

American Teachers and American Politics

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Facts concerning the political literacy of educators and the degree of their participation in politics are set forth in this timely article. Practical suggestions are also given for remedying lacks in these areas.

THE UNITED STATES this year is going through its every-four-years' jamboree known as a national election. A new president and vice-president, 35 members of the Senate, all 435 members of the House of Representatives, and numerous governors and other state officers will be elected. As the campaign develops, millions of Americans will become more excited, more vociferous, more heated.

This excitement and heat will be reflected in our schools. Fist fights over the relative merits of Eisenhower and Stevenson will occur on many a school ground. Straw-vote elections will take place in many a high school and college assembly. Strangely enough, however, both in the country in general, and in our educational institutions there will be a high amount of ignorance, apathy and inertia. A considerable number of citizens, teachers included, will not go to the polls. Many who do go will have little knowledge of the issues and candidates involved. Only a small proportion of people, and an even smaller proportion of teachers will participate in other types of political action.

In this paper the writer would like to set forth a few facts about the political knowledge and activities of the American people; state some assumptions and propositions concerning the political literacy and degree of political participation by American teachers; submit a "blueprint" for greater political activity on the part of teachers; suggest some steps that might be taken toward this end; and list a few of the problems and dangers that stand in the way. In the space available, one can do no more than "hit the high spots" in such an ambitious undertaking.

Some Facts of American Political Life

• Recent polls by the American Institute of Public Opinion have indicated that:

(a) 16% of our college graduates, 34% of our high school graduates and 58% of our elementary school graduates do not know how many United States senators there are from each state (January 18, 1952).

(b) 40% of the American people have no idea as to the identity of their senators. Only one-third of those quizzed in the same poll (who had had a college education!) knew

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the length of the term of office for a member of the House of Representatives.¹

(c) 45% of the American people don't know what a lobbyist is, and an additional 18% who think they do, are unable to recall the name of one single group or organization hiring lobbyists.²

• In the presidential election of 1880, 87% of the electorate voted, while 7% only of the potential secondary school population was enrolled in school. In contrast, in the Truman-Dewey election of 1948, only 51% of the electorate exercised their franchise, while 74% of the secondary school population was in school.³

• Contrasting the voting habits of our people with those in certain European nations, we find the following percentage of citizens who voted:⁴

In Belgium, freed from wartime Nazi totalitarianism	90
In the Italian election which rebuffed communism	89
In the British election which returned Churchill to power	82
In France, after nearly 4 years of Nazi rule	75
In Japan, with its new "made-in-America" democracy	70
In the United States in the presidential election of 1948	51

¹ *National Municipal Review*, 36:26 (January 1947).

² *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13:3 (Fall 1949), p. 552.

³ Kermit A. Cook, "Voting Responsibility and the Public Schools," *Social Education*, Vol. XV, No. 6 (October 1951), p. 280.

⁴ Abstracted from an editorial in *The Saturday Evening Post* of January 12, 1952, and inserted in *The Congressional Record*, Vol. 98, No. 587 (January 29, 1952), by Senator Knowland of California.

• A national study of general political activities of American citizens (including belonging to political organizations, writing to congressmen, attending political meetings, contributing to political parties, etc.) indicated that 38% of our people are "very inactive," 35% "fairly inactive," with only 27% characterized as "very active" or even "fairly active."⁵

• A recent study of American college and university graduates showed that only 17% had contributed money to any political cause or organization during the previous year, only 3% had attempted to raise money for such a purpose, and only 6% had ever run for any public office.⁶

• A study of American parents by a Gallup poll dated January 24, 1945 indicated that only one-fifth would want to see a son go into politics as a career.⁷ If a poll of 500 superior high school seniors in New York state conducted a few years later was any criterion, parents need have no worries—less than 1% showed any interest in politics as a possible life work.⁸

Political Literacy of and Degree of Political Participation by American Teachers

There is little data regarding the extent to which teachers as a group rate

⁵ Julian L. Woodward and Elmo Roper, "Political Activity of American Citizens," *The American Political Science Review*, XLIV: 4 (December 1950), p. 872-885.

⁶ Ernest Haverman and Patricia Salter West, *They Went to College* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 125.

⁷ Thomas H. Reed and Doris D. Reed, *Preparing College Men and Women for Politics*, (New York: The Citizenship Clearing House, 1952), p. 108-109.

⁸ Michael O. Sawyer and Roy A. Price, "What Young Folks Think About Politics," *Social Education*, 14:71-72 (February 1950).

in political intelligence and the degree to which they actively participate in politics. One study—in Detroit—indicates that while teachers in that city vote with greater regularity than do voters in general, an average of approximately 40% had not voted in the ten elections there between November 1943 and February 1947.⁹ Generalizations in this area, therefore, must necessarily be broached with caution. It is the writer's personal belief that while teachers probably do vote more regularly than the populace in general, there is a high degree of ignorance among them about political matters, and that they participate even less in other phases of political activity than do most business and professional persons. If this assumption is valid, what are the reasons?

Whatever may be the amount of political ignorance among school teachers, the causes for it would probably be found in some combination of the following factors:

- *The reflection to a certain extent of the political ignorance among the American people in general.* The writer never teaches a summer school or extension class without being repeatedly amazed at the extent of this political ignorance. In a student poll recently conducted by a large university, 29% stated that "sending letters and telegrams to congressmen has little influence on legislation"; 10% of the faculty concurred.¹⁰

⁹ Miller R. Collings and Stanley E. Dimond, "Do Social Studies Teachers Vote?" *Social Education*, 14:267-269 (October 1950).

¹⁰ N. M. Downie, C. R. Pace, and M. E. Troyer, "The Opinions of Syracuse University Students on Some Widely-Discussed Current Issues," *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 10:3 (Autumn 1950), p. 628-636.

- *Inadequate citizenship education, especially on the secondary and college levels.* A recent comprehensive survey concluded that few American institutions of higher learning were doing an adequate job in this field.¹¹ Another indicated that a high proportion of all American colleges and universities do not permit the use of their facilities for political speeches, do not sponsor or permit to be sponsored political activities on the campus; many do not even permit students to organize into political clubs.¹² The theory that "we learn by doing" is a popular one in American education, but there is comparatively little opportunity for our college students to "learn by doing" when it comes to the practical workings of the American political system.

- *The narrow, specialized training in Ph.D. programs, and the excessive emphasis on "Education" courses in the training of teachers.* The concentrated Ph.D. program really has shown in the past excessive emphasis upon "learning more and more about less and less," while the writer personally believes that all too many teachers colleges and schools of Education have over-emphasized methods courses to the detriment of a broad social and cultural background. There is some evidence that in both of these areas, forward-looking leaders are reorganizing their programs to give greater emphasis to broader education for citizenship. The program for the Ph.D. in Social Science at Syracuse University, and the new social

¹¹ Reed and Reed, *op. cit.*

¹² Robert F. Ray in cooperation with Richard H. Plock, *Partisan Politics on the Campus*, (Iowa City: Institute of Public Affairs, State University of Iowa, 1950).

studies plan in the School of Education at New York University are examples of each, which especially appeal to the writer.

- *A minimum of emphasis upon political science materials in summer sessions, "workshops," institutes, extension courses, etc., where teachers do most of their "refresher" work.*

While these four factors would appear to be important in understanding political illiteracy among teachers, additional reasons must be advanced for the light participation by educators in practical politics. The following should certainly be included in such a list:

- *The press of other activities, professional and otherwise, which consume the time of the teacher.* The never-ceasing demand for teachers to participate in every possible kind of community activity from church work to Boy Scouts, the excessive number of committee assignments, faculty and department meetings, PTA sponsorship, etc., which all too many administrators insist upon, extra counseling and advising, all leave little time for leisure, to say nothing of time for active political work, even if the teacher so desired.
- *An ever-present fear that political activities will bring retribution in one form or another from principal, superintendent, school board, or pressure groups in the community.* That this fear is generally grossly exaggerated and is frequently a pretext or rationalization for political inactivity does not reduce its importance. Cook's study several years ago showed that 356 schoolboard members in three Midwestern states gave a net reaction score of minus 55 when queried as to their opinions about teachers making politi-

cal speeches, and minus 56 when asked about teachers running for political office. Only "drinking alcoholic beverages" and "dating a student" ranked lower on the list of unapproved teacher behavior! Interestingly enough, teachers themselves strongly disapproved of political activity, although not to the same degree as did the board members.¹³

The writer has known personally several instances in which both elementary and secondary school teachers took a most active part in partisan politics; he has yet to find one case where a teacher was fired for so doing.¹⁴

- *Legal barriers.* In some states political activity on the part of public school teachers is limited by statute.

- *Opposition of local political leaders.* In some communities, the "old pros" in the political parties discourage the infiltration of amateurs, teachers and students included.¹⁵ The organization welcomes their votes and certain types of routine work—nothing more. However, this factor is probably less important than the others here mentioned.

A Suggested "Blueprint" for Political Activity

It is not being advocated here that all school teachers go out and run for

¹³ Lloyd Allen Cook and Elaine Forsyth Cook, *A Sociological Approach to Education*, (McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1950), p. 447.

¹⁴ The Reeds came to exactly the same conclusion in regard to the training of students for political participation. After questioning, among others, civic leaders and college administrators, they found that "even where the professor in charge of the course was an active partisan, there was in no single instance an unfavorable reaction." Reed and Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109-110.

public office. The writer can imagine nothing more ludicrous than the House of Representatives, for example, being filled with nothing but pedagogues! It is suggested, however, that American political life today and tomorrow would be greatly strengthened if the following steps could be taken:

- A marked improvement of the political literacy of teachers.¹⁶

- A definite increase in the number of teachers registering and actually voting in local, state and national elections.

- Increased additional political activity on the part of teachers, in some of the following ways: (a) In group activities: In political party work; through teachers organizations, good government leagues, etc.; in the legitimate political activities of the community organizations to which the teacher may belong.

- (b) As an individual citizen: By contributing of time or money or both to a particular party or candidate; by speaking, writing, raising funds or in other ways working personally for the party or candidate of one's choice; by active membership in a political party, club or committee; by writing to one's elected representatives and informing them of his position on political issues.

- Increased educational activity in the realm of political citizenship, especially on the secondary and college levels, by such activities as: (a) Encouraging the formation of student political clubs; (b) helping to organize faculty political clubs and discussion groups; (c) staging of "mock conventions" and similar programs; (d) bringing to the school for speeches and meetings, where possible, political candidates and elected officials; (e) encouraging students to participate in outside political work.
- A marked increase in the number of teachers running for political office.

Some Suggested Steps

Realizing full well the obstacles that stand in the way, the writer would still like to suggest four major steps which seem to be indicated as a minimum program toward achieving greater political literacy and more participation on the part of American teachers.

- *More emphasis, including actual student participation, on political processes and problems on all educational levels.* The Reed study makes several concrete suggestions in this connection, as well as summarizing some of the more outstanding college and university programs now in existence. Without attempting to list more than a few of the best, the following should be mentioned: University of Toledo, University of Minnesota, Iowa Wesleyan, University of Kansas, University of Wichita, Wesleyan, Colgate, Williams, and Syracuse. The recent trend toward "General Education" in American colleges also holds great possibilities for broadening the scope of political literacy. Unfortunately, to date there is little evidence that in any but a few

¹⁶ The best statement summarizing the objectives in this regard, in the writer's opinion, is found in Marguerite J. Fisher and Edith E. Starratt's *Parties and Politics in the Local Community*, rev. ed., Bulletin No. 20, The National Council for the Social Studies. (Washington, D. C., 1951). An excellent abstract is that by Merrill F. Hartshorn, "Local Parties and Politics," *NEA Journal*, March 1951, p. 212. (How many teachers can answer in the affirmative such questions as, "Do you know the political organization of your community? Do you understand the language of politics? Do you know how political parties carry on their work? Do you understand the political processes of nomination and election?")

institutions this possibility is being capitalized on.

• *A concerted drive to convince administrators in teacher-education programs of the need for more emphasis on this broader aspect of "education for citizenship."* This would necessitate a reduction in many teachers colleges of the amount of work in formal education methods courses, but in the writer's opinion such an adjustment would richly reward those administrators taking the step. Lessening of emphasis on Education courses in summer schools, extension classes, etc., and a corresponding increase in classes in Political Science, Economics and other Social Science fields are also indicated.

• *Special in-service programs in this area for working teachers, including summer session workshops, week-end conferences, and short courses.* In this connection, the Reeds suggest that there should be "An emergency training program especially for young teachers through which they will be brought into close contact with the politics and politicians of their region."¹⁷

• *An all-out campaign to strengthen those forces and groups which bolster the security and prestige of the teaching profession, and a renewed drive against as many as possible of those forces which increase and intensify fear among teachers, and which in effect make second-class citizens out of many of them—whose slogan becomes, "I'm not going to stick my neck out." (Would that we could increase 1000% the number of teachers—and administrators—whose motto would be, "You bet I'll stick my neck out—whenever*

and wherever a matter of basic principle is involved.")

Some of the suggested steps here would be: (a) Strengthening of teacher tenure laws in those states where such laws are now inadequate; (b) continued efforts to obtain higher salary standards; (c) continued strengthening of teachers organizations and associations, and increased cooperation with other public associations with similar interests and goals; (d) more active "lobbying" by teachers organizations; (e) persistent attempts to amend or abolish laws or ordinances which limit legitimate political activities of teachers; (f) individual and group teacher activity in every community to enlist the support of local organizations in furthering educational advancement and legitimate political activities, and in fighting the Zolls and their allies; (g) minimizing as much as possible the divisive trends within the educational profession itself, where such friction as fights between "progressives" and "essentialists" can weaken the status of the entire teaching personnel of the nation.

Some Problems and Some Dangers

The writer is not so naive as to believe that it will be possible to accomplish overnight the minimum program above suggested. The pressures barring the way are powerful ones, and not easily surmounted. The following questions are indicative of only a few of the problems and dangers that we must face if we are to make a realistic approach to this task of helping our teachers to become better citizens through more intelligent political action:

¹⁷ Reed and Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

- How does one convince teachers that the idea that "politics are dirty" is a lopsided concept, and frequently a rationalization indulged in as an excuse for inactivity?
- How can the individual teacher be shown more effectively the direct importance to himself of our whole political process?
- How can we impart more "guts" to educators—teachers and administrators alike?
- How can educational administrators be persuaded that all of the high-sounding talk about "education for citizenship" means little until there is far greater opportunity than now exists for political "learning by doing" on the part of both teachers and students?
- How does one persuade antiquated educators to change obsolescent requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy?
- How does one persuade leaders in teacher-education programs to reduce materially the proportion of work in formal "Education" courses, and increase the emphasis on broader aspects, including education for intelligent political action?
- How can we persuade an increasing number of able teachers to "stick their necks out," make political speeches, campaign for the men and party of their choice, run for public office, and in general play the part in our two-party political system that should be

the God-given right of every free American citizen?

- How can one help community leaders, business and professional men, legislators and others to develop a greater degree of fairness and decency in their dealings with the school and with teachers?
- How can the American people be shown that more individuals of superior ability can be induced to take up a life career in teaching only by raising salary standards, insuring greater freedom of personal behavior, giving to teachers higher social status, and, in general, breaking down everywhere those barriers which have turned many an able man and woman away from a teaching career in sheer disgust?
- How can it be driven home to all of us in America that "loyalty" and "conformity" are by no means synonymous terms, and that teachers' oaths accomplish less than nothing in the building of a patriotic, loyal citizenry?

The answers to these questions and many similar ones, are not easy. In some cases, probably they will not be found until the remote future. However, if all of our high-sounding phrases about "the democratic way of life," "education for citizenship," "bringing greater equality of opportunity to all of our citizens," etc., etc., are to be more than meaningless shibboleths, those of us in education must continue our search for answers.



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