

WHAT THE WOMEN OF CALIFORNIA HAVE DONE WITH THE BALLOT.

Mary Roberts Coolidge, Ph.,D.

When the women of California won the right to vote in 1911, many and curious predictions were made of its results. The great body of home-keeping women would refuse to register and vote, said some; or they would vote as their menfolk did merely doubling the representation, or vote against them and disrupt the family, said others. They would put up unfit women for office and support them with a "solid woman vote;" they would be the prey of politicians and in their ignorance lose the respect of men; they could or would not take the trouble to comprehend taxation, public utilities and great industrial issues; or they would demand foolish moral measures evolved from their emotional natures.

But 1911 is a long time ago in California where politics move fast; and the proof of suffrage, as of many idealistic things, is in what has been done with it. What the politician thinks of it is best expressed by the resolution adopted by the Legislature of 1915:

"That the experience of this state amply justifies the adoption of woman suffrage in 1911 *** that so successful has been the operation of woman suffrage that it is generally conceded that were the question to be again voted upon by the people of this state, it would be re-endorsed by an overwhelming majority *** and that *** woman suffrage *** is one of the important factors contributing to the marked social, political and industrial advancement made by our people in recent years and that any disparagement of the cause of woman suffrage attempted elsewhere *** has no basis in fact and is signally disproved by the acknowledged intelligence and discrimination shown by women voters in the settling of our great political problems at the polls."

The State Federation of Women's Clubs, long pledged to avoid religious and political discussion and representing culture and in some degree conservatism, in 1915 unanimously adopted a similar resolution endorsing the "beneficent results of suffrage." And even the San Francisco Chronicle, the chief morning paper of San Francisco, the organ of the regular Republican Party, and heretofore consistently opposed to woman suffrage, now comes forward with this cordial comment on the behavior of women in the National Election of 1916:

"To us the political woman is no novelty, and we judge her, as she wishes to be judged, upon her merits and regardless of sex. We have tried the wider suffrage and found that it is no passing craze, no whim of fashion. Our women have registered in large numbers, taken the keenest interest in public questions and gone to the polls. They have developed the political sense with remarkable rapidity, and the closest observer has been unable to detect any ill effects either in domestic, social or public life."

The details of what California women have done with the ballot in the last four years are interesting not only because the direful predictions of the conservatives have failed to come to pass; but still more so because of dramatic results which not even the suffragists anticipated. Women were fortunate in coming to power on a rising and progressive tide in politics which have been favorable to the humanitarian and moral issues vital to them, and which has encouraged them to keep clear of mere party traditions. Unquestionably the reform of political methods and the great popular awakening which has swept the Pacific Coast in recent years, has been substantially strengthened by the women voters; but the most important thing that they have done is to raise the level of suffrage itself. And they are doing it in a very natural, dignified and effective way.

Elections were pending when women received the suffrage in 1911 and with perfect and practical logic, classes were established by women in nearly every town and city for the instruction of female citizens. Whereas before this time there had been no civic leagues there now sprang up within a year thirty such groups which first concentrated themselves on civic education and then went on to whatever local reforms their neighborhood required. At present the condition of most towns may be inferred from what the Women's Improvement Club is or is not doing.

With astonishing spontaneity the Women's City Club of Los Angeles, the Women's Civic Center of San Francisco, and various Women's Councils in Sacramento, Stockton and other large towns, were organized for self-education in municipal affairs and to bring an intelligent public opinion to bear on local government. What they have contributed may be illustrated by the work of the Women's Civic Center of San Jose, a town of 40,000 inhabitants which has been misruled for a generation. After an investigation of official methods these fifty women were convinced that local misgovernment was chiefly due to the fact that responsibility could not be fixed on any official; and that the first remedy to be applied was a change in the type of charter.

After a compromise had been voted down by the people, the women of the Civic League proposed to unite all reforming factions in a single movement for a modern Charter. Under their urgency a Citizen's Charter Committee of men and women representing seventeen organizations was formed who accepted their plan to employ an expert from the University of California to write a new charter. They raised \$1,000 by a house-to-house, dollar and education campaign; they trained women speakers in charter study classes, supplementing the political experience of men with their tact, practical sense and civic devotion. After two elections and a referendum a City Manager type of charter was adopted - in spite of the opposition of the entrenched political ring - and is now in successful operation. Thus have fifty women, led by a middle-aged housewife of no political experience and no unusual education, furnished the initiative, the idealism and the persistence for a reform of which men had despaired.

The effect of the use of the ballot in quickening the minds of women of leisure to more serious issues is shown in the expanding civic section of the Federated Clubs. The Friday Morning Club of Los Angeles, a very large and long established club of social distinction, formerly devoted to personal culture and social pleasure has now an influential civic section - a good-sized club within the club - which takes an active part in municipal affairs and in State legislation for the benefit of women and children.

During the past four years California women have been quietly studying the political issues on which they have to vote; and this is no light task for, under the more democratic forms of government in the West, the initiative and the referendum bring before the people a large number of measures for direct vote. At one election as many as forty-nine proposals were submitted and the spectacle of thousands of women meeting to hear lawyers, professors and politicians expound the affirmative and negative of each of these questions was amazing as it was encouraging for the future of democracy. The discrimination of women, no less than of men, as shown by the results, proved that suffrage has definitely raised the level of citizenship through the earnest efforts of conscientious women to be themselves good citizens.

The greatest single contribution of women to better citizenship is probably the non-partisan Forum for the discussion of public questions and the hearing of candidates for political office. In former times democratic candidates were talking to democratic mass meetings and republicans to republicans - though both parties were always striving to reach the uncommitted voters. But now, preceding every election, there are always definite centers provided by the women to which all candidates for office are invited. No more amusing or instructive gathering can be imagined than these assemblies of women sitting in judgment while relays of prospective office-holders pass across the stage, explaining each in turn and regardless of his party affiliation, why they should vote for him. A Congressional candidate said recently that two-thirds of the audiences before which he spoke were composed of women and more than half the meetings were arranged by them - and all strictly non-partisan, a feature which he highly appreciated because it gave him access to others than his own party.

Women were surprisingly quick, perhaps because of their experience with naughty boys, to distrust candidates who try to hypnotize the voters with loud oratory and who dodge straight questions from the floor. Their intuitions seem to make them keenly alive to the dangers of machine politics and they are more and more the despair of politicians who wish to enforce party regularity and to herd voters ignorantly to the polls. The presence of women has definitely

raised the tone of political campaigns for they dislike personal attacks upon candidates and despise the wordy buncombe which is the stock in trade of the second-hand politician. Nor will feminine voters support men whose private record is crooked or indecent - an attitude which is compelling the party managers to put up better candidates. Moreover, in their simplicity they demand clear issues and when they understand them vote conscientiously; but rather than be befogged into voting wrong they will stay away from the polls.

In their first encounter with the Legislature women citizens showed remarkably good sense in the way in which they brought their political power to bear. Instead of demanding many and impractical reforms, the larger organizations - The Women's Christian Temperance Union, The Federated Clubs and the Juvenile Protective Association - got behind a few measures important to the welfare of women and children and let pass the hundreds of other bills whose supporters clamored to secure the "woman vote." They sent a delegate from the Women's Legislative Council to watch the session; and every legislator heard from the women of his home district what bills they expected him to support. If he shirked the fulfillment of his duty, he heard at once from the women of his home district, who were kept informed of the progress of their measures by the watchers of the Women's Council.

As a result, the three measures endorsed by more than fifty thousand organized women, i.e., equal guardianship of children, a detention home for girls carrying a two hundred thousand dollar appropriation and the (Iowa) Redlight Abatement and Injunction Law for the control of the social evil, were passed by large majorities in both houses - the latter, in spite of tremendous opposition on the part of the liquor and vice interests.

At the Legislature in 1915 the Women's Legislative Council endorsed five measures of which four passed, i.e., birth registration, an amendment to the child labor law to regulate street trades and prohibiting children under sixteen from working in certain dangerous industries; a compulsory education law keeping children under sixteen in school until they shall have passed the eighth grade; and a home teachers bill, which permits districts to employ a teacher to go into the homes to teach the English language, sanitation, domestic science and citizenship. The only bill endorsed by the Women's Council which did not pass was one making it mandatory to put women on all juries in cases where a woman or child is a defendant. In spite of an adverse opinion from the Attorney-General a considerable number of women have served on juries by the desire of the presiding judge and the consent of the attorneys; and another measure making women eligible to jury service will have the support of many lawyers and judges at the Session of 1917.

Women in California evidently do not much care to hold office. At the state election of 1914, out of 700 candidates for office only twenty were women and fourteen of these were on the Prohibition and Socialist tickets. At present of the fifty-eight County School Superintendents, half are women; a few women serve on school boards and have been elected to other county and municipal offices; but as a rule, it is difficult to find a woman who will run for office. Nor will women at large support a woman candidate just because she is a woman - they want her more competent than the men who oppose her. The Governor has appointed a number of women on important commissions, such as Industrial Welfare, Immigration and Social Insurance, where they are conspicuously efficient as unpaid members and as salaried executives.

Throughout the rural districts and the interior, women register and vote in about the same proportion as men, except when some moral issue arises, when they invariably vote more heavily. In San Joaquin County, a prosperous farming region with several large towns, the comparative figures of men and women voters at the last State election were as follows: Of the 7,228 persons registered 36% were women. It must not be overlooked that throughout California there is an average of 137 men to 100 women over twenty-one years of age and in the San Joaquin Valley the disparity is probably higher. Of the men who registered 76% voted and of the registered women 71% voted; and this essential quality of interest is found in all the countryside.

In the two college towns, Berkley and Palo Alto, women of

ten register and vote more heavily than men, especially on questions of social welfare and school elections. In the three large cities, however, they are generally six to eight per cent. behind their proposition; but here again allowance must be made for the fact that not less than one-fourth of the city population is foreign born and of those only one-half are naturalized. In San Francisco it is estimated that at least 80,000 foreign-born women cannot become citizens solely because their husbands do not become naturalized. If to this we add the fact that foreign men generally are much less favorable to women taking part in public matters than Americans, it is surprising that the proportion of women to men who register and vote is not less.

There has been some attempt on the part of those opposed to women voting to make it appear that in San Francisco particularly, women were slow to register and loth to vote. The fact is always suppressed that there are never less than 132 men to every 100 women in the city and that women should therefore properly be only 43% of the total number of voting adults. At the last mayoralty election the women unquestionably re-elected the incumbent as against Eugene Schmitz of graft-prosecution fame, who tried to "come-back". In this election women constituted 37 per cent. of the total registered vote and the women of the best residence districts voted in the proportion of 42 to 44 percent of the total vote cast in those precincts; while in the down-town tenderloin and dance-hall districts women constituted only 27 per cent. of the registration and a negligible portion of the vote. These proportions have been substantially maintained in minor elections since and were slightly increased in the National election of November, 1916, when they comprised 39% of the registration and voted within two per cent. as heavily as men.

It must not be forgotten that San Francisco gave a heavy vote against woman suffrage and Oakland also, in somewhat less proportion, five years ago. In such cities the vote of the promoters, hangers-on, and owners of saloon, red-light, and cafe properties and the "open town" class generally, is always against women and reform. With a heavy preponderance of men in the population and with such a concentration of lawless city interests, the women's vote can make no very apparent effect.

In Los Angeles, on the other hand, where the sexes are more equally proportioned; where there has not been any segregated or open vice district for about seven years, and where the vote in 1911 was in favor of woman suffrage, the women's vote has accomplished a very great deal in supporting clean municipal government and in promoting advanced measures of public welfare, in which women take a very active part.

In politics California women display an unusual combination of idealism and practicality; they want clean, competent representatives and clear, humanitarian issues; but they are also interested in the efficiency of election machinery. Their housewifely minds were distressed at the disorderly behavior of election officials and the inconvenience of polling arrangements. By their presence and their persistence in demanding the reform of election methods they have civilized the procedure in many precincts. As election officers they are more efficient than men in details, quicker and neater in tallying and quite as steadfast in seeing through the all-night sessions incident to national elections. In the very tedious election of 1914 in San Francisco they constituted one-third of the election officials, serving from 18 to 24 hours. As voters, it is generally acknowledged they act more quickly and spoil fewer ballots than men.

In California it is the solid, earnest, domestic, middle-class women who are chiefly interested in voting on civic and political questions. They bring to the service of the State the time and intelligence of thousands of wives and mothers whose judgment has been matured in solving the problems of family life. They desire to serve because they have the habit of useful activity and they enjoy re-educating themselves and widening their mental horizon.

Never before in the history of the world probably, has a body of newly enfranchised persons set out immediately to study the use of the franchise and to exercise it on the basis of knowledge rath-

er than party affiliations. This new attitude towards citizenship has rapidly enlarged the vision of home-keeping women and at the same time has provided a bond of common interest for all members of the family. Father, mother and children, especially as election time approaches, talk of candidates and issues. It is a common occurrence to see a young husband and wife approach the polls wheeling a baby carriage and many a precinct worker has held a child while its mother went in to vote. Perhaps the most unexpected result of woman suffrage has been the unifying effect it has had upon the family and the mutual respect which it creates between men and women in the discussion of public affairs.

The proof of suffrage is after all in the voting, whether by men or women; and so far women have shown themselves an addition to the voting force rather than a duplication of it. They have unquestionably a different view of life than men- a more intimate and human attitude toward social problems and a greater capacity for detail. Through the use of the ballot they are learning to grasp wider principles and they know at last the difference between direct contact and action and indirect feminine influence.

H.G. Wells has said that the social consciousness of women is an almost unworked mine of wealth for the constructive purposes of the world. The middle-aged woman, largely released from domestic cares, brings to the discussion of political affairs a fresh and essentially non-partisan point of view. She is using her intuitions and her idealistic conscience to reinforce reform; to support honest officials and to do that which men have neglected, and in California certainly, women are finding in the exercise of suffrage a larger life as well as making a contribution to the unpaid service of the State.