

# ADVANTAGES OF THE DIRECT PRIMARY ELECTION

The advantages of "direct primary" were recently set forth in an interesting way in the Arena, by Ira Cross of Madison, Wisconsin. From Mr. Cross's article these extracts are taken:

All attempts at reforming the caucus and the convention have resulted in dismal failures. New York, California, and Cook county, Illinois, which have the most highly legalized caucus-systems, are still boss-ridden and machine-controlled.

There can be but one remedy—the government must be brought back to the people. They must be given the power to directly nominate their party candidates. If they are sufficiently intelligent to directly elect them by means of the Australian ballot they are sufficiently intelligent to directly nominate them.

Experience with the direct primary in thirty-two states, where it is now being used in one form or other shows that every good direct primary law, whether applied to city, county or state, must have the following five essentials: (1) It must be compulsory upon all parties; (2) the Australian ballot must be used; (3) all primaries must be held under state regulations; (4) the state must bear the expense; (5) all parties must hold their primaries at the same place and time. Under a system of direct nominations one of the registration days is set aside for the primary. The voter goes to the polls, registers, receives a ballot containing a list of the candidates, and votes directly for the man of his choice. Nothing could be more simple in operation than this. It places in the hands of the voters the power to nominate their party candidates, and in all sane governments that is where it should be placed.

The real tests of any nominating system, however, are (1) the number of voters that take part in the primaries, and (2) the kind of candidates nominated.

Under the caucus system, no matter how highly legalized, the voters will not take part in making the nominations. They are not even interested, for in the caucuses they do not nominate candidates, they only elect delegates, and a delegate, no matter how honest he may be, cannot correctly represent the wishes of his constituents upon all, and quite often not even upon a small portion, of the candidates to be nominated in the convention. Do the facts uphold the argument? Take the caucus system at its best and what do we find? In San Francisco, New York city, and Cook county, Illinois, which places since 1901, 1900, and 1899 respectively, have had the most highly legalized and reformed caucus systems in the United States, an average of but 39 per cent of the voters of San Francisco, 41 per cent of those in New York, and 38 per cent of those in Cook county, Illinois, take part in making nominations. If but this small number of people attend the caucuses when such great care is taken to protect the voice and the will of the people, what a handful must turn out in those states in which few if any legal regulations are thrown around the nominating machinery! Under the caucus system the resulting government cannot represent the will of the majority. It can only represent the will of the minority, and it is to this small minority (composed though it usually is of men who are in politics for what there is in it) that our officials are directly responsible, not only for their nomination but also for their subsequent election.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the direct primary greatly increases the attendance at the primaries. The reason for this is that it gives the voters a real voice in making party nominations. They can express their choice upon all candidates from governor down to justice of the peace, and by this means are able to exert a direct influence upon the final results.

In Cleveland, Ohio, under the old caucus system, only 5,000 voters took part in nominating the republican candidates for city offices in 1892, but in 1893, when they used one of the most poorly framed and extra legal primary systems imaginable, over 14,000 republicans turned out. This number increased to 23,000 in 1896, to 28,000 in 1899, and to 31,000 in 1901, the vote at the primaries during these years averaging more than 35 per cent of the vote cast by the republicans at the subsequent elections. In Crawford county, Pennsylvania, where the direct primary has been used since 1860, the average attendance at the primaries has been more than 73 per cent. In the Twenty-fifth congressional district, where the system has been used since 1890, 77 per cent of the voters have made the nominations. Even where there was no contest, as was the case in 1894 and 1900, more than 62 per cent of the voters attended the primaries. What other portion of the United States can show such a record as this? "In Minneapolis," writes Mr. Day of that city, "under a highly legalized caucus system, but 8

per cent of the voters attended the caucuses." Under the direct primary, however, 91 per cent of the voters attended in 1900, 85 per cent in 1902, an off-year, and 93 per cent in 1904. In Hennepin county, Minnesota, in 1904, over 97 per cent of the voters took part in making congressional nominations. In the same year the returns from eighteen counties, scattered indiscriminately throughout Minnesota (all the returns that could be obtained), showed that over 72 per cent of the voters took part in the primaries. These figures show most conclusively that the difficulty is not the apathy of the people. Their civic patriotism is as strong as it has ever been in years past. They are interested in the government and will attend the primaries, if they are but given the opportunity to directly nominate their party candidates. The difficulty lies with the caucus system. It is indirect and inefficient.

Now let us see if there are any reasons why better men should be nominated under the direct primary than under the caucus and convention system.

In the first place it must be conceded that the majority of the people are honest and that they want good government and honest officials. Under the direct primary they can make this desire felt more effectively. They can exercise two vetoes upon any attempt to foist bad candidates upon the public, once at the primary, and again at the election. But under the caucus system they have no choice at the caucuses, while upon election it is usually a choice between two evils, between two machine-made candidates, and this is one reason why there is such an appallingly large stay-at-home vote upon election day.

In the second place, who is it that so bitterly antagonizes the direct primary? Most assuredly it is not the people! It is the same class of men that twenty years ago fought the introduction of the Australian ballot! The St. Paul Pioneer Press of March 17, 1904, said: "The machine men have never liked the primary. They fought it from the start and they continue to sneer at it." The Arena of August, 1904, also said: "It is needless to say that the grafters and the corruptionists, all indeed who have been engaged in debauching the people's servants, are bitterly hostile to the primary." Why is it that the politicians have suddenly become so solicitous about the welfare of the public, claiming, as they do, that the introduction of the direct primary would be detrimental to the best interests of the people? Why is it that they fight it so strenuously? It is because they realize that they cannot control the 70 or 80 per cent of the voters who turn out to the primaries as they dictate to the 20 per cent who attend the caucuses. They realize that under it their power to dominate the political arena would be gone, that they could not prevent the candidacy of good men. The direct primary introduces "the principle of free, open competition, where before all was secrecy, scheming and log-rolling. It enables any man to become a candidate without currying favor with the boss and the ring by methods which trench upon his self respect." The natural result is that better men come out for the nomination under the direct primary than under the caucus system. Speaking of the last primary held in St. Paul, the Pioneer Press of that city said: "Instead of a horde of office-seekers, bound to this or that faction, and foisted upon the public to feed at the public crib and to play into the hands of a small coterie of republicans, the primary law stimulated a search for good candidates all over the city, and the result was a primary ticket composed largely of men whom the office had sought, unpledged and indebted to no one. The result is the strongest ticket that the republican party has had for years, a ticket of strong campaigners, and of men who are entitled to the confidence of the people and who have it. No convention ever did so well except when stimulated by popular impatience, and that was once in a decade." Hundreds of other localities, where the direct primary has been tried, could testify to the same effect. The mere fact that those cities and states which have adopted this system have never thought of abandoning it, and that its popularity is ever on the increase, is sufficient evidence that it does result in better men being nominated for public office.

The caucus system presents no remedy for the evils of today. No matter how highly legalized, it will still remain complex, indirect and uncertain. In actual practice it represents but a small portion of the people. It places the power of nomination in the hands of the few, the boss and the ring. It is subversive of the principles of representative government. From all over the country comes the cry of the American people for deliverance. They demand that the control of the government be placed in their hands, and that they

be given the power to directly nominate all party candidates. Arrayed against them in this struggle for better government and purity in politics are the corrupting elements of our social and industrial world. What greater tribute can be paid to the efficiency of the direct primary to destroy machine domination and corruption than this bitter antagonism of the boss and the ring?

The direct primary has universally proven satisfactory. Even where tried under the most unfavorable circumstances, placed entirely outside the pale of the law, run by party organizations as it is in many places, introduced into factional, turbulent politics, into machine-ridden Minneapolis, it has proven eminently successful. It has given the people the power to nominate their officials. It has brought out more voters to the primaries. It has made the officials responsible to the people, and has freed them from the dictation of the machine. And finally, as a rule, it has resulted in the nomination of better candidates and in the inauguration of better government.

When these results are compared with those of the caucus system, there is no necessity for explaining further the universal demand for the adoption of the direct primary.

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Chas. R. Glenn, Lamar, Mo.—Enclosed find fifty subscribers to The Commoner and draft for \$30 to pay for the same. Mr. Bryan, these subscribers were secured by Uncle George Beamer of Lamar, Mo., one of Barton county's grand old men, who is strong, loyal and enthusiastic in his devotion to the democracy of William J. Bryan. Each and every winter since The Commoner began its career, Mr. Beamer has gone around faithfully in this community getting all the old subscribers for The Commoner and securing many renewals. Speaking to me yesterday, he said: "I am eighty-three years old and cannot hope to contribute this work many years longer. I have spent my whole life in spreading true Jefferson democracy. I am proud to say that I have cast two votes for William J. Bryan for president." Mr. Beamer is one of Barton county's best known and highly honored citizens. He is a man of broad intelligence, an extensive reader, being a subscriber to eleven periodicals, the principal one of which is The Commoner, which he reads with great interest, each and every issue. He is an exemplary citizen, loyal to his friends, merciful to his enemies, with great force of character, strong convictions and unyielding love and devotion to his chosen principles.

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