



NUGGET

Election by Ballot

Summary: The origins and practice of balloting.

Click on the reference numbers within the text to jump to the relevant reference.

Freemasonry is said to be '*... a social and moral institution that undertakes to build a symbolic Temple of which its members are the living stones;... it is obvious that the Craft must exercise every precaution lest unfit men weaken its walls*'.¹ Arguably, the sentinel that guards the Lodge and maintains its stability is the ballot box.

We also know that idea of 'blackballing' began in Georgian London, continued throughout the 19th century and beyond.² Though balloting was in use in Lodges in the 18th century and formed part of the 'Old Charges'. A ballot on any petition, must be strictly secret and inviolable, so that no one present will know how any other Brother had voted. It is a process prescribed by set of rules set out in the *Book of Constitutions*:³

- Such that each voter casts a single black or white ball,⁴ or drops a ball into a separate 'yes' or 'no' drawer within the 'ballot-box'.⁵
- An observer may see who votes, but cannot how they have voted.
- Following the vote, the box is opened and the outcome revealed.
- Those who pass are, '*...for all time to come, ... admitted into full and free fellowship with his brethren*'.⁶

The principle behind it, is to preserve harmony and exclusivity by ensuring that there is unanimous, or near-unanimous, agreement as to whether a candidate is acceptable to the majority of the members.

*'However, balloting is not a modern invention, it was used in China some 2000 BCE, to decide upon a matter of life or death, i.e. 'by a count of the black over the white it was so decided among the nobles that the prince would be separated from his head'; resonating with a similar quotation from the Rabbinical system, 'a man's life shall hang in the scales between the black and the white.'*⁷

Balloting was also a feature of Greek⁸ and Roman life, used by citizens and jurors alike.⁹ As evidenced by a wine cup from the 5th century, depicting a vote made at the height of the Trojan wars, to determine which of two competing heroes, Ajax or Odysseus, should be awarded the armour of the fallen warrior Achilles. Those entitled to vote, placed a pebble into a separate jar which was then emptied into a pile, to see whose was the highest. Ajax lost, and in the frieze around the cup, you can see him grasping his head in despair, before falling on his sword. The story shows us that even a brave and honourable man's fate lies in the balance of 'public opinion'.



*Ballot box from the Lutine Lodge No.3049.
© Museum of Freemasonry*

So, sometimes ‘secrecy’ can over-ride a basic tenet of Freemasonry, ‘respect and fairness’. No one man should be able to ‘hide behind the ballot’ and thereby ‘*work a hardship on a man apparently worthy of being taken by the hand as a brother*’¹⁰ and to use the ballot as an instrument of private spite, or vindictiveness, ‘*... it crushes not only him at whom it is aimed but him who casts it*’ and ‘*Ill used, it drops into the heart and blackens it.*’ This caution is perfectly enunciated in the *Handbook of Masonic Law of New York*, which states:

‘Brethren, you are about to exercise one of your most sacred rights as a Master Mason. Before you cast your ballot, I would remind you that it is important that you act in the best interests of Masonry. You must not allow personal prejudices or private piques and grudges to influence your ballot. You are to consider only the moral qualifications of the petitioner. There must be none among us who would cast a blemish on the Lodge and the whole Fraternity by balloting for an unworthy petitioner or by rejecting a worthy applicant’.

What is more, to do so challenges the views of the candidate’s proposer and seconder, and overrides the opinion of the Committee and the Worshipful Master. It does nothing to promote harmony.

And so, Brethren, the system we use to determine Masonic matters is one that has stood the test of time. Whenever a ballot is cast, let us be confident that the choices we make are just that, assures the successful recipient of our ‘blessing and trust’.

Endnotes

1. Haywood, H.L., (1923), *‘The Ballot’ in Symbolical Masonry: An Interpretation of the Three Degrees*, George H. Doran Co., New York
2. 1770: *‘The Duchess of Bedford was at first black-balled, but is since admitted.’* (1862), *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany: With Interesting Reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte*, Second Series, Vol I, p.262 Richard Bentley, London; *‘I shall make a note to blackball him at the Athenaeum.’*, Benjamin Disraeli, (1826), *Vivian Grey*, Vol II, p.148; Oxford English Dictionary; <https://wordsmith.org/words/blackball.html>; The rules of election to the ‘Travelers Club’, Dickens, Charles Jr. (1882) *Dickens’s Dictionary of London, 1882 (fourth year) : an unconventional handbook*, p.273, Macmillan, London.
3. *United Grand Lodge of England Constitutions*, (2019), Rules 49, 159, 160, 163–166, The United Grand Lodge, London.
4. Many years ago, in the early days of Freemasonry in England, the lighting in Lodge rooms was very poor. Candlelight was the best that the lodge could offer. So, to clearly identify colours within the ballot box was, at best, very difficult for some members; dirty/grubby white balls, or even worn and tainted black balls were a challenge. A member drawing forth a ball from the box to get a closer look at the colour was in danger of disclosing many a ballot. In desperation, measures had to be taken, so it was decided to cut square cubes and paint them black.
5. Specialist Ballot Boxes were first used in the late 18th/early 19th century, by many organisations; including Freemasons.
6. Winning, T. G., *The Ballot*, Hawick Lodge No.111, www.masoniclibrary.org.au/research/list-lectures/66-the-ballot.html
7. Radlein, Arthur D., (1999), *Election By Ballot*, Alfonso Serrano (Ed)
8. The English word, ‘ostracized’, comes from the practice used in ancient Greece wherein one was banished or cleared according to the casting of the shells called ‘ostraka’.
9. It was the ultimate people power and the Greek words Demos (people) and Kratos (force or power) entered our language as ‘democracy’. Professor Paul Cartledge (2014), *The Democratic Experiment*, https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/greeks/greekdemocracy_01.shtml [Accessed 11.07.19]
10. *The Black Cube* in *Short Talk Bulletin*, Vol. VII, November 1929

Click on the first letter of the reference to return to the relevant point within the text.



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*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

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Acknowledgement:

UGLE gratefully acknowledges Graham Murphy and Paul Harper as the originators of this document and for their permission to publish it in this form.

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