

# The Public

A National Journal of Fundamental Democracy &  
A Weekly Narrative of History in the Making

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## EDITORIAL

### Fighting Direct Legislation.

Plutocracy dies hard. Its beneficiaries and their agents were so stupid for a long time that the virtues of the Initiative and Referendum as a regulator of representative government took hold upon the popular imagination before plutocrats realized that "the blamed thing was loaded"; and now its progress has got such headway that nothing can head it off. But even as a fool king once tried to sweep back the ocean tides, so has the moribund Civic Federation of Chicago, relic of a professional secretary's genius in making a soft place for himself while incidentally furnishing plutocracy with a medium for selfish expression in the name of public spirit—even as that king so this civic federation has undertaken to sweep back the inevitable.

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Wonderful indeed was the Civic Federation's call for a meeting to sound alarms against the dangers to plutocracy of the Initiative and Referendum. "We foresee," so read the call, "the 'boss-controlled' minorities of our great urban centers holding the balance of power in legislative matters, the public having no chance to fix responsibility and no one to punish by defeating him for office!" If "boss-controlled minorities" could hold the balance of power on Initiatives or Referendums, it is not easy to see why they can't hold it on candidates; and if they hold it on candidates, how could the public punish candidates by defeat-

ing them for office? That call reads as if its writer had composed it after a banquet instead of before one.

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But over-stimulation at table does not account for the whole performance of those gentlemen who mistake devotion to their private interests for civic holiness. To discredit direct legislation they have made display of an enormously long direct legislation ballot, putting this absurd thing forward as characteristic. In fact the ballot they display is a South Dakota specimen, and its length is due not to direct legislation but to representative legislation. A legislature of South Dakota, in order to furnish enemies of direct legislation precisely this kind of campaign material, enacted a law requiring the text of every direct legislation measure to be printed on the ballot. Consequently, six questions on the South Dakota ballot make that ballot about ten feet long. But 32 questions on the Oregon ballot occupy no more space than the names of candidates do. The simple and sufficient Oregon ballot was devised by a law initiated by the people; the absurd South Dakota ballot was devised by a legislature.

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It was in its speakers, however, that the Civic Federation excelled at its banquet in opposition to the Initiative and Referendum. They were of two classes: (1) the confessedly unintelligent (on the subject in hand); and, (2) the manifestly self-interested. The first were well represented by Prof. Laughlin, one of those faithful conservatives who would probably insist upon eating with his fingers yet if forks hadn't come into vogue before he began to eat at all; the second found a perfect representative in the Oregon lawyer for the corporation which is to Portland what the electric combine is to Chicago. This gentleman reported from Oregon that the Initiative and Referendum there are dangerous. His testimony was quite unnecessary. To such corporation interests, as those he represents, the Initiative and Referendum are exceedingly dangerous, not only in Oregon but wherever they get a foothold. If they were not, they wouldn't be worth advocating.

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#### Government by Minorities.

Now that the Initiative and Referendum movement forges ahead, its adversaries discover in themselves a prodigious and hitherto unsuspected regard for majority rule. Heretofore insistent on limiting the suffrage to "the intelligent," or "the propertied," etc., they now fly so far from their

moorings as to oppose the initiation or the vetoing of measures by a majority of those who vote on them, if those voting be fewer than those who vote for candidates, even though every voter be allowed full opportunity. Here is a test of intelligence—the Initiative and Referendum—which is self-executing. A question is brought to vote; every qualified voter is given a ballot; every qualified voter who is intelligent on the subject votes one way or the other; the unintelligent (on that subject) voluntarily disfranchise themselves to that extent and for that occasion. But your restrictionist of the suffrage is not satisfied. He wants the whole body of voters who voluntarily refrain from voting on a referendum question to be counted in the negative—the lazy business men and the lazy professional men and the venal voters who get paid for voting for candidates but not for referendum voting, the "heelers" who take no interest in politics except as it has spoils in it, and blind partisans who relate their politics to nothing but the party of their daddies or a hero of the moment. Therefore your adversary of the Initiative and Referendum explains himself with professions of love for majority rule. But he doesn't want majority rule. What he wants is a temporary argument that sounds plausible, with which to oppose the Initiative and Referendum. So he urges that experience shows that only a small proportion of the electorate vote on referendum questions. It isn't true, but what if it were? The essential principle of majority rule is not that all shall vote whether they wish to or not; it is that all shall have opportunity to vote.

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#### Governor Wilson and Direct Legislation.

In our mention of Governor Wilson's attitude toward People's Power (pp. 74, 97), we appear to have given an impression that he has definitely declared for the initiative, referendum and recall—reforms he had previously opposed. For such an intimation we have had no warrant. The most that can be said is that in his inaugural address he apparently alluded to those reforms favorably. That there may be no further misunderstanding, we quote from his address as published in *The New York Evening Post*, of January 17th:

There is widespread dissatisfaction with what our legislatures do, and still more serious dissatisfaction with what they do not do. Some persons have said that representative government has proved too indirect and clumsy an instrument, and has broken down as a means of popular control. Others, looking a little deeper, have said that it was not representative government that had broken down, but the effort to get it. They have pointed out that with our present