

Robert La Follette

1855–1925



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette spent his life in efforts to create a better life for ordinary people. He held to these progressive ideals with faith and consistency.



As you read the biography below, decide whether Robert La Follette was a success or a failure.



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Robert M. “Fighting Bob” La Follette spent most of his life in politics, serving his home state of Wisconsin first as a congressman (1884–1890), then a governor (1900–1906), and finally a senator (1906–1925). As one of the foremost leaders of the progressive movement, he spoke out for ordinary people. Belle Case La Follette, Robert’s childhood sweetheart and wife, was a devoted feminist at a time when women were fighting for the right to vote.

La Follette earned his nickname not in the streets or on the playing fields but rather in the heat of political debate. He possessed a great deal of charm, a good mind, and a complete devotion to his political beliefs. He was a gifted speaker, and he seldom failed to make his point. He also published a journal devoted to progressive issues, *La Follette’s Weekly*.

La Follette arrived in Washington, D.C., as a new kind of senator. At a time when the Senate was packed with millionaires, he stood out as one who was not tied to big business. He believed that fewer than 100 men controlled the American economy, and that these men were under the power of the J. P. Morgan and Standard Oil banking groups. Politics, he said, was an unending struggle for control of the government between “the people,” or ordinary consumers and taxpayers, and “selfish interests,” meaning the big businesses that through legal means had received special privileges.

By 1924, at the time when La Follette was serving in the U.S. Senate, the majority of Democrat and Republican leaders and lawmakers were very conservative. The Progressives, a third party, included liberal Democrats, dissatisfied moderate Republicans, farmers, socialists, intellectuals, recent immigrants, and representatives from the labor unions—the ordinary people that La Follette represented.

The Progressive Party asked La Follette to be their candidate for the presidency that year. He accepted and ran on a platform that promised

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government reform, a fair tax system, regulation of big business, and a better life for those ordinary people.

For a third-party candidate, La Follette received a respectable share of the vote, about 17 percent. But he carried only one state, Wisconsin. After the election La Follette returned to his work in the Senate. He died in office only a year later.

Both of La Follette's sons, Senator Robert La Follette Jr. and Governor Philip La Follette, made careers in politics as Progressives. Decades later, *La Follette's Weekly* was revived and renamed *The Progressive*. It exists to this day.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What were the goals of the Progressives?

2. **Make Generalizations** What was the main goal of *La Follette's Weekly*? Why do you think the journal was revived and still exists today? Explain your thinking.

ACTIVITY

With a group of classmates, develop a dramatic presentation of a meal at the La Follettes' dinner table. What would the talk around the table have been about? Choose roles, do any necessary research, and practice your presentation before presenting it to the rest of the class.