

The seriousness of the whole problem may be suggested by the government's unwillingness until lately to force conscription on Ireland; nor can much ground for optimism be claimed in the articles of secession drawn up by the Sinn Fein convention, October 29, in the resignation of Sir Edward Carson from the cabinet, in the death of John Redmond, leader of the Nationalists, in the growing strength of the Labor party, in riots and open threats of revolt, nor in the continuous attempts of factions in every party to defeat all efforts at settlement.

None the less, early April brought important developments. In the first place, the government, through a notable speech of Mr. Lloyd George, announced its purpose to seek legislation extending to Ireland the principle of conscription. And in the second place, the plan of government adopted by the Irish convention was officially made public. This plan was carried in the convention by a vote of 44 to 29, most of the Nationalists uniting with the southern Unionists and labor representatives. It provides for a parliament at Dublin for the whole of Ireland, with full powers over domestic legislation, expenditures and direct taxation. The lower house, of 200 members, is to be in the main a popularly elected body, on the analogy of the British house of commons; the upper, known as the senate, is to consist of 64 representatives of commerce, industry, labor, churches, universities, county councils, and the peerage. The Nationalists agree to guarantee to the Unionists 40 per cent of the membership of the house of commons. The question of control of the customs duties is to be left for later settlement.

Minority reports were also presented by the Ulster Unionists and by a group of Nationalists.

The report contemplates that the new system shall go into operation immediately. The assent of the British Parliament is, of course, necessary; and whether it shall be forthcoming will undoubtedly depend to a considerable degree upon the Irish attitude toward conscription. If conscription is seriously resisted, there is little chance that either the government or Parliament will be in a mood to concede any measure of autonomy.

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Absent-voting in Norway. At every election many voters fail to exercise their suffrage rights. It is unquestionably true that most of those who do not vote voluntarily disfranchise themselves through

lack of interest, but there is no doubt that a considerable number of voters, through no fault of their own, are prevented from casting their ballots on election day. Commercial traveling men, railroad employees, actors, students and others often find it too inconvenient or expensive to vote; physical disability at times makes it impossible.

Until recently, no special consideration was given to the "absent" voter in this country. In the last few years, however, many states have legislated to give the ballot to voters temporarily and unavoidably absent from the polls.

In Norway, a "crowned republic" of Northern Europe, absent voting has been an established institution for over a century. Its experience may, therefore, prove instructive and illuminating. Because of scattered population, difficulty of travel, and a relatively large number of fishermen and seamen, absent-voting developed early in Norway, and has proved popular.

The Norwegian constitution dates from 1814. One of its original paragraphs provided that qualified voters residing within the kingdom, who could not meet at the polls on account of sickness, military service, or for any other valid reason, might send their written votes to the election officers before the polls were closed.¹ In 1896, this paragraph was amended, authorizing parliament to extend the same privilege by law to citizens outside the kingdom.² Under the present election laws, all qualified electors in Norway, unable to vote in person, may vote by letter; and though absent from their election district, they may participate in national and in local elections whether they are within the kingdom or outside the kingdom.

Norway elects its parliament for a three-year term on the double election plan—a majority is necessary to elect a member on the first ballot, a plurality elects on the second. Men and women have equal suffrage rights. In the parliamentary election of 1912,³ 488,913 valid ballots were cast at the first election. Of these, 25,611 or over 5 per cent, were sent in by letter. In the second election, 305,916 ballots were cast, and of these, 19,888, or 6½ per cent, were sent in by letter. 619 votes were received from abroad.⁴ The number of absentee voters varied considerably in different parts of the kingdom. In Finmarken,

¹ Norges Grundlov, §60.

² Grundlovsbestemmelse af 28 de mai—20 de juni 1896.

³ *Statistisk Aarboek for Kongeriket Norge*, 1912, pp. 194-195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1913, table pp. 206-207.

a sparsely settled county in the far north, 25 per cent of the ballots in the first election and 30 per cent in the second were sent in by letter.

In local elections, fully as large a proportion of votes are cast *in absentia*. In the 1913 city and village elections, 86,239 men and 96,953 women voted in person, and 4338 men and 7765 women voted by letter. In the rural communes, 187,326 men and 91,428 women voted in person, while 10,275 men and 15,599 women voted by letter.⁵

Absent-voting is relatively more prevalent in rural districts than in villages, and more prevalent in villages than in cities. While in all elections throughout the country, absent-voting is more common among women than among men.

The constitution, as already quoted, makes absent-voting permissible where absence from the polls is due to sickness, military service or other valid excuse. The election law of March 29, 1906, governing parliamentary elections, enumerates as valid excuses (a) natural hindrances, sickness, old age, bodily defect, pregnancy, confinement, child nursing or necessary care of children and other helpless persons; (b) military service or other important duty of such a nature as not to permit postponement, or business affairs whose neglect would cause the elector serious loss. Election officers in communal elections are not by law bound to this enumeration, but do use it as a guide in determining the validity of excuses for absent-voting.

In practice, the law is construed liberally, and particularly so in local elections. The election officers are assumed to take into account that it is the duty of the voter to appear in person at the polls if reasonably possible; the ordinary inconvenience, loss or expense attendant on casting the vote in person constitute no valid excuse for absence.⁶

The absent voter is required by law to make out his ballot privately and place it in an envelope which he must seal. He sends this sealed envelope, together with a letter explaining his absence, to the election officers of his district. If he is sick or otherwise incapacitated from making out the ballot himself, he may have it done for him, but in his presence. No proof is required for the statements made other than the solemn affirmation of the voter, but his signature must be witnessed by some reliable person over twenty-one years of age. Ordinarily, however, a physician will certify as to the sickness of a voter, and other reliable persons, not necessarily of full legal age, may confirm other statements made.

⁵ See table p. 8 of *Norges Officielle Statistik*, vi, 12, *Kommunevalgene*, 1913.

⁶ Alfred Ihlen, *Oversigt over Lovreglerne om Kommunevalgene*, pp. 62-63.

Those voting within the kingdom must vote for candidates in the same manner as those voting at the polls. Fishermen, immediately outside the territorial waters, are regarded as within the kingdom.⁷

Absentee voters outside the kingdom (including fishermen off Iceland, the Faroe and the Shetland Islands) are privileged to cast their votes for their party without designating any candidate's name, for they may not have had the opportunity to learn who the candidates are.⁸ Voters outside the kingdom must have their signature witnessed by a Norwegian consul or a Norwegian ship's captain. A voter may cast his ballot before leaving for a foreign destination if he so chooses.

In parliamentary elections, voters may not send in ballots more than three months before election.⁹ Those voting abroad may not vote before March 1, preceding the fall election.¹⁰ The date of the explanatory letter accompanying the ballot determines the date of the ballot.

A person, after sending in his ballot, may change his vote at any time provided his new ballot reaches the election officers before the polls are closed. If a person changes his plans and is present in the election district on election day, his vote by letter is not counted.

When the polls are closed, the election officers first decide on the validity of the excuses offered by the absent voter. The procedure is public and opportunity is given to disprove or to confirm the statements made. If the election officers decide against a person's right to vote, his ballot is not removed from its sealed envelope, but is preserved, together with its letter of transmittal. If the excuse is accepted as valid, the ballot is placed in a regulation voter's envelope, and deposited in the ballot box. In parliamentary elections, a separate ballot box is used for these votes that come in by letter.¹¹ In the communal elections of 1913, 13.5 per cent of the male absent voters and 15.6 per cent of the female absent voters in the rural districts had their excuses rejected as insufficient; in the urban districts, 11.6 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively, were rejected.¹²

Absent-voting has proved a success in Norway. Its homogeneous population has been predominantly rural, and relatively stationary. The voters of a district generally know each other and are known by the

⁷ See Bredo Morgenstjerne, *Lærebog i den norske Statsforfatningsret*, p. 229.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

⁹ Election Law of March 29, 1906, §23.

¹⁰ Law of June 2, 1906, §1.

¹¹ Law of Feb. 27, 1912.

¹² *Norges Officielle Statistik*, VI, 12, *Kommunevalgene*, 1913, p. 9.

election officers, who are, as a rule, men of standing in the community. There may be a tendency toward a too liberal extension of absent-voting privileges in some of the rural districts, but there is little likelihood of fraud. In cities, absent-voting is not used so extensively, and the election officers scrutinize the excuses for absences very carefully.

Other factors that help simplify the operation of absent-voting in Norway are the prevalence of the short ballot in national elections, and the absence of direct primaries, initiative, referendum and recall. Our American states have a far more complicated problem to solve, but its solution is neither impossible nor less desirable.

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