PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN BOULDER, COLORADO

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*Boulder has had two elections under proportional representation. Its
experience is here related. :: :: :: :: :: :: ::*

I

JANUARY 1, 1918, went into effect the home rule charter of Boulder which had been approved by the voters of the city in the election of October 30, 1917. The charter represents an attempt to recognize in a practical way the principles of the functional plan of organization. It accordingly provides, on the one hand, for a small but thoroughly representative council through the adoption of the Hare system of proportional representation and, on the other hand, for an efficient administration through a city manager and a small number of well organized departments.

In a population as small and homogeneous as that of Boulder there was from the outset considerable doubt as to whether a system of proportional representation would yield superior results proportionate to its complexity. Politics and factionalism, or even radically different interests, have very rarely been prominent in Boulder elections. The Hare system was adopted, therefore, not to remedy any flagrant evil, but rather because it was regarded as a more ideal mechanism than the old plan and so as an arrangement which might in the long run prove more satisfactory.

The first election under the new charter was held December 11, 1917. Nine councilmen were to be elected. Since the term of office was to be six years, in order to satisfy the require-

ment that three councilmen shall be elected every two years, it was necessary in the first election to arrange for three distinct sets of candidates, each set corresponding respectively to a two-year, a four-year, and a six-year term. This necessarily complicated the ballot. To assist the voters in mastering the new system, several public meetings were held at which concrete explanations and demonstrations were given. The papers of the city were very liberal in their exposition of the system. Simple and adequate directions were printed on the ballots.

Candidates are required by the charter to file their declarations of candidacy with the city clerk. Only when such declarations have been filed, may signatures be attached to the nominating petition. Signers must appear in person in the clerk's office to sign the petition. When not less than twenty-five nor more than thirty-five signatures have been made, the candidate is declared nominated.

For the two-year term in the election of 1917, there were seven candidates. Eight hundred and fifty-nine votes were cast. Of these only fifty-six were void. The electoral quotient, under the Boulder plan, is found by dividing the total vote by the number of representatives to be elected plus one. This process gave an electoral quotient of 201. The first count resulted in the election of one councilman, a popular physician, who had, in addition to the required 201, a surplus of ninety-eight.

The election of the other two was not made before the surplus of the first councilman had been distributed and the four candidates lowest on the list had been successively eliminated.

For the four-year term there were five candidates for whom were cast 796 valid ballots. The electoral quotient was 200. One candidate had a surplus of forty-two. This was a very prominent and widely known woman. The distribution of the surplus resulted in the election of a second councilman, a man who had been in politics for many years and had represented the Boulder district in the state senate. The third election resulted only after the final elimination of the two candidates lowest on the list.

Eight candidates were nominated for the six-year term, and one voter cast his vote for a ninth candidate. Eight hundred and fifty-nine ballots were cast. Of these fifty-eight were void. Of this group, the three who were declared elected were those who remained after the elimination of the six who in succession had the smallest number of votes. Of the three who had the highest number of votes only one had a number equal to the electoral quotient.

In part on account of its newness, in part on account of the interest aroused during the period of charter making, and in part on account of the larger responsibility of the council in organizing the new government and selecting a manager, the new system attracted an unusually large number of candidates. The result was a very satisfactory set of councilmen. The voters apparently had found the system workable. The percentage of void ballots was so small as to be negligible. While there were no evidences of great enthusiasm, and while there were some cases of adverse criticism directed at the complexity both in the balloting

and of the tabulation of results, yet the general opinion was that the system would probably prove superior when the voters had become better acquainted with it.

Three vacancies occurred before the time of the next general election—one as the result of the death of a councilman elected for six years, two as a result of resignations by councilmen elected for the four-year term, who enlisted in war service. These vacancies were filled, in accordance with the charter, by new men, appointed by the council, to serve until the next election.

The second election under the charter came November 4, 1919. Normally, only three councilmen would have been elected at this election. On account of the three vacancies, which had been filled temporarily by the council, the number to be elected was increased to six.

For each of the unexpired terms, there was only one candidate—in each case, the councilman who had already begun to serve as a result of appointment by the council. These candidates were, of course, elected; but the number of void ballots was amazing. Out of a total of 1,167 votes cast for the candidate for the unexpired part of the six-year term, no less than 297 were void. For the candidates for the remainder of the four-year term, 890 votes were cast. Three hundred and sixty-four were void.

Six candidates were voted on for the regular term. Two hundred and seventy-five ballots were void. The 890 valid ballots gave an electoral quotient of 223. Two candidates were declared elected after the first count—the popular physician who had been elected in 1917, and a well-known business man who is now mayor. The third was elected through the transfer of the surplus of the other two.

In addition to the election of coun-

cilmen, the voters were asked at this election to express themselves upon one simple charter amendment and one bond proposition. On the charter amendment, the void votes were equally amazing—close to 300.

II

The nature of the irregularities that made so large a percentage of ballots void was generally the same—the use of the cross in place of the numeral in voting for candidates, and the attachment of a cross to both “yes” and “no” on the charter amendment.

No adequate explanation can be found for these very unsatisfactory results, except as it is found in the force of habit of the voter and his general lack of care and close observation. On the charter amendment, the intention probably was to vote affirmatively. The negative vote was probably intended as a vote against the bond issue. One “yes” and one “no” was probably the decision made by the voter before he went to the polls. Through sheer carelessness, the crosses hit the wrong squares.

Simple and clear directions were printed on the ballots. The newspapers had explained as before. But the newness had worn away and the voter reverted to his original habit, the more easily because between the first and second city elections had occurred a state and national election in which he used the old method.

The enormous percentage of void ballots has discouraged even the enthusiast for the Hare system. A system that virtually disfranchises so large a number of voters can hardly be regarded as desirable, is an argument now not uncommonly heard in Boulder. The argument clearly has weight. Clearly, too, is it confusing to the busy

voter to use one method in one election and a different method in another.

The remedy must involve more adequate methods of instructing the voter. Directions on the ballot possibly can be printed in more striking form so as to catch more certainly the attention of the voter. The principles of commercial advertising have a place in the solution of this problem. Newspaper comment, posters, mass meetings, school-room instruction—all can be resorted to with better results. Continuous education and more effective education.

Much could be accomplished also through a plan of stationing at each polling place a group of competent, non-partisan advisers. This committee of advisers might take the place of the old election judges. A committee of very carefully selected members would be necessary—members with tact and understanding and enthusiastic patience. This committee would hand out the ballots, supervise the polling place, and receive the ballots; but more important than any one of these, would be its function of explaining to each voter, who had any doubt or question about the method of voting, exactly how to mark the ballot. With a committee that was awake in estimating the voters as they came in, it should be possible to achieve very close to perfect results.

The composition of the present council of Boulder is regarded as fairly representative: two women, six business men of varying stamp, and one college professor. The result of proportional representation so far as it can be judged from the personnel of the council has been satisfactory. The result when measured by the first essential of the whole Hare system—every vote counts, no votes are wasted—leaves enormously much to be desired.