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Stephen Coleman  
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## How Voters Feel

This book sets out to unearth the hidden genealogies of democracy, particularly its most widely recognized, commonly discussed and deeply symbolic act – voting. By exploring the gaps between voting and recognition, being counted and feeling counted, having a vote and having a voice and the languor of count taking and the animation of account giving, there emerges a unique insight into how it feels to be a democratic citizen. Based on a series of interviews with a variety of voters and non-voters, this book attempts to understand what people think they are doing when they vote; how they feel before, during and after the act of voting; how performances of voting are framed by memories, narratives and dreams; and what it means to think of oneself as a person who does (or does not) vote. Rich in theory, this is a contribution to election studies that takes culture seriously.

Stephen Coleman is Professor of Political Communication and co-director of the Centre for Digital Citizenship at the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds. He is also an honorary professor of political science at the University of Copenhagen and a research associate at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. Coleman's most recent publications include *Connecting Democracy: Online Consultation and the Flow of Political Communication* (with Peter M. Shane, 2011); *The Media and the Public: 'Them' and 'Us' in Media Discourse* (with Karen Ross, 2009) and *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy* (with Jay G. Blumler, 2009) – winner of the American Political Science Association award for best book of the year on politics and information technology. He has served as a specialist adviser to the House of Commons Information Select Committee inquiry on ICT and public participation in Parliament, as a member of the Puttnam Commission on parliamentary communication with the public and as chair of the Electoral Reform Society's Independent Commission on Alternative Voting Methods.

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## Preface

A persistent imbalance between attention to macro-level trends and forces and micro-level situations and experiences characterises much social science scholarship. Randall Collins's important observation that 'sociological concepts can be made fully empirical only by grounding them in a sample of the typical micro-events that make them up'<sup>1</sup> too often goes unheeded, as sweeping currents of systemic and structural effects are meticulously chronicled to the exclusion of situated phenomenologies of sensation and affect. Rarely has this been more evident than in the study of elections, which have tended to focus upon vast quantifiable entities, such as electorates, majorities, constituencies and swings, rather than the lived and felt experiences of voters. This is understandable: political science, and its strange subculture, psephology, have been mainly preoccupied by instrumental questions: Who wins and loses? How do campaigns succeed or fail? How do the numbers stack up? Whether or not one agrees with Larry Bartels's disparaging reflection that 'it would be fruitless to deny that a good deal of voting research consists of dreary minutiae utterly devoid of any broader political significance',<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Collins, R. (1981) 'On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology', *American Journal of Sociology*, 86:984–1014.

<sup>2</sup> Bartels, L. (2001) 'An Agenda for Voting Research' in Katz, E. and Warshel, Y. (eds), *Election Studies: What's Their Use?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 59–82.

there surely is a sense in which the act of voting as described in most election studies is stripped of its cultural vitality, leaving the individual voter as a disembodied cog in a vast political counting machine. This book sets out to encounter voters on new terms; to explore their memories, practices, anxieties, hopes, uncertainties and embarrassments as if these really mattered.

A study of how voters feel must address the two-sidedness of feeling. We are made to feel certain ways by situations in which we find ourselves. We feel our way through situations, reshaping them by our touch. How voters are made to feel and how they feel their way are matters of democratic sensibility. Making sense of such sensibility entails disacknowledging the taken-for-granted routines that surround the ballot box and observing the performance of voting as if it were a strange and exotic ritual. Only through the blur of unfamiliarity can the unexpected contours of the seemingly self-evident become truly vivid.

At the normative core of the analysis set out in the following pages is the assumption that, like any other complex communicative act, the expression of preferences calls for affective investment. The act of voting is not simply a statement of what people want, but a performance of who *the people* are. Before ‘we want’ there must be a plausible ‘we’ capable of exerting democratic autonomy. Democracy in this sense is an inherently creative project, the success of which depends upon a certain mode of sensibility. I suggest in the following pages that at its best such democratic sensibility is interruptive and improvisational rather than citational and repetitive. As Melanie White has put it, thinking about citizenship in terms of creative acts ‘forces us to consider those “openings” where citizens break or destabilize the bonds of habitual activity, and in so doing unleash a creative energy’.<sup>3</sup> Such ‘openings’ have been conspicuously visible in historical situations – some very recent – where hitherto disenfranchised people have asserted their right to hold social powers to account. These moments of political interruption constitute what

<sup>3</sup> White, M. (2008) ‘Can Acts of Citizenship Be Creative?’ in Isin, E. and Nielsen, G. (eds), *Acts of Citizenship*. New York: Zed Books, pp. 44–56.



Engin Isin calls ‘ruptures in the given’.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the experience of electoral democracy as a citational routine, embedded deeply in the given, is the main empirical focus of this study.

The research upon which this book is based emerged from the Road to Voting project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. My partners in this project – Vanalyne Green, Steve Bottoms, Bryan Davies, Brenda Hollweg and Irena Bauman – were a source of support and inspiration. Valentina Cardo, who was my research assistant during the first phase of the study, played a key role not only in setting up the interviews reported in Chapters 4 to 7, but also in sustaining my confidence in the idea of thinking about voters as people with stories to tell. I am grateful to Kate Percival for transcribing the interviews. Ben and Mimi and the LookleftLookright theatre company, who produced the play *Counted* based on the interviews I conducted, provided me with some fascinating insights into the ambiguities of the text. Above all, I am grateful to the sixty interviewees who contributed their time and thought to this research. In Chapter 3 I reflect upon the problematics of the interview as a technique for extracting raw experience. But here I want to acknowledge the generosity of the people who agreed to speak with me and express my sincere hope that this book will not in any way add to injuries of misrepresentation they might feel.

Every book is founded upon cumulative intellectual debt. Much of this is acknowledged implicitly by the many references to works of great scholars within this text. Other debts arise from the pleasure of direct conversation with friends and colleagues over the years. Richard Allan, Henrik Bang, Jay Blumler, David Butler, John Corner, Shelagh Diplock, Irving Rappaport and Mathew Taylor have all helped me to think differently about democracy; my colleagues and students at the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds have offered me an environment in which creative thought is the norm; Lew Bateman and his colleagues at Cambridge University Press have

<sup>4</sup> Isin, E. (2008) ‘Theorising Acts of Citizenship’ in Isin, E. and Nielsen, G. (eds), *Acts of Citizenship*, New York: Zed Books, pp. 15–43.

impressed me with their commitment to the publication of books containing ideas rather than bullet points; and Bernadette Coleman has shared with me a depth of insight and intuition that never ceases to amaze me. I am full of appreciation to all of these people, but they are not responsible for my worst arguments or least comprehensible phrases in the pages that follow.