

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. 2, No. 10

October, 2016

‘JUST CALL ME BILL’: WILLIAM TAFT BRINGS SPECTACLE POLITICS TO THE MIDWEST

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William Taft used numerous situations along the campaign trail to become a personable candidate in the 1908 presidential contest. In Marysville, Missouri, a young woman offered him her baby as his train pulled away. Taft kissed the baby’s forehead and the crowd went “wild over the demonstration.”² Later, tens of thousands of onlookers greeted him as he finished a tour of Midwestern states in St. Louis, Missouri. Two crowds virtually blocked the sidewalk and street as Taft acknowledged the throngs’ salutations for nearly two miles as he made his way to the Planters’ Hotel. Upon arrival, a crowd “swept” him a hundred feet down the corridor, despite the candidate’s weight and his assistants’ efforts to protect him. As a passageway cleared, he looked back with a warm smile and said, “As I remember mythology, there was a gentleman named Briarelus who had a hundred hands. I wish I had them all for my friends, the people of St. Louis.”³ An energetic campaigner, Taft spent sixteen hours connecting with folks throughout the state that day.

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² *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, October 6, 1908, 3.

³ *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1908, 4.

As Gil Troy writes, “the 1908 campaign marked a milestone in campaign history: for the first time, both major party candidates stumped actively and openly.”⁴ A man that never ran for any office, Taft, took on Democrat William Jennings Bryan, known as “The Boy Orator” for his ability to deliver speeches. Taft won despite the experience gap; this was Bryan’s third time stumping for the presidency in the past four elections. Political historians have underrated Taft’s victory: he became the first presidential contestant to stump and win since William Henry Harrison did so in 1840.⁵ Over the next sixty-four years, seven candidates went on eight failed tours.⁶ Following Taft’s success, Calvin Coolidge has been the only man to run for the presidency without stumping.

The historiography of Taft’s tour has evolved over the past thirty-five years. Historians long rated his campaigning ability as below average and in need of Theodore Roosevelt’s resuscitation. Recently, they have given Taft more credit for his electioneering appearances. In 1980, Taft biographer Judith Anderson opined that his speeches “failed to arouse much admiration and enthusiasm”; however, “with Roosevelt on his side, he was invincible.” This analysis echoes many of the Ohioan’s early biographers’ interpretations: Taft himself was not an effective campaigner, but Roosevelt’s support got him to the White House. Paolo Coletta offered a different interpretation in 1971 when he painted Taft as a “capable campaigner who made no mistakes,” although Bryan outmatched him from the stump. Recently, historians have begun to side with Coletta over Anderson. In 2009, Lewis Gould posited that Taft “actually did well” at campaigning. Five years later, Doris Goodwin quoted onlookers’ descriptions that Taft was “on the level,” and that although he was not a “professional entertainer” his words “strengthened himself in the hearts of his hearers.”⁷ She did not praise him directly. Taft’s ability to reach out to voters was vital to his candidacy because he ran at a time in American political history when the ability to deliver charismatic speeches and shake hands was put at a premium by larger-than-life candidates such as Roosevelt, Bryan, and Eugene Debs. Presenting the image of an active, in-touch, presidential candidate also

⁴ Gil Troy, *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 124. For his coverage of the election of 1908 see pages 119-124.

⁵ Jeffrey Bourdon, “Symbolism, Depression, and the Specter of Slavery: William Henry Harrison Tour for the Presidency in 1840,” *Ohio History* 112 (2011).

⁶ Winfield Scott in 1852; Stephen Douglas in 1860; Horatio Seymour in 1868; Horace Greeley in 1872; James Blaine in 1884; William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and 1900; Alton Parker in 1904.

⁷ Judith Anderson, *William Howard Taft* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 109, 114; Paolo Coletta, “Election of 1908,” *History of American Presidential Elections, 1900-1936*, Vol. 3, ed. by Arthur Schlesinger (New York: Chelsea House, 1971), 2087; Lewis Gould, *The William Howard Taft Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 20; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 554.

proved especially important for Taft because of his physical appearance and penchant for playing golf.

Taft toured several regions during the campaign, including the Midwest, the South, the Mid-Atlantic, and New England. Historians have not paid enough attention to the importance of the Republican candidate's initial, Midwestern swing in shaping him as a candidate; Taft molded himself into a great campaigner while touring the region before he went anywhere else. He delivered charismatic speeches, personally shook hands, conducted brief, private conversations with onlookers, gained confidence in his appearance, and received favorable press coverage while touring in Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Kansas, and Missouri. Taft did not focus solely on white men, making a concerted effort to communicate with women and African Americans as well. He started the process of reaching out to females in Iowa and black men and women in Kansas. While in the Midwest, Taft needed to identify himself with Roosevelt because of the president's popularity, but he also needed to forge his own identity. He handled numerous, spontaneous interactions during his initial tour smoothly and with a personal touch. Later, these skills served him well when electioneering along the eastern seaboard. In a "campaign of personalities," as Troy calls it, Taft and his campaigners' ability to package and sell his personality to all types of voters proved to be a key to his victory.⁸ The Republican's swing around the region is even more important when considering Bryan's campaign strategy. The Boy Orator could bank on winning the Solid South, but he also needed to win one or two states in the Northeast or the Midwest.⁹ The Democrat knew that his populist rhetoric would resonate more effectively with farmers and rural residents in the Midwest than with laborers in the East. This made Taft's tour of the region even more pivotal.

Taft's tour of the Midwest also allowed his party to engage in "spectacle" politics, the kind of political maneuvering that highlights the image of the candidate in voters' minds. Michael McGerr observes that following the election of 1896, the use of "spectacle" or "spectacular politics" declined in presidential races; "by 1908, the occasional parade was simply a curiosity, a pale reminder of an earlier time. . . . Smaller events in schoolhouses or the county seat, once preceded by red fire and a short parade, began to disappear as well. In cities, spectacular rallies featuring both speeches and

⁸ Troy, *See How They Ran*, 124.

⁹ Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), 160.

parades were quite rare by 1908.”¹⁰ Taff’s Midwestern tour revived a sense of spectacle politics in 1908 in places such as Des Moines, Chicago, Fargo, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Northfield, Fairbault, and many of the small towns in between them. McGerr also claims that the election of 1896 saw three types of political styles – spectacle, educational, and advertising – “bound together for a moment.”¹¹ Taff’s 1908 victory was the result, at least in large part, of the Republican campaigner’s ability to blend all three of these styles in a single race.

The Midwest had not always played a prominent role in presidential politics. Ohio was the only state in the region that participated in Jeffersonian Era elections because most of the area was either unsettled or recently had been divided into territories by the federal government. Virginians dominated the early presidential scene as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison depended on Southern and Mid-Atlantic regional support. Later, states such as Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri all supported Democrat Andrew Jackson. However, by 1836 they had their first home-grown candidate, the Ohio Whig William Henry Harrison. In 1841, the former war hero became the first president from the Midwest. The next chief executive from the region was Abraham Lincoln in 1861. He retained support throughout the region with the exception of Missouri. Over the course of the next four decades, six of nine presidents were born in the Midwest – five of them in Ohio, including Ulysses Grant, Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley. All of these Republicans received strong support in the region. Broadly speaking, at the start of nineteenth century presidential politics, Virginia and the South held the spotlight, but Midwestern candidates dominated the second half of the century.

Just as states in the Midwest were being brought into the political fold, presidential candidates started challenging the notion that the presidency sought the man and not the other way around. Both William Henry Harrison and Lincoln toured for the office in Ohio, Harrison after receiving the Whig nomination and Lincoln before garnering the Republican nod. Despite their successes, stumping for the presidency was problematic as many candidates found trouble on the road, including Winfield Scott in 1852, Stephen Douglas eight years later, Horatio Seymour in 1868, and

¹⁰ Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 146.

¹¹ McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 145.

Horace Greeley four years later.¹² All of them toured the Midwest. In 1880, James Garfield decided to stay home and talk as he ran the first front-porch campaign in Mentor, Ohio. Benjamin Harrison successfully followed suit in 1888 from Indianapolis, Indiana. Republican presidential candidates held firm to most of the Midwest during the Gilded Age. The first two “porch” candidates dominated the region, only losing Missouri and West Virginia to Democrats. In 1892, Harrison followed the tradition that the incumbent stay quiet in the White House, while his supporters sought re-election for him. His opponent, Grover Cleveland, also abstained from electioneering and won Missouri, West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. This was the last year that neither major party candidate actively campaigned.

The campaign of 1896 saw the front-porch style compete against a touring candidate. Bryan burst onto the national political scene in Chicago with his “Cross of Gold” speech at the Democratic National Convention, calling for a change from the gold standard to a gold/silver standard for backing paper money. The shift would put more paper money in farmers’ pockets and help them pay their debts. The gold/silver plank was part of the Populist movement’s platform. Populism was one of several class oriented social movements, along with trade unionism and socialism, which sought to right the social disorders brought about by industrialization and modernity.¹³ Bryan demonstrated a knack for pitting farmers against businessmen and illuminating the importance of the producers in American society. As Michael Kazin writes, Bryan expressed “evangelical fervor; a broad, moralistic definition of consumerism; continuity with the icons of democracy; the equation of Americanism with the interests of the common people; and the need for a popular uprising to cleanse the nation.”¹⁴ Upon garnering the nomination, he traveled to twenty-six states, made 250 stops, spoke about eighty thousand words a day, and saw up to five million people. He gave so many impromptu talks that it is impossible to know how many speeches he

¹² Scott actually picked up a baby once and realized it was a black child and immediately put the baby down. The press had a field-day with the episode. See Jeffrey Bourdon, “Sweet Irish Brogues, Mellifluous Germans, and African Slaves Ignored: Winfield Scott’s Caricatured 1852 Electioneering Tour for the Presidency,” *Ohio Valley Historical Magazine* (Summer 2016). In 1860, Douglas had a campaign appearance at the Jones Woods barbeque in New York City that turned into a food fight. Twelve years later, Horace Greeley did something that no other candidate could do during Reconstruction by bringing Northerners and Southerners together by offending all of them with his campaign speeches.

¹³ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 29.

¹⁴ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 44. For his full chapter on the election of 1896 see pages 42-46.

made.¹⁵ Bryan's rhetoric resonated with voters more than usual because an economic depression had gripped the nation since 1893. It also made the Democratic Party look like they might shift their ideology on the political economy from the usual laissez-faire attitude that characterized them during the Gilded Age to a more active approach.

To combat this, William McKinley became the third contestant to speak to voters from his front porch, in Canton, Ohio, as he drew over 750,000 people.¹⁶ The campaign grew to such proportions because an economic depression had gripped the nation since 1893 and Republican organizers had perfected the art of drawing out crowds with different occupations from around the country. McKinley espoused maintenance of the gold standard and a nationalistic approach to overcoming the depression. With this approach and a high tariff schedule, the Republican promised American workers a "full-dinner pail" during his administration. By maintaining the gold standard, the Republican Party appeared to support the same laissez-faire approach to the political economy that they had throughout the Gilded Age. Although Bryan outdid McKinley when talking, the Democrat gave extemporaneous speeches which reporters had a hard time copying down, while the Republican's hand-written speeches were dispersed to editors after he finished. Bryan may have sounded better, but McKinley's speeches were read, in full, by millions of newspaper readers the day after he delivered them.¹⁷ Moreover, Bryan's moral message motivated many urban immigrants to support McKinley, although they usually voted Democratic.¹⁸ In the process of running, neither candidate wanted to seem disinterested in the office, and neither wanted to appear too aggressive and lose their dignity. Touring for Bryan and front-porch campaigning for McKinley served as ways for them to do so. McKinley won the election and most of the Midwest with Bryan taking South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. The loss marked the failure of Populism in presidential politics.¹⁹ In the process, both men tested the maxim that the presidential office seeks the man, not the other way around. The campaign saw both parties engage in all three political styles: spectacle, educational, and advertising.²⁰

¹⁵ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 68. For his full chapter on the election of 1896 see pages 45-79.

¹⁶ James Garfield was the first in 1880 and Benjamin Harrison in 1888 was the second.

¹⁷ William Skrabec, *William McKinley, Apostle of Protectionism* (New York: Algora, 2008), 143.

¹⁸ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 45.

¹⁹ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 269.

²⁰ McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 145.

The election of 1900 saw a different set of issues face the same candidates with depression's end in 1897 and the outbreak of the Spanish-American War one year later. This time McKinley supported continued military efforts in the Philippines while abstaining from electioneering. The Republican's zeal for war with Spain also molded party ideology on foreign policy at the dawn of the Progressive Era as Republicans became an aggressive, imperialistic party in the name of reform. Having garnered a national reputation by leading the Rough Riders into Cuba, Roosevelt attained the Vice-Presidential nomination and stumped for McKinley. Bryan, a pacifist and an unofficial preacher, toured again and argued for anti-imperialism. He even contended that Americans should feel unpatriotic enough to stop celebrating Independence Day. Despite his efforts, the Democrat lost again.²¹ McKinley dominated the Midwest, only losing Missouri to Bryan. One year later, McKinley was assassinated and Roosevelt became president.

Taft served as Roosevelt's most trusted advisor during both of his terms. The Secretary of War was born on September 15, 1857, and earned an undergraduate degree at Yale University before attending Cincinnati Law School. After a brief attempt at newspaper reporting, Taft became an assistant county prosecutor in 1881 and then an internal revenue collector for Cincinnati the next year. In his late twenties, Taft started practicing law and quickly became the leader of the Cincinnati bar. At twenty-nine, he became an Ohio state superior court judge and issued injunctions against strikers and opposing labor boycotts. These decisions would be issues for him while meeting laborers in 1908. Several years later, Taft started his relationship with Roosevelt when he served as Solicitor General and Roosevelt was a Civil Service Commissioner. In 1892, Taft became a federal judge and two years later he ruled against the Chicago Pullman railroad strikers. This would be another hurdle for him during the campaign. In 1903, Taft bragged that he would never have to worry about being nominated for the presidency with his anti-labor record. It seemed that Taft's judicial record was antithetical to the newly developing, Progressive/pro-labor, Republican ideology.

Taft succeeded Elihu Root, a New York City lawyer and Secretary of War under McKinley and Roosevelt, in early 1904. He stumped for the president's re-election and disliked it. Taft told friends that, "I am not a politician and I dislike politics. I do want to go on the bench, and my ambition is to be Chief Justice of the United States. I would be more service there to the United

²¹ For an in-depth look at the election of 1900 see Walter LaFeber, "Election of 1900," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1877-1917*.

States as I could be as President.” In the summer of 1904, Roosevelt told a relieved Taft that Root would probably be the next Republican candidate. However, Root’s liabilities quickly became apparent: bad health, too many Wall Street ties, conservative views incongruent with Roosevelt’s notions of Progressivism, and advanced age – he would be sixty-three in 1908. In March of 1907, Roosevelt started publicly backing Taft for the presidency months before an economic panic shook the business world. Later that year, Taft’s half-brother, Charles, persuaded Arthur “Jake” Vorys to be the future candidate’s informal advisor in Ohio. Early in 1908, Frank Hitchcock retired as Assistant Postmaster General to advise Taft as well.²²

The Republican nominating convention started on June 16, 1908, in Chicago, with Taft favored for the nod. Only Roosevelt could possibly steal it. On the second day, party chairman Henry Lodge kept party leaders’ attention for thirty minutes as he discussed Republican policies and criticized Democrats, but once he mentioned Roosevelt’s name the crowd erupted as everybody started waving hats, umbrellas, and flags in “a wild, frenzied uncontrollable stampede for Roosevelt.”²³ They chanted “Four, four, four more years” for the next forty-nine minutes.²⁴ Lodge tried to regain control, but someone tossed a four-foot long teddy bear into the air and delegates tipped it around.²⁵ The *Washington Post* wrote that “Each time it appeared above the heads of the delegates, it was a signal for another outburst” and the meeting was “on the verge of a good natured riot.” Finally, an Oklahoma national committee member grabbed the bear and sat on it to quell the throng.²⁶ The next day, a large lithograph of Roosevelt was carried onto the main stage and the crowd erupted again. Although the throng cheered for Roosevelt, Republican delegates still set their sights on Taft as seven states cast their ballots for the Secretary of War. One onlooker opined that “The scene was absolutely unique in American history, the voting being taken during a terrific uproar in behalf of a man whose name was not before the convention.”²⁷ Despite Roosevelt’s towering shadow, Taft garnered the nomination by late afternoon.

Once the convention ended, Taft ensconced himself in Hot Springs, Virginia, throughout August to play golf and make a few speeches to lawyers in the area. Despite this early, laid-back

²² LaFeber, “Election of 1900,” 2062-2064.

²³ Des Moines *Daily News*, June 17, 1908.

²⁴ Coletta, “Election of 1908,” 2072.

²⁵ Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit*, 544.

²⁶ *Washington Post*, June 18, 1908.

²⁷ Galveston *Daily News*, June 19, 1908.

approach, Taft had to be thinking about *how* to run for the presidency. Onlookers expected the other candidates and Roosevelt to stump. Taft could be relatively assured that Bryan would tour. Although the Democrat initially promised to remain homebound, "I believe I can do more good this way than I can by traveling."²⁸ By mid-September, a traveling Bryan told a Buffalo crowd that he was "endeavoring to meet the exactions of the campaign."²⁹ He was not alone as the Socialist Party nominee, Eugene Debs, took his "Red Special" railroad train across America and seemed to arouse enthusiasm wherever he went, starting in August.³⁰

On August 12, Hitchcock announced that Taft would make no speeches outside of Cincinnati as part of his campaign.³¹ However, just over a week later the *Chicago Tribune* reported that "it had been hinted here" for "a couple of days" that the candidate might travel outside of Ohio to deliver some "weighty speeches" in swing states. Taft told reporters on August 21 that "After the first week of a campaign is over and one finds himself talking without difficulty on all of the various subjects of discussion, I do not think there is anything more enjoyable than making at least one speech a day." He also stated that "There is nothing to prevent a change of the original plans." The candidate contended that any transition to an "ordinary campaign" would be made "entirely" by the Republican National Committee and also hesitantly added that "There is no harder work than making hurried speeches from the rear end of a train and I doubt if such work is effective."³²

Taft's late August trip from Hot Springs to Cincinnati may have also helped nudge his perspective on stumping. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that he delivered a series of speeches along the way which aroused onlookers and surprised his campaign managers. In Athens, Ohio, Vorys introduced the candidate to a local Taft club and hinted that it might be a good time for him to give a political talk to motivate the national committee to send him stumping. The candidate gave a rousing, thirty-minute speech in which he expressed his support for labor organizations and defended his record on injunctions as a judge. Taft spent the day riding a train, stopping in various towns, greeting well-wishers with "relish," giving brief talks, shaking lots of hands, and flashing his "Taft smile." He "admitted the day had demonstrated that the campaign was on, and added

²⁸ William Jennings Bryan to Henry Watterson, 4 August 1908, Henry Watterson Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹ *New York Times*, September 22, 1908.

³⁰ Coletta, "Election of 1908," 2071-2072.

³¹ *Chicago Tribune*, August 13, 1908.

³² *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1908.

that he was not sorry.” Vorys described Taft as a “real live wire” on the trail.³³ The next day, the *Tribune* noted that the candidate was “greatly pleased” by the reception that he had received throughout Ohio and that his supporters’ zeal had convinced the national committee to send him stumping. Now Taft would tour in at least ten doubtful states.³⁴ By the second week of September, he seemed urgent to talk, saying “I can’t conceive of anything more depressing than to be denied participation in an active campaign or to be kept quietly in one place depending wholly on fragmentary reports as to what is going on and as to what conditions are.”³⁵ This was quite a turnaround for a man who wrote to a friend that “A national campaign for the presidency is to me a nightmare” just four years earlier.³⁶ Taft’s renewed attitude about campaigning also matched his party’s new ideology, espousing aggressive legislation over the laissez-faire approach to fixing problems.

Taft’s campaign managers and assistants should be given more credit for helping him once he hit the trail. Primary secretary Fred Carpenter assisted with all daily routines.³⁷ The Sergeant-at-Arms of the United States Senate, Colonial Daniel Randall, watched over the candidate as he reached out to voters. J.T. Williams represented the Republican National Committee and helped coordinate Taft’s stops. The speaker’s statements were made available to the press by publicity agent Gus J. Karger. “Big Jim” Markham, secretary for the chief of police in Chicago, took his annual leave to make the Midwest swing with Taft “just to show off what a trained man could do in getting through crowds.” Markham started the trip with a broad smile, but over time it became “more straight and severe.” He still maintained that his “recipe” for helping the candidate through a crowd “proved more effectual than any argument in the campaign” in his mind. “Big Jim” claimed to “just step on their corns and smile and the way opens quite far enough for even Mr. Taft to pass through.” Markham was accompanied by Chicago police detective Joseph Barris, who served as a look-out for the candidate. Assistant Secretary Wendall Mischler tried to write down everything that the Republican said and did on the trail to distribute to newspapers. In between stops, Mischler would typewrite his notes for the editors. Maybe the second most important man on the train was J.J. Richardson, a throat specialist from Washington D.C., who spent every day of the tour

³³ *Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 1908, 1.

³⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 1908, 2.

³⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1908, 2.

³⁶ Taft to M.A. McRae, 12 November 1904, Reel 46, Series 3, William Howard Taft Papers.

³⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, October 1, 1908, 11.

applying constant treatment to the speaker's perennially hoarse throat.³⁸ The candidate traveled with several "spellbinders," or men that spoke in lieu of his ability to, such as Reverend John Wesley Hill of New York and Representative Boutell of Illinois. The crew also consisted of ten newspaper editors.³⁹ Finally, Nebraskan Crawford Kennedy distributed approximately one million photographs of Taft and a million and a half campaign buttons to onlookers.⁴⁰ After the turn of the century, the parties started shifting from conducting educational-oriented campaigns to using more advertising-oriented themes.⁴¹ The combination of people on Taft's train illuminate this idea as reporters wrote down his positions on issues to inform their readers alongside distributors handing out propaganda to enthusiastic onlookers.

Taft's team proved to be first rate once the tour began. His assistants coordinated numerous "spontaneous" stops through telegraphing. As he began his swing through the Midwest, Taft encouraged local leaders to board his train and advise him on what their constituents wanted to hear about. They suggested that he bypass discussing the Philippines, bank guarantees, and even labor injunctions in favor of the tariff schedule, so Taft "took his cue from these reports."⁴² At the end of his Northern tour, the candidate's arrangers made sure that he followed Bryan so that he could have the last word in front of voters.⁴³ As Troy writes in *See How They Ran*, "The debate about stumping no longer centered on tradition and proprieties but on tactics and partisanship."⁴⁴ Taft's handlers even tried to control the news cycle to make him seem like an active candidate in between tours. According to a report, in between his swings in the Midwest and the South, in one day Taft "climbed Mount Auburn, the highest of Cincinnati's seven hills, and then climbed the stairway of the water tower, which the candidate took in anticipation of three weeks in a private car." The paper also mentioned that the Unitarian contestant attended Christ Episcopal Church with his wife.⁴⁵ Republican managers carefully packaged their overweight candidate who did not follow a mainstream American religion. This type of reporting exemplified the trend from educational re-

³⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1908, 2.

³⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, October 1, 1908, 11.

⁴⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1908, 2.

⁴¹ McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, 160.

⁴² *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1908, 1.

⁴³ *New York Times*, October 22, 1908, 3.

⁴⁴ Troy, *See How They Ran*, 124.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, October 12, 1908, 3.

porting to advertising, as McGerr writes, “Party managers no longer thought primarily of educating the people with didactic literature; more and more, these men saw their main function as obtaining as much space as possible in the newspapers.”⁴⁶

Taft’s touring train proved to be an efficient, electioneering caboose. The “Taft Special” was composed of five cars, the “Constitution” which housed the candidate, the “Riva” for his assistants and the newspaper editors, the “Alabama” for invited guests and newspapermen, the “Ponce De Leon” for dining, and a baggage car which carried all the trunks, campaign literature, pictures of the candidate, and campaign buttons. Taft shook hands from the train after he gave speeches and used his time on board to answer letters, telegrams, and telephone calls, while going over the daily, local newspapers to calibrate his words for the next audience. The candidate usually only ate breakfast and dinner, but once the travelling started he began eating lunch as well, in part because it helped him socialize with local leaders on the train.⁴⁷

Newspapers covered Taft’s tour in its entirety. Papers during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era were notorious for their partisan coverage of candidates and elections. Sheets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune* served as Republican organs and painted relatively positive pictures of Taft’s campaign, although the Chicago paper did criticize him when they felt it was warranted. Other papers, such as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *New York Herald*, represented the Democratic Party and had a tendency to criticize Taft’s tours. Smaller papers also offered partisan analysis of Taft; the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Minneapolis Tribune*, both Republican sheets, reflected on Taft’s visit to their cities very positively, while the *Fargo Daily News*, a Democratic organ, posited a more critical view of his trip to their city.⁴⁸

Taft showed signs of being an excellent electioneer while starting his Midwestern tour at George Ade’s farm in the rural town of Brook, Indiana. The *New York Times* described the scene: “All forenoon, from miles around the countryside, buggies, family carryalls, hay racks, and farm vehicles of every description crowded the roads leading to Hazeldon, the home of George Ade.” Ade’s automobile drove Taft through “a veritable gauntlet of vehicles hitched to telephone poles,

⁴⁶ McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, 158-159.

⁴⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, October 1, 1908, 11.

⁴⁸ I have tried to synthesize a mixture of Republican and Democratic organs on the local level as well as more prominently read papers such as the *New York Herald*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Although the papers were always partisan, I hope a mixture of their reviews of Taft makes for a relatively balanced overall picture.

fence posts, trees, or anything else calculated to restrain the horses.”⁴⁹ The Cleveland *Plain-Dealer* noted that “The trees were full of people whose slipping feet and clinging hands showered bark on the candidate. Mr. Taft was occupied half the time watching the particular man poised above him on a teetering bough, that he might be ready to step aside when the man should fall.”⁵⁰ Aware of McKinley’s success in 1896, Ade promised a free lunch to visitors from Chicago, Cincinnati, and Indiana in “full dinner pails.” The Cincinnati *Enquirer* claimed that when he found out how many people were coming, “a heavy draft was made toward the tanners of Chicago and Indianapolis” and hundreds of “full dinner pails” were shipped to the farm. He even charged people thirty cents a plate. The paper joked that Ade had saved his farm from bankruptcy and taught the country a lesson in political economy. For years to come, dinner pails in Indiana would be called “Georgeades.”⁵¹ Taft declared that Ade was the “Indiana Sultan of Sulu” and contended that his Western trip was not an invasion of an enemy country, but instead a tour of “truly Republican territory.”⁵² His initial interactions in Indiana demonstrated the penchant that both Taft and his organizers had for spectacle politics.

Later that afternoon, Taft arrived in his Chicago hotel and shook hands with unionized freight handlers and engineer conductors. He “spoke for an instant with each man, joking with most of them and keeping the whole long line laughing.” Upon meeting a “striking young Hercules,” Taft said that “It’s a pleasure to meet such a handsome young man.” Embarrassed, the young man “blushed deeply” while a “little old man” behind him stated “And now wouldn’t ye like to meet an intelligent man, Mr. Next President?” Taft shook his hand and noted that “I can tell from the feel of that hand that you work for your living.”⁵³ That night, as Taft walked toward Orchestra Hall to give a speech, he was “easily distinguishable” by his size, his smile, “and above all, by a large straw hat.”⁵⁴ The candidate entered the hall and announced that if he could, then he would like to shake the hands of all 8,000 men present, many of them railway workers.⁵⁵ Once done talking, the Republican held an informal reception in the hall while seventy-five uniformed police officers tried

⁴⁹ New York *Times*, September 24, 1908, 1.

⁵⁰ Cleveland *Plain-Dealer*, September 24, 1908, 2.

⁵¹ Cincinnati *Enquirer*, September 24, 1908, 3. A tinner is a tin miner.

⁵²In 1896, Republican William McKinley espoused a high tariff schedule to ensure American workers a “full dinner pail.” New York *Times*, September 24, 1908.

⁵³ Chicago *Tribune*, September 24, 1908, 3.

⁵⁴ Chicago *Tribune*, September 24, 1908, 1.

⁵⁵ New York *Times*, September 24, 1908, 1.

to maintain crowd control. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, “The women were just as anxious to shake the hand of the big man as the men, and many an old women held on like grim death as she said ‘Good-Bye and good luck to you.’”⁵⁶ Taft started honing several effective electioneering practices during his first day touring: he ingratiated himself to locals by praising his introducer; he tried to shake everybody’s hand and talk to them personally; his image was outstanding with his “Taft smile” and appearance; and he involved women as well as men. By personably interacting with unionized laborers, Taft also started more closely aligning himself with reform-minded, Progressive Republicans who were probably nervous about his anti-labor record as a judge.

The next day, Taft toured Illinois and Wisconsin for his “first real experience in national campaigning in outside states.” Some hitches presented themselves along the way. The “Taft Special” actually stopped in a cornfield in Illinois overnight so that the candidate and his assistants could sleep. At seven o’clock the next morning, the candidate “hurriedly” dressed so he could see people waiting for him in Caledonia. He suffered from a hoarse voice while talking in Benoit. In Milwaukee, people waited overnight for a seat at Taft’s speaking venue, the Hippodrome. When the doors opened, “there was a mad scramble for seats.” Law enforcement’s attempts to maintain control were “futile” as “men lost their hats and women were pushed about like a boat in a storm by the jostling crowd. Those who possessed athletic ability sealed the fire escapes to catch a glimpse of the distinguished guest.”⁵⁷ This appearance was important because Taft secured Senator Robert La Follette’s endorsement when they appeared onstage together.⁵⁸ La Follette’s advocacy for Taft even more closely aligned the presidential candidate with the Progressive ideological wing of the Republican Party.

While his speeches seemed like a success to the *Milwaukee Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune* pointed out that Taft’s organizers did not effectively plan for him to meet the local folks for a handshake and some small talk. The paper contended that party managers generally overlooked the value of personal contact with the candidate. It made onlookers feel more connected to him and then they could go home and tell their friends to make them feel more involved. The sheet put it perfectly: “In a small town there is food for gossip for many weeks as to what Judge Jones said when he reached over the railing of a train, and how Willie Brown hung on to the candidate’s trousers, and what the great man said to Mrs. Smith when she insisted on shaking his hand as the

⁵⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, September 24, 1908, 3.

⁵⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 25, 1908, 4.

⁵⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 25, 1908, 1.

train was moving off.”⁵⁹ The newspapers were aware of the importance of creating a positive spectacle for onlookers. Taft’s weight, smile, and affability later created many unique, positive spectacles for voters across the Midwest to hold on to and tell their friends about later.

Taft’s campaign managers must have received the message because the candidate spent the next day in Iowa making a series of short stops to meet voters at train stations. News of the train’s arrival preceded it by telegram an hour or two beforehand which gave farmers from remote areas time to gather near the tracks. After his first stop in Clinton, Taft was handed fifty-three babies and shook the tiny hand of each one. He also exercised witty repartee with his audience. A man in overalls yelled out that “The only thing I’ve got against you is the way you part your hair in the middle: at least your picture looks that way.” Taft retorted “That’s libel” and lifted his straw hat, “You see, I’ve parted with so much hair that I haven’t left much to part, anywhere.” Governor Cummins added that “He parts it with a towel now.”⁶⁰ In Burlington, the candidate left his train and took a carriage around town making “half minute stops” to say a few words and shake hands.⁶¹ This gave people an opportunity to see him at even closer range. Taft could feel their passion, so he insisted on giving several “offhand addresses” which were “most intimate.” According to one newspaper editor, the face-to-face meetings in small towns served the candidate better than large gatherings in cities because it allowed him to put on the great “vote getting quality” of “magnetic honesty” which he possessed. Throughout the day, Taft made a total of eighteen stops. He was called “Bill” by onlookers, told that “he was alright,” and that he would “get there.” As Taft traveled, he became more skilled at mass handshaking by leaning “far over the rail of the car platform and work with both hands at once, grasping two or three hands in one clasp, and then let go and take another bunch, meanwhile talking in a lighter vein answering questions and wearing continually the famed Taft smile.”⁶²

Taft’s day in Iowa also demonstrated the importance of women to the contest. On a national level, women’s suffrage had been debated since 1848 when the National Women’s Suffrage Convention was held in Glens Falls, New York. In 1869, Wyoming gave women the right to vote. Other western states started following suit, including Colorado, Idaho, and Utah by 1908. Taft was aware of the issue, but not as sensitive to it as many women would have preferred. While in

⁵⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 25, 1908, 4.

⁶⁰ *New York Herald*, September 26, 1908, 5.

⁶¹ *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 26, 1908, 2.

⁶² *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1908, 3.

Des Moines, he visited the Plymouth Congregational Church to meet the Des Moines Women's Club and talk to 2,200 women. At the end of his speech, Taft stated that "I want to say too, that I am in favor of women's suffrage—that is, when all the women want it." The New York *Herald* reported that "The last clause checked the applause that had been started."⁶³ Apparently, Taft's energy for voting reform for women only went as far as "all the women" wanted it to go.

Taft continued interacting with women in Minnesota. In Northfield, an "extremely pretty girl" sat on top of a white elephant in the crowd. When she greeted Taft, he became flustered and "wandered far afield in his remarks from prosaic politics."⁶⁴ The Minneapolis *Tribune* reported that he laughingly said to the girl that "It is an unexpected pleasure to meet this beautiful symbol of Republican victory. I am sure that in such company I could go on to victory. I wish I were up there with you, but there isn't time for the crowd to rig up a derrick to put me there. I find when I have ridden horses that it has made them very sober and contemplative by the time they have reached home, and I am afraid even this elephant would be sorry if he had to bear my weight."⁶⁵ Later in the day in Faribault, a similar interaction occurred. This time a large elephant was led to the rear of the train. The animal had a G.O.P sign draped over it and was ridden by a "very pretty girl." More prepared for the interlude, the candidate quipped that "I'd like mightily to be up there with you," as the crowd laughed, "but I know you have not a derrick strong enough for me to mount. But just the same I believe I could ride that animal with great success."⁶⁶ These interactions produced rich symbolism. The Grand Old Party's symbolic animal had been the elephant since Thomas Nast's cartoon in 1874.⁶⁷ Taft also knew that women's influence would be important, especially because some of them could vote. Additionally, Taft enjoyed horseback riding. On one occasion, his horse collapsed beneath his weight and the search for a larger one became highly publicized. Roosevelt even asked him to stop riding because it was "dangerous for him (Taft) and cruelty to the horse."⁶⁸ Now, the candidate made light of his riding situation several years after the embarrassment.

⁶³ New York *Herald*, September 26, 1908, 5.

⁶⁴ Chicago *Tribune*, September 27, 1908, 2.

⁶⁵ Minneapolis *Tribune*, September 27, 1908, 2.

⁶⁶ New York *Times*, September 27, 1908, 2.

⁶⁷ *Harper's Weekly*, November 7, 1874, 912.

⁶⁸ Anderson, *William Howard Taft*, 105-106.

Maybe the most fascinating stop that the “Taft Special” made was in Fargo, North Dakota. The city instituted a rebate pricing system for stores that were part of a local association to encourage “considerable shopping” by visitors.⁶⁹ People came to see the candidate from as far as 450 miles away. A torchlight procession accompanied Taft through town on his way to a local fort where a tremendous barbeque was planned. Fourteen bands provided music and a squad of mounted cowboys accompanied the parade with “their characteristic yells.” The *New York Times* described the scene as “picturesque.”⁷⁰ On the other hand, the *Fargo Daily News* posited that the parade was “completely disorganized by the surging meaningless crowd.” The paper described that “Other sections of the torch-light procession, failing to get in line, paraded the streets in disorganized masses . . . Broadway was a scene of confusion and disorder, all of which was taken as an overflowing gushing Taft enthusiasm, but in reality was the unpartisan curiosity of Fargo and several thousands of people of the nearby towns, bent on seeing a new political national character.” The sheet complained that Taft only spoke for five minutes, but admitted that “the demonstration was unprecedented in the history of the campaign so far. . . It is the greatest crowd that has gathered at one time to hear and see Taft, with the possible exceptions of Des Moines and the Twin Cities.”⁷¹

Coordinators in Fargo also planned an elaborate meal for Taft and his followers. They served twenty mules and ten steers at the barbeque.⁷² Two large black bears from Montana were brought as well.⁷³ Speeches were made in a cleared area in the woods “in a natural amphitheater.” Log fires and large torches set up around the audience created “a weird light and smoke effect” over them. Taft joked about putting the Democratic Party into the White House and a “somewhat elderly” woman yelled that “We don’t want to try it.” Taft responded that “I hope not, Madam. I have no doubt that you are the heart of a family of sturdy men, whom you control, and I rely on such intelligent ladies as you to carry out your views.”⁷⁴

Debate in the press over the fate of the bears at the barbeque illuminated the weight of Roosevelt’s symbolism over the campaign. Famously, the president loved to hunt big game, especially aggressive animals such as bears. In 1903, he traveled to Mississippi where some locals tied one to

⁶⁹ *Fargo Daily News*, October 25, 1908, 3.

⁷⁰ *New York Times*, September 29, 1908, 2.

⁷¹ *Fargo Daily News*, September 29, 1908, 1.

⁷² *New York Times*, September 29, 1908, 2.

⁷³ *New York Herald*, September 29, 1908, 3.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, September 29, 1908, 2.

a tree for him to shoot, however Roosevelt insisted on hunting the animal. Once the story circulated, the president was given the nickname “Teddy.” The *New York Times* claimed that the bears in Fargo were originally going to be part of the meal and that they were trapped for some time and were fattened with nuts for the occasion. However, the locals decided to spare them “because of the sentiment that it would never do to have the candidate eat up the ‘real Teddy bear,’ as they were designated by a large sign over them.” The *Times* claimed that they were chained to a table near Taft as he ate.⁷⁵ The Cincinnati *Enquirer* and the Chattanooga *Daily Times* backed the story and added that a banner hung over them stating, “We are real teddies.”⁷⁶ In a separate report, the *New York Herald* wrote that the animals “were roasted on great spits in the open air” and that Taft “ate the bear meat with as much gusto as any of the thousands of enthusiasts” indulging in free food.⁷⁷ The conflicting stories in the media highlighted a quagmire that Republicans faced while selling Taft: how to properly link him to Roosevelt as a reformer, but make him his own man.⁷⁸ Maybe more than any other example on the campaign trail, the presence of the bears at the dinner demonstrated Taft’s organizers’ propensity for effective, spectacle politics.

Taft continued to become more effective as he traveled from North to South Dakota. The *Chicago Tribune* claimed that “he has suddenly acquired the art of plain speech. He adapts himself to his audiences in a wonderful way considering his lack of training and his speeches have been getting better and better because they have been becoming simpler . . .” The Republican was also becoming adroit at the art of personal contact with his visitors, a newspaper reported that “he shakes hands with all and is becoming adept in the way of making responses to good natured remarks of the people gathered in front of him.” While in South Dakota, the candidate was asked to make an extended speech but his voice was too hoarse, so Taft told his audience that “perhaps after he had been a candidate for the presidency as long as his distinguished opponent he would himself become possessed of leather lungs and a loud voice.”⁷⁹ He continued to ingratiate himself with western women as well; at the beginning of one talk he admitted that “I like to look into the faces of the ladies. It gives me inspiration, and I know that if I have them with me I will get the votes.”⁸⁰ The

⁷⁵ *New York Times*, September 29, 1908, 2.

⁷⁶ Cincinnati *Enquirer*, September 29, 1908, 2; Chattanooga *Daily Times*, September 29, 1908, 2.

⁷⁷ *New York Herald*, September 29, 1908, 3.

⁷⁸ Troy outlined this question in *See How They Ran*, 120.

⁷⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 1908, 1.

⁸⁰ *New York Times*, September 30, 1908, 2.

folks in South Dakota came away impressed with the candidate because of “his obvious good nature and his lack of the guile of the experienced politician.”⁸¹

In Wolsey, South Dakota, Taft discussed his weight and penchant for golf. Roosevelt played tennis privately and advised Taft to stop golfing before touring, writing that “I have received literally hundreds of letters from the West protesting it, some of them from men who themselves object, but more of them from men who do not object to it . . . but who are convinced it is having a bad effect . . . I hope you wont. . . . It is just like my tennis; I never let any (people) friends advertise my tennis, and never let a photo of me in tennis costume appear.”⁸² From the stump, Taft did not hide his love for the game and the real reason why he played: his weight. He stated that people thought that golf was a rich man’s game and that his zest for it showed how out of touch he was with plain people. Taft explained that in America, golf was “a game for people who are not active enough to play baseball or tennis or have too much weight to carry around to play those games, and yet when a man weighs 285 pounds you have got to give him some opportunity to make his legs and muscles move and golf offers that opportunity my friends were certain that if I could only come out here and show you what kind of a man I was in appearance you would get over the impression that there was anything about me that resembles a dude.”⁸³ Taft did not hide his love for golf from his admirers, and he did not mince words about his size.⁸⁴

Following a few days traversing Colorado and Wyoming, Taft made his way to Kansas where he continued to connect with local, common folks. A telegram came from Syracuse, Kansas, which stated “Hello, Bill-We live in the short grass country. Never saw a president and will probably never have the chance again, and we are going to see if you indorse the Roosevelt policies enough to take your Teddy early and let us take a look at you at 6 a.m.” Taft replied in the affirmative and the Chicago *Tribune* reported that the “look” was good based on the crowd’s reaction in Syracuse. Later in Dodge City, Taft saw a sign which read “Wheat 1908 92 cents-republican rule; wheat 1896 55 cents-democratic rule.” He told his audience that he could supplement it with “statistics

⁸¹ Chicago *Tribune*, September 30, 1908, 1.

⁸² Theodore Roosevelt to William Taft, 5 September 1908, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* Vol. VI, ed. Elting E. Morgan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 1209-1210.

⁸³ New York *Times*, September 30, 1908, 2.

⁸⁴ Taft’s followers even created a Fat Man’s Taft Club in Chicago comprised of Union stockyard workers who weighed an average of 246 pounds. On page five of the 2 August 1908 issue of the Chicago *Tribune* they printed a list of the members, their weight, and a picture of several of them. The club also wrote a campaign song in which each verse ended with the phrase “That’s why we fight for Big Billy.” The paper even submitted that some Democratic stockyard men were thinking about changing their political affiliation to become members.

a little more complete.” The Republican compared the exact prices of corn, wheat, oats, horses, cows, oxen, sheep, and hogs under Democratic versus Republican rule to show listeners that Republicans helped them more economically.⁸⁵ These examples demonstrated Taft’s ability to effectively engage in an educational campaign while still connecting with a local audience. Some cowboys and cowgirls sent the “Taft Special” off from Dodge City by firing rapid fire shots from their revolvers. There were “large percentages” of women everywhere Taft stopped “and they were almost more enthusiastic than the men.” African Americans also started to appear along the campaign trail in Kansas. The *Tribune* reported that “There was a noticeable gathering of colored people, and they were a good deal more enthusiastic than one might have expected.”⁸⁶

Taft started addressing black men and women in Kansas City, Missouri, at the Independence Baptist Church. A group of African Americans had assembled at the church and hoped that Taft would come by and say a word. Taft told them that he was a friend of their race and that he had always been one. He contended that black folks faced a problem that they must solve themselves: “You must make yourselves useful members of the body politic and to do this you must educate yourselves industrially and thoroughly. You must learn to be frugal and husband your resources. Your development along these lines has been great, and there is but one prediction that can be made as to the future, and that is a bright one.” The Republican did not specifically propose how the federal government might help African Americans. Listeners responded with “great enthusiasm,” and “speakers of the negro race who followed him made no pretense of concealing their political sentiments” for Taft.⁸⁷ The candidate was “roundly cheered” when he left and some speeches after that endorsed him.⁸⁸

Just a few days later, an “anti-Taft” group of over 500 black men met in Galesburg, Illinois. The plans were “all anti-Taft,” but when the leader of the Colored Waller’s Association, Republican Joseph S. Davis, walked across the platform the group “shouted wildly” for him. Davis exclaimed that “There is every reason why the negro should vote for Taft. . . . Because many of you dislike President Roosevelt is no reason why you should hesitate in marking your ballot for the Republican candidate. He is not Roosevelt and we all know what the republican party has done. Let us stick

⁸⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, October 4, 1908, 4.

⁸⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, October 4, 1908, 1.

⁸⁷ *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 5, 1908, 2.

⁸⁸ *New York Times*, October 5, 1908, 3; *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 1908, 6.

to a sure thing and not take any chances.”⁸⁹ In 1906, Roosevelt dishonorably discharged 167 African American soldiers stationed in Brownsville, Texas, stemming from an alleged dispute between one of them and a local bartender which resulted in his murder. Roosevelt took the action despite the soldiers’ insistence that they were in their barracks all night.⁹⁰ Not only had Roosevelt upset black voters with the Brownsville Affair, but his public relationship with gradualist Booker T. Washington also irked many black activists. After their highly publicized dinner in the White House, and Roosevelt’s appointment of Washington as the Postmaster General, W.E.B DuBois and other members of the NAACP started adopting anti-Republican strategies at the Niagara Movement meeting in 1905. Taft did not address the Brownsville Affair, or Roosevelt’s relationship with Washington, during his campaign speeches. To effectively court African American voters, the Republican Party needed to separate Taft from Roosevelt. It proved more convenient to link the two men as reform candidates for white voters.

Courting African American voters proved particularly important for Taft as the Republican candidate. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Republicans were seen as saviors of African American communities, but as the Era of Jim Crow unfolded the political picture started blurring for African Americans. As Hanes Walton writes, by 1908 “northern Democrats were treating blacks much better than the reactionary Republicans and southern Democrats, who combined to deprive blacks of their rights.”⁹¹ Although Roosevelt appointed a black man as Postmaster General, the African American community perceived Democrats to be pro-labor, anti-management, anti-special privilege, and anti-imperialist. All of these ideas were popular among black voters in the early 1900s, and a Democratic win in 1908 was seen as a win for black people.⁹² These factors combined to make Taft’s public speeches to African Americans in the Midwest even more important. He did not want to look indifferent toward a voting bloc that appeared to be vacillating between the two major parties.

⁸⁹ Chicago *Tribune*, October 8, 1908, 4.

⁹⁰ An investigation into the incident in decades later showed that the soldiers were innocent and their dishonorable discharges were changed to honorable discharges, but they received no compensation for their lost pensions.

⁹¹ Hanes Walton, *Black Politics: A Theoretical and Structural Analysis* (Philadelphia: JB Lippincott, 1972), 112. For more on the transition from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party at the turn of the twentieth century, see August Meier, “The Negro and the Democratic Party, 1875-1915,” *Phylon* (1956): 182-191.

⁹² *Ibid.* For more on the rise of Jim Crow, see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1974; Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disenfranchisement in the South 1880-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

The climax of Taft's swing through the Midwest came when he personally met Bryan at the fourth annual banquet of the Chicago Association of Commerce. Taft showed up late for the dinner, but when he finally arrived, everyone in the room – including Bryan – stood up and looked toward the entrance as the Republican, “moving like a ship among a swarm of tugs,” walked towards his opponent's table. Bryan “smiled slightly” as Taft approached him. The two shook hands and once the applause subsided Bryan asked Taft if he was having a good day. Taft stroked his throat as if to say he had a hoarse voice and laughed while the crowd reciprocated. Someone in the audience screamed, “What's the matter with Bill?” The crowd chanted back, “He's alright!” Both candidates gave non-partisan speeches at the request of the commerce association.⁹³ They also created a first-time spectacle in American politics by meeting publicly on the campaign trail.

Much has been written about Bryan's speaking ability, but Taft also made a great impression on many of his listeners. Early during his swing around the Midwest, the *Milwaukee Journal* posited that while the candidate was not an orator, “he is a good straight from the shoulder talker. He talks in a far more popular vein than he writes and the impression that he leaves behind as his train pulled out is distinctively favorable.”⁹⁴ Later, Taft delivered a speech to a group of workingmen in the pouring rain in Leavenworth, Kansas. The crowd gave him “deafening cheers” and “there were not a dozen umbrellas in the crowd yet not a man left until the candidate had finished speaking.” When the candidate was done “he showed no aversion to their greasy-stained hands.”⁹⁵

Maybe “an Englishmen” best summed up the impression that Taft made when electioneering: “the charge that he lacks ‘personal magnetism’ is laughable. I will defy anyone to come across him in private without feeling drawn toward this good-humored, unconventional, rollicking giant, with his frank, free bearing, his massive look of power and adequacy, his radiating air of jollity and zest.” The “Englishmen” claimed to have made four impressions of Taft upon meeting him: the candidate was extremely likable, trustworthy, unhurried, and possessed an “ever-ready instinct and capacity for dealings with men and things.” Taft's electioneering ability probably affected all four thoughts. The observer also came away impressed with the candidate's body, saying “Mr. Taft's overwhelming physique alone seemed somehow to guarantee his efficiency. One could not imagine the problem that would give away at such impact; and one could quite easily conceive him crashing

⁹³ *New York Times*, October 8, 1908, 1.

⁹⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 24, 1908, 11.

⁹⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, October 5, 1908, 1.

through all obstacles and entanglements with the all-conquering certainty of a smiling, patient, supremely human steam-roller.”⁹⁶ Taft used his weight to help reassure his image with the people he interacted with, not the other way around. The same “Englishman” labeled Bryan “the Peter Pan” of American politics and stated that, “To put it briefly and brutally, he cannot think . . . and is much too elementary to be either cynical or sophisticated.”⁹⁷ Taft crafted a reassuring image in the “Englishman’s” mind which helped the candidate advertise himself as better for the job.

Taft’s swing around the Midwest helped him prepare for his other regional trips. His interactions with working class voters, women, and African Americans in the Midwest helped prepare him to meet those groups all along the eastern seaboard. The effervescent candidate continued to shake hands with everyone that he could and tried to have as many personable moments as possible with each potential voter. These were both trends that he started in Iowa. He handled numerous, un-vetted moments and spontaneous interactions for the rest of the campaign with confidence, ease, and humor, a skill honed in the Midwest. The Republican also continued tailoring his speeches for local audiences in other regions, a practice he started in the Midwest. Going up against Bryan required a level of quality, spectacle politics and the Midwest proved to be an excellent theatre for Taft to do so.

On Election Day, Taft tallied 7,675,320 popular votes to Bryan’s 6,412,294, secured a 51.5 percent majority, and garnered 321 electoral college votes to his opponent’s 162.⁹⁸ However, despite Taft’s seemingly successful tour in the Midwest, his popular percentages were lower than the sitting president. Taft retained at least eight per cent *less* of the popular vote than Roosevelt in Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. However, he still won the popular vote in those states. Taft also did not do as well as Roosevelt in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Missouri, but he took those states, too. Despite the discrepancy between the candidate and his predecessor, Taft’s swing around the Midwest should not be taken lightly because some of those states were not a guarantee for him. Recent biographers of both Taft and Bryan agree that if Bryan had wanted to win in 1908, then he needed to add at least one or two North-eastern or Midwestern states to his already solid South.⁹⁹ The Democrat’s chances in the Midwest

⁹⁶ *Harper’s Weekly*, October 31, 1908, 10.

⁹⁷ *Harper’s Weekly*, October 31, 1908, 11.

⁹⁸ Gould, 21.

⁹⁹ Gould, *The William Howard Taft Presidency*, 18; Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 160.

looked much better than they did in the Northeast. In 1896 and in 1900, Bryan only won approximately 34 percent of the popular vote in New England and Mid-Atlantic states. Some pundits thought that the Democratic candidate might have a chance in the North because the American Federation of Labor circulated over five million pieces of literature supporting Bryan's campaign and he garnered Samuel Gompers's backing. However, Michael Kazin has recently pointed out that outside of the South there were many skilled, Republican unionists who did not like Gompers's support for Bryan. They thought that it spurred labor's traditionally nonpartisan stance in presidential elections. One man wrote across a pro-Bryan pamphlet "When were you told to tell me how to vote? I'll vote to suit myself. Hurrah for TAFT."¹⁰⁰ The Boy Orator's populist rhetoric would more likely resonate with voters in the Midwest as he averaged just over 44 percent of the popular vote in 1896 and 1900 in the region. In the early 1890s, the Populist Party gained momentum in places such as the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska, which helped Bryan win South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri in 1896. The contests in Indiana and Ohio were also very close that year. Bryan had made some effective, political inroads in the Midwest in 1896, but he was unable to enlarge that coalition in 1908 in part because of the effectiveness of Taft's electioneering tour around the region.

While some of the popular percentages in the Midwest probably disappointed Taft, he did not just allow pictures to circulate of himself playing golf, riding horses, and eating, while Bryan and Debs portrayed themselves as hard-working candidates establishing connections with voters living far from the establishment. When the press had little campaign news to report in August, they resorted to detailed stories about Taft's golf play which gave voters the impression that he was primarily interested in recreation. This was much to his disadvantage with the electorate.¹⁰¹ The stories surrounding his Midwestern swing in September changed the media's spin of Taft's campaign, much more to his advantage with prospective voters. Also, by listening to local leaders explain their problems and then meeting the locals personally, Taft became a "reform" candidate which matched the ideology of the growing, Progressive wing of the Republican Party.

The election also generated more interest than in 1904 as ten percent more eligible voters participated. Nearly two-thirds of all eligible voters pulled the lever in 1908. The election seemed to generate more excitement among voters than the Roosevelt-Parker contest. In the process, there

¹⁰⁰ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 160.

¹⁰¹ Godwin, *The Bully Pulpit*, 551.

seemed to be little questioning that touring was necessary. The *Chicago Tribune* captured the attitude when explaining the necessity of stumping for Taft: "Everybody has known that he made friends where he could meet them personally, but it has remained for the last six weeks of the campaign to demonstrate to the people that the Republican candidate has opinions of his own, is competent to express them, and is *willing to go out in the good old fashioned way* and give the people a chance to meet him face to face before they give him their vote."¹⁰² As late as 1892, neither presidential candidate toured. By 1908, the *Tribune* labeled touring "the good old fashioned way." While Bryan may have been the king of stumping by 1908, Taft's ability to connect with men, women, and African Americans helped shore up the state-wide majorities he needed to win the election.

Following four tough years in office, Taft came in third in the presidential election of 1912, losing to Democrat Woodrow Wilson and Bull Moose contestant Teddy Roosevelt. The election was a four-way race in which Roosevelt became the only third party candidate to come in second, defeating Taft and Debs. All four candidates stumped and made their way through the Midwest. Taft became the first incumbent to stump for the presidency and placed third. In 1921, he was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, a position he relished. He remains the only person in American history to be both President of the United States and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Bryan became Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State five years after losing to Taft. In 1925, he prosecuted the Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, against Clarence Darrow. Bryan died shortly after the first "Trial of the Century." His opponents liked to pick on the preacher; in 1908 they quipped "Choose Taft Now, You Can Choose Bryan Anytime!"¹⁰³ While "The Boy Orator" may have lost three presidential contests, he and Roosevelt changed American politics by popularizing stumping. In 1912, Bryan liked to brag that his detractors picked on him for touring all of those years before, but now all four candidates did it openly and unabashedly.

The twentieth century also saw the importance of the Midwest in presidential politics continue. In 1920, Warren Harding held the final front-porch campaign of any presidential candidate in Marion, Ohio, as groups from all over the region, and the country, visited him.¹⁰⁴ Twenty-eight

¹⁰² *Chicago Tribune*, September 24, 1908, 1.

¹⁰³ This slogan referenced the point that Bryan had already been nominated by the Democrats in 1896 and 1900. At the age of forty-eight he had been the party's nomination three times.

¹⁰⁴ Harding nominated Taft for the Supreme Court in 1921.

years later, the Midwest became a vital point for Harry Truman's famous whistle-stop tour which helped him secure a close victory over Thomas Dewey and retain the presidency for a fifth straight term for Democrats. In the 1960s, changes in party rules forced Iowa's caucus ahead of New Hampshire's primary, a distinction the Granite state had held since Harding's victory. Since 1972, Iowa has been seen as the early kingmaker in American politics. Taft's home state of Ohio has also assumed a significant role in American presidential politics in the second half of the twentieth century. The state has voted for the winner of every presidential contest from 1964 through 2012. Now candidates from both parties flood both states with advertisement, visits, and their surrogates. For the foreseeable future, candidates must exercise the same electioneering skills that Taft did in the same place: the Midwest.