

Victor by Twenty-Two Votes

THE 1908 campaign was not only one of the most difficult in the career of George Norris, but also one of the most significant in terms of his growing insurgency and political independence. It made dramatically evident to him the fact that while it was important to oppose the Democrats, it was equally important to maintain only a minimum of coordination with the Republican organization. In effect he was fought on two fronts in this campaign—by the Democrats and by his own party. At the outset only the first enemy was apparent.

Nebraska Republicans in September, 1907, endorsed William Howard Taft to carry on the policies of President Roosevelt. At the state convention at Omaha on March 12, 1908, Nebraska became the first state to declare for Taft. And as early as November, 1907, Norris agreed with his fellow Republicans in this choice. He did this first in an interview published in the *Lincoln Journal*, then in correspondence, then in his participation on the executive committee of the Nebraska Taft League.¹

In the Fifth Congressional District by January, 1908, there was a movement to elect Norris a delegate to the Republican National Convention. But he refused to allow his name to be considered, claiming he did not believe the honors should all go to one man as long as other worthy, able, and competent individuals were available. "Members of Congress," he believed, "should not undertake to dictate in these matters and should under no circumstances use the power of their position to control conventions."² Moreover, he had his own campaign to consider.

George Allen, whom Norris, before his break with Cannon, had successfully recommended for the postmastership of Clay Center, could not serve as campaign manager. The heavy responsibilities of campaign manager fell on the capable but inexperienced shoulders of J. R. McCarl, who reported early in 1908 that few individuals openly sought Norris' place on the Republican ticket. On the other hand, there were persistent rumors that the Democrats would nominate Fred

Ashton, a state senator from Grand Island, as his opponent. Ashton had the reputation of being an unscrupulous campaigner. And scuttlebutt indicated that Norris, who preferred to conduct a campaign in which issues and principles predominated, might be in for an especially tough fight, as would all the Republican candidates, since it was an open secret that Bryan would be the Democratic standard-bearer.³

However, politics did not really generate much excitement until Congress adjourned and the major national conventions met, the Republicans in Chicago on June 17 and the Democrats at Denver on July 7. Norris remained in Washington while Republican delegates chose Taft and James S. Sherman of New York as their standard-bearers. He returned to McCook early in July and shortly thereafter filed an application to have his name placed on the official primary ballot as a Republican candidate for the office of representative in Congress from the Fifth Nebraska Congressional District.

To help candidates, the Republican State Central Committee worked out a plan by which it hoped, more than ever before, to coordinate the campaign and simplify financial arrangements. Contributions to the state committee would be utilized equally by congressional committees. Republican postmasters would not have to make separate contributions to each of these committees as had been the case in the past. But they now were requested to contribute 3 per cent of one year's salary instead of the usual 2 per cent. This arrangement had been worked out before Norris returned to Nebraska. Finding that other Republican congressmen already had agreed to it, he had little alternative but to accept it as well.⁴

Though Norris was on the best of terms with the Republican State Central Committee, he nevertheless refused to participate in its affairs. He preferred the role of the lone political operator, even though he had recently cooperated more than ever before with the Republican organization in Nebraska. Since his days on the bench, Norris refused to participate in party squabbles or selection of officials. He held himself aloof but was always prepared to support the ticket once nominations had been made. He never tried to build a political machine, and this fact applied to his entire political career. No postmaster or any other officeholder he had recommended was ever called upon for any kind of support.⁵

After the September primaries the party slates were completed and Norris learned that Ashton would be his opponent. Beside Bryan's popularity in Nebraska, Norris had an additional handicap. The Democratic candidate for governor, A. C. Shallenberger, resided in the Fifth Congressional District, where the popularity of both Bryan and

Shallenberger undoubtedly would help Ashton. Furthermore, both congressional candidates realized that many former Populist voters who had supported Theodore Roosevelt would probably vote for Bryan. Since the platforms of the major parties contained many progressive planks, both candidates undoubtedly knew that while Roosevelt could outshine Bryan as a personality if not as a liberal, Taft could not on either score. Thus even though Ashton was a poor public speaker, he had a chance to unseat Norris on election day.

Norris had further reason to be concerned. Friends said Ashton was tricky and unscrupulous, and these warnings convinced him it might be impolitic to leave the country at this time to attend the Berlin meeting of the Interparliamentary Union. Finally there were many political squabbles, including one pertaining to prohibition, that threatened to upset the harmony that previously prevailed within the Republican organization. Thus before the campaign got under way Norris knew that he would have a hard fight, though nobody realized just how hard it would be.⁶

Early in September Norris was in touch with the National Republican Congressional Committee in New York to get prominent speakers to appear in the district. He was convinced that the Democrats would make every effort to carry it, since it was not as strongly Republican as most of the other Nebraska districts. Yet knowing all of this, he still did not see any particularly distressing obstacles in his path. Since he believed that despite promised support from Bryan and Shallenberger, Ashton could be defeated, Norris arranged to spend almost half his campaign time outside of his district. Complacency was supplemented by a desire to play a role in the national campaign, indicative of his rising status as a member of Congress.⁷

Both United States senators from Nebraska were intending to speak on his behalf, and Governor Charles Evans Hughes of New York, touring the country for Taft, would speak at Hastings and possibly at McCook before the end of September. Norris himself refused all opportunities to speak in his own district prior to October in hopes of receiving—and on the false grounds that he had received—speaking assignments from the state committee. No such assignments were given him, however, and as September came to a close, Norris had done no campaigning and much explaining to those whose requests he had turned down.⁸

In response to inquiries at this time he felt called upon to explain his views on the House rules and the Speaker. Moreover, he learned that his opponents were criticizing him as a "Cannon man." Therefore he came out in opposition to the re-election of Cannon as Speaker,

claiming that Cannon had used "the power of his high position to prevent the consideration of legislation asked for by the people and desired by a large body of the membership of the House of Representatives." His most serious objection, Norris explained in a published statement, was to the Speaker's opposition to any change in the rules which would modify or lessen his arbitrary power. In other words, he believed the Speaker "ought to be the servant of the House, doing its will, rather than the master controlling its action." Preventing discussion and throttling legislation should not be within his power. However, Norris realized that Cannon was not unique in the exertion of arbitrary power. He made it clear that his conflict was not so much with the Speaker as with the rules, not so much with Cannon as with the system.⁹

Certainly, Norris agreed, stringent rules were necessary in a body as large as the House of Representatives, and the Speaker ought to be the presiding officer. But in his power to appoint chairmen of standing committees and in his dominance of the powerful Committee on Rules, which determined the order of business and procedure, the Speaker exercised arbitrary authority. Norris explained that his resolution would make the Speaker merely "the dignified presiding officer of the greatest representative parliamentary body on earth."¹⁰

This statement represented the extent of Norris' campaign thus far. The state committee, handling all financial arrangements, had not sent him any funds while his opponent seemed to have unlimited means at his disposal. This discrepancy was soon noticed in the enthusiasm of some newspapers whose support had been purchased by the Democrats. While Ashton was attacking him in the press and in his speeches, Norris, without funds, was bound by an arrangement which was supposed to allow him to speak in Nebraska outside of his district but which actually kept him at home in McCook. And he had promised to campaign in Kansas early in October. Therefore it would not be until the second week in October that he could begin campaigning in the Fifth Congressional District.¹¹

Norris was so discouraged that he contemplated withdrawing from the contest. He actually drafted a withdrawal letter but was prevented from mailing it by some devoted friends. While he would have enjoyed nothing more than campaigning and attacking the opposition, he believed that he could not fight the Democratic party, the Republican organization in Nebraska, and the lethargy of many local Republicans. If he were to be re-elected, he would need assistance and cooperation, and if neither was forthcoming, he intended to withdraw from the campaign.¹²

In early October he revealed that the treasurer of his campaign committee had not received any funds, nor had he been notified of contributions collected in the district. Thus no posters, leaflets, or advertisements for Norris had yet appeared. Finally, he was dismayed to learn, after his arrival in Kansas, where he was to speak on behalf of Republican candidates, that he had been chosen for the signal honor of traveling with Taft during his campaign trip through Nebraska. Norris learned of this decision from newspapers in Kansas. It seemed to him that the announcement had been given to the press even though the state committee knew that such an arrangement could not be carried out since he was speaking in Kansas at the time Taft toured Nebraska.¹³

While Norris was campaigning in Kansas, McCarl was desperately trying to raise funds from people who had not contributed to the Republican campaign chest. He spent part of a day at party headquarters in Lincoln where he heard the depressing news that the state committee had already used all of the money collected from the Fifth Congressional District. Indeed, the only good news McCarl learned in Lincoln was that Congressman Willis C. Hawley of Oregon and possibly Governor Sheldon would speak in the district.

Though McCarl was disheartened with this situation, he was equally determined to see it through and go into debt, if necessary, to get Norris re-elected. He wisely decided not to make the matter public knowledge, lest he jeopardize all chances of a reconciliation with the state committee and further damage Republican prospects in the campaign.¹⁴

McCarl kept loyal Republicans supplied with information about Norris' record in Congress to aid in refuting Democratic charges that he was not a loyal supporter of Roosevelt and was friendly with Speaker Cannon. But rather than devote his energies to refuting misrepresentations about Norris, McCarl began to investigate Ashton's record as a member of the Nebraska legislature. Among other items, he found that Ashton opposed all antiliquor legislation and this fact, he knew, would prove helpful in an area where prohibition had many supporters. Ashton's opposition to the primary law might also be of interest to many voters.¹⁵

On October 12, 1908, Norris at long last opened his campaign with a well attended evening meeting at Orleans in Harlan County. Thereafter he spoke once or twice on all days but Sundays. Once he was speaking, meeting the people, defending his record, and attacking that of his opponent, his discouragement disappeared. There was little time to lean back in an office chair, plant his feet on the top of the desk,

and between puffs of the inevitable cigar discuss the political situation. The cigars were always with him, but the leisure moments were few and were usually confined to an editor's or lawyer's office or a hotel lobby.¹⁶

With Norris continually speaking, with Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana and both United States senators from Nebraska as well as Governor Sheldon all appearing in the district and endorsing Norris, McCarl soon felt better about the course of the campaign. Since the campaign treasury was almost empty, he used his own money to have posters and handbills prepared for distribution. He drafted for publication in all Republican papers a statement entitled "Ashton Legislative Record," pinpointing Ashton's opposition to many of the recently enacted progressive reforms of the Nebraska legislature. It also provided documentation of the charge that Ashton was an agent and lobbyist for brewers.¹⁷

McCarl was working seventeen and eighteen hours a day directing the campaign; he also was overdrawing his account at the First National Bank of McCook which fortunately continued to honor his checks. He was discouraged about the early course of the campaign and doubted if Norris, owing to his long absence from the district, could cover it adequately. Though in mid-October he felt he was fighting a losing battle, his friendship for Norris was "the saving clause in this measure." On his account McCarl could not think of quitting and was determined, despite handicaps, to battle right down to election day.¹⁸

As the campaign moved toward its climax, the congressional candidates became briefly involved with the national effort. Because Nebraska was Bryan's home state, he was relentless in his attempt to carry it on election day. Both parties made determined efforts to appeal to the voters, but the Democrats made the greater effort, and Bryan devoted more time to the state than Taft. Without Roosevelt to appeal to Nebraska voters, many of them decided to leave the Republican fold and return to the candidate whom they had supported in 1896 if not in 1900. Rising Bryan sentiment made the role of Republican candidates exceedingly difficult because their opponents had the opportunity of being pushed to victory on the strength of Bryan's vote-getting appeal. This was particularly true in the Fifth Congressional District where Bryan personally endorsed Ashton. The effect of Bryan's appeal for a straight party vote would be of the utmost importance because it affected Norris' chances.¹⁹

But Norris continually made a good impression, and Ashton a correspondingly poor impression. Optimism began to return to the Norris

headquarters. Everyone involved exerted himself to the utmost; prominent Republicans appeared in the district; and the Republican press gave increased support. McCarl faced the outcome with greater confidence. Victory, however, was not yet assured, and Norris' worries grew to include personal anxiety when he learned that his middle daughter, Marian, was ill with diphtheria, and that the family was quarantined.²⁰

Reports confirmed what McCarl and Norris both already knew—that the race would be very close and would probably be decided only after all the ballots had been counted. One further bit of perplexing news was the appearance of a third party in Hall County where Ashton resided, called the County Option League. While this group would take votes from both parties, it was hard to tell which candidate would suffer most.²¹

To the very end of the campaign Norris stressed his record as a follower of Roosevelt in Congress. His speeches carried conviction, and his honest, forthright presentation created a favorable impression even among Democrats. The impression was more marked when contrasted with his opponent's campaign. Ashton delivered few speeches and personally canvassed for votes on the streets, in the saloons, and elsewhere. He cast aspersions on Norris' honesty and character and misrepresented his record as a congressman. At the same time, the liquor interests supporting Ashton were exerting great efforts to defeat both Norris and Governor Sheldon. Their agents circulated among temperance people the report that both men were "whiskey men"; in the saloons the agents reversed themselves and argued that Norris and Sheldon were temperance men.²²

In the last week of the campaign the Democrats made a tremendous effort for Bryan. McCarl meanwhile planned to make the Hastings rally scheduled for Tuesday, October 27, the great event of the campaign. The businessmen of McCook, who put up the four-hundred-dollar guarantee required by the Burlington officials, sold enough tickets to cover their investment in a special train. At least one hundred and fifty voters from McCook expected to make the trip. At each town along the line, a band and a speaker would greet the train, though the engineer agreed to stop whenever anyone wanted to get aboard. The "Norris Special" was scheduled to arrive in Hastings between three and four o'clock in the afternoon and would depart at ten-thirty in the evening.²³

While these plans were being made, the State Central Committee unexpectedly sent a check for over four hundred dollars to McCarl and smaller amounts to all but one of the county chairmen in the district. These funds helped them to provide transportation and meet

other expenses to insure a full Republican turnout on election day. McCarl claimed the check "saved our lives out in the Fifth [District]." He now predicted victory by a majority of over three thousand votes. Favorable reports of the impact of Norris' speeches and of the rise in Norris sentiment aided by the success of the "Norris Special," helped him arrive at this conclusion.²⁴

By the end of October the work of McCarl and Norris was virtually concluded. There remained only the election eve rally at McCook for Norris. Shortly after midnight on election night, McCarl was expected to inform the Republican National Committee of the results. He planned to be at work tabulating the votes all night or at least until Norris' victory was assured. As it turned out, both the candidate and his manager waited much longer than election night before the official result was known.²⁵

Though the election of 1908 represented another Republican victory on the national scene, Taft did not do as well as Roosevelt in 1904, while Bryan did much better than Alton B. Parker. Though Bryan had only 162 electoral votes to 321 for Taft, one historian has noted, "There was a national vote cast for Bryan, and it was urban as well as rural; it was Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern."²⁶ Nebraska gave its electoral vote to its adopted son who carried the state by over four thousand votes. In the Fifth Congressional District Bryan carried ten of eighteen counties, including Red Willow, Norris' home county. He lost populous Hall County, where Ashton resided, by eleven votes. The Democrats also managed to defeat Sheldon, whom Norris claimed "was as good a Governor as Nebraska ever had." Three Democratic congressmen were elected, while Republican incumbents E. H. Hinshaw in the Fourth District and M. P. Kinkaid in the Sixth, both of whom, incidentally, were opposed to Speaker Cannon, were clearly re-elected. The results in the Fifth Congressional District were so close and the returns so confusing that no one knew who was elected until the last ballot was officially counted.²⁷

Since the vote was so close, McCarl insisted that each committeeman be on hand for the official count to see that no "honest mistakes" occurred. The results revealed that Norris had defeated Ashton by twenty-two votes, 20,649 to 20,627. While Ashton carried his home county by fifty-three votes, Norris ran ahead of his ticket in this county. The committeeman from Hall County complained, "The Railroads simply overwhelmed us"; not a single Republican was elected in Hall County in 1908. In view of the outstanding Democratic triumph in the counties comprising the Fifth Congressional District, Norris'

scant victory stood out as a signal achievement against a very dark background.²⁸

On November 8, five days after the election, Norris obtained a set of official figures that assured his return to Congress. With a slim margin between defeat and victory there was a distinct possibility that Ashton would contest it. Norris requested that the Nebraska secretary of state notify him immediately of any suspicious returns so that he might commence proper action against the canvassing board of the county where these returns originated. He made this request because of rumors that his opponent, aided by "an unlimited checkbook," might try to bribe a county clerk to make an intentional error when filing the vote.²⁹

Norris viewed his election as a triumph over "a checkbook" and over malice. Though his majority was small and he had to meet a large portion of the expenses himself, Norris was nonetheless gratified by his victory. He was disappointed by the defeat of J. F. Boyd in the Third Congressional District and of Governor Sheldon. Above all Norris regretted the defeat of William P. Hepburn in Iowa, the leader of the small band of Republicans in the House of Representatives who were challenging the rules by which Speaker Cannon exercised his power.³⁰

On the evening of November 12, a victory celebration was held in McCook. And on November 13, 1908, the secretary of state notified Norris that he very much doubted if Ashton would undertake to contest the election. But all through November Norris and McCarl anticipated a contest and prepared themselves accordingly. It was only when he received a certificate of election in January, 1909, that Norris finally was convinced that Ashton would not initiate a contest.³¹

That the 1908 campaign was one of the most difficult in the career of George Norris there is no doubt. That it played an important role in the development of his insurgency and political independence is equally certain. He was in the process of showing his independence of party machinery in the House of Representatives when his campaign experience convinced him of the wisdom of running campaigns with a minimum of coordination with the Republican organization. Hereafter he would tend more and more to pursue his own course and, if anything, he would complain about party interference. With the burden of a mismanaged Republican organization in Nebraska, with the hostility of Speaker Cannon in Congress, with little money to conduct his campaign while the opposition seemingly had unlimited funds, with few friendly newspapers supporting him, and with the liability

of a late start in speaking, Norris was able to eke out a twenty-two vote plurality, while the Democrats with Bryan as their standard-bearer won a singular victory in Nebraska if not on the national scene.

Norris' growing independence of party organization was a major element in his insurgency. It developed gradually and logically out of his experience and was molded by no single incident. The fact that he represented a political "burnt-over" district which, since his arrival in the late 1880's, had strongly supported all shades of political opinion from respectable Republicanism to belligerent Bryanism may have made his position somewhat easier. But basic to the success of the role he was to enact was the personality, courage, and integrity of the man himself. Unassuming, modest but straightforward, presenting facts and issues sometimes for hours on end, avoiding personalities, diatribes, and emotionalism, relying on the friendship of a small band of friends, and without a political machine to aid him, Norris was able to gain and hold the respect of voters. Whereas many Populists and Democrats added emotional fervor to the issues they raised, Norris presented reason and logic with the probity of a country judge turned politician. That he succeeded in his insurgency throughout a long career attests not only to his ability but also to the highmindedness of the constituents whose interests he represented. The second session of the Sixtieth and the entire Sixty-first Congress witnessed the eruption of insurgency in a way that brought Norris and his cohorts to the attention of a nationwide audience and, despite his narrow victory, made his constituents proud of his performance.