Thelen, LaFollette and the Insurgent Spirit
Study Questions
(Review material on state politics in Diner, “Progressive Discourse”)

Prior to a major shift in the constitutional interpretation during the 1930s, many of the social and economic problems now handled at the national level were the province of the states. Robert M. LaFollette was one of a remarkable cohort of progressive governors, including Theodore Roosevelt in New York, Woodrow Wilson in New Jersey, and Hiram Johnson in California, who addressed these problems aggressively, and in so doing helped to shape progressivism as a national—and nationalizing—movement. Coming from the reform or “insurgent” wings of both parties, these governors rejected “business as usual”; they sought to build up the capacities of state government to deal with political corruption, monopoly power, and the vulnerability of workers and consumers. But they were not all exactly alike.

1. What particular issues did LaFollette place at the center of his agenda? Which ones did he initially ignore?
2. What kinds of new constituencies did he hope to mobilize in place of the ethnic and interest groups that 19th century politicians had appealed to? What were the implications of approaching voters as taxpayers, consumers, citizens, instead of as members of ethnic groups? How did organizing his appeals this way help LaFollette to articulate a more positive program of legislative reforms?

3. In many ways, LaFollette’s years as governor were a training ground, teaching him lessons that would be useful when he became a Senator. Yet we see certain personal flaws that would limit his impact later on. What were those flaws, and how did they affect his leadership? How does Thelen explain LaFollette’s spotty record as governor? How good a governor would you say LaFollette was? Why does Diner seem to have a higher regard for his performance than Thelen does?