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The Perpetual Campaigner: Patrick Lucey's Life in Politics

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Introduction

On March 23, 2010, former political reporter John Powell interviewed former Governor Patrick Lucey for the Legislative Reference Bureau's oral history project. This project collects and preserves Wisconsin legislators' stories and insights—especially those not recorded elsewhere—after they have left office or are preparing to do so. Over the course of his long career in Wisconsin politics, Lucey was elected state representative (1949–51), lieutenant governor (1965–67), and governor (1971–77). He also chaired the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, served as U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, and ran for U.S. vice president as an Independent. Lucey and Powell's conversation largely focused on Lucey's work campaigning for others rather than his own myriad accomplishments. As a whole, the interview emphasizes Lucey's lifelong commitment to elevating the Democratic Party at the local, state, and national levels.

Childhood

Patrick Joseph Lucey was born on March 21, 1918, on the heels of Saint Patrick's Day and Saint Joseph's Day. "I assume you'll want to call him Patrick Joseph," the attending nun at Saint Francis Hospital in La Crosse said to his mother, who simply answered, "Yes, sister." Within weeks, his father left home to serve his country in what was then known as the Great War. But the elder Lucey returned safely from France before Patrick Joseph's first birthday because, as he put it, "they settled the thing before he got to the front."

Back home in Ferryville, Wisconsin, Lucey's father established himself as a business owner and settled his growing family in an apartment above one of his grocery stores. Although the Great Depression was a "scary time," Lucey explained that his family was already accustomed to living modestly: "You know, when you're living up over a grocery store, very often you eat whatever they're long on downstairs." Frugality also dictated the decision for Lucey to live with his grandmother when he began high school at Campion, a Jesuit school in Prairie du Chien:

They decided that that was less expensive than having me be a boarding student at Campion. I was the oldest of seven, so even though dad was fairly successful as a small town business man, they were watching their pennies because they knew they had six more kids to educate.

College, interrupted

Although education was a priority, obstacles kept blocking his path. Not long after Lucey started his freshman year at St. Thomas College in St. Paul, Minnesota, his father convinced him to drop out to run his new store in Bloomington, Wisconsin:

At age nineteen, I was a main street merchant. And I was supposed to do it for one semester, and then go back to school. Well, at nineteen, having two employees—I sort of liked it. And I stayed on for three years. And finally I told him that I wanted to be a lawyer, and that I had to get back to school, and he'd have to find somebody else to run the store.

Rather than return to St. Thomas, Lucey resumed his education at the University of Wisconsin in Madison—only to shortly become one of the nation's first peacetime draftees.¹ Lucey registered his disappointment with the secretary of the draft board in Prairie du Chien: “Gee, I wanted to get to law school, and if you'd let me have one more year, I could get in the first year of law school before I go in the service.” In reply, the secretary joked that “All lawyers can do is protect us from other lawyers. If we draft them all, we've got nothing to worry about.”

In August 1941, Lucey went into the service, where his experience working for his father served him well. After a year spent in basic training and officer candidate school in Wyoming, he got his “marching orders” and shipped out to Puerto Rico:

The three years' experience in the grocery business actually turned out quite beneficial, because I wound up as the subsistence officer at the general depot in San Juan and finally reached the rank of captain in that capacity, and served there until the end of the war—until 1945.

By then, Lucey was determined to complete his college degree. While visiting Madison for the homecoming game, he stopped into the registrar's office and learned that only 17 credits stood between him and his bachelor's degree. Ever enterprising, he “crowded” those credits into a single semester and graduated with the Class of 1946. (Despite this short overlap with his cohort, Lucey remarked in amusement, he spoke at several class reunions.) However, Lucey's hope of finally going into law school was dashed when his father once again asked him to come back home to work in the family business:

Here I was, [a] 28 year old, 11 years out of high school, and finally getting a bachelor's degree. I said to Dad, “You know, they're so kind to veterans here that I could stick around for two school years and two summer schools and get a law degree.” He says, “I need you in the business.” He says, “If we need a lawyer, we'll hire one.” And he persuaded me to come home.

This time, his father convinced him to manage several farms that the elder Lucey had purchased—despite the fact that he had “never worked a day of [his] life on a farm.” Lacking knowledge and firsthand experience, Lucey did the next best thing: he sought the advice of experts at the University of Wisconsin and various state and federal agen-

1. On the peacetime draft, see David Vergun, “[First Peacetime Draft Enacted Just Before World War II](#),” U.S. Department of Defense, April 7, 2020.

cies. His efforts succeeded. Lucey's father made a profit on the farms when others in the area struggled to come out even.

His first campaign

Politics electrified Lucey long before he ran for elected office. Al Smith's presidential bid in 1928 was the first to capture his attention: "I suppose the fact that he was Irish and Catholic maybe had at least as much to do with it as the fact he was a Democrat." By the early 1930s, he was "very excited" about the campaign of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "And in those days, I could've recited to you the names of every member of the cabinet."

Though national politics ignited his interest, his own electoral career started small—and somewhat inauspiciously. Lucey's name was not listed on any ballot in 1946, but his friend Jean Garvey orchestrated a political victory anyway: "[Jean] conducted a write-in campaign and I was elected justice of the peace in Ferryville. And I think I got seven votes to nothing, you know?" He "tried a few cases" as justice of the peace, and he also helped organize the Democratic Party in Crawford County with the aim of electing more Democrats in what was "pretty much a Republican area." To this end, Lucey decided to challenge Assembly Speaker Donald ("Don") McDowell, a Republican representing the county, in the 1948 election. His strategy in this election bid was simple:

I was still a bachelor then. My mother campaigned with me. We'd go into a little town, and she would go house to house, and I would do the farms around the town. And at the end of the day, we'd meet and drive home together.

In addition to knocking on doors, Lucey sent mailers and ran classified ads in the weekly papers. These expenses amounted to about \$1,000, which Lucey covered himself, with the exception of \$50 given to him by the railway worker unions. "I was surprised by that," Lucey recalled: "I didn't know what to do with it. My dad said, 'The thing you do is you put it in the campaign.'"

This first campaign relied so much on his own time and energy that Lucey nearly turned down an invitation to meet President Harry S. Truman as he traveled from Winona, Minnesota, to Milwaukee:

I was invited to go on the Truman campaign train. It wasn't coming through Crawford County—here I was running for the assembly—and I questioned whether or not, with Truman's lack of popularity, it would be politically smart for me to take a day off of my campaign to ride on the campaign train. And finally my ego exceeded my political judgment, and I chose to ride on the campaign train—and shook hands with Truman, of course.

As the 1948 general election approached, a Republican who had lost to McDowell in the primary, Tex Reddick, decided to run as an Independent in what then became a

three-way race. This decision split Republican votes and landed Lucey with a 500-vote margin of victory.²

Elevating the party

Democrats were vastly outnumbered in the assembly—74 to 26—when Lucey joined the body in January 1949.³ Although this imbalance limited the Democrats’ ability to pass legislation, Lucey still remembered his first legislative session as “an exciting experience.” Nearly half of his Democratic colleagues in the assembly had been elected for the first time in 1948, and this “new blood” infused life into the party. As part-time legislators, representatives earned \$100 a month and were not assigned staff. But Lucey learned to work the system to his advantage early on:

Dr. [Ora] Rice, a dentist from Walworth County, was chairman of the [agriculture] committee, and I chose to be on [it]. Dr. Rice was so sure of his district that he really didn’t bother to answer correspondence very much. So the secretary of the [agriculture] committee had a lot of time on her hands. And she did a lot of correspondence for me.

Expanding on his efforts in Crawford County, Lucey sought to reinvigorate the Democratic Party statewide. He and a group of fellow World War II veterans—including John Reynolds, Gaylord Nelson, and Jim Doyle Sr.—began to steer a course away from “the old Democratic party,” which had been “quite conservative” in his estimation.⁴

To this end, Lucey teamed up with a journalist who became an important political ally. During his first term in the assembly, Lucey met William Proxmire, a *Cap Times* reporter who did some “political chores” in his spare time. Together, Lucey and Proxmire (“Bill” or “Prox”) developed a means for Democratic legislators to publicize the work they were doing in the legislature:

There were these weeklies all over the state of Wisconsin that couldn’t afford to have a reporter covering for them into Madison and probably never carried anything but what the Democratic Party was up to. So we decided that each week, we would meet, like on Monday or Tuesday, and decide on an issue, and then he would develop a press release on that issue. And we would clear it with one or two members of the Democratic caucus so we could quote legislators making these charges or statements or whatever. And we would send out this press release to all of the weekly papers in the state. It worked very well.

The system worked so well that it emboldened Proxmire to launch his own assembly

2. Lucey received 3,465 votes to McDowell’s 2,920 votes. “Assembly Vote by Districts” in Howard Ohm and Hazel Kuehn, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1950* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau), 759.

3. Note that there were 100 representatives or “assemblymen” at that time.

4. For a useful discussion of the origins of this group’s efforts, see “Links to the Party” in Dennis L. Dresang, *Patrick J. Lucey: A Lasting Legacy* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2020), 45–48.

campaign in 1950. Lucey likewise gambled on a bid for higher office, running for Congress that same year. Although Proxmire succeeded in ousting an incumbent Democrat, Lucey experienced his first electoral loss. This time, a crowded field in the Republican primary hurt Lucey. Republican Gardner Withrow, a former Progressive with organized labor endorsements, beat out two conservative candidates in the primary and garnered moderate and conservative support in the general election. On November 7, 1950, Lucey lost by more than 10,000 votes.⁵ Still, Lucey understood politics to be a long game. Accordingly, he framed his individual loss as an incremental gain for his party in a Republican district: “It was the best that a Democrat had ever done.”

Earning a living

Having lost his congressional bid, Lucey began the 1950s as a “paid employee of the Democratic Party,” serving as its executive director—which, as he pointed out, translated to “field man.” But when the party lost the presidency to Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952, Lucey resolved to earn a living independent of the party. “The Democratic Party [couldn’t] afford to have somebody in the field,” he reasoned. Moreover, Lucey had wed Jean Vlasis, a fellow Democratic organizer, and the couple welcomed their first child in 1952: “I’m married, and we have a baby boy now. And I’ve got to decide how I’m going to live the rest of my life.”

Down the hall from the Democratic Party offices was Badger Realty, a real estate business run by Phil Siegel. Lucey observed that Badger Realty’s salesmen “seemed to do pretty well” and signed a two-year contract with Siegel. Lucey pointed out that Siegel had not required other salesmen to sign contracts, but Siegel explained that he thought Lucey would be his future competition: “Phil had it figured right that I would eventually be a broker of my own right.” Sure enough, Lucey struck out on his own and founded Lucey Realty, which he ran until 1970, when he was elected governor and sold the business.

Reflecting on his career in realty, Lucey signaled the importance of work outside of government: “I think that as far as running for office, [it’s] probably better to do what I did and conduct a business and have your family pretty well taken care of before you launch out into being a governor or an ambassador or something.” He lamented the fact that some legislators launch political careers without any prior experience outside of government: “I think it’s unfortunate that so many people now start out as clerical staff in the legislature, and then get elected to a seat, and that’s the only employment experience they’ve had.”

5. Lucey received 38,265 votes to Withrow’s 54,783 votes. A Socialist candidate received only 180 votes. See “Vote for Members of Congress by Districts” in M. G. Toepel and Hazel Kuehn, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1952* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau), 745.

Collaborating with “Prox”

Throughout the 1950s, Lucey and Proxmire worked together to strengthen the new Democratic Party. A key goal to this end was unseating Joseph McCarthy, the U.S. senator from Wisconsin who had famously vowed to expose secret Communists working within the federal government.⁶ To this end, Lucey managed Thomas Fairchild’s unsuccessful campaign against McCarthy in 1952. At the time, Lucey recalled that he felt McCarthy “had the potential of being an American Hitler.” In retrospect, he viewed McCarthy quite differently—not as an ideological zealot and would-be dictator but a pathetic drunk who was “desperate” to win reelection by any means, even if it meant concocting a supposed Communist plot.

Whatever threat he posed, McCarthy died in 1957 before he could be unseated at the polls—and Proxmire ran in the special election held in August 1957 to fill his seat. Lucey played down his role in the campaign: “I was chairman—I wouldn’t say I was campaign manager, because Proxmire pretty much ran his own campaigns.” Still, he played a pivotal part, even serving as a proxy for the candidate during a debate with Clement Zablocki, a Republican congressman from Milwaukee who was also running to fill McCarthy’s seat:

Clem challenged Proxmire to a debate, and it was set up someplace in Dodge County. So I went to see Proxmire, and I said, “Remember now, next Tuesday”—or whatever it was—“you have to be in Dodge County to debate Clem Zablocki.” He says, “I don’t want to do that.” He said, “Why don’t you represent me?”

To Congressman Zablocki’s disappointment, Lucey showed up in Proxmire’s place at the debate. In this surrogate role, he deployed dry humor to make his case for the candidate: “I said that we couldn’t afford to have Clem Zablocki elected to the Senate because his seniority in the House was so valuable to the state of Wisconsin that he ought to stay where he is.”

Ultimately, Proxmire won the election—to the shock of almost everyone, including his campaign chairman. Lucey remembered calling Ellen Proxmire—with whom Lucey had previously campaigned for other candidates—the night before the election to try to prepare her as gently as possible for her husband’s expected loss:

I said, “Ellen, I haven’t done as much as I would like to have done as chairman of the committee, but at least I thought I should call you and remind you that this campaign is only different to the extent that you are the wife of the candidate. But the outcome is likely to be [a loss] just as it has been for a number of campaigns that you and I have been in

6. For a brief summary of McCarthy’s “Enemies from Within” speech and its consequences, see “[‘Communists in Government Service,’ McCarthy Says](#),” United States Senate, accessed September 23, 2020.

together.” And she screamed in the phone, and she says, “Patrick! Pat, you don’t understand! We’re gonna win!” And I thought to myself, “Well, I should’ve called her sooner.” [laughter] But she had it.

Sometimes, even seasoned campaigners miscalculated the odds. As Lucey explained, Ellen Proxmire understood from the energy at campaign events that her husband’s campaign resonated with the people of the state.

Lucey and Proxmire continued their collaboration after the latter’s unexpected Senate victory. Proxmire did not see eye to eye with the current chair of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, Philleo Nash, who had discouraged his Senate run. So he enlisted Lucey’s help in scouting for a potential challenger ahead of the October 1957 convention:

He thought that I should go around and recruit a candidate who would be acceptable to him and acceptable to, probably, the Gaylord Nelson faction of the party. And so I did that. I went around, went up to Green Bay, talked to various people, and came down here to Milwaukee. And finally, as sometimes happens when you’re commissioned to recruit a candidate for something like that, you wind up running yourself.

The reluctant candidate ultimately beat out Nash by fewer than a dozen votes out of around 1,400 delegates, earning him the ironic nickname “Landslide Lucey.”

Campaigning with JFK

After the special election, Lucey kept in touch with another prominent Democrat who had “campaigning up and down the Fox River Valley” for Proxmire: John F. Kennedy. Lucey became an influential advocate for Kennedy after the Massachusetts Senator launched his presidential campaign in 1959.

Especially important was Lucey’s work in convincing Kennedy to enter the Wisconsin Democratic primary on April 5, 1960. (In those days, presidential candidates did not enter all state primaries as a matter of course.) Many considered Wisconsin a sure win for Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, and thus a waste of resources for any opposing campaign. As Lucey recalled, “At one point, Jack told me that every advisor that he had in Washington was opposed to his coming into the Wisconsin primary. . . . His father and I were the only two advisors who were trying to persuade him to come into Wisconsin.” Lucey was confident in Kennedy’s chances in the state:

I expected him to win. In fact, [Kennedy speechwriter] Ted Sorensen and I, like, the night before the election, filled out slips of paper that we exchanged. And frankly, both of us had him carrying all ten districts.

Kennedy was not *quite* that successful on April 7, 1960; he carried six of Wisconsin’s

ten Congressional districts and won by about 100,000 votes.⁷ And ultimately, Kennedy did not carry the state in the general election against Republican Richard Nixon, which Lucey attributed partly to “anti-Catholic feeling in Dane County.”⁸

Asked to share his reflections on Kennedy, Lucey remarked on the attention he paid to the minute details of campaigning. The president’s “wonderful speeches” gave him the appearance of being “above the nitty-gritty of politics,” Lucey remarked, “but he was very conscious of what it takes to win an election.” Lucey illustrated this point with an anecdote:

He’s in the White House, and he said, “Well, how do things look back in Wisconsin? If I were running now, how would I do?” “Well, I said, for one thing, you would carry Vernon County.” He said, “How can you say that? [I] lost Vernon County by 1,000 votes”—which happened to be the right number. Imagine, you know, there’s 72 counties in Wisconsin. How many counties are there in the whole country? And he knew the margin by which he had lost Vernon County.

If anti-Catholic sentiment had hobbled his campaign against Nixon, this feeling all but dissipated after Kennedy became president. To illustrate this point to Kennedy himself, Lucey cited the example of a conversation he had with the owner of Nelson’s Restaurant in Vernon County, where Lucey had hosted a lackluster campaign event for Kennedy in 1960:

I said, “Well, do you remember Nelson’s Restaurant in Viroqua?” “Well, yes, I do.” I said, “Well, I had lunch there the other day, [and] Mr. Nelson said that if you were running today, you would carry Vernon County.” And he said, “Well, what explanation did he give?” I said, “Well, I asked him that question. And he said you’d carry Vernon County because the Pope did not move into the White House.”

This change of heart boded well for Kennedy’s reelection campaign, which was already in full swing when the president was shot and killed on November 22, 1963. Lucey heard the news on his way to the airport to fly to Ohio for the campaign—but he “refused to believe it.” After he boarded the airplane, the announcement came over the loudspeaker: “It is now official. The president is dead.” When the plane landed in Chicago for its stopover, Lucey took a rental car back to Madison: “It was a terrible blow.”

Another tragedy: 1968

Just four years later, Lucey once again found himself into the throes of a presidential campaign. Steve Smith, with whom he had collaborated to elect John F. Kennedy, called Lucey

7. “Wisconsin Presidential Preference Primary, April 5, 1960,” in M. G. Toepel and Rupert Theobald, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1962* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau), 753–56.

8. Kennedy lost with 830,805 votes against Nixon’s 895,175 votes. See “Vote for President and Vice President by County,” in M. G. Toepel and Rupert Theobald, eds., *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1962* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau), 860.

in early 1968 to ask if he would lend the same support to Bobby Kennedy. Lucey thought Bobby would be a “cinch” following President Lyndon Johnson’s March announcement that he would not seek reelection:

Steve Smith wanted to know if I’d go down to Nebraska for a weekend to help get that [campaign] set up. Well, I got down there, and despite having a very young family and an active real estate business, I didn’t leave Nebraska for five weeks. And we won Nebraska.

A series of whirlwind campaign stops followed, with Lucey traveling to Oregon, then California. There, he helped John Seigenthaler Sr. run the campaign in the northern part of the state:

I told John that I felt that this close to an election, [the] only politics that counted was retail politics. And so if he were to assign me a precinct, I would simply go door-to-door all day Monday and Tuesday.

On June 4, 1968, the day of the California primary, Lucey flew from San Francisco to Los Angeles for Bobby Kennedy’s victory party, but was late because he took cheaper transportation from the airport to save the campaign some money. When he got to the hotel and checked in, Lucey heard a “commotion” from the direction of the ballroom. Still in the lobby, he ran into the journalist Sandy Van Oker and asked him what was going on. Van Oker didn’t know either, but both men heard Steve Smith from the ballroom telling everyone to “please leave quietly”:

So I went up to my room, and by the time I got to my room and turned on the tube, here was Sandy Van Oker—he already had acquired the information that Bobby had been shot in the kitchen. And if I’d taken the cab instead of the limousine, I’d have checked in and gone to Bobby’s suite. I might have been with him walking through the kitchen when he got shot.

For the second time in his life, Lucey grieved the loss of a candidate in whom he had invested his time, energy, and hope. Asked if he thought about “giving up politics” after such a traumatic event, he answered, “No.” Within weeks, Lucey threw his support behind Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy who, like Bobby Kennedy, also opposed the war in Vietnam: “So as long as it was a choice, I’d go with the anti-war candidate.” Lucey tried to project optimism for McCarthy’s campaign in advance of the Democratic convention in Chicago in August 1968:

I had gotten to know Ted White pretty well ever since the ’60 campaign, when he wrote *The Making of the President*. He was working on *The Making of the President 1968*, and I said, “Well, Ted, you’re going to have a chapter of your book called ‘The Miracle at Chicago.’” And I told him how I hoped to win the convention for McCarthy.

Ultimately, there was no such miracle. After the campaign failed and Vice President Hubert Humphrey was chosen as the Democratic candidate, Lucey belatedly endorsed Humphrey on October 23, just weeks before the election.

Governor of Wisconsin

After the 1968 presidential campaign, Lucey returned to campaigning for himself. In 1970, he successfully ran for governor and was inaugurated in January 1971.

Discussing his career as governor, Lucey highlighted his efforts to boost Wisconsin business, remarking that “The biggest thing that I did for business as governor was to exempt machinery and equipment used in the manufacturing process from the property tax.”⁹ He explained the rationale behind this legislation as follows:

If you want a well-paid workforce, you want to encourage the employers to invest in good, modern equipment, because then you can command a better wage, and the likelihood is that the companies in Wisconsin will be more competitive with other companies in other states where they don't have this advantage.

With similar goals in mind, Lucey also urged foreign businesses like Kikkoman, a major soy sauce producer, to come to Wisconsin:

We had a very active commercial section, you know, [urging] businesses to come to Wisconsin. . . . I think the most significant thing we accomplished was getting the Japanese to come into Walworth County and make soy sauce. It was the first time that a Japanese company had brought any manufacturing process to the United States.

Another significant change during his administration was the merger of Wisconsin colleges and universities to create the University of Wisconsin System. Until the 1970s, two university systems coexisted in the state. As Lucey saw it, these dual systems prompted “ridiculous decisions . . . to appease two sets of regents,” including the following example:

I remember one time they wanted to build an Olympic-sized swimming pool at Milwaukee for UWM. Well, in order to get it through the legislature, they had to go up to Oshkosh and enlarge a swimming pool to make it Olympic size in order to get the votes to get the money for the pool here in Milwaukee. [laughter] And it turned out that it cost more to enlarge the Oshkosh pool than it did to build one here from scratch.

Significant opposition to the merger came from the Madison campus. According to Lucey, faculty and administrators there “felt they were a world-class university and that they would be downgraded by being linked to these schools that had once been state normals and then state teachers colleges.” From Lucey's vantage point, however, these

9. This exemption was enacted under [Chapter 90, Laws of 1973](#).

former normal schools had evolved significantly to more closely resemble UW–Madison: “The mission of the two systems had in fact merged, and so the legislation was simply to recognize that fact and abolish one board of regents and have a single board of regents.” Ultimately, the merger passed with bipartisan support, as at the time, the Democrats controlled the assembly but the Republicans controlled the senate.¹⁰

Lucey also sought to reorganize state courts, but doing so required amending the state constitution to provide for a unified court system.¹¹ This substantial undertaking overlapped his first and second terms because, as Lucey put it, “to amend the state constitution is not easy.” Specifically, the process requires adoption of identical joint resolutions in successive sessions of the legislature, followed by consideration by Wisconsin voters in the form of a referendum. To ensure the passage of the ballot questions put before voters in April 1977, Lucey recruited the support of both the Wisconsin State Supreme Court and the Minnesota State Supreme Court. To his relief, the amendments passed.¹²

Reflecting more broadly on his time in office, Lucey observed that bipartisanship was more common than it would become decades later. “The attitude was so different,” he noted, illustrating his comment with a story about a particularly contested budget bill. One day, Lucey was driving around the capitol square when he spotted Republican State Senator Robert (“Bobby”) Knowles:

He came over and got in the car with me, and I said, “Look, [here] we are into late June, and the fiscal period starts July 1, and I need to get this budget passed. . . . I actually only need one vote from your caucus. And so far you’ve just been adamant about opposing it.” And he said, “Well, it’s a good budget. . . . If you still need my vote in October, it’ll be there, but . . . as [a party] leader I can’t break away from my caucus and vote for your budget right now.” I said, “Alright, Bob, give me the name of the softest vote you’ve got in the Republican caucus.” And he named a senator from Sheboygan. . . . So I went in the capitol and I sent for the senator, and he came down to my office, and 45 minutes later I had a budget.¹³

In other words, opposing party leadership attempted to facilitate compromise even while publicly opposing certain legislation. Still, Lucey recognized that he would never get everything he wanted or make everyone happy:

10. The merger was enacted under [Ch. 100, Laws of 1971](#).

11. For a brief, useful explanation of this amendment and the courts’ earlier history, see “[History of the Courts](#),” Wisconsin Court System, accessed September 23, 2020.

12. Changes to the constitution were proposed under 1975 AJR 11 (JR 13) and 1977 SJR 9 (JR 7). For more about the related ballot questions, see *Constitutional Amendments to be Considered by the Wisconsin Electorate April 5, 1977*, Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau Brief 77-1 (March 1977).

13. Lucey identified Knowles as senate majority leader; however, he served as senate majority leader during the 1963 and 1965 legislative sessions and as senate president pro tem from 1967 to 1973. Rupert Theobald and Patricia Robbins, eds., *The State of Wisconsin Blue Book, 1975* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau), 40.

My popularity usually was in the low 50s. My theory was that as long as it was 51 [percent] on Election Day, that's all that mattered. And sometimes I would [take] positions, two or three positions a day, that would have a negative impact on my popularity.

As ambassador to Mexico

As governor, Lucey had not actively campaigned for Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign, so it was a shock to him when Carter asked him to serve as his ambassador to Mexico. He seriously considered the offer for various reasons. First, he assessed the prospect of a third term as governor:

I had already started raising money to run for a third term. But frankly, as I looked around, I didn't have any program for a third term. I mean, everything I had set out to do of any importance was already achieved.

Then he considered the significance of the offer itself:

I guess what it came down to is no matter what you think of a president, if he asks you to do something, you can't just ignore it. You're inclined to take it seriously.

But Lucey sought to keep the invitation under wraps until voters weighed in on the court reorganization at the polls: "I thought, 'If it leaks that I'm even considering going to Mexico, and I try to generate interest in the court reform, no reporter's going to want to talk about court reform, they're going to want to talk about Mexico.'" Once voters had approved the court reorganization in April 1977, Lucey finally announced that he would resign the governorship.

Only after he arrived in Mexico did Lucey discover why Carter had appointed him: the Mexican foreign minister, who became a close friend of Lucey's, told him "we selected you." Lucey asked the foreign minister to elaborate:

He says, "Well, my president was over at the White House and we told Jimmy Carter that we didn't want a career diplomat. . . . We wanted a real American. We wanted a politician."

Lucey's aide, Stan Zuckerman, confirmed this assessment in a separate oral history interview. As Zuckerman explained, Lucey had "clout" in Mexico because "he could call the President without having to go through the State Department."¹⁴ That kind of influence increasingly mattered in Mexico, which was becoming a major player in energy exports.

In addition to dealing with energy issues, Lucey played an important role in negotiating prisoner exchanges between the United States and Mexico. He also oversaw strategies

14. Charles Stuart Kennedy, [Interview with Mr. Stanley Zuckerman](https://memory.loc.gov/), Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (July 26, 2004), 78–83, <https://memory.loc.gov/>.

intended to shield the United States from hoof and mouth disease by keeping the disease from reaching Mexico. As he explained, “More people reported to me from the Department of Agriculture than from the Department of State,” because of Mexico’s importance to agricultural operations in the United States. In all these efforts, Lucey’s language skills did not constitute a major asset: “My Spanish was lousy in Puerto Rico and it was lousy in Mexico.”

Although Lucey hosted President Carter on his visit to Mexico, this experience did not strengthen their relationship. In fact, Lucey noted, “it gives you an idea of how my estimate of [Carter] tended to decline.” Generally, Lucey explained, when heads of state visited other countries, the host head of state (in this instance, Mexican President José López Portillo) would traditionally receive the visiting head of state in a formal reception. Then the visiting head of state would reciprocate. But the Carter administration refused to do so on budgetary grounds. To save face, Lucey elected to host the reception himself—and did so with remarkable frugality. He flew down the cooks from Fond du Lac who had served him in the Wisconsin governor’s residence—along with their mother, who came along to make dessert. Stan Zuckerman contacted composer Leonard Bernstein, who agreed to come down and conduct an orchestra led by the Mexican president’s wife, who was a concert pianist.

The event was a rousing success. After the concert at the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City, Lucey hosted a dinner:

Maybe 70 people had dinner at the official residence, and the head table was the two presidents and their wives, Bernstein and his daughter, and the Luceys. And Bernstein and the Mexican president begin to exchange Spanish love songs. . . . Bernstein would start a Spanish song, the Mexican president would pick up on it, and it seemed like they both knew the same songs, you know.

The impromptu “contest” lasted until after midnight, to the chagrin of Mrs. Carter: “I could see that she was very unhappy that this was a performance where there was no role for Jimmy.”¹⁵

Campaigner and candidate: 1980

Eventually, Lucey resigned his ambassadorship to campaign a third and final time for one of the Kennedy brothers. This time, he supported Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy against incumbent President Carter for the Democratic nomination:

I suppose people could say I was an ingrate, but I hadn’t asked for the ambassadorship.

15. Charles Stuart Kennedy, [Interview with Mr. Stanley Zuckerman](https://memory.loc.gov/), Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (July 26, 2004), 78–83, <https://memory.loc.gov/>.

It was something I did because Carter wanted me to do it, and I didn't feel that—given a choice between Ted Kennedy and Carter—[I] had to remain loyal to Carter.

As deputy campaign manager, Lucey once again worked alongside Steve Smith, as he had in Jack's and Bobby's campaigns. But when Ted Kennedy's campaign crumbled, Lucey's involvement in the presidential race did not end. In fact, the campaigner became a candidate himself. John Anderson, a former Republican Congressman campaigning as an Independent, had impressed Lucey with his performance in the Iowa debates: "My feeling was that if it gets to the point where Ted Kennedy is not the candidate, this is the guy I'd like to support for president." Lucey turned down an invitation to become Anderson's campaign manager but accepted the invitation to join the ticket as Anderson's vice president.

Ever the campaigner, Lucey was optimistic about their chances of winning against incumbent Carter and Republican challenger Ronald Reagan. Still, he was cognizant of the obstacles that any third-party candidate faces in a presidential race:

In a three-way race, if it's really tight, you only need 37 percent. When I came into it, [Anderson] was at about 25 [percent]. And so you could argue that, well, if you bring in the Kennedy Democrats, you'd get 37 [percent]. The fact is that third-party candidates have a real problem in that as the general election approaches, voters tend to go home. They tend to go back to their own party. And that's what happened here.

On November 4, 1980, Anderson and Lucey lost with only about 7 percent of the vote.¹⁶ Asked if he had any regrets, Lucey said plainly, "No. It was just two months. And I had wonderful staff and a good speechwriter."

Conclusion

At the time of his LRB interview in March 2010, Lucey had not retired from politics. He continued to attend political events and mentioned that he had even attended a luncheon the day before. Throughout the interview, Lucey spoke more about others for whom he had campaigned than about himself, and in so doing, conveyed his ongoing enthusiasm for the Democratic Party. In closing, he shared an anecdote about another candidate who shared this enthusiasm—and surprised Lucey with detailed knowledge of Lucey's political career. At a Jefferson-Jackson Day reception in Milwaukee in 2008, then-Governor Jim Doyle introduced him to presidential candidate Barack Obama. As Lucey remarked, "Even though I had read one of his two books, I had the feeling that Obama knew more about my history than I knew about his." Lucey was both bemused and impressed.

16. Other sources place the figure at 6.6 percent. For a synopsis of this race, see Adam Clymer, "[John Anderson, who ran Against Reagan and Carter in 1980, Is Dead at 95](#)," *New York Times*, December 4, 2017.

Patrick Lucey died on May 10, 2014, at the age of 96. Former Governor Doyle remembered him as “a politician in the best sense of the word,” concluding that “[He] was a great governor. . . . He was a great political leader. But the thing about Pat Lucey is he was even a better man.”¹⁷ ■

17. Shawn Johnson, “[Former Wisconsin Governor Patrick Lucey Dies at 96](#)” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, May 12, 2014.