

Interesting Stuff About Elections

Most of us don't know the most interesting facts about the election process. This article is an eye opener. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

Most of us in western countries were taught that the political process we now call democracy, at least the election part of it, began in Ancient Greece. Indeed, Greece did have a workable democratic system where each citizen had a right to be heard on any subject of interest to the community. However the system broke down when too many wanted to be heard. In fact, the Greeks didn't have the first form of democratic election.

It shouldn't be surprising that in the Middle East, the likely birthplace of agriculture and the first known large civilizations, the people of Ebla (in modern day Syria) elected their kings for seven year terms. That was two thousand years before the Greeks got their system started.

We humans aren't the only species on the planet to vote. Even though honeybees can't count, they have an elective system for deciding where to locate a new hive. When the time to build a new hive arrives, scouts go out in all directions searching for the best spots. When they return, each has a location in mind. They decide the best one by dancing. The more vigorously a scout dances, the more she is able to persuade other scouts to join her. When the marathon dancefest is over, the scout bee that recruited the most other scouts to her choice wins and the other bees agree to make it unanimous.

At least they make the decision unanimous most of the time. When two or more queens are competing for supremacy of a hive and one can't manage to kill the other(s), the hive can split and re-establish themselves as two independent hives. The losing queens are killed. Always.

Polling before human elections has been going on for a long time. In the United States, the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* conducted a poll before the 1824 presidential election. The poll predicted that Andrew Jackson would tally the most votes. And he did.

Unfortunately, the US has this strange beast called the electoral college. Each state has a way to determine how its share of members sent to the electoral college after an election will vote. The vote of the electoral college--technically not the citizens who voted in their local communities--determines who will become the president of the United States.

The electoral college vote in the House of Representatives in 1824 gave the nod to John Quincy Adams, who immediately become the president.

The first televised election in which a computer played a major role in the US was in 1952. CBS viewers saw Walter Cronkite sitting beside UNIVAC 1, which made the remarkable prediction that Eisenhower would win after only seven percent of the votes had been counted and registered.

However, what the CBS viewers actually saw was no more a working computer than those of *Star Trek* or other sci-fi movies. Mr. Cronkite sat beside a cardboard panel filled with massive numbers of Christmas light bulbs that flashed on and off intermittently. The real UNIVAC 1 that did the work of tallying counted votes was in Pennsylvania.

Back in 2007, neuroscientists thought they likely had the best way to determine (well ahead of the 2008 election) which candidates were most likely to have their names on the ballot. They connected to the brains of a large number of undecided voters (in a lab setting) and showed each pictures of the leading candidates for each party.

The results of the survey? The candidates that elicited the *least* amount of brain activity were John McCain and Barack Obama. While most of us would see that as being funny or strange, sociologists will do similar tests in future elections to determine if low brain activity when viewing a picture of a candidate might be a factor to determine how undecided voters will vote in the election.

In a few countries, citizens are required to vote, by law. Failing to vote is a serious offence and if you didn't vote

you had better have a dandy excuse when the authorities come calling after an election. Belgium has a system for compulsory voting. If you miss voting in four elections over a period of 15 years, you are automatically penalized. The penalty? Offenders are not permitted to vote for the next ten years. (Okay, the system's not perfect.)

The penalty for violating Belgium's compulsory voting law--and for those of us who are not US citizens, the hanging chad problem whose resolution elected a president whose primary functions seemed to be to start wars and ruin economies--seem confusing. But they don't hold a candle (for confusion) to the way the Venetians used to elect their chief magistrate or Duke, called the Doge. For over five centuries (some sources say closer to 1000 years), Venice elected its Doge using the following process. (Warning: This is even more confusing than most stuff to do with elections.)

Thirty members of the Great Council were chosen by lot. Another lot reduced this number to nine. Those nine then chose 40 others for the next stage. Another lot reduced the 40 to 11. (Still with me?)

The 11 then chose a group of 41 who actually elected the Doge.

Historians assure us that the Venetian system worked well to avoid corruption and impact by special interest groups, though the final man selected was inevitably from the aristocracy. The Doge held office for life and lived and worked in a palace beside the Grand Canal, with St. Mark's Basilica on the other side.

The lever voting machine came into use in the United States in 1892, in Lockport, New York. Its inventor, Jacob H. Myers, intended to "make the process of casting the ballot perfectly plain, simple and secret. Its patent shows that at the time it first came into use the lever voting machine had more moving parts than any other machine in the country.

Moving forward to 2007, the Swiss used some sophisticated new technology to ensure security for their election. It involved the use of quantum physics. Voting was done electronically, of course, with the keys for returns being transmitted using polarized photons.

Back in the United States, the Department of Defense, for the election in 2006, used a web-based voting system for their military personal stationed out of the country and for US expatriates. The system cost over \$830,000. Some 63 people used it to vote.

A little sociological voting trivia. Candidates whose names appear on the ballot close to the names of the most popular candidates apparently receive more votes than the polls beforehand suggested they should. Candidates whose names are first on the ballot list tend to get more than their expected share of votes. Australia has compulsory voting and those whose names appear first on the ballots tend to receive one percent of the total votes cast, even if the person is a relative unknown.

Rain changes voting patterns. In the US, for every inch of rain that falls on election day in a given county, the voter turnout dropped by 0.8 percent, in a study.

Think that rain shouldn't affect an election much? Computer models have shown that if it had rained in Illinois on election day in 1960, Richard Nixon would have defeated John F. Kennedy.

If it had been a sunny day in Florida for the 2000 election, Al Gore would have clearly got more votes than George W. Bush, which would have made Gore the president. With or without the notorious hanging chads.

Bill Allin

Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems, a guidebook for parents and teachers who want to grow children who are balanced developmentally in all respects, not just intellectually and physically.

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Author: builder

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