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An Experiment in the Stimulation of Voting

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The contributions made by the lecturers and the keen interest in the sessions shown both by university students and the general public have given substantial encouragement for the continuance of the Institute. Plans are already being made for a similar meeting next summer.

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**An Experiment in the Stimulation of Voting.** In the fall of 1924 an attempt was made in selected districts in the city of Chicago to measure the effect of a non-partisan mail canvass to get out the vote. This experiment was a continuation of the study of non-voting begun in Chicago in connection with the mayoralty election of 1923. The basis of the non-voting study was the collection of six thousand personal interviews. The reasons for not voting given by the persons interviewed were classified and tabulated so as to bring out the relation between typical reasons and the situations resulting in non-voting. A survey of persons who failed to vote in the presidential election of 1924 showed that the distribution of causes of non-voting in the previous study was fairly accurate. The experiment in the stimulation of voting was an attempt to test the causes of non-voting in an objective fashion.

In order to set up this experiment it was necessary to keep constant, within reasonable limits, all the factors that enter into the electoral process except the particular stimuli which were to be tested. The factors known to have some relation to non-voting are: sex, the dramatic quality of the election, the convenience of the voting system, mobility, foreign birth, and the nature of the local party organization. The method of random sampling was used to control these factors during the testing of the particular stimuli used in the experiment.

A thorough canvass was made of six thousand adult citizens living in twelve selected districts in the city. Special efforts were made to list all the eligible voters living in these areas. The second step in the experiment was the division of the citizens in each of the districts canvassed into two groups, one of which was to be stimulated while the other was not. The assumption was made that if a larger proportion of the stimulated citizens registered and voted than of the non-stimulated citizens, the particular stimuli used had had some effect. Since the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens were selected from the same precincts, there was no reason to suppose that the strength of the local party organizations would vary much as between the two groups. Furthermore, the percentage distributions of the stimulated and non-

stimulated by sex, color, country of birth, length of residence in the district, rent paid, knowledge of government, and schooling were practically the same. It can therefore be said that as far as possible these variables were kept constant during the experiment.

After the experimental and control groups had been selected the next step was to determine the method to be followed in stimulating voting. After some deliberation, it was decided to use individual non-partisan appeals sent through the mails. Inasmuch as the previous study of non-voting had shown that the bulk of the non-voters were not registered, emphasis was placed upon increasing registration. The final step in the experiment was the ascertainment of the actual voting response of the six thousand citizens interviewed. After checking carefully the records in the election commissioners' office, a re-canvass was made of all non-voters so as to be sure that none of the citizens who had moved would be counted as non-voters.

The first card sent out was a factual notice regarding the necessity of registration before the presidential election. While most of the cards were printed in English, there were also Polish, Czech, and Italian versions of the notice. Forty-two per cent of the three thousand citizens who received it registered, as compared with thirty-three per cent of the twenty-seven hundred citizens interviewed who did not receive it. The spread of nine per cent between the registration response of the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens is a fairly accurate measurement of the value of mailing a factual notice regarding registration. The second notice, in two different forms, was sent to those who had been subjected to stimulation and who did not register on the first day of registration. Fifty-six per cent of the seventeen hundred citizens receiving one of these notices, as compared to forty-seven per cent of the seventeen hundred and seventy citizens who did not receive it, registered on the second day of registration. One of the second notices sent out was a post card like the first one, while the other was a cartoon notice picturing the non-voter as a slacker. While the two notices had about the same influence in stimulating registration, the cartoon notice was slightly more effective than the factual notice among the women. The cumulative effect of the mail canvass is shown by the fact that seventy-five per cent of the stimulated citizens registered, as compared with sixty-five per cent of the non-stimulated.

In connection with the Chicago aldermanic election of February 24, 1925, a cartoon notice picturing the honest but apathetic citizen as the friend of the corrupt politician was sent to all the stimulated citizens

that had registered the previous fall. Fifty-seven per cent of the registered voters who received this notice actually voted as compared with forty-seven per cent of the citizens who did not receive it. At each stage of the election process, and at different elections, the non-partisan mail canvass to get out the vote had a positive stimulating effect upon the voting response of the citizens interviewed.

The spread between the voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens was not the same in all of the twelve districts studied. The variations in the effectiveness of the non-partisan mail canvass to get out the vote can be explained for the most part in terms of concomitant variations in the strength of the local party organizations. In general, the notices had the least effect where there were strong local party organizations and the greatest where the local party organizations were weakest.

In three of the districts studied, from fifteen to twenty per cent more of the stimulated citizens registered and voted than of the non-stimulated. In all three of these precincts the voting response of the non-stimulated citizens fell below the average of the entire group studied. The non-voters in these districts were largely citizens who could not find out the details of registration and voting through the medium of the newspapers because of their inability to read the English language. It appeared that a personal notification regarding election matters had a tremendous influence upon them.

Another interesting tabulation made was that showing the percentage of citizens voting, classified according to party preferences. This tabulation showed that the Democratic organization in the districts studied was more efficient than the other party organizations in getting its members to vote. Of the non-stimulated citizens, seventy-three per cent of those known to be Democrats voted on November 4, 1924, while only sixty-two per cent of those known to be Republicans voted. The mail canvass conducted by the University had a greater stimulating effect upon the potential Republican voters than upon the potential Democratic voters. Of the potential Democratic voters who received the registration notice, seventy-five per cent voted—an increase of two per cent over the voting response of the non-stimulated Democrats—while seventy per cent of the potential Republicans who received the registration notices voted—an increase of eight per cent over the voting response of the non-stimulated. An even higher differential between the voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated was found among the potential La Follette voters (a differential of forty per cent),

but the size of the sample was so small that definite conclusions cannot be drawn from the figures.

The results of the experiment were then analyzed by citizenship status, country of birth, term of residence in the district, and economic status. It was shown that the mail canvass to get out the vote was just as effective among the foreign-born as among the native-born, and also that there was no great variation in the voting response of the citizens classified by country of birth. However, the native-born colored women and the women born in Italy were slightly more responsive to the notices than some of the other groups studied. The reason for this is the lack of civic organizations among these women, such as the League of Women Voters, which is strong among the native white women. The get-out-the-vote notices brought the highest returns among the new residents of the city, largely because without such notification many of them would have been non-voters. The citizens who had lived in their particular election district for less than ten years had a much poorer voting record than the citizens who had been residents of their local community for ten years or more. The experiment showed that it was possible to bring out a larger proportion of the newer residents by the simple device of notification. Of the citizens who had lived in their districts for less than ten years, fifty-nine per cent of the non-stimulated and seventy-two per cent of the stimulated registered, whereas of those who had lived in their districts for more than ten years, seventy-one per cent of the non-stimulated and seventy-six per cent of the stimulated registered. The voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated by rent paid showed that the better the quarters the citizen lives in, the more apt he is to vote in presidential elections, and that a non-partisan get-out-the-vote mail canvass accentuates this tendency.

From the standpoint of controlling non-voting, the relative voting response of the educated and the uneducated is of considerable interest. The experiment showed that ordinarily more than half of those who cannot read and write English fail to vote. However, the illiterates, when notified regarding the details of the voting process, responded in nearly as large numbers as the literates. In other words, the non-partisan get-out-the-vote canvass had great influence upon the negroes and the foreign-born citizens who could not read English. The citizens who can read English and who are accustomed to receiving mail do not need to be reminded in a personal fashion regarding the mechanics of registration and voting.

The analysis of the voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens classified according to years in school showed that the more schooling the individual had the more likely he was to register and vote. On the other hand, it was also demonstrated that the more schooling the person had received in this country the less likely he was to be affected by a non-partisan get-out-the-vote mail canvass. There was a differential of eleven per cent between the voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens who had received less than eight years of school, and a differential of less than one per cent between the voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens who were college graduates. In other words, the mail canvass counteracted variations in the voting response produced by differences in education. The negroes and the foreign-born whites who had had no schooling were much more influenced by the non-partisan get-out-the-vote canvass than persons who had had some schooling either in this country or abroad.

The voting response of the stimulated and non-stimulated citizens according to the score attained on a simple test regarding American political institutions showed that persons who could answer most of the questions were usually regular voters and did not need to be informed about the voting process. On the other hand, those who could answer few or none of the questions on American government were the non-voters, a surprising number of whom responded to the non-partisan appeals. The significance of this part of the experiment is that persons with some knowledge of politics and government are much more apt to vote of their own accord than those with little or no knowledge of government.

Certain inferences and conclusions seem to be warranted by the examination of the results obtained in the experiment. First, it is possible by the method of random sampling to measure the success of an unofficial non-partisan mail canvass to get out the vote. The same technique might be used to measure the influence of other methods of stimulating interest in elections. Second, a complete notification of all adult citizens regarding the time and place of registration and elections will secure a more complete listing of all persons qualified and anxious to vote than is obtained at present. Such a notification would be a simple matter in a city like Boston where there is an annual police canvass of all adult persons. Third, a complete notification of all the registered voters regarding the conditions and issues to be voted upon would

increase the proportion of registrants that vote in any election. There are several states where such notification is now required by law.

Finally, the experiments showed that knowledge of English, formal schooling, and familiarity with the simplest features of American political institutions are all factors which greatly influence the extent of popular participation in elections. A system of education reaching all adult illiterates would be a great step toward the permanent solution of the problem of non-voting. Too much emphasis cannot be placed upon the value of education as a method of stimulating a sustained interest in voting. The present experiment was largely educational, and the results produced can be traced to the confidence which the information imparted gave to certain persons who had been timid regarding the election process.

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**Invalid Ballots Under the Hare System of Proportional Representation.** One of the most widespread objections to the Hare system of proportional representation is its complexity. A Chinese puzzle seems simpler to the casual observer, and the man in the street is likely to conclude that such a method of voting has no value, because he will not take the time to understand it. Even those who have studied it closely often express doubts as to its feasibility for general elections. On the one hand, it requires the voter to express his choices among the candidates in a totally unfamiliar manner, and on the other, it imposes on the election officers a very special duty of being not only honest but accurate. The complexity of the count is probably the greater difficulty of the two. But with the rapid development of the technique of statistical compilation it seems probable that this will soon present no serious obstacle to the widespread use of the system.

The method of voting contemplated under proportional representation requires that the voters be converted from their traditional habits of expressing preferences by cross marks to the somewhat more exact method of expressing choices by means of numerals. If there is any real danger that the voter will be so confused that he will be unable to give an effective expression of his wishes, it would certainly show itself in a large percentage of invalid ballots. Unfortunately, the records of election statistics are woefully lacking on this point. Until proportional representation has once been adopted, little attention is paid to the number of ballots rejected, and if statistics are kept at all they are rarely