

SOONER MAGAZINE

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Affairs of the State:

The Overburdened Voter

By H. V. THORNTON

THE SUCCESS of the democratic method of government, particularly its success in the future, depends upon intelligent and thoughtful voting. This premise few will deny; yet to many observers, voting of this nature in Oklahoma seems extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible. This unpleasant conclusion rests upon both quantitative and qualitative considerations: the number of officers elected, and the inability of the voter to essay properly, or to appraise correctly, the qualifications of the successful administrator.

In the statewide primary election of 1938, to make a random choice, the Democratic voter was confronted by 126 candidates seeking nominations for 17 state offices, including offices of the United States Senate and the House of Representatives. But this is not all. Each county, with eleven elective offices to fill, presented to the voter not less than three candidates per office, or a total of 33. Add to these the numerous candidates for state representative, state senate, and various judicial posts, and it is safe to estimate that the Democratic voter in this primary had to consider, or pretend to consider, the qualifications of some 165 to 180 candidates for offices ranging from the governorship to county surveyor. It might be noted that this imposing number does not include candidates for justice of the peace, and other local offices whose importance is not denied by omission from the list.

It seems safe to say that few persons, even those who devote considerable time to the study of Oklahoma government, politics, and political leadership, have either the time or disposition to study the qualifications of such an array of aspiring candidates. It is an impossible task; yet a ballot cast on studies or knowledge of the qualifications of some candidates instead of all candidates is, in varying degree, blind voting.

The surprising strength shown by famous name candidates—Daniel Boone, Patrick Henry, Sam Houston, Oliver Cromwell, Mac West—who, so far as the

majority of the voters are concerned, have nothing to recommend them except the name, is an indication of the helplessness of the voter when he is confronted by a large number of candidates seeking nomination for a large number of public offices.

As stated in a previous article, the democratic process makes no such impossible demands upon the voter. Popular choice, for example, of commissioners of insurance, labor, charities and corrections, of treasurers, mine inspectors, county clerks, police chiefs, or even justices and attorneys is not an essential of democratic government. As a matter of fact, election of such officials creates a high degree of irresponsibility. The public cannot know whether a treasurer or auditor is competent because the tests of competence in such office are unknown to the average voter. The smooth and efficient operation of such offices is indispensable to good government; but whether such offices have been efficiently and honestly managed can be determined only by those who have an expert knowledge of accounting, and those in close contact with their daily operations.

A regrettable commentary upon the ability of voters to select competent administrators is found in the rather frequent refusal of bonding companies to provide bond for locally elected treasurers and clerks. Refusal is based less upon want of character in those elected than upon their want of understanding concerning the duties of the offices they may have acquired. Bonding companies know, even if the public does not, that an honest mistake may be just as expressive as a dishonest act. The degree to which an administrator can be held accountable by the public is intermittent at best. Between elections he is largely free from public scrutiny because his tasks are technical, and totally without the dramatic quality which attracts and maintains public interest. Furthermore, the legal status of his office shields him more or less completely from general executive supervision.

In another respect the limitations of

the voter ought to be recognized in the make-up of the ballot. The competent administrator rarely makes a good candidate, while it is in colorful candidates that the voter in general is interested. Above all other considerations, the administrator ought to be thoroughly capable of performing the duties of the office to which he aspires. But the elective official, instead of being concerned about his competence as an officer, must be primarily concerned about his ability to make an effective campaign. He may prove

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 14)

The Cover

Kathryn Miller, Tulsa, as the Madonna, and Joan Lima, Oklahoma City, as the Juggler, will appear in the twelfth annual performance of the Juggler of Notre Dame. Photo by Richard Meek.

Contents

AFFAIRS OF THE STATE	1
By H. V. Thornton	
RIDING THE SOONER RANGE	2
By Ted Beard	
THE UNIVERSITY	3
WITH THE ARMED FORCES	7
By Elaine Larecy	
CALLING THE ROLL	14
By Elizabeth Lees	
ALUMNI IN THE NEWS	18
OKLAHOMA BOOKS	19
SOONER SPORTS	20
By Harold Keith	

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