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Election Procedures in Multnomah County

City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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REPORT
on
ELECTION PROCEDURES IN
MULTNOMAH COUNTY

TO THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS,
THE CITY CLUB OF PORTLAND:

On the fifth day of January 1953, the Board of Governors of the City Club directed this committee to undertake the following study:

"To study State, County and City election procedures with a view to determining what improvements and economies therein can be suggested.

"This study to include, to the extent which the committee finds feasible and appropriate:

1. The selection and establishment of polling places.
2. The number, selection and compensation of election officials in the several precincts.
3. The distribution of election equipment and materials to the several precincts.
4. Present procedures for counting votes.
5. Should voting machines be given a further trial in this county, and if so, what ballot reforms would be prerequisite?"

SCOPE

After the preliminary organization, the committee agreed that it would deal only with election procedures in Multnomah County as they affect state, county and city elections. It was the committee's opinion that a report which required a study of any changes in present election laws would be far beyond its scope.

In order to provide as wide a background as possible, the committee held meetings or procured information from the following:

- Mr. James W. Gleason, Registrar of Elections, Multnomah County;
Mr. Kenneth E. Rinke, County Chairman, Democratic Central Committee;
Mrs. Frederic W. Young, Vice-Chairman, Republican Central Committee, Multnomah County;
Mr. Philip Englehart, Chairman, Republican Central Committee, Multnomah County;
Mr. Gene Rossman, former member, County Commission and present representative, Automatic Voting Machine Company in Oregon.
Mr. Monroe Sweetland, national committeeman, Democratic National Committee of Oregon;
Mr. J. W. Edwards, Superintendent of Schools, School District No. 1;
Mr. John West, Multnomah County Purchasing Agent.

Material was also obtained from the Superintendent of Elections of King County, Washington, and from the Bureau of Municipal Research, Portland.

FINDINGS

Hauling of Equipment and Selection of Polling Places

Preparing the approximately 800 polling places in Multnomah County for an election is a task of no mean proportions. Because each polling place must have all its equipment in place at the opening of the polls, the drayage and cartage problem is serious and ex-

pensive. For many years, the carting of election materials has been handled by the Post Special Delivery Co. According to a letter from Mr. John West, County Purchasing Agent, the contracts with this company have been on a negotiated-price and emergency-order basis. No call for bids has been made since 1945; and apparently, in the more than eighteen years which Post Special Delivery Co. has been handling this work, bids have been called for only three times. The reason given for this unusual procedure by the County Purchasing Agent and County Commissioners as well as Mr. Gleason, registrar of elections for the county, is that no other bidders are available.

The registrar of elections has advised us that drayage was handled on a contract basis and that the selection of polling places was under his supervision. Investigation by the committee of the reasons why other firms were not interested in the drayage business revealed that the contract combined the drayage service with finding and leasing polling places. Under these conditions a firm doing only a drayage or cartage business was not interested in bidding.

According to a letter from the Public Utilities Commissioner of Oregon, April 14, 1954, the Post Special Delivery Co. is the assumed business name of H. E. Cowgill, who is an assistant to Registrar James W. Gleason, with the title of Superintendent of Elections. Mr. Cowgill has been a county employee for many years. His present salary is \$394 month.

The contract for drayage and locating and leasing of polling places for the May, 1952, primary election obligated the county for \$12,695, and for the November, 1952, general election, \$13,024.50. There was no allocation in the contract or in the bids of an amount for drayage and another for locating and leasing polling places.

According to Mr. Gleason, the county road department delivers the election equipment outside the city limits. Special drayage is hired to take out the election boxes, and a deputy must go with each truck.

The committee was given a rough estimate by one trucking firm in Portland, that on an assumed 800 precinct basis, the drayage and cartage work alone could be done for \$9,000-\$9,500 for each election. On this basis the contract cost of finding and leasing polling places over and above the superintendent of elections' salary would have been \$7,000 to \$8,000 for the two elections in the year 1952.

At a meeting with the county commissioners on April 12, 1954, at which this situation was discussed, members of the committee were informed that the commissioners had just decided to let a contract for drayage only, and have the functions of finding and leasing polling places performed by county employees. According to Commissioner M. James Gleason, it is not expected that any additional employees will be needed. The county commissioners' decision apparently was made after arrangements for the primary election of May 21, 1954, had been concluded, since we were informed that these primaries would be handled on the same basis as previous elections and that a contract had been let to Mr. Cowgill for drayage and finding and leasing polling places.

Selection of Polling Places

The site of a polling place is not fixed by law. In Multnomah County the selection of sites is one of the duties of the registrar and in other counties it is one of the duties of the sheriff. No set rules or regulations prevail. Apparently, in many cases, it is a matter of finding someone who will permit his house to be used.

Rental costs are: churches and private residences, \$17.50; fire stations, no cost; schools within Portland, an average of \$12.50 per school.

There are approximately 800 polling places in Multnomah County. Out of a possible 84 schools in the city of Portland, 40, or slightly less than 50% are used. Thirty-seven schools out of 41 in Multnomah County outside of Portland are used. Mr. J. W. Edwards, Superintendent of the Portland Public Schools, stated to the committee that there would be no difficulty in arranging for greater use of public schools. The breakdown of type of polling sites in Multnomah County is as follows: 467 in private sites, 196 in semi-public and 111 in public, including schools, or approximately 60% private and 40% public or semi-public.

Apparently there is little or no competition among home owners for the privilege of housing polling places.

According to Mr. Gleason, Mr. Englehart and Mrs. Young, there has been little criti-

cism on the part of voters of the facilities provided. However, the committee has some evidence that in many voting places space is inadequate, there is considerable confusion because of small children on the premises and parking facilities are poor.

All witnesses seem to agree it might be desirable to serve more than one precinct at a given polling place. This, however, would require enabling legislation, because the law states, in Section 246.020—O.R.S., "at least 10 days before any election the county court shall designate one polling place IN each precinct."

Election Boards

The selection of election board personnel is under the direct supervision of the registrar who in turn is responsible to the county commissioners. The registrar appoints a supervisor in each precinct. The supervisor recommends ten persons to serve on his board. The average number of election board members for each precinct is five clerks, including two who are judges, and a five-man counting board.

The two judges must belong to different political parties. Members of the board reside in the precinct in which they work. The registrar appoints the board members on recommendation of the supervisor, for a period of two years on the first of January in the even years. There is no regular examination or any procedure for selection of applicants, or any training program for personnel.

Election board members are paid 75c per hour and the supervisor receives one 8-hour day extra per election. The total number of election board members serving in Multnomah County, according to the registrar of elections is approximately 8,000.

Mr. Rinke and Mr. Englehart stated that the election boards function conscientiously but, due to the advanced age of many of the members, the work is often very slow. Both stated that the wage of 75c per hour represented a barrier to procurement of competent help. Mrs. Young added that a major complaint was that frequently the chairman of the election board does not know what his powers are. Mr. Rinke believes that training of election board personnel would be beneficial.

Voting Machines

Since the committee believes that the question of voting machines is of vital concern to the people of Multnomah County, it went to considerable effort to assemble pertinent information on this problem.

Voting machines are in use in 29 states and the Territory of Hawaii. In the November, 1952 election, according to Gene Rossman, more than 24 million voters cast their ballots on machines.

The paper ballot has been discarded by over 6,000 communities in the United States. The bulk of the larger cities and counties within which they are encompassed now vote by machines. The committee finds that present voting procedures in Multnomah County are cumbersome, time-wasting and more expensive than need be.

Passage of H.B. 441 by the Oregon Legislature in 1953 gives each county the option of using voting machines. Two counties have elected to do so.

In Multnomah County machines were tried experimentally in 1923. The county clerk, who at that time was Joseph Beveridge, was in favor of the machines and intended to put the matter up to the people in the form of referendum for a \$350,000 bond issue for their purchase.

However the use of voting machines became a political issue. In the one election where some machines were used, according to the registrar of elections, Beveridge's opponent managed to discredit machines by various tactics which delayed and hampered the voting process. After that experience no county officer has dared, seemingly, to sponsor machine voting.

In 1950 the Multnomah County Board of Commissioner appointed a Citizens Advisory Committee to study the machine question. Although considerable material was collected from many counties and municipalities in the United States, no report was ever made. According to Mr. Gene Rossman, representative of the Automatic Voting Machine Co., the type of machine which could handle the lengthy ballots used in Portland would cost \$1600 (list price). It can tally 520 candidates and up to 40 measures. Machines may be rented or purchased. A rental of \$150 per year can apply on the purchase price

if a county decided to buy, and terms can be arranged for installment purchase. On the basis of one machine per precinct, a total investment of \$1,280,000 would be required for complete machine voting in Multnomah County.

All individuals interviewed by the committee expressed no personal opposition to use of voting machines, and agreed to endorse them if the voters showed an inclination to sponsor the large investment involved.

The major benefits of voting machines are:

(1) Manipulation of the voting process is rendered extremely difficult, thus insuring an honest election.

(2) Counting is swift and accurate—results can be obtained within an hour or two after the polls close. Machines guarantee an accurate count as well as ballot secrecy.

(3) Machines would enable the county to consolidate precincts and generally reduce the staff necessary to handle elections. A minimum of one machine per 400 registered voters is considered adequate and is required by law, but precincts with less than 400 voters would still need one machine. According to the registrar of elections a reduction of possibly 5000 election board personnel could be expected.

(4) Machine voting would considerably reduce the cost of elections and hence in time would offset the large investment in machines.

(5) Assuming that voting machines are stored in the schools, certain educational values would be possible. Superintendent Edwards has stated that their use in school elections would be valuable educational experience.

Saving in costs would come from reduced personnel, reduced cartage and drayage of election equipment (machines could be stored in schools, firehouses and other public buildings used as polling places), consolidation of election precincts, and reduction of printing expenses by reason of the fact that only sample ballots would be required.

A study made by the King County, Washington, superintendent of elections of voting costs in King and Multnomah counties, shows that voting with machines is much more economical than with paper ballots. King County, with 906 precincts, using machines, spent \$221,660 on the 1948 election, whereas Multnomah County with only 512 precincts, spent \$232,015. Election costs were \$453.15 per precinct in Multnomah County and only \$244.65 in King County.

Edward J. Logan, Superintendent of Elections for King County, stated in a letter of August 13, 1950, to the Portland Bureau of Municipal Research:

"The savings in the use of voting machines are tremendous. I believe that the accuracy of the voting machines is a great protection to the voters. In our last election, we had precincts, voting on paper ballots, canvassing the returns as late as 84 hours after the polls had closed. We know that these election officials were sincere and honest in the canvass of the election, but we know that it is impossible for the returns made under such conditions to be accurate.

"Mechanical failure of our machines is practically non-existent, and any trouble which we have experienced on election days is attributed to the lack of experience of our election officials."

A letter from Thomas A. Toomey, Recorder of Voters for the City and County of San Francisco, to County Commissioner Gene Rossman, November 16, 1949, states:

"While it is true that the use of voting machines insofar as California is concerned is a means of saving money for the taxpayer, we do not look on their use as an economy measure only. Our first consideration is the efficiency with which an election can be held. . . .

"The machines are absolutely foolproof; we never have any difficulty or controversy over throwing out ballots, and aside from the savings in this type of operation, the use of voting machines enables us to hold an election with a minimum amount of confusion and trouble."

In questioning the various officials on the possibility of reducing election board members by using voting machines, the committee found general agreement that the number could be substantially cut. If this were done, there would be a possibility of higher pay. This would attract better personnel and make training an easier task.

Opposition to Voting Machines

The stated objections to the introduction of voting machines in Multnomah County may be generally summarized as follows:

(1) Reduction in number of election board officials, estimated at about 5,000, would deprive these people of customary income. It has been stated that this would incline them to vote against the machines or candidates sponsoring machines.

(2) Operation of the machines might confuse voters, particularly at first.

(3) According to some county officials, machines might not speed up voting; in fact, might even slow it up. This conclusion, however, does not agree with evidence contained in material gathered by the Citizens Advisory Committee of Multnomah County in 1950.

(4) Consolidation of precincts would be difficult.

(5) Investment in machines is high. Machine voting would have to be sold to the people.

(6) Supplemental ballots might still be needed for some initiative and referendum measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) The committee is of the opinion that the manner in which the county commissioners have let the contract for drayage of election equipment to Post Special Delivery Company is not in the county's best interests. The committee believes that it is indefensible for a person to hold a dual relationship with any governmental body, namely: as an employee and contractor, especially when the functions for which he receives a regular salary are so closely related to that of the contract. The committee therefore recommends that this practice be discontinued.

(2) The Registrar of elections should assume, immediately, direct responsibility for the selection of polling places and carry out an aggressive program for the purpose of greater use of public buildings, such as schools, both private and public, fire stations, libraries and churches, and less use of private residences and private garages.

(3) A training program mandatory for all election board personnel should be instituted immediately.

(4) On the basis of your committee's study, it appears that although exact savings possible from machine voting have not been ascertained, the matter has such apparent merit that it warrants a thorough analysis. The county commissioners should appoint a new Citizens Advisory Committee to study machine voting. The excellent material accumulated by the 1950 committee can be the ground work for a thorough investigation of the problem. It is the opinion of this committee that a county committee having official standing would have more authority to make a thorough report and its conclusions would be more generally acceptable and carry more weight with the public. As a part of such a study, consideration might well be given to the necessity and desirability of legislation that could permit the consolidation of voting locations to accommodate the voters of more than one precinct.

(5) To facilitate the work of this committee, the commissioners should secure, immediately, several voting machines to be used experimentally in Multnomah County Elections.

Respectfully submitted,

VAN S. CAMP

JAMES CAUGHLAN

TITUS A. FRAZEE

ANTHONY NETBOY

SEYMOUR L. COBLENS, *Chairman.*