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*A realistic examination
of the electoral process*

Proportional Representation Is a Risk

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In January, February and May, FORUM presented a series of three articles by William Redin Woodward and George H. Hallett, Jr., co-editors of the Proportional Representation Department of *The National Municipal Review*, explaining the fundamental democracy at which proportional representation aims and which it achieves through the Hare system of P.R. The challenge of this highly controversial stand has been taken up by Ferdinand Hermens, author of *Democracy or Anarchy?*

FEW reforms have elicited the sustained support of as many idealists as has proportional representation. (hereafter referred to as P.R.). At the same time, few devices are as apt to defeat the aims of its proponents as is this system of voting.

The principal error which misleads the supporters of P.R. is their failure to examine their basic assumptions. Aply and persuasively they point out that our elections often fail to distribute the seats in a legislative body in proportion to the votes cast for the various competing groups. But, is it the purpose of elections merely to reflect the divisions which may exist in a country at a particular time? When, in the summer of 1919, the Italian Chamber of Deputies debated whether it should adopt P.R., Pro-

fessor Alessio made a speech of warning, proven prophetic in the course of time, in which he said:

"What . . . is the function of P.R.? It is to create . . . an elected assembly in which the forces of the various parties exist in the same proportion in which they exist in the nation.

"But that, gentlemen, is absurd! Parliament is confused with the nation.

"The nation, gentlemen, has continuity of existence, permanency. . . .

"Parliament has a duration of five years. In this short time it must carry out a program, support a government, or replace it. Its action and purpose cannot be realized without a majority."

Signor Alessio was, evidently, aware of what John Locke called

"the variety of opinions, and contrariety of interests which unavoidably happen in all collections of men." He knew that if there is to be a democratic government we must go beyond such "variety" and "contrariety." In fact, do we not invite anarchy if we limit ourselves to an attempt to reproduce in a parliamentary body all differences existing in a country, without making any provision for coordination and unity?

Elections under a majority system do take into account the disrupting factors in which society abounds; they offer a way of overcoming potential disintegration by a unifying force which is set in motion by the voluntary action of the voters themselves. Basically, the solution lies in the simple requirement that candidates, in order to be elected, must obtain more than 50 per cent of the valid vote¹. Proponents of P.R. stop at this figure; they emphasize that 51 per cent may get everything and the 49 per cent nothing. We must go beyond the mathematics, however, and realize the deep sociological implications of the process by which the totals are accumulated. In the first place the process involved is one of

¹ If more than two candidates are in the running, a candidate may win with less than half of the total vote. Election by mere pluralities is, however, by no means incompatible with the requirements of government by consent. The well-known examples of Woodrow Wilson and Fiorello LaGuardia, both of whom were elected to their first terms with about 40 per cent of the vote, demonstrate that such officials will endeavor strongly to govern in such a way as to rally a majority of at least the major party vote when they come up for re-election.

persuasion (except in boss government, now happily in decline). We may properly say that government by majority is government by persuasion. In the United States those to be persuaded include Protestants, Catholics and Jews, people of North, Central and Southern European descent, farmers, workers and businessmen, and besides, voters with a considerable variety of political views. In the doubtful state in particular, which decide victory or defeat in a national election, no party wins which does not succeed in rallying a cross section of all major (and some minor) groups. For this reason the late Thomas Woodlock was right when he said "Democracy is the protection of minorities by the rule of the majority." Our majorities in fact are composed of voters who in their turn belong to various minority groups, and who would leave a majority party, causing it to revert to minority status, if their rights were violated. The party leaders are aware of this fact, and as a result they constantly endeavor to broaden the areas of agreement among their followers, and to narrow down the areas of disagreement.

P.R., on the other hand, makes possible the election of a candidate by mere fractions rather than by a cross section of *all* the people. *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, in a front page editorial, published on June 4, 1939, said: "It is clearly apparent that if there were 20,000 Hindu voters in Cincinnati they could elect a representative of their race to Council just because he is

Hindu, and without reference to other necessary qualifications." To be more practical, the paper added: "Right now it is better than an even money bet that the next city council will contain at least one Bingo member whose election will be brought to pass by Bingo enthusiasts."

Hindus are pacifists, and Bingo enthusiasts hardly constitute a serious threat to social cohesion. Ours is the time, however, of political extremists of the Fascist, Nazi and Communist type. It is interesting to note that in a decisive number of cases these extremists were unable to secure local strongholds which they would have needed in order to make any headway at all under the majority system. Hitler's Nazis, for example, were in the elections of December, 1924, and in those of 1928 everywhere so utterly weak that, under a majority system, they could not have elected a single candidate. It is unlikely that the National Socialist party could have continued to exist after having been defeated year after year. Probably it would have become defunct and Hitler might have resumed his career as a house-painter.

P.R. elected enough Nazis to keep that party alive even in the lean years, and it made possible an easy and rapid growth when the party could exploit the misery of the depression. One hundred and seven Nazis were elected in September, 1930, the election in which the Weimar Republic suffered a blow from which there was to be no recovery. How would they, even then, have fared under a majority

system? If we divide the territory of the Reich into 400 districts of approximately equal size, we find that the Nazi lists did not secure as much as 40 per cent of the total vote cast in a single constituency. What such a result means under the majority system is illustrated by the Progressive movement of 1924. The elder LaFollette obtained 16.2 per cent of the popular vote, in spite of the fact that his ticket could not find a place on the ballot in some states. Hitler secured 18.3 per cent, a very liberal system of P.R. making it possible for him to have his lists appear on the ballots in every precinct in the country. LaFollette secured only the electoral vote of Wisconsin, 2.4 of the total, and his coalition collapsed the day after the votes were counted. Hitler obtained, thanks to P.R., nearly a fifth of the seats in the German Reichstag and was able, in conjunction with the Communists and the Nationalists, both of whom had been favored by P.R. also, to make the normal functioning of parliamentary government impossible.

There are few cases where P.R. is applied as logically, and where its consequences are likely to be as serious, as was the case in the Germany of the Weimar Republic. In Germany the entire country practically formed one large constituency; with a minor modification—adopted to avert the threat of a midwives' party — all local surpluses could be transferred to a national list. Thus a party might secure a substantial number of seats even if it nowhere appealed to more

than a tiny fraction of the electorate. Thus full "electoral justice" was done and the results were as described above. It is interesting to note that Thomas Hare, the inventor of the single transferable vote, proposed making England into one single constituency. He frankly stated that in such a case "minorities . . . (will) far exceed the entire number of minorities now existing, by the operation of numberless affinities and compulsions which, in a state of liberation, will dissolve the present majorities."

Modern advocates of P.R. are less consistent. They keep election districts small and do not permit the transfer of surpluses from one district to the other. In Ireland, for example, 15 constituencies elect only three members each. This means that a third of the total vote is needed to make certain of the election of a candidate. At the same time, whichever party secures more than 50 per cent of the total vote obtains two of the three seats. Under such conditions, the typical results of P.R. may be obscured to such an extent that even the election of a majority party to a parliamentary body becomes possible. Let it be added, however, that so far as Ireland is concerned, there remain a sufficient number of large constituencies to cause fears among competent observers that, if the present arrangement is continued, the country may yet travel the path of political disintegration.

Similar considerations apply to the P.R. elections held in France. The number of seats per constituency was deliberately kept down in

order to freeze out small parties. This was accomplished to a considerable extent. The wasting of votes on the part of some of the minor groups was enormous. Let it be added that the measures taken against small parties did not make the large parties any more able to govern. In the latest P.R. elections, the Communists became the strongest party, a fact which caused them to increase their claims and made cooperation with them more difficult. Besides, the three major parties are separated so thoroughly by the peculiarities which P.R. allowed them to develop—and which contrast sharply with campaign alliances and campaign understandings concluded before the adoption of P.R.—that the coalitions which they form do not coalesce. They are often but a thin disguise for the semi-paralysis which seems to have become a permanent feature. As a result, government authority has been so sadly lacking that the call for the "strong man" reverberates throughout the country.

Many other points could be considered which space limitations prohibit. Let it be remarked in passing, however, that the argument heard so often that political divisions are determined by social divisions to such an extent that systems of voting do not matter, cannot stand comparison with the concrete facts. In Weimar Germany, for example, the only requirement of success was that those members of all social groups who were willing to cooperate on a democratic basis be induced to do so. The majority system would have done this; in no

election, up to and including September, 1930, would a combination of Social Democrats and the Center parties have failed to secure a majority. On the other hand, it is easy to see that P.R., regardless of the social structure, would destroy majorities which the plurality system has allowed to develop. Take the case of the present Labor government in England. In spite of its name, had it not had the strong support of middle-class voters—some of whom voted for the Conservatives in the past and may do so again in the future—it would never have come to power. Even with this support the Labor candidates polled only about 48 per cent of the popular vote. Few observers would deny that, under P.R., they would have secured even less, as many voters would have supported Liberal and other minor party candidates if they had had a chance. In other words, the one stable democratic government of a major country now existing in Europe would have been utterly impossible under P.R. No change in the social structure was needed to bring about such a result.

A few words must suffice, also, on the recent history of P.R. in Germany. When, during the Moscow Conference, Molotov insisted on P.R. for all German elections, he only reflected the anxiety of the Communists in the Western zones, who, without P.R., would suffer almost complete defeat practically everywhere. The American delegation took the strange stand that P.R. should be used for the constituent assemblies, but that the

Germans should be allowed to choose a different system afterwards. By this time it should be clear that once P.R. has been used it creates so many vested interests that its abolition is all but impossible. Professor Karl Löwenstein, in his thoughtful book, *Political Reconstruction*, proposed, for this reason, the opposite procedure:

“It is suggested . . . that for elections to be a national assembly the majority system should be universally applied. If subsequently the assembly decides, in any country, in favor of proportional representation for future elections, it may do so. The British people were able to retain the beneficial two-party system . . . only because they obstinately refused to be lured into the political quagmire of proportional representation.”

The return of P.R. was decided upon in the American zone of Germany without a proper weighing of the issues involved. As soon as informed Germans began to realize what had happened, there arose a vigorous opposition to P.R. A manifesto by a number of leading scholars and writers, published in the Heidelberg monthly, *Die Wandlung*, was followed by nearly 2,000 communications from readers. By March 7, 1947, no fewer than 1901 of these communications had expressed themselves against P.R., and only 73 for it. Similar experiments in Würzburg and Berlin led to similar results. If our aim is to be the democratization of Germany, it is time that our official policy should pay attention to these facts.

In the United States the P.R.

issue presents itself principally in local government, on which the proponents of P.R. concentrated when it became clear that their chances in state and national government were small. The claim, now frequently advanced, that P.R. is necessary for good government, has no basis in fact. Only about a dozen American cities have P.R.; few would claim that they are all well governed, and no one can deny that at least several hundred cities have good government without having P.R. Nor is there any essential relation between the city manager plan and P.R. There are more than 600 manager cities now; only about 2 per cent have P.R., and at least half of the total have good government.

Some of the more significant aspects of P.R. have been brought to light by its use in New York City. The major newspapers, with the exception of *The New York Sun*, were at first willing to give it a trial. *The Daily News* changed its stand in November, 1937, as soon as the count of the first P.R. ballots made it plain that Fusion had failed to secure control of the P.R. council on the same day when Mayor LaGuardia and his city-wide running mates were, under the plurality system, returned with sweeping majorities. Fusion never did capture the council; the accomplishments of the reform administrations were made possible only through elections held under the plurality system. When, in 1941, the first Communist was elected to the council, *The New York Times*

came out against P.R. In 1943, when two Communists and one fellow traveler were elected, the opposition was joined by *The New York Post* and *The World Telegram*. Of the major newspapers, *The Herald Tribune* is now the only one upholding P.R. An editorial published in *The New York Times* of April 2, 1947, commented in these words on the impending attempt to abolish P.R.:

P.R. as a method of choosing a City Council was adopted by the voters of New York 11 years ago in the belief that it would prevent Tammany domination of the Council by creating an accurately representative opposition to such domination. It has not had this result. It has had the result, rather, of exaggerating small-group representation out of all proportion to the real numerical strength of such groups in the community. The system has made possible and encouraged the election of extremists who could not otherwise hope for public office. It has acted as an instrument of disintegration, fragmentizing the electorate by emphasizing areas of disagreement rather than of agreement. There is now under way a movement to repeal the system, through a popular referendum to be held next fall. We wish that movement well.

What *The Times* says is important from the point of view of national as well as of local government. Our cities, to say the least, do not need P.R.; countries using it for national government incur a fatal risk by doing so.

The Power of the Soviet Press

By Sidney B. Fay

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THE Soviet press today constitutes one of the most important aspects of Russian domestic life and of international politics. It is the great propaganda instrument which is conditioning the minds and thinking of 190,000,000 people. It instills into them fear, suspicion and hatred of capitalist governments of the world. It emphasizes the superiority of the Russian Communist system: the Soviet Union represents democratic progress, equality of opportunity and employment for all. The capitalist powers stand for reaction and imperialism which will inevitably cause their collapse through an economic depression and crisis. The two systems are fundamentally opposed to each other, and Communism will surely triumph over Capitalism.

This Marxist-Lenin ideology fosters a psychology which aims to make the people approve and support all the policies of the Soviet regime. It justifies the present aggressive Russian tactics in Eastern Europe. It might also conceivably, in spite of the Russian people's desire for peace, arouse in them a willingness or even a desire for war against the capitalist "enemy." It fosters illusions, like a Frankenstein monster, which even an absolutist or dictatorial government might not be able to control,

This danger is well illustrated in earlier Russian history. In the 1870's the Tsarist regime had tolerated and even encouraged the so-called "Pan-Slav" Press. This took a nationalistic, jingo attitude, quite outdoing jingoism anywhere else in Europe, championing Russia's ambitions in the Balkans. It was finally the decisive factor which swept Russia into war with Turkey on April 24, 1877. The Tsar and his ministers did not want to fight Turkey. They had held to the belief that they could secure their aims by diplomacy. How unexpectedly they were overtaken by the opening of hostilities is indicated by the fact that, on the very day war was declared, none of the usual preparatory measures had been taken for controlling the telegraph service, which up to noon functioned as usual. It was not until the afternoon that the lines were shut off from accepting and sending private messages so that the telegraph system could be used exclusively for the necessary mobilization orders.

In this connection it might be recalled that, after the Balkan Crisis between Germany and Russia, the Kaiser wrote in English to the Tsar on May 8, 1909:

My Dear Nicky: . . . The Press has behaved in the basest way against me. I am accused