

In the last four elections the Prohibitionist party and the Greenback (now the Labour) party each held a national convention, nominated candidates for presidency and vice-presidency, and obtained at the polls a number of votes far too small to carry any single State, and therefore, of course, too small to choose any presidential electors, but sufficient to affect, perhaps to turn, the balance of strength between Republicans and Democrats in two or three of the doubtful States. The Prohibitionist candidate has drawn most of his votes from the Republican side; the Greenbacker or Labour man from the Democratic: hence there is apt to be a sort of tacit alliance during the campaign between the Republican organs and the Labour party, between the Democratic organs and the Prohibitionist; and conversely much ill blood between Republicans and Prohibitionists, between Democrats and Labour men. Any one can see what an opening for intrigue is given by these complications, recently increased by the appearance on the scene of the "People's Party," and how much they add to the difficulty of predicting the result of the contest. The area of that contest is a continent, and in the various regions of the continent forces different in nature and varying in strength are at work.

## CHAPTER LXXII

## THE ISSUES IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

UPON what does a presidential election turn? The presidential candidate has a double character. He is put forward as being individually qualified for the great place of executive head of the nation, because he is a man of integrity, energy, firmness, intellectual power, experience in affairs. He is also recommended as a prominent member of a great national party, inspired by its traditions, devoted to its principles, and prepared to carry them out not only in his properly executive capacity, but, what is more important, as virtually a third branch of the legislature, armed with a veto on bills passed by Congress. His election may therefore be advocated or opposed either on the ground of his personal qualities or of his political professions and party affiliations. Here we have a marked difference between the American and European systems, because in England, France, Germany, and Italy, elections turn chiefly on the views of the parties, secondarily on the character of individual leaders, seeing that the leaders are not chosen directly by the people, but are persons who have come to the top in the legislatures of those countries, or have been (in Germany) raised to office by the Crown. In America, therefore, we have a source of possible confusion between issues of two wholly distinct kinds — those which affect the personal qualifications of the candidate, and those which regard the programme of his party.

Whether, in any given presidential election, the former or the latter class of issues are the more conspicuous and decisive, depends partly on the political questions which happen to be then before the people, partly on the more or less marked individuality of the rival candidates. From about 1850 down to 1876, questions, first of the extension of slavery, then of its extinction, then of the reconstruction of the Union, had divided

the nation, and made every contest a contest of principles and of practical measures. Since the controversies raised by the war have been settled, there have been few real differences of political principle between the parties, and questions of personal fitness have therefore become relatively more important.

The object of each party naturally is to put forward as many good political issues as it can, claiming for itself the merit of having always been on the popular side. Any one who should read the campaign literature of the Republicans would fancy that they were opposed to the Democrats on many important points. When he took up the Democratic speeches and pamphlets, he would be again struck by the serious divergences between the parties, which, however, would seem to arise, not on the points raised by the Republicans, but on other points which the Republicans had not referred to. In other words, the aim of each party is to force on its antagonist certain issues which the antagonist rarely accepts, so that although there is a vast deal of discussion and declamation on political topics, there are few on which either party directly traverses the doctrines of the other. Each pummels, not his true enemy, but a stuffed figure set up to represent that enemy. During the presidential elections of 1880 and 1884, for instance, the Republicans sought to force to the front the issue of Protection *versus* Free Trade, which the Democrats refused to accept, having avowed Protectionists within their own ranks, and knowing that the bulk of the nation was (at most) prepared only for certain reductions in the tariff. Thus while Republican orators were advocating a protective tariff on a thousand platforms, hardly a Democrat ventured to refer to the subject except by saying that he would not refer to it. Both sides declared against monopolists and the power of corporations. Both professed to be the friends of civil service reform. Both promised to protect the rights of the Americans all over the world, to withstand Bismarck in his attacks on American bacon, and to rescue American citizens from British dungeons. Both, however, were equally zealous for peace and good-will among the nations, and had no idea of quarrelling with any European power. These appeals and professions made no great impression upon the voters. The American, like the Englishman, usually votes with his party, right or wrong, and when there is little distinction of view

between the parties it becomes all the easier to stick to your old friends. The tariff issue, however, told somewhat in favour of the Republicans; and while the Southern men voted against the Republican party because it was the party which had carried on the war and crushed Secession, the bulk of the North voted for that party for the same reason. It was by associations from the past rather than by arguments on the present and the future that men's action was determined.

The next election, that of 1888, is remarkable for the fact that the victory of the party which had been defeated in 1884 was mainly due to a personal intrigue, a secret "deal," which is believed to have turned over from the Democrats to the Republicans the thirty-six electoral votes of New York State. In the contest of 1892 the Democrats imitated the Republican tactics of 1884 by attacking the latter party upon an issue (that of the Federal Elections or so-called "Force" Bill) which the Republicans had carefully avoided, and which they refused to accept. The protective tariff did on this occasion raise a definite issue and materially affect the result. But as regards currency questions, profound and important as they were, the "platforms" of the two great parties differed but slightly, and neither could command the allegiance to its platform of the whole of its rank and file. In particular the strange spectacle was presented of a candidate avowing strong and clear views, who found himself in this weighty matter more in accordance with the bulk of his Republican opponents than with a large section of his Democratic supporters.

When political controversy is languid, personal issues come to the front. They are in one sense small, but not for that reason less exciting. Whoever has sat in any body of men, from a college debating society up to a legislative chamber, knows that no questions raise so much warmth, and are debated with so much keenness as questions affecting the character and conduct of individual men. They evoke some of what is best and much of what is worst in human nature. In a presidential election it is impossible to avoid discussing the personal merits of the candidates, because much depends on those merits. It has also proved impossible to set limits to the discussion. Unmitigated publicity is a condition of eminence in America; and the excitement in one of these

contests rises so high that (at elections in which personal issues are prominent) the canons of decorum which American custom at other times observes, are cast aside by speakers and journalists. The air is thick with charges, defences, recriminations, till the voter knows not what to believe.

These censures are referable to three classes. One includes what is called the candidate's "war record." To have been disloyal to the Union in the hour of its danger is a reproach. To have fought for the North, still more to have led a Northern regiment or division, covers a multitude of sins. It is the greatest of blessings for America that she fights so seldom, for in no country do military achievements carry a candidate farther, not that the people love war, for they do not, but because success in a sphere so remote from their ordinary life touches their imagination, marks a man out from his fellows, associates his name with their passionate patriotism, gives him a claim on the gratitude, not of a party, but of the nation as a whole. His prowess in repulsing the British troops at New Orleans made Andrew Jackson twice President, in spite of grave faults of temper and judgment. Some Indian skirmishes fixed the choice of the Whig party in 1840 upon William H. Harrison, though his competitor for the nomination was Henry Clay. Zachary Taylor was known only by his conduct of the Mexican War, when he was elected by the same party in 1848. The failure of General Grant as President in his first term, a failure which those who most heartily recognized his honour and patriotism could not deny, did not prevent his re-election in 1872; and the memory of his services came near to giving him a third nomination in 1880.

More serious, however, than the absence of a war record, are charges of the second class—those impeaching the nominee's personal integrity. These no candidate need hope to escape. Few men can have passed years in a State legislature or State or city office, or Congress, without coming into contact with disreputable persons, and occasionally finding themselves in situations capable of being misrepresented. They may have walked warily, they may not have swerved from the path of rectitude, but they must have been tempted to do so, and it requires no great invention to add details which give a bad look to the facts. As some men of note, from whom better

things had been expected, have lapsed, a lapse by a man of standing seems credible. It is therefore an easy task for the unscrupulous passions which a contest rouses to gather up rumours, piece out old though unproved stories of corruption, put the worst meaning on doubtful words, and so construct a damning impeachment, which will be read in party journals by many voters who never see the defence. The worst of this habit of universal invective is that the plain citizen, hearing much which he cannot believe, finding foul imputations brought even against those he has cause to respect, despairs of sifting the evidence, and sets down most of the charges to malice and "campaign methods," while concluding that the residue is about equally true of all politicians alike. The distinction between good and bad men is for many voters practically effaced, and you have the spectacle of half the honest men supporting for the headship of the nation a person whom the other half declare to be a knave. Extravagant abuse produces a reaction, and makes the honest supporters of a candidate defend even his questionable acts. And thus the confidence of the country in the honour of its public men is lowered.

Less frequent, but more offensive, are the charges made against the private life of a candidate, particularly in his relations with women. American opinion is highly sensitive on this subject. Nothing damages a man more than a reputation for irregularity in these relations; nothing therefore opens a more promising field to slander, and to the coarse vulgarity which is scarcely less odious, even if less mendacious, than slander itself.

These are the chief heads of attack. But there is nothing in the life or habits of a candidate out of which materials for a reproach may not be drawn. Of one it is said that he is too fond of eating; of another, that though he rents a pew in Dr. Y——'s church, he is more frequently seen in a Roman Catholic place of worship; of a third, that he deserted his wife twenty-five years ago; of a fourth, that he is an atheist. His private conversations are reported; and when he denies the report, third persons are dragged in to refute his version. Nor does criticism stop with the candidate himself. His leading supporters are arraigned and dissected. A man's surroundings do no doubt throw some light upon him. If you are

shown into a library, you derive an impression from the books on the shelves and the pictures on the wall; much more than may you be influenced by the character, if conspicuously good or evil, of a man's personal friends and political associates. But such methods of judging must be applied cautiously. American electioneering carries them beyond reasonable limits.

I do not mean that elections always bring these personal issues prominently to the front. Sometimes, where the candidates excite no strong enthusiasm or repulsion, they remain in the background. Their intrusion into what ought to be a contest of principles is unavoidable when the personal qualities of a candidate may affect the welfare of the country. But it has the unfortunate result of tending to draw attention away from political discussions, and thereby lessening what may be called the educational value of the campaign. A general election in England seems better calculated to instruct the masses of the people in the principles as well as the practical issues of politics, than the longer and generally hotter presidential contest in America. The average intelligence of the voter (excluding the negroes) is higher in America than in Britain, and his familiarity not only with the passwords and catchwords of politics, but with the structure of his own government, is much greater. But in Britain the contest is primarily one of programmes and not of persons. The leaders on each side are freely criticised, and most people are largely influenced by their judgment of the prime minister, and of the person who will become prime minister if the existing ministry be dismissed. Still the men are almost always overshadowed by the principles which they respectively advocate, and as invective and panegyric have already been poured for years, there is little inducement to rake up or invent tales against them. Controversy turns on the needs of the country, and on the measures which each party puts forward; attacks on a ministry are levelled at their public acts instead of their private characters. Americans who watch general elections in England say that they find in the speeches of English candidates more appeal to reason and experience, more argument and less sentimental rhetoric, than in the discourses of their own campaign orators. To such a general judgment there are, of course, many exceptions. I have read American election speeches, such as those of Mr.

Beecher, whose vigorous thinking was in the highest degree instructive as well as stimulative; and the speaking of English candidates is probably, regarded as mere speaking, less effective than that of the American stump.

An examination of the causes which explain this difference belongs to another part of this book. Here I will only remark that the absence from British elections of flags, uniforms, torches, brass bands, parades, and all the other appliances employed in America, for making the people "enthuse," leaves the field more free for rational discussion. Add to this that whereas the questions discussed on British platforms during the last fifty years have been mainly questions needing argument, such as that of the corn laws in the typical popular struggle which Cobden and Bright and Villiers led, the most exciting theme for an American speaker during a whole generation was one—the existence and extension of slavery—which specially called for emotional treatment. Such subjects as the regulation of the tariff, competing plans of liquor legislation, currency and labour questions, are so difficult to sift thoroughly before a popular audience that the orator has been tempted to evade them or to deal in sounding commonplaces. Latterly, however, the growing gravity of the problems which the customs tariff and the national currency present, has induced a noteworthy change; and although these complex economic topics are often handled with little knowledge and in a declamatory way, it is a real gain that the popular mind should be constantly directed to them.

If the presidential contest may seem to do less for the formation of political thought and diffusion of political knowledge than was to be expected from the immense efforts put forth and the intelligence of the voters addressed, it nevertheless rouses and stirs the public life of the country. One can hardly imagine what the atmosphere of American politics would be without this quadrennial storm sweeping through it to clear away stagnant vapours, and recall to every citizen the sense of his own responsibility for the present welfare and future greatness of his country. Nowhere does government by the people, through the people, for the people, take a more directly impressive and powerfully stimulative form than in the choice of a chief magistrate by thirteen millions of citizens voting on one day.