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Voting and the Spirit of Democracy

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Daniel C. Schofield

With An Introduction By
Matthew A. Brown
Rhode Island Secretary of State

University Library
University of Rhode Island
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FOREWORD

I believe that when people participate in the decisions our government makes, we are all better off: our public policies are better informed, our officials are more accountable, and the public has more trust in government.

That is why I am pleased to support the University of Rhode Island Library's "Voting and the Spirit of Democracy" exhibit, which brings together a range of materials highlighting the history of voting and why it is important.

Only 33% of Americans ages 18-24 went to the polls in the 2000 Presidential election. Furthermore, a study by the National Assessment of Education Progress found that 75% of students at upper elementary and secondary levels were not proficient in civics and government.

I am committed to improving those numbers by promoting programs which educate young voters about our democracy and their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

"Voting and the Spirit of Democracy" is an important part of that effort. I want to thank all those who have worked so hard to make this exhibit a success and to organize other events to encourage young people to vote in the Presidential Election on Tuesday, November 2nd.

Matt Brown
Rhode Island Secretary of State

INTRODUCTION

Early Voting

The United States was not the first country to allow its citizens to vote by a form of ballot. As early as the 5th century BC citizens of Athens and latter Rome were allowed to cast black or white stones in giving their choice of the "popular courts". Roman law allowed its citizens to vote in secret through the use of wooden tablets each engraved with the name of a candidate or with "yea" or "nay". These methods in early Europe did not curb the control of elections by free spending political bosses, such as Caesar in Rome or the Medici family of Florence. Suffrage in these early times was limited to a very small group of citizens.

Throughout the early period of American history, beginning with Jamestown and Plymouth there existed in the different colonies some system of popular election. While these elections were not as democratic in comparison by modern standards, they gave citizens a voice they would not have in the mother county of England. The Northern colonies allowed their citizens more power in electing colonial officials (usually governor and other general officers) than their counterpart colonies in the South. This degree of citizen participation in government was also true in the Dutch province of New Netherland. It should be noted that most Royal colonial governors were appointed by the King; whereas in proprietary colonies by King or large landowners, and it was only in the charter colonies where the most freedom was given. Nearly everywhere local officials were chosen by popular suffrage.

Early U.S. Voting
Christian White Men of Property

In modern day United States many bemoan the low attendance at the ballot box on election day. Yet during the colonial and the early Federal periods the portion of the total vote was percentage wise much smaller than that of today. This was due largely to the fact that America was overwhelmingly agrarian, and as America reflected its British ancestry where there existed legal, social and psychological barriers to voting, the agrarian class did not vote.

In general most historians believe that only 6 to 10% of the population voted in the first presidential election in 1789. In many states electors were chosen by the legislature; only a few states chose their electors by popular vote. In fact Rhode Island, New York, and North Carolina did not even participate in the election. In South Carolina the state legislature chose presidential electors from 1789 until 1876. The reasons for the small percentage of voter participation are many, however it was mainly due to three causes 1) only white males were allowed to vote thus eliminating blacks, women and others 2) some colonies required a religious test and 3) all colonies required some degree of property ownership.

Expansion of suffrage began to take place after the American Revolution. In most states eligibility and participation increased during the 19th century as the elimination of property and religious qualifications took effect during the Jackson Period. Further advances were made by the removal of race restrictions by the 15th Amendment in 1870 and women suffrage by the 19th Amendment in 1920. In 1971 eighteen year old citizens were allowed to vote for the first time.

EXHIBIT CASE 1
Colonial and Revolutionary America

During the colonial period citizens or freemen voted a form of ballot. The Massachusetts Bay law of 1648 stated "that for the yearly choosing of Assistants … freemen shall use Indian corn & beans" to vote. The word ballot comes from the Italian "ballota" which refers to the use of black and white balls in the voting process. White marbles were used in favor of a person or issue and a black marble against. Today the method is still used by some organizations to accept or reject a person for membership.

In colonial or early Rhode Island freemen were required to vote in person at the capital in Newport for Governor, Deputy Governor, Secretary, Attorney General, Treasurer and Assistants (to be known later as Senators). As Rhode Island grew it became more difficult for freemen to travel to Newport, thus a system of proxy voting was created. Freemen were allowed to vote by written and later by printed ballots at their town meetings (Figure 1). In Rhode Island a ballot was called a prox. These proxes were then collected at the town meetings and sent to Newport to be counted at the May session of the General Assembly. Freemen were required to sign the back of their prox to validate their vote; however in so doing, their signature obviated the precept of a secret ballot. The *Dictionary of Americanisms* states that the word prox or proxy is confined just to the state of Rhode Island. A prox in all other colonies was referred to as a ticket. A prox was a list of candidates for election; so called because voters could cast a ballot by proxy. The earliest known Rhode Island prox was printed in 1743. At certain times in the colony's history parties used slogans on their ballots to gain the support of the electorate, for example "Liberty, Property and No Stamps" was used in the election of 1766 (Figure 2) a popular slogan at the beginning of difficulties with the mother country. In fact in Revolutionary Rhode Island the use of paper money to pay debts became a major issue and in 1787 William Bradford, an attorney from the commercial town of Bristol and a gubernatorial candidate used the slogan "Landholder" (Figure 3) at the head of his prox. The sentiments of the day were not in favor of the landholders and Bradford lost the election by a 2 to 1 margin.

EXHIBIT CASE 2
The first half of the 19th Century

During the colonial period and first quarter of the 19th century many citizens were denied the right to vote due to restrictive voter qualifications. Voting was primarily reserved for the property owner and the wealthy. In addition to restrictive voter qualifications there existed many other oppressive factors, for example in the South voice voting placed undue pressure on tenant farmers who were forced to vote in the presence of their landlords, while other states required voters to sign their ballots – thereby obviating the secret ballot. There was much need for voting reform.

The Jefferson and Jackson eras helped to create a spirit of democratic reform. As already stated religious test and property qualifications were basically eliminated during this timeframe. By 1832 all states except South Carolina allowed freemen to choose their Presidential electors; however, blacks, women and native Americans were denied voting rights as were most foreign born citizens in some states.

While the first half of the 19th century provided some reform the electoral process led to frequent electoral fraud and abuse. The printed ballot was often used as a propaganda tool in both presidential and state elections. Figure 4 is an example of an unusual Rhode Island state ballot for 1824 that made use of the issues and candidates of the upcoming November presidential election to gain support for the April state election.

Ballots (i.e. "tickets" and in the case of Rhode Island "proxes") were printed by partisan newspapers and party candidates and their supporters distributed them directly to voters at rallies or at polling places. Figure 5 shows an Ohio ballot from 1854, used at the height of the Know Nothing period, the illustration on this ticket was intended to appeal to the anti-Catholic prejudice of the electorate.

EXHIBIT CASE 3
The second half of the 19th Century

Ballots printed by the parties and their supporters continued to be a problem in the second half of the 19th century. Often they were printed with patriotic symbols such as flags, eagles or other scenes; sometimes they were printed on color paper. These graphics and colors were recognizable to the poll watchers who would alert partisan workers or hired thugs who would bully or use violence to intimidate voters and thus defeat the opposition. In some instances factory owners provided workers with ballots and rides to the polls on election day, if the workers wanted to stay employed they were to vote as their employer wanted.

Another form of corruption was the creation of bogus ballots. Opposition ballots were copied, identical looking to the original but with substitution candidates for each office in the hope that the voter would not notice the switch. Many uninformed voters did not notice and inadvertently voted for the opposition.

Because printed ballots only offered the candidates of the party that issued them, ballot pasters were created to allow voters the option of over-riding some of the party selected candidates. Pasters were printed names of candidates for office that could to be cut out and pasted over the name of a party's candidates on a ballot. The pasters had glue on their back side. To prevent the use of pasters parties designed large ornate print, curved print and tape worm ballots. Graphics continued to be used on ballots, Figure 6 depicts a California ballot showing strong prejudice against Orientals. By the end of the 19th

century the adoption of the Australian Ballot allowed for major election reform in most states and prevented many forms of corruption.

EXHIBIT CASE 4
The 20th Century

Many people think the disputed Presidential election of 2000 was typical of the 20th century election process. It did show that modern elections are not perfect and reform is always needed but this last century (20th) was one of major election reform.

Some of the early reform came by way of the Australian ballot of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Australian ballot was printed and distributed by state and local government not political parties or their candidates; it provided for uniformity and allowed voters to split the ticket. It helped eliminate many of the frauds of the past by providing for hired and trained poll workers to assist voters (Figure 7).

The 17th Amendment to the Constitution allowed for the popular election of United States Senators by voters thus eliminating election by state legislatures which in many cases were controlled by a variety of interest groups. At this time many states adopted the direct primary and provided for recall elections; thereby giving voters even more control.

Perhaps the most important reform of the 20th century was the 19th Amendment which gave women the right to vote nationwide in 1920. The women suffrage movement had its origin in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 which was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. In 1869 Wyoming Territory gave women the right to vote and when the territory became a state in 1889, female suffrage was retained thereby making Wyoming the first state to grant female suffrage. Suffrage spread east from the west and in 1919 the proposed 19th Amendment was finally ratified.

In Rhode Island a constitutional amendment (Article XX) was approved in 1928 removing the property qualifications for voting in city council elections of Providence; the last form of discrimination concerning property which primarily affected foreign born citizens. This amendment repealed the Bourn Amendment passed in 1888 which gave property owners control of the Providence City Council.

The United States Constitution was again amended in 1964 to eliminate the poll tax in federal elections, most states followed suit for state elections. Finally in 1971 eighteen year olds citizens were also allowed to vote.

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