

New York's Literacy Test of Voters Is Pronounced a Success

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THE EYES of the nation were turned toward New York State on the 4th of last November for at least one reason which had very little to do with the Democratic or Republican capture of her forty-five votes in the Electoral College. Educators, legislators and civic and political leaders were critically attentive to see how the only State in the Union with a test for voters prepared and administered by its educational authorities would fare during the first Presidential election in the history of its experiment.

Other States have so-called literacy tests for voters. We have had such a provision in our own State constitution since 1921. But not until the legislation of January, 1922, in New York State had any of these State tests been other than a vague requirement to be able to read and write or to understand a section of the constitution in such a fashion as to satisfy the boards of election. By giving the State Department of Education power to prepare actual educational tests and hold examinations based on them, the Legislature of New York State enacted a literacy test law with teeth in it.

It was generally agreed that if such a law could be successfully administered in New York State it would be practicable elsewhere, and that New York City held the key to success or failure.

Many difficult problems, of course, exist, in connection with its administration throughout the State, but we, with our enormous electorate and our high percentage of foreign-born naturalized voters, were considered its real testing ground. Moreover, our experience, with the law the previous year had not been so fortunate. In the midst of the week set aside for examination a question was raised regarding the constitutionality of the provision of the law which gives the educational authorities sole control of the test. While a judicial decision clearly establishing our responsibility in the matter was rendered before registration week was over, nevertheless the board of election in many cases accepted evidence of literacy on their own responsibility. There was inevitable confusion pending the final legal decision.

I am convinced that the result of our recent experience are so satisfactory that other States will rapidly follow our lead. Detailed reports from the evening school principals in charge of these examinations have been coming into our office during the past month. We now have an accurate and comprehensive picture of what took place.

The annual crop of new voters in New York City is about 60,000. In 1923 during the ten days in which the schools were open for the test 53,286 new voters presented themselves for certificates of literacy. Such a percentage is astonishing. It puts to shame the efforts to "get out the vote" from the general electorate, for the entire percentage of

eligible voters appearing at the polls was only a little over 50. Many of this 53,000, it is true, were men and women who had failed to register the previous year and therefore did not come from the current 60,000. But offsetting this is the fact that many persons got certificates of literacy by going directly to the boards of election with a diploma from the eighth elementary grade or one of higher rank and did not go to the schools at all.

Thus a first broad conclusion from the results of the last election seems entirely warranted, namely: that the challenge of the test, together with the concerted publicity given to it, "got out the vote" from this group more successfully than from the electorate at large. Certainly the fears of those who thought that this additional trouble would keep many new voters from registering were not realized.

Ten thousand two hundred and seventy-four people failed to pass the examinations, and were thereby declared ineligible to vote. Of the 44,941 who actually took the examination (8,345 received certificates without taking the examination, on presentation of authentic evidence of literacy from either day or evening schools) 23 per cent, therefore, were unable to read and write English as well as a child in the fourth elementary grade, for it was on such a scholastic standard that the tests were based. This high percentage alone, it seems to me, demonstrates the value of an educational test administered by educational authorities. No one knows what percentage of new voters was turned down as illiterate by the boards of election prior to the conduct of the examination by the schools, nor is there any such record in other States. Yet I have no hesitancy in venturing that it was no such percentage as this. On the other hand, if we are to have a test at all, is there any one who believes that the ability to read and write English that is required from a child in the fourth grade is too high a standard?

It is estimated that 80 per cent of those who took the test were naturalized citizens of foreign birth. Every one of the failures came from this group. That illiteracy among foreign-born adults is much greater than among the native-born is well known and, in view of our compulsory school laws for children, easily understood. But the foreign-born men and women who took this test already had passed successfully the citizenship examination given by the courts and the Bureau of Naturalization. One of their requirements also is ability to read and write English. We are forced to conclude, therefore, that there is a great discrepancy between the court standards for citizenship and those for voting as established by this State.

Despite the usually large number of people applying for certificates — three times as many as in 1923 — complaints

from those who took the test have been surprisingly few. Usually when these are run down we find little justification. Altogether, eighty schools in different parts of the city were opened for the test on eight different nights, while on Saturday, Oct. 11, the last day of registration, the centers were open all day. One hundred and seventy-nine teachers were responsible as paid examiners, but these were given fine assistance by 528 volunteers from social and civic organizations all over the city, with an actual time service of 1,106 hours. The cost of administering the test to each individual applicant was exactly 7 cents, surely not an unwarranted expenditure to guarantee a literate electorate for our city.

Of course there were difficulties. Despite the splendid co-operation of the press and social and civic agencies, many people misunderstood the real purpose of the test. At one school the Principal noticed a girl, well dressed and apparently well educated, leaving the room with an exceedingly disgusted look on her face. He questioned her and learned that she had failed. On investigation he found that she had endeavored to answer the questions without reading the paragraphs at the top, on which the questions were based, and a paraphrase of which was the only thing necessary. Many people similarly expected the examination to be a test of comprehension rather than simply of their ability to read, write and understand English, and had spent weary hours in studying history, civics and our governmental institutions. One man answered all questions by writing Congressman LaGuardia's name ten times, confident, apparently, that this would convince the examiner that he possessed all the information necessary to cast an intelligent and discriminating ballot.

Another sort of misconception was typical of the many "highbrows" who, having left college diplomas in some forgotten corner of the world, were chagrined at being forced to prove their ability to read and write a simple story about a cow or the invention of the steamboat. A woman who after reading the test paper tore it up as an insult to her intelligence is typical of the attitude, while the story of a very famous opera singer, voting in New York State for the first time, constitutes a most human document. This lady, on the first day of registration, rushed into the election booth demanding to be enrolled at once. Questioning on the part of an election official brought out that she was casting her first vote in New York State. He informed her that she would have to take the literacy test. Righteous indignation ensued. "Go to a public school and mingle with my servants? Never! The country could go —" well, almost anywhere. The election official tried to point out that going to a public school was after all little more common, than casting her ballot in a public booth,