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# CITIZENS' BUSINESS

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## Appoint More, Elect Less

No. 1150

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That so many offices of minor importance are filled by election is the chief mark of Philadelphia County's backwardness.

A MAJOR objective of city-county consolidation is the performance of a number of county functions by appointed rather than elected officials. The city's experience with appointive department heads shows that the method could profitably be extended to the county. In fact, nothing illustrates more vividly how the city has been free to advance while the county is anchored to the notions of a century ago than the appointing of city department heads and the election of county department heads.

**Some Big City Jobs.** CITIZENS' BUSINESS this week offers some comparisons of the relative importance of city and county offices. Take the largest 3 city departments, under directors chosen by the mayor. The department of public safety budget this year is about \$17,900,000, providing for about 7,500 regular employees. The director of public works has a current-expense budget of about \$10,000,000, providing for about 6,000 employees. The director of public health has a budget of about \$4,100,000, providing for about 2,800 employees. These are important jobs, but the city's business would suffer severely if these and other appointed department heads had to conduct political campaigns to get their offices, and if they were directly responsible to the voters rather than to the chief executive.

**Some Smaller Jobs.** There is a startling contrast in the elective county offices. Although Philadelphians can elect a mayor who will appoint a director of public safety with a budget of \$17,900,000 and 7,500 employees, they are required by the constitution to go to the polls to choose a coroner, whose 1934 budget is \$97,600, providing for 40 employees; a clerk of quarter sessions (budget of

\$257,100 and 96 employees); a register of wills (budget of \$159,200 and 68 employees); a district attorney (budget of \$283,750 and 83 employees); a recorder of deeds (budget of \$290,700 and 135 employees); a sheriff (budget of \$364,190 and 168 employees); a controller (budget of \$161,960 and 59 employees); and a city treasurer with 47 employees and a budget of \$111,900 (after eliminating large appropriations for debt service, pensions, etc., which are not indicative of the size of the job). Then there are the county commissioners. They have 173 regular employees, 101 of them in the weights and measures bureau. They are a conduit for large appropriations which in no way measure their responsibilities. When these are eliminated, an outside figure of under \$900,000 remains—several times larger than that of any other elected county officer, but then there are three commissioners to carry the load.

**Why Elect?** Judged by expenditures and number of employees, the elective county offices are rather small jobs. Roll them all into one and the appropriations listed above are not over 15% of the budget of the director of public safety; the number of employees is not over 12%. Why should such offices be permitted to distract attention from the really important ones that the voters must fill? Of course, the true test of whether an officer should be elected is whether he determines policies to any great extent. If he does, there is good reason for electing him. But the county officers of Philadelphia County do not determine policies to any great extent. Even the county commissioners, once a legislative body, lost all their legislative powers to city council back in 1854.

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## The Row Offices

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The qualifications, compensation, and method of selection of county officers in Pennsylvania illustrate some quaint old notions about government.

NEWSPAPERS throughout the state are now carrying notices setting forth why this and that candidate for a county office should be elected. The notices are well worth studying.

### The Butcher, Baker, and Candlestick-Maker

A candidate for the office of prothonotary is described as one of the most successful farmers in the county, a record-holder in the Cow Testing Association. "The well known auctioneer" in a certain town wants to be register of wills. A candidate for county commissioner boasts extensive experience in the insurance business. The chief asset of a candidate for coroner is that he has successfully managed a county fair association. A man who is boomed for county treasurer is by trade a saddler. Hundreds of similar examples could be cited.

### Those with Experience Need Not Apply

This is very interesting. District attorneys, to be sure, are members of the bar, but the feeling seems to be that almost anyone can fill the other offices. In fact, there is one qualification which seems to be advertised very infrequently—familiarity with the job to which the candidate aspires. This may be because such familiarity is unimportant in the eyes of the voters. More likely, however, it is because the candidate has had no experience in the office. If he has had, possibly he looks upon it as of dubious value, for harsh things are often said of the man whose familiarity with a county office results from his having held it before.

### Platforms with Weak Planks

What are the platforms of these candidates? They all promise to abide by the laws, and to run their offices to the best of their ability. They could hardly do less. Some of them assure the voters of

### Old Styles in Democracy

County government in this state is still living back in the eighteenth century. Its central idea is that democracy will perish unless the maximum number of public officials is elected, and that everyone is as fit as everyone else to be elected. The result, of course, is government by amateurs—but at professional prices. It is discouraging that, obvious as this is and has been for many years, the system still seems to have quite a "kick" in it. No wonder the proclamation of an election of county officers is frequently headed up with: "God save the Commonwealth."

### What about Philadelphia County?

We have not had Philadelphia particularly in mind in the preceding paragraphs but its situation is much the same as that of other counties. In several respects Philadelphia suffers by comparison with other counties. Because of the extent to which city officers in Philadelphia perform county functions, certain county officers have even less discretion than the same officers in other counties, and there is accordingly less reason for choosing them by popular election.

### Another Difference

Another difference between Philadelphia and the more rural counties is that in the latter the candidates are, or can be, known personally to a large proportion of the voters. A candidate for sheriff may be their old school teacher. They know how hard he has worked and they flock to the polls in a glow of kindness to put him in clover for four years. It is said that the clover grows no less luxuriantly in Philadelphia, but it is utterly impossible for any considerable proportion of the voters to be personally acquainted with the candidates.

How the voters of Philadelphia manage under such a handicap to choose county officers who are good and deserving men, properly equipped to do their work, is a mystery which our readers may be able to fathom.

their party that if elected they will do all in their power to promote the interests of the party—an activity which is not listed among the duties imposed by law upon county officers. Beyond this their promises are few and vague. Some of them if elected will have discretion in the performance of their duties and can promise to exercise the discretion in a certain way, but most of them will have no leeway at all and few will have very much.

### Why Elect Them?

It is entirely fitting for political parties to line up behind candidates when there are issues which the election can settle, and real issues are sometimes decided by the election of some county officers. But if there are no issues there is no use for political parties, and most of the activities of county officers have nothing to do with public issues. Recording deeds, registering wills, prosecuting criminals, serving writs, collecting taxes, holding inquests—what is the difference between the republican and democratic ways of performing these duties? None at all. Why then should counties be put to the expense and nuisance of having such officers chosen by political parties?

### A Discrepancy

While it is commonly thought that county officers need no special qualifications, they usually receive very special compensation—so generous that there is absolutely no need, so far as county officers are concerned, to revive the laws which used to inflict penalties on persons who refused to accept public office. Certainly there is a discrepancy here. How it should be corrected might not be easy to say briefly, but the proper correction would probably involve, as a general rule, raising the qualifications of the officers to just as great an extent as it would involve lowering the compensation.