

SUFFRAGE AND THE "I. Q."

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THE progressive and illuminating article by Professor Edward L. Thorndike in *Harper's Magazine* for January, 1920, in which the "I. Q." (intelligence quotient) figures prominently, brings to a head a problem which has been before our country from its beginning and is to-day one of the most debated in popular interest. What shall be the standard of suffrage in our democracy?

According to the practical common sense of the people the question has been answered already. Their answer is that in our democracy only those shall have suffrage who are fit to share the government. In order to determine fitness an age limit of twenty-one years has been fixed. For the same reason the line of sex has been drawn. In nine of the States an educational test has been established. In the States generally, criminals are disfranchised, and idiots and aliens are excluded; while some shut out Indians and men in the army and navy of the United States. In a rough way the principle has been adopted, by the common sense of the people of the several States, that no one shall vote who is not fit to pass upon the public questions involved in our elections and to judge the qualifications of candidates. Doubtless most people will admit that this test of suffrage is reasonable. It would seem to be an axiom that no one shall have a share in the government unless he or she is fit.

But it is within common knowledge that our tests of fitness are very crude. Modern researches make our hard-and-fast test of twenty-one years of age quite unsatisfactory, almost to the point of absurdity. It is only because it works well on the whole, and is founded upon necessity, that it is not challenged. Modern investigation has proved that there are many thousands, perhaps millions, of men of twenty-one years and over who are children in intellect. Some of these mature more or less; others remain children

as long as they live. We admit to suffrage a large number of children in intellect, solely because they are over twenty-one years of age in body. On the other hand, we exclude from the suffrage many persons who are over twenty-one years in intellect simply because their bodies are not twenty-one years of age, regardless of the service which they might render to the public by their intelligence in political matters.

Again, judged by the standard of fitness, it is evident that sex ought not to be a test, one way or the other. Personal fitness to share the government is the real test according to the popular judgment, not whether the voter is man or woman. Sex has been taken as a convenient test for apparently the same reason that twenty-one years has been taken, — that it is a rough and convenient way of determining the question of fitness. It has been assumed that the feminine nature and feminine occupations are such as to make it probable, on the whole, that the aggregate of women's votes would not tend to promote the public welfare. If all women were of the intellectual, moral, and administrative caliber of some women, there seems to be no doubt that sex would never have been made a suffrage test. On the other hand, if all women were of the manifest unfit quality of many who occur to the minds of the anti-suffragists, it is equally beyond doubt that woman suffrage would always remain a preposterous proposition. The whole woman-suffrage question has resolved itself into a question of relative proportions of the desirables and the undesirables, for we all recognize the standard of personal fitness and that there can be no abstract personal right to vote, for that would upset the age limit and our other tests.

Demonstration of the child mind in adult bodies, which is a comparatively new truth for the general public, only strengthens the common belief that many unfit persons share the suffrage. Their influence is felt in the election of representatives in state and national legislatures. Thus they have their full numerical part in the decision of hotly contested elections, perhaps more, considering the dispo-

sition of many of our educated people to shirk their political duties, while it is those less favored who are more likely to exercise their full suffrage rights. These children in mind, though adult in body, may turn the scale from the side of wisdom and justice by their immature judgments. They are liable, at any time, to be a hindrance upon our due political development. In consequence of their misjudgments our foreign policies may be distorted, and thus they may add to the backwardness of world progress. They are sure to be a constant element of weakness and danger. Over and over again have national and state crises been shaped by a single vote, and we know now better than ever before that we have in our body politic as legal voters many men who have only a child's mind.

It is a reasonable proposition that a considerable portion of the foolish clamor on the part of the electorate in times of great popular excitement comes from this child element among our voters. It seems to be a reasonable prediction that woman suffrage will at least double the number of child voters, and that it will as much more than double the peril from this class as the woman nature is more emotional and demonstrative than man's. How many Emma Goldmans we shall see in the future is only a guess, but we must expect to see many. Any observer who has weathered many woman-suffrage demonstrations, with their violent words and actions on the part of speakers and followers, will realize that when the woman child-voter is added to the man child-voter, and their inflammable, immature, and ignorant minds take up public problems of critical importance, the general welfare will be exposed to a new and permanent peril.

Professor Thorndike's presentation of the remarkable progress of the science of reaching the intelligence quotient suggests whether it may not well be applied as a test of fitness for suffrage. It would seem to be superior to age, sex, or educational test. For suffrage the sole standard is fitness to share the government. It makes no difference what a person's age or sex or education or other qualifica-

tion is, provided that the voter has sound sense about candidates and public policy, and has the public spirit and the courage to put his intelligence into action, unbribed by his own selfishness or ambition and uninfluenced by the domination of any unworthy outside force.

It may not be easily practicable to formulate a test for the voter's judgment regarding candidates; moreover, candidates change at every election, more or less. But it would seem to be easily practicable to formulate a test for a voter's judgment upon popular policies. It must be supposed that all tests would be simple and not of a nature to trip up the subjects. Men and women might well be required to have some elementary knowledge of our history and political institutions, some grasp of the principles upon which our government is based, some ideas by which to determine their attitude toward questions which are sure to arise for expression of popular judgment and purpose. Tests better than any now in use would seem to be within the range of easy possibility.

So much progress has been made in improving questions for civil-service examinations that it seems to amount to a demonstration that practical suffrage tests can be framed by political and psychological experts which shall do full justice to every applicant for registration while protecting the public from the dangers which inhere in the tests now in common use. In most of our States the tests are age, sex, place of birth, length of residence, mental condition above idiocy, and absence of criminal record to a certain extent. For the first three of these tests the voter has no initiative whatever, no responsibility or control. For the other tests, it is easy to establish a qualification and, when established, it has only a slight bearing upon the real fitness of the voter to have a decisive vote on governmental policy compared with the better tests which may well be applied. Taking into joint account the progress in making mental tests which is revealed in Professor Thorndike's article and the methods now practiced by civil-service examiners, it is evident that these two forces, in coöperation,

have it in their power to produce practical tests for suffrage which will promote the public welfare more effectively than any or all of the tests which can be found in all of our forty-eight States.

It is admitted that there will be strenuous opposition by many people to the application of any test which they probably cannot pass, or which they fear they cannot pass, or which they oppose from sheer inertia, resting in the security of present enfranchisement. But such opposition can have no reasonable standing, either in right or expediency. In the first place, fitness is already the standard in states and nation. Only the method of determining fitness is under consideration. It is upon the proponents of change to prove their point, and the facts and reasons previously given are held to satisfy the reasonable burden of proof. In the second place, public policy has overthrown previous opposition of the same class all along the line in respect to qualification for professions and occupations which have to do with public welfare. The legal tests to secure fit lawyers and doctors for the public have been enlarged to include druggists, dentists, veterinarians, school teachers, embalmers, nurses, opticians, and what not else, with the tendency still running strongly in that direction. It is absurd to say, in view of this settled and successfully practiced public policy, that while the public must be protected in all these lines from the unfit who would exploit them, yet there must be no test to prevent the ignorant voter from exploiting the entire body politic.

It is admitted that the ballot is the poor man's protection against exploitation by powerful interests. Full weight is to be given to this consideration, and the public welfare is a broad topic with many sides. Due weight is to be given to the expression of the judgment of the mass of the people and to the manifestation of national purposes and traits. But it is also true that the ballot in the hands of ignorant voters may be a means of intolerable tyranny by selfish and powerful class interests over the helpless minority, whether rich or poor. Ignorant despot-

ism may be as destructive of national prosperity as the power of cunning manipulators at the other end of the intellectual scale. It may also be, in reality, as destructive for the despots as for their victims, and all may go down in ruin together. When great majorities support foolish policies, as in the greenback delusion following the Civil War, what may not be the public calamity when the balance of power is held by persons who are children in mind, though they pass every suffrage test now applied? All due protection of personal and class rights must be secured in order to realize the full operation of our political principles. But the general welfare is supreme over any person or class. In essence, the whole issue raised here is the possibility of better tests than we now have, in order to attain the purpose upon which we are all agreed, — that nobody shall vote who is not fit to share the government. In view of the nation-wide, and even world-wide, bearing of this question, it has legitimate claim upon the entire public.