forming a mass of annoyances...impossible to ignore, must result in a campaign more bitter and personal than two years ago.²⁶

The stalwarts had two major weaknesses upon which the La Crosse press commented. One was a lack of "grass roots" organization as compared to the LaFollette administration. Another weakness of the stalwarts was a lack of aggressive and capable leadership. This faction looked to Senator John C. Spooner for leadership, but he failed to answer the call. The Leader-Press commented:

During the last two years of the factional campaign in Wisconsin there have been frantic appeals to Senator John C. Spooner from the leaders of the stalwarts to "come out," to announce himself against Governor LaFollette and to do his part in the battle to dethrone the governor. But Mr. Spooner, whether because he was afraid, as the administration men tauntingly said, or too disgusted

²⁵La Crosse Leader-Press, April 23, 1904. (Hereafter cited as Leader-Press with the appropriate date.)

²⁶Editorial in Leader-Press, April 23, 1904.

with the Wisconsin factional war to permit himself to become embroiled in it...held his peace....This year the stalwarts again appealed to the senator but he failed to respond....²⁷

The results of the early caucuses gave Baensch an early lead. The Chronicle optimistically predicted the defeat of the LaFollette forces as a result of the early stalwart successes.

This is the beginning of the finish of a political escapade in Wisconsin....This much-maligned state is to be emancipated from the rule of a clique which without conscience or care for the public welfare, has prostituted the government in order that the ambitions of one man may be achieved.²⁸

However, the Leader-Press warned that "the stalwarts are presuming too much on the fine lead they secured in the early caucuses."²⁹

As the April 29 La Crosse caucus approached, the Chronicle reasserted its view of LaFollette. In an editorial the Chronicle commented:

The Chronicle has never attempted to conceal any portion of its attitude toward the governor... It is utterly opposed to the further continuance of Governor LaFollette in office and it favors the measures for which he stands with only such modification as to make them laws of the people, for the people; instead of laws of LaFollette, for LaFollette and by LaFollette.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., May 19, 1904.

²⁸ Editorial in Chronicle, April 20, 1904.

²⁹ Editorial in Leader-Press, April 25, 1904.

³⁰ Chronicle, April 24, 1904.

LaFollette made a timely speech three days before the La Crosse caucus. The Leader-Press stated that "The governor is wise in coming here if he determined to have the county... His visit here today should turn the tide in his favor."³¹ The Chronicle commented that LaFollette was summoned by "frightened local leaders who feel that the battle is going against them. He will probably come prepared to furnish entertainment to the people who care to hear him, and will attempt to stem the tide of public opinion by the use of that masterful oratory which is his best weapon."³²

The local newspapers reported different accounts of the speech. The Leader-Press wrote that "The governor arose amid terrific applause and for two hours and five minutes talked to the people as never before, and only stopped then because he had to hasten to his train..."

In an editorial in the same issue, the Leader-Press said:

It was a great occasion and The Man was equal to it. Two thousand voters, a majority of the republican [sic] electorate of La Crosse... assembled to the La Crosse theatre...It was a great opportunity and Mr. LaFollette did justice to it...Never before had he delivered to La Crosse an oration as eloquent and convincing as he did last night. It is doubtful if La Crosse ever heard a speech surpassing it...It ignored trivialities...The governor succeeded in convincing his auditors that their votes in the caucuses should be determined by their views on railway supervision, popular nominations,

³¹Editorial in Leader-Press, April 26, 1904.

³²Editorial in Chronicle, April 26, 1904.

and equal taxation, to the exclusion of other questions.³³

The Chronicle reported that "The governor outdid his best previous effusion in this city, and frequent reference to President Roosevelt or to generally accepted propositions of prospective state legislation elicited hearty applause." In the same issue the Chronicle viewed the arrival of "His Excellency" as necessary since "La Crosse county is 'safe and sure for the stalwarts'..." It appealed to the La Crosse voters to learn "the difference between the music of eloquence and the appeal of logic. If you were against LaFollette before his visit you should be against him now."³⁴

The local press published the results of the April 29 La Crosse County Caucus on the following evening. The Leader-Press stated that the local strife ended in a "drawn battle." LaFollette had secured 10 delegates while Baensch gained 11 delegates."³⁵

The Chronicle headlines reported that "The Governor Sustains Net Loss of 11 Here."³⁶ The outcome of the La Crosse County Caucus, although not a complete victory for either faction, did not cause any dissatisfaction in either group.³⁷

³³Chronicle, April 27, 1904.

³⁴Chronicle, April 27, 1904.

³⁵Leader-Press, April 30, 1904.

³⁶Chronicle, April 30, 1904.

³⁷Ibid., May 1, 1904.

II. MAY: THE STATE REPUBLICAN CONVENTION

As the May 18 state Republican neared, stalwart Senator Joseph V. Quarles believed that in an "honest count the opposition to LaFollette has a safe majority in the Republican convention."³⁸ Each faction called the other "bolters." However, the stalwarts had rented the Fuller Opera House weeks in advance of the convention in order to hold a separate meeting.³⁹

On May 17, 1904, the day preceding the convention, the state central committee met at Madison to determine the credentials of the delegates. The committee, which included six stalwart members, voted unanimously to seat enough of the contested delegates to constitute a clear majority of insurgent delegates.

The night before the convention, the stalwarts caucused at the Fuller Opera House. They decided to march on the convention hall the following morning. Anticipating such an action by the stalwarts, the Governor took precautions. An eight-foot wire fence and brawny guards protected the entrances to the gymnasium.⁴⁰

At 11:00 a.m. the stalwarts marched upon the gymnasium and came upon LaFollette's precautionary forces. The

³⁸Quarles to Cowie, May 16, 1904.

³⁹Barton, LaFollette's, 306.

⁴⁰Ibid., 346.

Governor's sentries forced the old guard delegates to walk single file through the entrance gate to gain admission. Only delegates who had the tickets countersigned by the state central committee were admitted to the convention.⁴¹

In the proceedings which followed, the insurgents moved that the convention adopt the majority report. When stalwart Marion B. Rosenberry attempted to move for adoption of the minority report, he was seized by three "assistants" to the sergeant-at-arms and forced into his chair. The convention finally accepted the majority report of the Central Committee with 574-5/6 votes for LaFollette to 485-1/6 for the stalwart position. The Baensch delegates left the hall at this point, protesting the illegal proceedings of the convention. The Cook delegates legitimized the half-breeds of the Wisconsin Republican party.⁴²

The stalwart forces regrouped at the Fuller Opera House that evening. Feelings against the Governor were extremely bitter. "This man is the quicksands of politics... six months more will see him completely engulfed."⁴³ The next morning the delegates nominated Cook for Governor after Baensch withdrew "in the interests of harmony." Spooner,

⁴¹Ibid., 347-349; B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, 176-177.

⁴²Ibid., 351-361; B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, 176-177.

⁴³[Unidentified] to Quarles, May 18, 1904, Cowie mss.

Quarles, Babcock and Baensch were chosen as Delegates-at-Large to the Republican National Convention.⁴⁴

The gymnasium convention concluded its business with the renomination of LaFollette for Governor, the endorsement of his program, and the election of National Convention Delegates-at-Large. LaFollette told the convention "from this hour until...election day there shall be no halt and no stop."⁴⁵

The La Crosse press increased to three local newspaper companies when the La Crosse Tribune published its first issue on May 16, 1904. In an editorial it stated that the Tribune would "be independent of party or faction."⁴⁶ However, as the election neared the Tribune would abandon its neutral position and endorse the Democratic Party.⁴⁷

With the approach of the state Republican Convention, the Chronicle commented that LaFollette continued to suffer further losses "and make the nomination of Judge Baensch assured."⁴⁸ However, on May 17, 1904, the state central committee voted unanimously to seat enough LaFollette delegates to give the administration a majority.

⁴⁴Barton, LaFollette's, 363-365; Gaveney to Cowie, May 20, 1904, Cowie mss.

⁴⁵Ibid., 371-379.

⁴⁶La Crosse Tribune, May 16, 1904. (Hereafter cited as Tribune with the appropriate date.)

⁴⁷Editorial in Tribune, October 26, 1904.

⁴⁸Chronicle, May 15, 1904.

The Chronicle stated:

The Chronicle long ago predicted that, in the event of a close finish, the third termers would... [oust] those really entitled to the seats... Delegations pledged to LaFollette, without the slightest show of right to seats in the convention, will beat the convention from a number of counties.⁴⁹

The Chronicle commented that "if a state central committee can arbitrarily say who may be delegates to a state convention and who may not be there is no use of holding caucuses..."⁵⁰

The Baensch delegates left the convention and caucused at the Fuller Opera House when LaFollette delegates were appointed to the contested seats. The Chronicle wrote that the stalwarts were "robbed of their rights in the convention" and had "walked out of the convention after pleading...for fair treatment."⁵¹ The Baensch delegates were later joined by the Cook forces whereupon the stalwarts nominated Congressman Cook of Neenah for governor.

III. JUNE: THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE

The goal both stalwarts and half-breeds sought from May to October, 1904, was the official label of "Republican" on the November ballot, which would legitimatize the successful

⁴⁹ Editorial in Chronicle, May 18, 1904.

⁵⁰ Ibid., May 21, 1904.

⁵¹ Chronicle, May 19, 1904.

faction. The settings where the political battles would be held were the Republican National Committee and the Supreme Court.

Both factions endorsed Roosevelt's nomination for President and sent representative groups to Washington to present their views to him. Although Roosevelt encouraged neither faction, the half-breeds were at a decided disadvantage due to the influence of Senators Spooner and Quarles, Postmaster Payne, and Representative Babcock upon the national committee. The stalwarts hoped this influence would lead to the recognition of their faction as the "regulars" in the November election.⁵²

Delegates for the rival factions appeared in Chicago on June 15 to present their arguments to the National Committee. The stalwarts were represented by Senators Spooner and Quarles and two stalwart lawyers. LaFollette represented the half-breeds and had the counsel of two insurgent lawyers. The committee heard the arguments and voted unanimously to seat the stalwart delegates. LaFollette returned to Wisconsin, claiming that the hearings were a "grotesque farce," to await the Supreme Court's decision.⁵³

⁵²Barton, LaFollette's, 380-381; B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, 179; E. S. Hotchkiss to Cowie June 10, 1904, Cowie mss.

⁵³Barton, LaFollette's, 385-386; B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, 179-180.

The local press commented on the defeat of LaFollette forces at the National Committee hearings. The Chronicle said that the decision "was a surprise to no one, not even to the LaFollette faction...Fifty men, sitting as a jury, after hearing both sides, voted unanimously to seat the delegates elected by the opera house convention [sic]."54

The Tribune commented that LaFollette failed to have his delegates seated by the national committee largely due "to a speech delivered by LaFollette at Chatauqua, New York, July 19, 1903. Extracts from it hitting at some of the big leaders of the party were quietly circulated among the members of the national committee."55

The Leader-Press wrote:

Robert M. LaFollette has an unfortunate propensity for saying what is substantially true, offensively and exaggeratedly. That fault has handicapped him through his whole political career...In that manner he has made enemies who... have prevented him carrying his policies to prompt and complete success...Mr. LaFollette...has made a grievous blunder in telling the committee his opinion of it...56

IV. JUNE TO OCTOBER: LAFOLLETTE CAMPAIGNS IN WISCONSIN

Both factions returned to the campaign in Wisconsin and awaited the Supreme Court decision. LaFollette campaigned

⁵⁴ Editorial in Chronicle, June 19, 1904.

⁵⁵ Editorial in Tribune, May 19, 1904.

⁵⁶ Editorial in Leader-Press, June 22, 1904.

throughout the year in Wisconsin. The insurgent forces under the leadership of LaFollette and his private secretary, John J. Hannan, were magnificently organized.⁵⁷ The thoroughness and efficiency of the insurgents was apparent in their campaign effort. They prepared lists of hard core insurgents and loyal supporters. LaFollette then appointed one of his lieutenants to deputize a loyal insurgent in every state school district to canvass the district with LaFollette campaign materials.⁵⁸

The major political issues of the LaFollette campaign were the railroads and the direct primary. The Assembly committee on railroads introduced a bill in 1903 that created an appointive railroad commission that would regulate rates. LaFollette stated in a message to the Legislature in 1904:

Upon the railway companies rendering an adequate and impartial service at reasonable rates general prosperity is dependent. Deprived of either, every community is checked and limited in its growth...The denial of an impartial service at reasonable rates, is the denial of equal opportunity.⁵⁹

It was not until 1905 that a railroad commission was appointed.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Barton, LaFollette's, 323-325.

⁵⁸Ibid., 416.

⁵⁹Ellen Torelle, The Political Philosophy of Robert M. LaFollette: As Revealed in His Speeches and Writings (Madison, 1920), 87; Barton, LaFollette's, 80-81.

⁶⁰Barton, LaFollette's, 246-247.

LaFollette believed that the state should enact nomination reforms of laws to prevent machine methods and money domination.⁶¹ In 1897 he launched the direct primary election campaign. In 1904 the legislature passed the direct primary law with a clause requiring a referendum in 1904. It was not until September, 1906, that the law was implemented.⁶²

The local press commented on the campaign efforts of both factions. The lack of an organized endeavor by the stalwarts as compared to the LaFollette administration was evident in La Crosse. In an editorial the Chronicle stated that "The lack of a machine makes it necessary for the Conservatives to constantly urge the voters to be watchful, to impress upon them the necessity of voting." The Chronicle did not see this as an admission of weakness because "the instinct of self preservation can be depended upon to destroy any machine..."⁶³

"In every ward in the city LaFollette petitions have been freely circulated and signed and in every ward big Roosevelt-LaFollette clubs have been organized," wrote the Tribune. "Nearly all the work was accomplished before the local stalwart workers found out that the movement was going and it is now declared that the LaFollette faction is more

⁶¹Margulies, Decline, 35.

⁶²B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, I, 188.

⁶³Chronicle, April 13, 1904.

fully and powerfully organized in this city than ever before."⁶⁴

The issues that LaFollette emphasized in his campaign were the direct election primary and an appointive railroad commission. The local press was divided in its support of the election primary referendum. The Chronicle declared that "Primary election are not republican [sic] doctrine" and further that "no state which has tried this system of nomination is satisfied with them."⁶⁵

The Leader-Press supported the primary referendum and called for a "united vote [on] the primary election. In the same issue it stated its position.

It [direct election primary] gives no party the advantage over the other. It is not a party policy...Citizens may vote for [the candidate] they think...will make the best governor but they should vote for the primary election as the first step toward securing popular nominations of candidates...Thoughtful citizens should mark a cross in the 'Yes' square at the foot of the ballot after the primary election proposition.⁶⁶

The Tribune stated that the electorate could "vote for it [primary election referendum] or against it regardless of party" because "it is not an issue in the campaign."⁶⁷

On September 27 and 28 the Governor campaigned in La Crosse county and spoke at the La Crosse theatre on the

⁶⁴Tribune, July 21, 1904.

⁶⁵Editorial in Chronicle, October 7, 1904.

⁶⁶Editorial in Leader-Press, November 5, 1904.

⁶⁷Editorial in Tribune, November 1, 1904.

evening of September 28. In his speech that evening LaFollette utilized the "roll call" device. "He carried a grip full of data to show where the last legislature stood on the reform propositions and in each instance named Gaveney as one who voted against them. His arraignment of the stalwarts and Gaveney was severe."⁶⁸

The Chronicle limited its comment to a physical description of LaFollette. Under the headline, "GOVERNOR GIVES WAY UNDER STRAIN," the paper stated:

His tired eyes could not stand the glare of the footlights. He had the lights turned out... His voice was husky and the tone strained.

His hearers [sic] wondered at the outward signs of undermined health. The trouble the Governor had with his eyes and the condition of his voice, together with the fact that he has been wearing two overcoats during his trips in his automobile, caused comments which bore a note of alarm.⁶⁹

The only comment the Leader-Press reported was that "La Crosse turned out a large audience considering the stormy weather..."⁷⁰

The local press criticized LaFollette's campaign methods. The Leader-Press commented on LaFollette's use of the automobile. "After Governor LaFollette's automobile has

⁶⁸Tribune, September 29, 1904.

⁶⁹Editorial in Chronicle, September 29, 1904.

⁷⁰Editorial in Leader-Press, September 29, 1904.

frightened a few farmers' teams and caused their owners to be spilled out in the road, the Governor's hold on the agricultural vote is likely to be weakened."⁷¹

The Leader-Press also condemned LaFollette's assault on his factional opponents.

It has been characteristic of the campaign made for the last ten years by the faction headed by Mr. LaFollette, to reflect on the motives and even the honesty of political opponents. Men who do not approve of the policies the governor [sic] favors have been classed indiscriminately as bribe-takers, creatures of the corporations and betrayers of their constituents...The great number of La Crosse stalwarts...are opposed to Governor LaFollette on the question of his expediency of his politics...⁷²

The Tribune stated similar comments in an editorial. It wrote that one of the characteristics of LaFollette and his organization was the failure to discern "fair purposes behind the efforts of an antagonist...It is strange that so masterful a man...should have this peevish tendency to assail as rotten all forces opposing him..."⁷³

V. OCTOBER TO NOVEMBER: SUPREME COURT DECISION AND ELECTION

Both factions presented motions to the Supreme Court and expected a decision on September 27 as to which ballot Secretary of State Houser should designate as officially

⁷¹Editorial in Leader-Press, August 24, 1904.

⁷²Ibid., September 30, 1904.

⁷³Tribune, September 29, 1904.

"Republican:" the half-breed ticket or that of the stalwarts. The stalwarts argued that the Republican National Committee's decision stating the regularity of their faction was binding because the National Convention was the highest party authority. The administration counsel countered with a motion for dismissal on the grounds that the Court had no jurisdiction for only the state central committee had the power to certify either faction to represent the party.⁷⁴

The stalwarts understood the gravity of the situation and many openly supported the Democratic candidate George W. Peck for Governor. Stalwart Robert S. Cowie wrote:

You may think...that I have strong faith that the Cook ticket is going to win in the court but the facts are that I have the most serious doubts about it. I doubt [sic] that they will assume jurisdiction of the matter and I am free to say that in my opinion Mr. Cook should and will promptly withdraw from the race if the court takes that view of it. I know there are many stalwarts who will in that event vote the Democratic ticket for Governor but I am not of them and I believe their numbers are being seriously exaggerated.⁷⁵

Both factions had to wait until October 5 for the Supreme Court decision. On that date the Court, by a three-to-one vote, ruled in favor of the LaFollette ticket. The Court declared that the state central committee was the determining agency.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Barton, LaFollette's, 401-405.

⁷⁵Cowie to H. L. Ekern, August 26, 1904, Cowie Mss.

⁷⁶Barton, LaFollette's, 405-406; B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, 186.

When Cook withdrew from the race former Governor Scofield, a bitter foe of LaFollette, replaced him. Spooner's influence upon the stalwarts had deteriorated to such a point that he could not persuade the faction to withdraw from the field.⁷⁷ He gave two more speeches in October and then returned to the east, declaring "the situation in this state is hell."⁷⁸

On November 5, 1904, the Saturday preceding the election, LaFollette closed his campaign with a speech at the university gymnasium. On the following Tuesday the Governor won by a plurality of 50,000. The primary election referendum succeeded. Moreover, the administration gained control of the legislature.

The party strife did not end with the election of LaFollette. Animosity, bitterness and emotional factionalism continued and spread into the community and family. Gaveney wrote, "The Stalwarts lost the round but are by no means groggy."⁷⁹ However, the stalwarts were a demoralized and defeated faction. Robert M. LaFollette had consolidated his political control of Wisconsin.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Barton, LaFollette's, 408; B. and F. LaFollette, LaFollette, 186.

⁷⁸Spooner to Beveridge, October 14, 1904, Spooner mss.

⁷⁹Gaveney to Cowie, November 18, 1904, Cowie mss.

⁸⁰Barton, LaFollette's, 422-423; Margulies, Decline, 81-82.

The La Crosse press commented on the Court decision and LaFollette's successful quest for popular support. The Tribune severely criticized the stalwart faction and its leaders. In an editorial the Tribune commented:

The old stalwarts symbolized by Spooner took the position of protection, trust support, lavish expenditure, grasping power at home and abroad, combination, commercial politics...ever with promises never fulfilled...

Can these so-called leaders not see that it is not LaFollette, not the Socialist missionary, not the ambitious small men, which is moving all these masses?⁸¹

The Chronicle stated that the Court decision did not make LaFollette "a Republican." In the same issue the Chronicle commented:

The decision does not...enter into the merits of the controversy. It simply found... in favor of the LaFollette ticket and that it is final, whether biased or not.⁸²

The Chronicle continued to oppose LaFollette because he "does not represent the sentiment of a majority of the members of the Republican party of Wisconsin."⁸³

The Leader-Press attacked the methods the Supreme Court used to arrive at its decision, and commented on the possibility of its creating a "dangerous power" in Wisconsin.

⁸¹Editorial in Tribune, October 5, 1904.

⁸²Editorial in Chronicle, October 6, 1904.

⁸³Ibid., October 7, 1904.

Had the supreme court [sic] entered into the merits of the controversy,...then the decision of the court would have been of more value in setting rightfully the squabble between the two divisions of the party. And it is likely that the decision would have been the same as yesterday.⁸⁴

The Tribune abandoned its "independent" position as the election neared and announced its support of "Democracy" and the national and state Democratic tickets. On October 26, 1904, the Tribune declared in an editorial:

The Tribune was started as an independent newspaper...and it...planned to keep...out of politics on the...theory that a paper that has no politics makes no political enemies. This was not a difficult position to assume when no campaign was in progress, but...readers are influenced to a considerable degree by the views of the newspaper they trust...and it became a source of embarrassment when the most important questions of policy were involved in a political battle. Indeed, to refrain from assuming a position regarding these important matters is a confession of weakness, and evasion of duty.

The Tribune...has carefully weighed the platform...of both parties...and...stands in this campaign for that party which promises to do things and can do what it promises to do. It stands for the party of consistency, wisdom and progress, the democratic party [sic].⁸⁵

The Chronicle made a final bitter attack upon LaFollette two days before the election. "A demagogue and pretender has been masquerading in republican [sic] uniform... The candidate for governor stands for the worst practices in politics..."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Editorial in Leader-Press, October 6, 1904.

⁸⁵ Tribune, October 26, 1904.

⁸⁶ Editorial in Chronicle, November 6, 1904.

The Leader-Press maintained its neutral position throughout the "trying political campaign. No other daily newspaper in La Crosse has...maintained an independent course...The Leader-Press believed such a newspaper was needed in La Crosse."⁸⁷

The Wisconsin electorate voted on November 8, 1904. LaFollette was re-elected, the primary election referendum succeeded and the administration gained control of the legislature. The Leader-Press maintained its independent policy by conspicuously omitting editorial comment.⁸⁸

The Tribune stated a "mistake has been made" and that LaFollette and Roosevelt would "sink in the sea of trustdom without leaving a ripple on its placid surface." The local paper believed that "LaFollette must drop the politics that is played for politics sake, and work for legislation not factional or personal, but popular."⁸⁹

The Chronicle commented on the narrow margin of victory for LaFollette and suggested that LaFollette had actually been defeated.

The result...while disappointing to a great many conservative people, was no more disappointing to any one than to Gov. LaFollette...At the time of going to press, returns are too meager to state exactly what his plurality will be, if indeed he has

⁸⁷ Editorial in Leader-Press, November 7, 1904.

⁸⁸ Leader-Press, November 9, 1904.

⁸⁹ Editorial in Tribune, November 9, 1904.

a plurality...The result can be interpreted as nothing less than a rebuke.⁹⁰

VI. ELECTION RESULTS

The 1904 gubernatorial election results produced a LaFollette plurality of 50,952. The election results for 1902 and 1900 gave respective pluralities of 47,599 and 102,745.⁹¹

The vote at the state level was almost equally divided. LaFollette received 227,253 votes or 10.9% and Peck gained 176,301 votes or 8.5% of the votes. The remainder of the candidates gained 46,006 votes or 2.2% of the votes.⁹² Locally LaFollette received 4,286 votes or 9.9% and Peck gained 4,239 votes or 9.8% of the votes cast in the county of La Crosse. The LaFollette plurality was 48 votes. The remainder of the candidates gained 392 votes or only .8% of the votes cast in the election. The election results for 1902 were equally close in the city and county of La Crosse with LaFollette defeating his Democratic opponent by a plurality of 506 votes.⁹³ Finally, the state's voters approved the

⁹⁰ Editorial in Chronicle, November 9, 1904.

⁹¹ Halford Erickson, The Blue Book of the State of Wisconsin (Madison, 1905), 559.

⁹² Ibid., 24, 329-330.

⁹³ Ibid., 330, 369.

primary election law by a plurality of 50,507. La Crosse voted 2,472 "for" and 1,749 votes "against" for a plurality of 723 votes.⁹⁴

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was undertaken to examine the editorial content of three La Crosse, Wisconsin newspapers, the La Crosse Leader-Press, the La Crosse Chronicle and the La Crosse Tribune, during the gubernatorial campaign of 1904, so as to present the position taken by each newspaper concerning the re-election of Robert M. LaFollette. The primary sources employed in this study were microfilmed copies of the three La Crosse newspapers. The examination covered the period from January 14, 1904 through November 9, 1904.

Several trends clearly emerge from the examination. First, the Leader-Press maintained an independent position on the gubernatorial campaign, but endorsed the primary election law referendum. Secondly, the Chronicle supported the stalwart candidates and denounced the primary election law referendum. Third, the Tribune initially maintained a neutral political opinion but eventually abandoned this position and supported the Democratic party and its candidates. The Tribune believed that the primary election law referendum did not merit consideration as a political issue.

⁹⁴Ibid., 529.

An attempt to assess the influence of the Presidential election on voter outcome would demand an investigation of far greater magnitude than this study. There has been no attempt to assess the influence of the three newspapers on the local electorate, since such an investigation would undoubtedly fail to establish the reasons why the voters of 1904 chose as they did.

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