How Close Votes Influenced World Events

The Sequels to Many Issues Which Were Decided by Single Votes—Are Our Methods of Consulting Public Opinion Faulty?

There's no gainsaying that an election is close when the balance of millions of votes is decided by thousands, or even hundreds. But there have been closer elections, and too many of that kind. The present election is still in its primary stage. The record for closeness cannot be approached until it is found necessary to reach a decision through a secondary and extra-legal stage, as was done in the Hayes-Tilden contest. That turned upon the single vote of the fifteen member of the Electoral Commission, who was chosen by four Judges of the Supreme Court. In a score or more of decisions he cast the deciding vote, and always cast it with the same partisan leaning. Elections like that, or even this, are rather seeds of future trouble than settlements of current issues. The recollection of that decision at this time of another narrow balance of the popular and electoral vote increases regret that it is so difficult to learn the popular will by the method of counting votes. Our history abounds with instances in which the course of events has turned upon single votes, and some of them may be conveniently selected from the compilation made by Speaker Clark for one of his Chautauqua lectures.

General Jackson was elected Major General of Tennessee militia by a majority. Without that one vote he could not have fought the battle of New Orleans, and politics would have been different for a quarter of a century.

Martin Van Buren won the Presidency through his defeat by one vote on the confirmation of his nomination as Minister to England.

John C. Calhoun, as Vice President, cast the deciding vote which gave to Van Buren what Calhoun never got for himself, although his claims were not inferior.

Edward Everett lost the Governorship of Massachusetts by one vote, and that took him out of the list of availables for the Presidency.

Thomas H. Benton was elected to the Senate by a single vote. The loss of that one vote not only would have cost him his career of thirty years, but would have meant the loss to the Senate of one of its strongest and most famous members in a most trying era. One of the great characters of American history might never have emerged from obscurity.

Henry Clay cast the deciding vote in the Constitutional Convention which admitted Kentucky to the Union as a slave State. If Kentucky had entered the Union as a free State it is hardly doubtful that Missouri would have done the same, and it is conceivable that there might have been no Missouri Compromise, and perhaps even no civil war.

The Walker tariff passed the Senate by a single vote. Taft lost the vote of Idaho through a tie in the precinct of Boise. If one more man had voted for Taft, Roosevelt would have lost control of the State.

There is at least one case in which a single vote was the entire election. At the primaries for the Prohibition nomination for Judge in Schuykill County, Penn., one vote was cast. There being no other candidate or voter, Richard H. Koch was unanimously chosen. A miss is said to be as good as a mile, and under some conditions one vote is as good as a million.

On the other hand, a majority of 100,000 may be worthless, as was actually the case in Indiana. At the general election in November, 1900, a proposed amendment that "the General Assembly shall by law prescribe what qualifications shall be necessary for admission to practice law in all courts of justice" was submitted to the electors.

Nearly 100,000 more votes were cast for the amendment than against it. But it did not receive a majority of the votes cast for Presidential Electors and Gov-
The Supreme Court held that it had not been carried by the constitutional process, and it was submitted that the situation would be remedied in the states where elections were held in the courts—an evil cure for what may lie ahead, considering the present system of party control and the raising of such questions.

In a letter embodying a, rather official, communication was said, "For appeal, 66,461; against appeal, 66,461; majority in favor of appeal, 0; majority against appeal, 0."

But the result was very much closer in those states where the elections were held in the courts.

The election was not decided by a majority of the votes cast. The male voters cast their ballots among several parties. The votes of the female voters were not taken into account. The total of the votes would count; that is, on the candidates of the two leading parties.

The multiplicity of parties is more a menace to constitutional government than the Electoral College worked. It might be urged. The multiplicity of parties is in part responsible for the multiplicity of issues which creates the doubt what elections decide and for the absence of a majority.

Mr. Wilson is a pluralist President.

At the other extreme from the abolition of the electoral system is the idea of using it as it was designed to be used, as a representative body with power to make laws and to act upon both candidates and issues. It is only after a century that the defects in its operation suggest itself.

It was not thought undemocratic in the first generation after its adoption. It was thought then that Electors chosen by the people acted for the people more substantially than the people voted for them. The difficulties of travel and confusion among women which then do not exist now. The idea of the States in the nation—then was then felt so important that there would be no majority without it.

The centralist sentiment now is not a failure, at least it is not a success. The result is that the mass of the people now do not control the operation of the system. The mass of the people are not the voters. The operation of the system includes various interested parties. The system does not include all the people.

The idea of a mass national vote has its attraction, but it is not so simple as it looks. The institution of Federal election machinery has many objections.