Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS

Australian System.
New Form of Votes used Nov 5, 1889

To Vote for a Person, mark a Cross [X] in the Square at the right of the name.

GOVERNOR.	Vote for ONE.
JOHN BLACKMER—of Springfield	Prohibition
JOHN Q. A. BRACKETT—of Arlington	Republican
WILLIAM E. RUSSELL—of Cambridge	Democratic

DISTRICT ATTORNEY—Suffolk District.	Vote for ONE.
JOHN W. LOW—of Boston	Prohibition
OLIVER STEVENS—of Boston	Republican, Democratic

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR.	Vote for ONE.
JOHN W. CORCORAN—of Clinton	Democratic
WILLIAM H. HAILE—of Springfield	Republican
BENJAMIN F. STURTEVANT—of Boston	Prohibition

SHERIFF.	Vote for ONE.
JOHN B. O'BRIEN—of Boston	Democratic, Prohibition, Republican

SECRETARY.	Vote for ONE.
GEORGE D. CRITTENDEN—of Buckland	Prohibition
WILLIAM N. OSGOOD—of Boston	Democratic
HENRY B. PEIRCE—of Abington	Republican

COMMISSIONERS OF INSOLVENCY — Vote for THREE.
HENRY AUSTIN—of Boston — Democratic
ALFRED L. BAURY—of Boston — Republican
... JANES—of Boston — Republican
FRANK P. MAGEE—of Boston — Democratic
NATHANIEL G. ROBINSON—of Boston — Democratic
... — Republican
WILLIAM ... — Prohibition
TRUEMAN B. TOWNE—of Boston — Prohibition
GEORGE E. WOODMAN—of Chelsea — Prohibition

TREASURER AND RECEIVER GENERAL.	Vote for ONE.
GEORGE A. MARDEN—of Lowell	Republican
EDWIN L. MUNN—of Holyoke	Democratic
FREDERICK L. WING—of Ashburnham	Prohibition

AUDITOR.	Vote for ONE.
WILLIAM H. GLEASON—of Boston	Prohibition
CHARLES R. LADD—of Springfield	Republican
WILLIAM D. T. TREFRY—of Marblehead	Democratic

SENATOR—Third Suffolk District.	Vote for ONE.
EDWARD J. DONOVAN—of Boston	Democratic
JAMES H. HENDRICK—of Boston	Republican
GEORGE L. SMALL—of Boston	Prohibition

Secrecy in Voting in American History: No Secrets There

DONALD A. DEBATS

UNIVERSITY *of* VIRGINIA

Public Voting

Secrecy in Voting in American History: No Secrets There

by

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For most of America's history, from colonial days to the 1890s, keeping the content of your vote secret was almost impossible. There was no expectation that the vote should be secret and little understanding of how this could be accomplished even if it were a good idea. Many people—and not just political operatives—thought secrecy was not a good idea. In those days there was no model for structuring elections so they could be private individual matters, conducted quietly inside public buildings, with votes cast while hidden red, white, and blue striped curtains. That is not the way US elections were conducted. The alternative—today's secret ballot—with which we are now so familiar had yet to be invented, or, as it turned out, imported into American politics.

All elections for most of America's history were organized to be non-secret. They were public events with individual voting occurring in plain sight of the crowds that election days once attracted. They were the culmination of weeks of excited electioneering. In large cities, they were public spectacles, with torchlight parades and the large scale public "illuminations," so popular in the Victorian era. In rural places, election days often coincided with markets

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Cover and opposite

Australian Secret Ballot, 1889 Massachusetts gubernatorial election. The 1889 Massachusetts election was the first state-wide election in which the secret ballot was used. The state-printed ballot replaced both oral and party-supplied ticket voting, the two modes of voting that had prevailed in the United States since colonial days. The secret ballot moved elections from an out-of-doors public event to an indoor event in which voting was private. Former Massachusetts Governor Oliver Ames, who had served three one-year terms, did not run in the 1889 election. In that year's December issue of the *North American Review* he praised the new system for its impact on "good manners" and "the best test of the 'reading and writing' qualification of the State constitution that has ever been had." Perhaps as a consequence, turnout in the 1889 election was 25 percent lower than in the 1888 gubernatorial election. The first city to use the secret ballot was Louisville, Kentucky for the 1888 Presidential election, but Kentucky was the last state to adopt secrecy in voting, ending its long practice of voting by voice, viva voce, in 1891.

Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society

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TREASURER AND RECEIVER GENERAL. . Vote for ONE.

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EDWIN L. MUNN—of Holyoke	Democratic	
FREDERICK L. WING—of Ashburnham	Prohibition	

AUDITOR. . . . . Vote for ONE.

WILLIAM H. GLEASON—of Boston	Prohibition	
CHARLES R. LADD—of Springfield	Republican	
WILLIAM D. T. TREFRY—of Marblehead	Democratic	

ATTORNEY-GENERAL. . . . . Vote for ONE.

ALLEN COFFIN—of Nantucket	Prohibition	
ELISHA B. MAYNARD—of Springfield	Democratic	
ANDREW J. WATERMAN—of Pittsfield	Republican	

COUNCILLOR—Fourth District. . . . . Vote for ONE.

CHARLES W. BALDWIN—of Boston	Prohibition	
EDWARD J. FLYNN—of Boston	Democratic	
FREDERICK B. TAYLOR—of Boston	Republican	

DISTRICT ATTORNEY—Suffolk District. . . Vote for ONE.

JOHN W. LOW—of Boston	Prohibition	
OLIVER STEVENS—of Boston	Republican, Democratic	

SHERIFF. . . . . Vote for ONE.

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NATHANIEL G. ROBINSON—of Boston	Democratic	
HENRY W. SHUGG—of Boston	Prohibition	
WILLIAM M. STOCKBRIDGE—of Boston	Republican	
TRUEMAN B. TOWNE—of Boston	Prohibition	
GEORGE E. WOODMAN—of Chelsea	Prohibition	

SENATOR—Third Suffolk District. . . . Vote for ONE.

EDWARD J. DONOVAN—of Boston	Democratic	
JAMES H. HENDRICK—of Boston	Republican	
GEORGE L. SMALL—of Boston	Prohibition	

REPRESENTATIVES IN GENERAL COURT. Vote for TWO.
Eighth Suffolk District.

THOMAS H. HOWARD—of Boston	Prohibition	
PATRICK M. KEATING—of Boston	Independent Democrat. Republican	
PHILIP J. LIBBY—of Boston	Independent Democrat. Republican	
JOSEPH P. LOMASNEY—of Boston	Democratic	
WALTER S. NASH—of Boston	Prohibition	
BARTHOLOMEW O'DOWD—of Boston	Independent Democrat	
JOHN H. SULLIVAN—of Boston	Democratic	

Monster Democratic Torch-Light Procession Passing Through Union Square, N.Y.C., Thomas Nast, 1856. Nast depicts a torchlight parade held in support of Presidential candidate James Buchanan, complete with banners and fireworks. Such vast public spectacles were part of the public enthusiasm associated with elections prior to the adoption of the secret ballot. Buchanan would go on to win the election only a week after this wood engraving was published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on September 27, 1856.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

and sale days. In both contexts, crowds of voters and non-voters, the eligible and the ineligible, young and old, men and (some) women gathered at pubic polling places and watched as the voters, one by one, stepped out from the crowd to vote.

And as those men (for in almost all places only men could vote before 1918) stepped forward, it was almost always the case that the contents of their votes, their individual political choices, were identified by sight or sound and known to every person in the throng that assembled before the voting place. Here was a public festival during which you could learn a good deal about your friends and neighbors, your boss, or your employee. Seeing or hearing the individual votes as they were given revealed the tide of partisan battle. Political operatives could figure out what might yet be done to alter that outcome in the remainder of the day.

To be sure, there were efforts in some places at some times (California in the 1870s and Massachusetts in the 1850s being the prime examples) to develop a more private manner of voting. But discovering what secrecy meant and how it could be institutionalized remained, even in reform-minded places, a great puzzle. The "secret-ballot," a.k.a the "Australian ballot," was an import (arriving only in the 1890s) from Australia via Britain. It transformed America's Election Day by privatizing, but also bureaucratizing, sanitizing, and individualizing what had once been a dramatic public event. From that moment on:

- Elections would be indoors, run by government officials in a public building
- Instead of competing party tickets, there would be a single state-produced ballot available only inside official polling stations.
- The ballot would contain the names of all candidates (with room for write-ins)
- The voter would mark the ballot in a private booth and deposit it with no identifying marks.

But until that happened—in the 1890s—all American elections were conducted in one of two ways: by voice or by ticket. These methods of conducting elections were specifically designed *NOT* to be private, but unapologetically to reveal, especially to party operatives, each voter's political

choices. The party wanted the voter to know which ticket he was supporting, and the party wanted to know that too. The public dimension of voting was important to some political thinkers and many political operatives, alarming to a few reformers, and accepted by the many as the way elections had always been conducted.

By the middle of the nineteenth century most states (the US Constitution makes the conduct of all elections, even congressional and presidential elections, a state power) had opted for voting by a ballot rather than by voice. The 'ballot" became the party-issued printed ticket listing that party's designated slate of candidates for all offices being contested. Voting in this manner meant depositing, in public, the party ticket into a ballot box. That ticket, as we will see in the essay "How the Other Half (plus) Voted: The Party Ticket States" [see: http://sociallogic.iath.virginia.edu/node/9], was very distinctively marked and colored and voters were identified by the "the color of their ticket."

The other way of voting, still employed by seven states in the mid-nineteenth century, was by voice—*viva voce*. Voting in a viva voce state required you to go to the polling place and read out, or recite if you couldn't read, the names of the candidates you wished to support.

Both modes of voting produced the same result: individual votes were knowable in that they could either be seen (party-tickets) or be heard (*viva voce*). This was the common theme of all elections in America's political history until the threshold of the twentieth century. And it made sense: in those times political choices were understood to be communal, not private, matters. Voting to advance private individual interests calls for secrecy—but public voting made perfect sense when politics was understood to be about group or communal interests. ∎

Glass Globe Voting Box, 1884. Prior to the secret ballot, voters would often deposit party-printed tickets in glass jars, which allowed their vote to be visible to those around them. With the arrival of secret voting, privacy became paramount. Before the electronic voting machine, voters would deposit their secret ballots in wooden boxes, metal tins, and even cardboard boxes.

Courtesy of Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of American History

University of Virginia | The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities

Voting Viva Voce
Unlocking the Social Logic of Past Politics

sociallogic.iath.virginia.edu

Two mid-nineteenth century cities—Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky—shared a common voting arrangement: both states required all votes in all elections to be cast in public by voice (viva voce). The poll books provided an official written record of every voter's spoken declaration. Professor Don DeBats presents and analyses this data on the website.

Public Voting. This project reveals the world of American politics at a time when every citizen's vote was public knowledge, and shows how social identity influenced votes.

Alexandria, Virginia | 1850s. On the Potomac just opposite Washington DC, Alexandria was a thriving commercial city based on slave labor in the late 1850's as the secession crisis loomed.

Newport, Kentucky | 1870. On the Ohio just opposite Cincinnati, Newport was, as the Panic of 1873 crashed down, a thriving industrial city based on immigrant labor.

Colophon