

## **Office of the Vermont Secretary of State Vermont State Archives**

### **Statewide Referendum 1914: Primary Elections**

**Background:** Candidates were selected through a caucus and state convention system. Abuses, most evident in the 1902 Republican gubernatorial nomination battle, led to calls for a primary system. Primary bills were routinely introduced starting in 1902, often dying in their house of origin. In 1908 a primary bill passed the senate, only to fail a third reading in the house. In 1912 a Progressive faction of the Republican Party (associated with Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose campaign) denied the Republican gubernatorial candidate a majority, captured several legislative seats, and numbered the direct primary among its key issues. To recapture Progressive strays the 1912 Republican platform included a pledge to find "some practical system" for nominating candidates.

**Issue:** The strength of the Republican Party lay in its town organization. The towns controlled the caucus nominating system and, through town representation, also controlled the Vermont house. Since a primary would advantage the larger population centers, representatives of the smaller towns used their significant legislative majorities to defend the caucus system. Facing a Progressive revolt and committed to some action by their party's platform, the 1912 legislators could not simply continue to defeat primary bills; instead they asked for voter opinion on a preferential or direct primary.

**Referendum:** To postpone action, while showing compliance with their platform, the legislators fashioned a joint resolution calling for an advisory referendum (No. 491, Joint Resolution to Provide for the People to Express their Views Respecting a Preferential Primary and a Direct primary, approved February 22, 1913). Voters were asked to vote yes or no on two questions: "Do you favor a preferential primary system whereby the voters may instruct their delegates to political conventions as to their preference for candidates for office?" and "Do you favor a direct primary law whereby the voters are to vote directly for the

candidates for state, congressional and county offices?"

The vote was at March town meeting, 1914 and the results were 11,312 yes to 8,021 on the preferential primary and 22,645 yes to 5,697 no (145 defective ballots) on the direct primary.

**Result:** The confusing ballot may have been engineered to fragment primary supporters, leaving the door open for retaining the caucus system. Failing that, the non-binding preferential primary would still allow the towns to retain some control over nominations. Whatever they hoped for results, voter preference was clearly for a primary system and for a direct primary, with 71% of the voters favoring either a non-binding or direct primary. The ballot questions, however, split the vote so that neither primary system received a majority of the total votes cast. The preferential primary received 24% of the total votes; the direct primary, 47%.

Due to an amendment to the Vermont Constitution, the General Assembly did not meet until January 1915. On March 18th the house defeated a direct primary bill on a 103 to 115 roll call. Only the Progressive representatives delivered a majority in favor; a majority of Republicans and Democrats voted against the measure. Perhaps more significantly eighty-four of the negative votes, regardless of party, came from representatives of towns with populations below 1,000.

Governor Charles Gates sent a message to the house referring to the referendum and noting that the legislature should be "honor bound to pass a direct primary bill." As a compromise he suggested that the legislature pass a direct primary bill that included a referendum provision. Gates' compromise was approved by a 147 to 25 vote, with 74 abstentions.