

Dr. Noitall Returns: Just in Time for the Election!

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are the world authority on elections, the man who invented the electoral college, the man who showed how tombstones could vote, the man who created the absentee voter.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. What do you think of the recent mess in the vote for the president?

Noitall. This is not a mess. This is democracy at its best. The American Constitution is pure genius. What other country could take two dull characters and produce an exciting election?

Science. But there is widespread belief that there have been errors in voting procedures and reporting of results.

Noitall. That only strengthens democracy. People are used to scandals involving celebrities and presidents, but the newspapers rarely mention the meek little citizens whose day-to-day heroics maintain our democracy. Who knows the name of the skipper of a supertanker, the usher in a movie theater, the signaler at a train crossing, the election commissioner of a state; yet those people perform vital functions for a democracy. They are only heard of when something goes terribly wrong. Then they are on prime-time TV. When else have you heard an election commissioner on TV? I call it the democratization of error. In the past, "The Making of the President" was written by some behind-the-scenes guru in the party high command. In the future, it will be written by the precinct worker.

Science. True, but isn't it likely to involve a setback to democracy? Foreigners are already saying we look silly.

Noitall. Nonsense. Society only gets progress on the basis of error. DNA has mutations; elections have mix-ups; airplanes have crashes. You learn from the error and move forward. Error is essential for progress.

Science. But the wise people are saying that we are already spending too much money on elections and these errors are the last straw.

Noitall. You are talking about the pontificators: the columnists, the TV anchors, the taxi drivers, and the barbers. These people don't know what they are talking about. American societal values are based on money. Voters are secretly delighted at news that their vote cost the political party \$10,000. Voters in districts where little money is spent have a self-esteem problem.

Science. So you are not even convinced that money and close elections can corrupt the electoral process?

Noitall. Quite the contrary. Making the election more expensive may require better cost-benefit analysis. Kennedy said, after his victory by a narrow Illinois vote, that he was pleased. His father had said he didn't have enough money to buy his son a landslide. Donors might demand an anti-Floridation guarantee as a condition of their support.

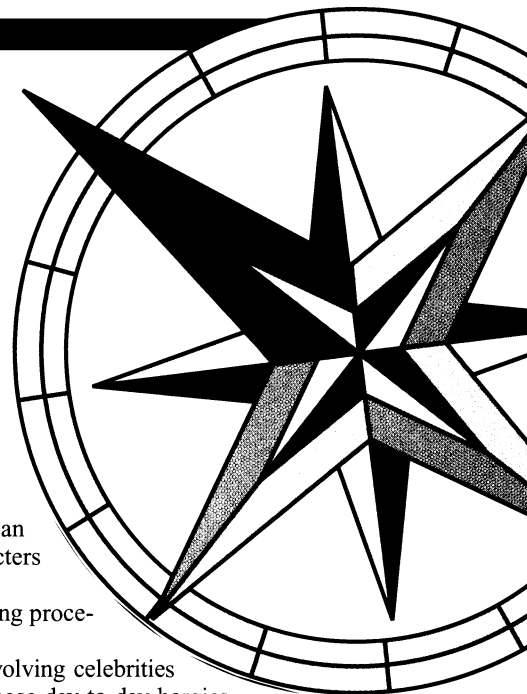
Science. So you are not alarmed by the legal wrangles? Do you think that this chad controversy is likely to bring in machines as a requirement for foolproof voting?

Noitall. Big machines are just what the voters won't like. Ambiguity in the laws is conducive to democracy. Each side can say "I was robbed" for different reasons on different occasions. Machines and online voting are too impersonal and too unambiguous. Our great-grandchildren will be hearing stories of the good old days when Gush and Bore ran and people were still going to the polls personally and voting on paper ballots. It was the last great election before the hackers took over and judges and commissioners were replaced by IBM machines.

Science. So you are not hopeful about the future?

Noitall. Not about machines. Part of the excitement of elections is the uncertainty. We've already gone a long way in reducing uncertainty by polling that predicts the outcome. The impeccable machine will complete the image of a rigged election. So the closeness has created new interest by introducing uncertainty where we never expected it. Physicists learned to welcome an uncertainty principle. Fortunately, I think we will be able to perform genetic engineering on voters so they can cope with uncertainty and even enjoy it.

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"This is
democracy
at its best."

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