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Perspective

Is This Democracy?

by Raymond Moley

IN 1958, after Roman Catholic bishops of Ohio had expressed public opposition to a right-to-work proposal in the campaign there, I wrote a piece in this space suggesting that ministers of the Gospel should stay out of politics except when specific issues of faith and morals are involved. I then received a great many letters disagreeing with me. Most were from Protestant ministers. This left me with only the sad satisfaction that at any rate my small effort had helped to unite the Christian churches on at least this one subject.

Never have so many letters come in about an article until now. This time they are all in response to what I wrote in this space three weeks ago about the millions who were prevented from voting because of residence requirements. In this instance all the letters were in accord.

Some letters were from people who were themselves the victims of absurd and outworn residence requirements. Others dealt with the difficulty of getting and casting absentee ballots. Some were from state and local officials suggesting reforms. And since I had invited legal opinions about Federal legislation dealing with the subject, several were from lawyers. I hope that this present article will bring many more.

NOBLY CONCEIVED MESS

The denial of the right to vote is a subject which governors should deal with in their annual messages and which legislators should consider in the new year. There can be only one conclusion from the abundant evidence on hand. Democracy is a nobly conceived experiment. But in its operation in the United States it is a mess. While there are millions of people who are too careless and apathetic and selfish to care about voting, there are millions of others who want to vote and cannot.

It now appears not only that many have been disfranchised because of clumsy laws and customs, but that an indeterminate number who legitimately voted were not counted in the final returns—enough, perhaps, to have reversed the final choice of a President. No doubt, thousands of other "votes" were counted which

were not cast by anyone except corrupt election officials.

This compounds the indictment against our electoral system. With all the public money that is spent in law enforcement, we are still apparently unable to guarantee a completely accurate and honest election for the Presidency of the United States. This casts a shadow upon the competence and integrity of the nation.

BACK TO TWEED

It is all well to say, as did one sanctimonious newspaper, that "there are frauds in every election." But when the evidence already revealed in Cook County, Ill., shows conditions which take us back 90 years to the wholesale corruption of Tammany's Tweed Ring, complacency is not becoming in any American.

In Texas, The Houston Chronicle conducted a spot check of eleven counties and found that the Texas law had not been complied with to account for paper ballots which were thrown out for alleged improper marking. Since the ballots regarded as invalid were not properly kept for canvassing by higher authorities, no one will ever know how many voted for whom and whether valid voters were counted. There were many thousands of discrepancies, perhaps 150,000, between the numbers of votes cast and the numbers credited to the candidates in the returns. There may have been enough to have changed the result in the state.

A first responsibility rests upon the states. They should modernize their election laws and, so far as possible, make them uniform over the nation. Action toward that end could come from governors' conferences and the associations of state secretaries of state and attorneys general.

The responsibility of Congress is to take steps to provide Federal inspection of elections of Presidents, senators, and members of the House. There have been laws and proposals to protect the voting rights of Negroes and to control the activities of corporations and labor organizations. There seems to be no reason why Federal power with new legislation should not protect the accuracy and honesty of voting generally.