

2021

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Recommended Citation

Oxford, Juniper (2021) "Teddy and Fighting Bob: Progressive Presidential Candidates of the Early Twentieth Century United States," *Legacy*. Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/legacy/vol21/iss1/5>

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Teddy and Fighting Bob: Progressive Presidential Candidates of the Early Twentieth Century United States

Introduction

Theodore Roosevelt Jr. ran for president in the general election of 1912 under a new political party, nicknamed the Progressive “Bull Moose” Party.¹ A decade later, Robert La Follette ran for president in 1924 with his newly formed Progressive Party.² The presidential elections of 1912 and 1924 are essential in understanding how Roosevelt and La Follette were central to political progressivism in United States history. This political tradition, interpreted through the political careers of Roosevelt Jr. and La Follette, provides a window to the past to understand the personal interpretation of progressivism during the first part of the twentieth century and beyond. Despite their differences, political and personal, La Follette and Roosevelt agreed on plenty of issues. Both politicians shared the same side of the greater debate—but differed in the how, why, and when progressive political needed to be implemented in the United States political landscape.

While the two men had vastly different backgrounds that shaped their political perspectives and characters, their lives were woven into the fabric of American political progressivism and composed a gathering of progressive American voters’ narratives. The appeals to the American voter lay within the bones of the 1912 and 1924 campaigns giving credence to the claim that progressivism was contingent on public will and popular sentiment and that progressivism could be as shifting the populace it aims to support. William Taft’s 1909 presidency was plagued with controversies like the Ballinger Affair, in which a Taft appointee, against Roosevelt’s domestic policies, turned the recently public lands into private holdings. The privatization of these lands

1 Theodore Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt Association Collection, *Progressive Covenant with the People*. (New York: Thomas A. Edison, 1912. Audio. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99391565/>).

2 “The Official Statement of Senator Robert M. La Follette Announcing His Candidacy for President of the United States,” (Cleveland, Ohio, July 4, 1924) University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library, last modified June 3, 2018, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/items/3cdc8f00-4813-0136-4f2e-0050569601ca-a>.

shook the faith of conservationist Republicans in their new president.³ The effect of that election was twofold; it was incendiary to the public; additionally, it worsened the relationship between Taft and Roosevelt.⁴ The perceived betrayal by the Taft administration propelled support behind a challenging Roosevelt candidacy. The circumstances that surrounded 1912 and 1924 were the actions that provoked reactions from the American public, and as the time had called for, political progressivism rose to meet the challenge. Roosevelt and La Follette had their respective political ambitions, but they saw themselves first and foremost as politicians guided by their principles, which relied on the better judgment of an informed and politically forward public base.

The Roosevelt and La Follette presidential campaigns are historically significant because of their electoral outcomes. Although neither had succeeded at getting the presidency, both candidates obtained enough votes to be considered credible contenders and posed a serious challenge to the two-party system. This study focuses on these political campaigns, the candidates, and the political legacy of the progressives. It establishes a link between the personal dealings of these men and the making of an American-progressive identity. Their own political experiences guided La Follette and Roosevelt; their backgrounds helped bolster their chances of being elected to the presidency. However, their political maneuvers instilled flaws that proved fatal to their candidacies.

Progressives in 1912

Theodore Roosevelt Jr.'s characteristically strong personality comes through many historical records. His speeches captivated audiences, and he brought forward a public character befitting more of a modern politician than many of his predecessors—or even his colleagues. Presidential historian, Michael Riccards, has noted that “As no president in memory and probably none up to that time, Theodore Roosevelt became a ‘personality’—a politician whose every action seemed newsworthy and exciting.”⁵ His philosophy might be best explained by his appreciation for the West African proverb, “Speak softly and carry a big stick—you will go far.”⁶ Roosevelt exemplified the proverb throughout his life, his political career, and his relationships. His

3 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 610.

4 Ibid.

5 Michael P. Riccards, *The Ferocious Engine of Democracy: A History of the American Presidency*, Vol. 2. Theodore Roosevelt through George Bush (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1995), 5-6.

6 Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Random House Publishing, Modern Library Edition, 2010), 754.

personality came through his charisma and sense of fashion. Based on the New York legislature's first impression of Roosevelt, John Walsh noted that "He carried a gold-headed cane in one hand, a silk hat in the other, and he walked in the bent-over fashion that was the style with the young men of the day. His trousers were as tight as a tailor could make them and had a bell-shaped bottom to cover his shoes."⁷ Roosevelt's personality made him unforgettable and helped him forge political alliances and wage political war. His tactics earned him an alliance with Governor and Senator Hiram Johnson and caused rocky relationships with prominent politicians like President and Chief Justice William Taft. It also created a life-long bitter opponent out of Governor and Senator Robert La Follette. However, a distinction should be noted between a rivalry of deeply personal roots and an ideological likeness that places La Follette in the same line of progressive succession as Roosevelt.

Through his political career, Robert Marion La Follette Sr. was known as "Fighting Bob" because of his consistent advocacy of progressive policies (many of which, perhaps foremost on worker's rights and suffrage, were a product of his raising) and constant battling with party bosses. A reporter described La Follette as "popular at home, popular with his colleagues, and popular in the house...he is so good a fellow that even his enemies like him."⁸ La Follette's political popularity was fueled by both his tenacity and his good nature. La Follette gained respect as a politician disinterested in power and with whom loyalty to a cause was paramount. In 1912, La Follette was critical of Theodore Roosevelt, who ran in his newly formed Progressive Party when Republican Party leaders handed the nomination to the incumbent President Taft.⁹ He derided the third party run as a foolish split of the progressive voting bloc, who held their confidence in the Republicans and believed the course of action would lead to a Democratic victory. La Follette had hoped that pulling the progressives into his party would make them an unelectable force because they lacked the coalition-building they required while being led by the former president. La Follette also believed that Roosevelt was interested in political power and would not give progressive ideals electoral support if it would not win him the election. "He offered no reason for a third party, except his own overmastering craving for a third term," wrote La Follette.¹⁰ In a seemingly contradictory fashion, La Follette ran on his own Progressive Party in 1924.

7 Ibid., 144.

8 Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (United States: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 85.

9 David Paul Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (United States: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 93-96.

10 Robert M. La Follette and Mathew Rothschild, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1913), 670.

However, La Follette made building a coalition the focus of his campaign and ran against both a conservative Democrat and conservative Republican. While Roosevelt joined a field of candidates with relatively strong anti-trust positions, La Follette became the sole viable alternative to a duopolistic view of deregulation.

Theodore Roosevelt's and William Howard Taft's relationship began to decay after Roosevelt's exit from the White House. Newly elected President Taft departed from the strict expectations of former President Roosevelt, as Roosevelt more or less expected a Taft presidency to become a carbon copy of the Roosevelt policy. "The Trusts, The People, and The Square Deal" was an op-ed written by former President Theodore Roosevelt Jr. in *The Outlook*, a weekly socio-political magazine. The 1908 op-ed criticized President William Howard Taft's handling of a merger between the then known Steel Corporation and the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company.¹¹ Some have suggested that it was the handling of this merger by the administration a key reason for the eventual presidential run of Theodore Roosevelt against William Howard Taft. In the document, Roosevelt levied the argument that his administration's previous encounters with the Steel Corporation gave him the impression that they cooperated fairly with the government.¹² Thus, Taft's administrative actions regarding U.S. Steel Corporation carried criticism of his predecessor and became detrimental to Roosevelt's progressive credibility if Roosevelt had allowed it to happen without recourse. This was a significant motivation for Roosevelt to run for president, not simply because Taft had betrayed the confidence of the conservationists, disenchanted with the Ballinger Affair, but because he sought to protect his image and pride as a trustbuster and an authority on those issues.

During the 1912 Republican primary, President Taft was expected to see some challenges to his re-nomination campaign. Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, a sitting United States senator, challenged Taft as a progressive in the race. The progressive Republicans hoped for a Roosevelt run, but Roosevelt often dismissed the possibility of a third term. La Follette gained the support of many of these progressive Republicans, but he was not the ideal leader that the progressives desired. Roosevelt finally entered the race, but much too late in January of 1912. Reluctant La Follette backers from the progressive wing of the Republican Party began to jump ship to support Roosevelt. The following month, in February 1912, La Follette gave the speech killing his hopeful campaign. Roosevelt had just entered the race, and speculation was swirling that La Follette would end his campaign. La Follette's daughter was

11 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Trusts, The People, and The Square Deal* in *The Outlook*, New York (November 18, 1911).

12 Ibid.

going into surgery to have a gland removed near her jugular. Before joining his daughter, he decided to give a speech as scheduled the day before to project confidence in his campaign. During the speech, he became nervous, often diverging from his original point, repeating himself accidentally, and rambling for about two hours. "La Follette reacted to rude listeners by aggressively compelling them to pay attention. He lost his temper, angrily shook a finger at disrespecting guests, and listeners walked out on him."¹³ The speech took the steam out of his campaign. Newspapers, afterward, reported the event as a mental breakdown and that more supporters went to Roosevelt's camp.¹⁴ He stayed in the race until the convention and decided not to unite the party's progressive wing against Taft. Roosevelt won seven more states than Taft, almost 400,000 more popular votes, and more than double the delegates before the convention. Nevertheless, the Republican Party's bosses allocated enough delegates on-site at the convention to hand the nomination to Taft instead.¹⁵ With Taft as the handpicked nominee, Roosevelt focused his efforts to mount a third-party effort.

Theodore Roosevelt's budding campaign was propelled forward by endorsements from Republicans of William Howard Taft's home state, Ohio, most notably James R. Garfield, son of the former president James A. Garfield. Later, after the Republican convention, he formed the Progressive Party with other powerful political allies. This group included the likes of Gifford Pinchot, Senator Albert Beveridge, Jane Addams, and Senator Hiram Johnson after his vice-presidential nomination. Roosevelt was an established politician, and while some of his allies, like Henry Cabot Lodge, did not back his third party run, he also did not speak out against it, nor in favor of Taft. This coalition gave Roosevelt the necessary legitimacy to have a realistic shot at the presidency.

In the 1912 general election, the four major candidates were incumbent President William Howard Taft of the Republican Party, former President Theodore Roosevelt of the Progressive Party, Governor Woodrow Wilson of the Democratic Party, and Activist Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist party.¹⁶ Woodrow Wilson had a total of 6,293,454 votes, Theodore Roosevelt had a total of 4,119,207 votes, William Taft had a total of 3,483,922 votes, and Eugene Debs had a total of 900,369 votes. Woodrow Wilson received 435 electoral votes, Theodore Roosevelt received 88 electoral votes, William Taft received eight

13 Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent*, 91.

14 Ibid.

15 Deborah Kalb, *Guide to U.S. Elections* (United States: SAGE Publications, 2015), 398-399.

16 Ibid., 543.

electoral votes, and Eugene Debs received no electoral votes.¹⁷ The Progressive Party of 1912 remains the last third party to get more votes than a major party in a presidential election. Like the 1912 Republican primary, the general election saw Roosevelt receive significantly more popular votes than Taft.¹⁸ No other candidate garnered over 5% of the popular vote.

Progressives in 1924

A decade later, in 1924, Calvin Coolidge, the conservative Republican incumbent president, sought a second term in office. Unlike Theodore Roosevelt's run in 1912 under the Progressive Party *after* his loss of the Republican nomination, Robert La Follette contemplated openly for a third-party run from the outset.¹⁹ La Follette intended to coalesce the left-leaning factions splintered into various third parties, unions, political organizations, and other groups to challenge Calvin Coolidge and John Davis, his conservative Democratic opponent. Coolidge did not face serious competition from his progressive opponent, Hiram Johnson of California. He even won the state of California during the Republican primary. It appeared that the progressive Republicans had begun to put more stock into La Follette's campaign over Johnson's.

Robert La Follette's campaign, in 1924, built a strong base of support by consolidating the progressives, liberals, and other left-wing organizations. The Committee of 48, named after the then 48 states in the union, was a progressive political organization that hoped to form a new Progressive Party in response to conservatism gaining influence in both the Republican and Democratic Parties.²⁰ The Committee of 48 signatories included Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger of Ohio, Politician George Wilcox of Hawaii, and Amos Pinchot of New York. While mainly active around 1919-1920, it drummed up interest in a cause a couple of years later, in 1922, during the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA). The CPPA comprised progressive groups. It sent representatives to open operations throughout the United States.²¹ The first CPPA convention brought together different progressive units. This included the Socialist, Progressive, and Farmer-Labor parties as well as political groups and labor unions. In turn, the CPPA was influential in gaining steam for the Progressive Party Convention of 1924, as its numbers helped visualize

17 Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970).

18 Kalb, *Guide to U.S. Elections*, 398-399.

19 Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit*, 181.

20 The Committee of Forty-Eight, *The Committee of Forty-Eight: For a Conference of Americans Who Are Equally Opposed to Reaction and Violent Revolution: Its Purposes — And the Reasons for It* (New York: The Committee of Forty-Eight, 1919).

21 Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit*, 182.

the support that a potential candidate could generate. The Progressive Party, which moved to nominate Robert La Follette as its presidential pick, welcomed multiple voices from all forms of left-wing thinkers except for the communists. La Follette himself denounced the communists, and the Communist Party was one of the only notable third parties to nominate a candidate for president, which they did for the first time in 1924.²² Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist candidate who ran in the presidential elections of 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920, persuaded the Socialist Party to endorse La Follette's candidacy for president.²³ Like Roosevelt before, La Follette seemed more interested in using a 'party' structure as a pure means to gain the presidency rather than to commit to an enduring organization comprised of his progressive colleagues in both parties.²⁴

The 1924 general election had three "major" candidates: incumbent President Calvin Coolidge of the Republican Party, Ambassador John W. Davis of the Democratic Party, and Senator Robert M. La Follette of the Progressive Party. Calvin Coolidge had a total of 15,723,789 votes, John Davis had a total of 8,386,242 votes, and Robert La Follette had a total of 4,831,706 votes. Calvin Coolidge received 382 electoral votes, John Davis received 136 electoral votes, and Robert La Follette received 13 electoral votes.²⁵ The Progressive Party of 1924 got 16.62% of the popular vote, one of only three times a third party has received over 10% of the popular vote in the last 100 years.

Roosevelt's Progressives in 1912 and La Follette's Progressives in 1924 channeled their popularity as a political strategy. The goal of Theodore Roosevelt and his allies was to overwhelm the election. The idea of open and direct primaries was becoming a more common occurrence by the early 1900s. As primaries became an effort to gain the public's confidence, party leaders developed barnstorming or traveling "from place to place to making brief stops (as in a political campaign or a promotional tour)" as their primary strategy.²⁶ Roosevelt believed that the idea of a direct primary gave him the competitive edge that would turn the tide of the Republican primary, taking power away from the Republican Party bosses, who had already settled on Taft as their nominee. On February 24, 1912, Theodore Roosevelt wrote a letter to William Glasscock titled "Seeking the Nomination."²⁷ In his letter,

22 Ibid. 182.

23 *New York Times*, "La Follette Gets Debs Endorsement" (July 17, 1924), 3.

24 Ibid. 183.

25 David Leip, *1924 Presidential General Election Results*. (Accessed October 27, 2020. <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1924>).

26 Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/barnstorm>, Accessed August 25, 2021).

27 Louis Auchincloss and Theodore Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 655.

Roosevelt noted that “One of the chief principles for which [he had] stood, and for which [he] now stand, and which [he had] always endeavored and always shall endeavor to reduce to action, [was] the genuine rule of the people, and therefore [he hoped] that so far as possible the people may be given the chance through direct primaries, to express their preference as to who shall be the nominee of the Republican Presidential Convention.”²⁸ Progressives meant to bring about widespread reform, and thus their election, and seating relied on the count of a popular vote—and an enfranchised population. The direct primary strategy was more popular with urban politicians than rural ones. “Republicans supporting a gubernatorial or congressional district primary represented counties that were more rural (75.3%) than were those opposed to the proposition (53.8%).”²⁹ Some politicians believed that those who stood to gain from their progressive policies were willing to vote on those policies through the primary system. Thus, progressive candidates like Roosevelt and La Follette sought direct primaries. Progressive policies benefited from direct election because progressives had bet on the idea that policies that put the collective as a high priority would receive the endorsement of the collective society. Robert La Follette had also championed the direct primary in Wisconsin, and his policies propelled him to impressive results in the popular vote for a third-party run in the 1924 election: “Robert M. La Follette popularized the direct primary.”³⁰

Before his run as the nominee of the Progressive Party of 1912, Theodore Roosevelt had a vast political career that spanned two decades. His first position was as a member of the New York State Assembly, and he nearly continuously held a political position until he became President of the United States, in 1901, after President William McKinley’s assassination. Similarly, Robert La Follette had a long political career but was keen on being re-elected into the same political offices. Roosevelt, in contrast, held a political office short term as a strategy to ascend to President in just 20 years. A more fantastic picture comes to mind about what kind of politicians La Follette and Roosevelt were when considering Roosevelt’s upward spiral and La Follette’s slow yet steady climb. As an elected official, Roosevelt spent most of his time holding executive offices in his home state or federal government in Washington D.C., while La Follette spent most of his time in the federal government’s legislative branch. In their political careers, both Roosevelt and La Follette were shaped by the offices they held or by the offices they held guided by their characters. La Follette’s effort to build a strong coalition for a progressive electoral force to win the 1924 election was like how legislators work with their colleagues to

28 Ibid., 655.

29 John F. Reynolds, *The Demise of the American Convention System, 1880–1911* (United States: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 210.

30 Ibid., 230.

get a bill passed. Roosevelt shaped his political persona with the confidence and strength of a dynamic leader by giving speeches fashioned to what the people wanted to hear. This process mimics how a governor or a president might whip up support to get their legislative bodies to take up their campaign promises. Both progressive campaigns for the presidency embodied the political histories of each respective candidate. La Follette's strategy of coalition building and calculated planning is emblematic of the processes of a successful congressperson. Roosevelt's dynamic and charismatic leadership relied on his skillset, built and improved through countless dealings directly with the public through his various, numerous public offices. In that regard, La Follette's campaign strategy was rooted in his experience on the legislative branch, while Roosevelt's campaign strategy was built on a career in the executive.

Political Cartoons and Progressive Candidates



Figure 1: Karl Kae Knecht
"The More You Mix In, The Easier
To Satisfy Everyone."

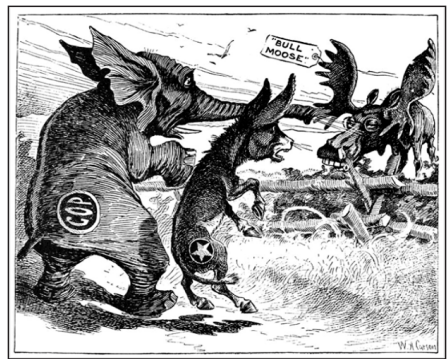


Figure 2: W. A. Carson
"Bull Moose Campaign."

In the early twentieth century, political cartoons were one of the media's most dominant forms of election coverage. Theodore Roosevelt was often lampooned and lambasted by critics through political cartoons, such as in the cartoon depicted below, illustrated by Karl Knecht. In figure one, on the left, Roosevelt is depicted as a baker, exclaiming, "The more you mix in, the easier to satisfy everyone!"³¹ The image portrayed him pouring a bottle of "Progressivism" into a big mixing bowl labeled "A Teddy Speech." Ingredients around him include "Radical Spice," "Any Old View," "Conservative Views," "Pure Democracy," and a mixture of "Initiative, Referendum, [and] Recall." Knecht depicted Roosevelt as a man who claimed to support everything

31 Karl Kae Knecht, *The More You Mix In, The Easier To Satisfy Everyone* (Cartoon) in the *Evansville Courier* (Evansville, IN, 1912).

and therefore stood for nothing. If a voter in 1912 picked up a copy of the *Evansville Courier* to find this political cartoon, the voter might have taken away from this cartoon that they should not take Theodore Roosevelt's candidacy seriously. In the figure on the right (Fig. 2), W. A. Carson depicted Roosevelt embodying the bull moose mascot of the Progressive Party.³² The image shows the Progressive bull moose scaring off the Republican elephant and the Democratic Donkey. Carson's cartoon exemplifies a fundamentally and different perspective than that of Knecht. In the second image, titled "Bull Moose Campaign," Carson insinuated that the Progressive Party is a serious, credible threat to the old two-party system ruled by the Democratic and Republican parties.

Robert La Follette did not escape political cartoons, still immensely popular by the 1924 presidential election. The political cartoonists typically caricatured La Follette by making him very short, playing on the senator's height of 5 feet and five inches (Fig. 3). The cartoonists gave him a stern appearance and made his hair stick upwards high. In the political cartoon on the left, La Follette holds a "strongest card." The cartoonist, John McCutcheon, insinuated that La Follette had cleaned up Wisconsin with reforms and that he could do it across the United States. Furthermore, La Follette looks into the readers' eyes with his "Exhibit A," which shows that La Follette's policies have been applied and have worked. This is exemplified by the depiction of the railroads as an octopus gripping onto the state. In turn, the state reaches out to "Good Laws." The pitcher and a cup of water in the image indicate that La Follette gave a speech and that he has plenty of evidence for his belief that he is qualified. The big pitcher told of a long speech duration.



Figure 3: John T. McCutcheon "Mr. La Follette's Strongest Card."

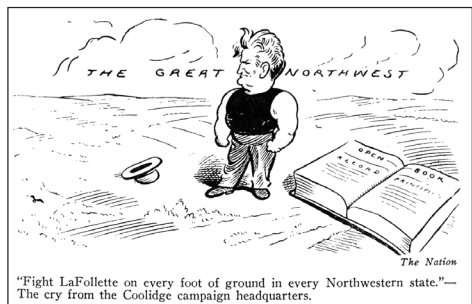


Figure 4: Art Young "Fight LaFollette on Every Foot of Ground--"

32 W. A. Carson, *Bull Moose Campaign* (Cartoon, 1912).

In the second cartoon (Fig. 4), published by *The Nation*, La Follette appears standing in the plains of the “Great Northwest.” The text reads, “Fight LaFollette on every foot of ground in every Northwestern state”—The cry from the Coolidge campaign headquarters.”³³ The open-faced book shows his record and principles. The cartoon suggests three separate statements: 1) La Follette is an open book with a good record; 2) La Follette has a hold on the Northwestern states; 3) the Coolidge campaign stands more to lose from La Follette doing well than the Davis campaign doing well.

There was a grain of truth in the cartoons of Robert La Follette and Theodore Roosevelt, like often there is in any satirical work. For Roosevelt, in figure 2, the image shows a Progressive bull moose frightening the two major-party mascots. In figure 4, La Follette displays the position of the Coolidge campaign as worried about their prospects in the Northwest. A candidate was more likely to garner support from the ex-supporters of a candidate with ideological proximity. Both Roosevelt and La Follette broke from the Republican Party, so naturally, their opponents, Taft and Coolidge, were worried about their ability to win with a “split party” in the race. For Roosevelt (figure 1), the cartoon assailed him as eclectic and people-pleasing by making an ideologically and sometimes contradictory and mixed speech. For La Follette, figure 3 depicts him as someone with strong convictions and a proven record by showing him providing evidence of his record in a presentation or speech. Both Roosevelt and La Follette’s political cartoons reflect their political positions. Roosevelt’s record showed his true nature as a people pleaser politician, as Roosevelt grew steadily more progressive during the last term of his nearly eight years in office as president. After leaving office, he changed his political stances to support positions he did not act on as president.

When it mattered, and even when Roosevelt had the power to change the nation through policy, he continued to work through his political ideas. This process made Roosevelt appear as a contradictory or indecisive politician willing to tap into the population’s desires to get back into the White House. Additionally, Roosevelt appeared as an evolving politician whose political positions changed as he expanded in the political arena while the circumstances shaped his positions in office. For La Follette, the opinions expressed in both cartoons depicted him as a man of evidence illustrated by his formidable record on the railroads and having an “open-book” of his political record laying out next to him. McCutcheon and *The Nation* expressed the opinion that La Follette’s “Strongest Card” was his political experience by living up to his promises—and that his opponents should be worried about

33 Art Young, “Fight LaFollette on Every Foot of Ground in Every Northwestern State” in *The Nation* (Cartoon, 1924).

a candidate of substance because who would know his political history more than those of his region of the United States?

In a letter to journalist and muckraker Lincoln Steffens regarding an article Steffens had written, Roosevelt responded, “you contend that Taft and I are good people of limited vision who fight against specific evils with no idea of fighting against the fundamental evil; whereas La Follette is engaged in a fight against the ‘fundamental’ evil.”³⁴ In another letter, written in 1908, Roosevelt appeared to acknowledge a difference, politically speaking, between himself and Robert La Follette. James Chace described the difference between Roosevelt and La Follette succinctly when he argued, “Where La Follette wanted to smash monopolies into pieces, Roosevelt continued to believe that they were inevitable and wanted to regulate them more fully.”³⁵ Roosevelt and La Follette drew on these political differences and refused to endorse one or the other in the 1912 election, which resulted in the split of the progressives in the 1912 Republican primary. Without La Follette releasing his delegates to go to Roosevelt at the Republican convention, Roosevelt certainly stood no chance at gaining the nomination. In the 1924 election, Hiram Johnson ran in the Republican primary against Calvin Coolidge. In 1912, Johnson could have lent considerable legitimacy to the newer Progressive Party and the La Follette campaign, having been Roosevelt’s running mate. However, Johnson did not endorse La Follette’s campaign.

Conclusion

The definition of political progressivism has evolved through centuries of American history. The meaning of progressivism meant different things to La Follette and Roosevelt. Progressivism certainly has different meanings if we apply the term to President Woodrow Wilson, a self-described progressive, or Eugene Debs, who ran on what could be considered a progressive platform; even President William Howard Taft, who also had been described as the progressive protégé of Roosevelt himself. With Robert La Follette and Theodore Roosevelt being the two most electorally popular progressives in American history, it is reasonable to conclude that their campaigns functioned as a referendum of public yearning—which then molded the word progressive. In reference to the 1912 general election, Nathan Miller has noted that frontrunners Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt described women’s suffrage and the abolition of child labor as “Rooseveltian proposals.”³⁶

34 Louis Auchincloss and Theodore Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 581.

35 James Chace, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs -The Election that Changed the Country* (N.p.: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 103.

36 See essay titled “My Hat Is In The Ring” in Nathan Miller, *Theodore Roosevelt: a Life* (New York: Morrow, 1992), 529.

Roosevelt himself confirmed his suffragist position at the 1912 Progressive Convention, stating that the ballot was “as necessary for one class as to the other.”³⁷ Some scholars have described Robert La Follette’s wife, Belle, as a ‘leading feminist’ who helped to develop his political positions on feminists’ issues and women’s suffrage.³⁸ La Follette had written personally on the rights of women to a constituent stating that “a government of equal rights cannot justly deny women the right of suffrage. It will surely come.”³⁹ La Follette also called for the end to child labor in his 1924 campaign for president. In all, both La Follette and Roosevelt agreed in solving very similar social issues of the times, this shared set of values coupled with social policy contributes to a more detailed portrait of the American progressive in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Progressive Party platforms of 1912 and 1924 illustrate how everyday people, trade organizations, and other socio-political groups supported progressive politicians and how these politicians manifested their support for these different groups. One such connection centers on the role of agricultural unions and organizations in the 1924 elections. As agricultural workers made up a large portion of the base of support for such events as the CPPA and the Progressive Party convention, it should be surprising that the platform that La Follette ran on, in 1924, catering to “The Farmers,” by highlighting the “Distress of American Farmers.”⁴⁰ Parallel strategies in support of railroad workers were included in La Follette’s campaign. The campaign drafted in their literature a section titled “Railroads,” which sought to fix the rates of travel and the “public ownership” of the railroads.⁴¹ Supporters of the 1912 Progressive Party Platform included laborers and working-class people. Roosevelt’s platform included ideas regarding time off for workers and 8-hour workdays.⁴² The Ballinger Affair had not just precluded the run of Roosevelt; some have claimed it may have resulted in it. The Ballinger Affair enraged conservationists, and the 1912 Progressive Party stood to gain from that outrage. Roosevelt’s Progressive Party platform included sections over

37 Theodore Roosevelt, *Confession of Faith*. Speech delivered at the National Convention of the Progressive Party, Chicago, IL (August 6, 1912).

38 Mary Jo. Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Harvey J. Kaye, *The American Radical* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 160.

39 Robert La Follette, *Robert La Follette, Senator, to Anne Fitzhugh Miller, supporting women’s right to vote* (April 9, 1908, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbcmiller001174/>, Accessed August 25, 2021).

40 Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *Minor/Third Party Platforms, Progressive Party Platform of 1924 Online* (The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273290>, Accessed August 25, 2021).

41 Ibid.

42 Ronald J. Pestritto and William J. Atto, *American Progressivism: A Reader* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 274-287.

“Conservationism” and “Waterways” for example—perhaps a reference to the specifics of the affair as much as it is an important issue for the issue-oriented voter.⁴³

Though neither candidate won the presidency, both candidates have been enshrined in American political history as candidates who saw massive results from the newly opened direct primaries. Theodore Roosevelt made his return to the Republican Party and endorsed their nominee in the 1920 election. However, the progressive organizations, unions, and parties that surrounded La Follette gave him the legacy of the progressive vision. La Follette died shortly after the 1924 election in 1925. Eugene Debs’ endorsement of La Follette appeared to show a consolidated political Left political that Theodore Roosevelt never managed to unify. The strength of Roosevelt was that he was a great executive, but his weakness was his inability to be a legislator like La Follette, as he failed to unify a solid base of support. La Follette was able to unify the progressive and liberal movements because he had the experience of working with coalitions in the legislature. Roosevelt’s ability to create the image of a strong leader gave him an electoral edge. Roosevelt’s inability to consolidate support behind him and La Follette’s inability to take the reins and capture a crowd is likely what led each to electoral defeat. Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette were issues-based candidates. Though their impressive third-party results could be owed to their enigmatic characters, it is evident that support for their shared ideological vision held for over a decade during the Progressive Era. Political progressivism must be understood beyond the confinements of a rigid definition. It breathes and expands when it needs; when a collective hope for progress, it turns its eye to any forthcoming issue.

43 Ibid.