

Voting

Voting [*Stemme, Ballotation, Votum* – noun; *stemme* — verb]

From Old Danish *stæm(m)æ* (noun) and *stemmelse, stemming, stemning* (verbal nouns). Both seem to go back to Middle Low German, *stemme, stemne, stimme* and *stemmen*, though the noun is widely attested in Germanic languages. The base, lexical meaning in Danish is voice; letting your voice ring out, be heard. Qualified, it means voicing one's opinion, making one's views known, giving one's consent. It's related to the Danish *bestemme*, decide or determine, and most likely to *Stævne* as well (Old Danish, *stefnæ*, Old Norse, *stefna*) which means gathering, negotiation meeting. *Ballotation* simply means a ballot and comes from the French *balloter*, which refers to the procedure of using black and white balls to decide a vote. *Votum* means a ballot or election too, or the written or oral statement meant to influence people to cast their vote in a certain way. It's a loanword from Latin where it had clear religious overtones again, meaning solemnly swear, taking an oath.¹

The semantic range of the words Kierkegaard uses is quite broad then, echoing a rich political culture and history. This can be schematized in the following way: Actual participation in deliberating, determining, and ratifying

Published in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15, tome VI, Emmanuel, S. M., McDonald, W. & Stewart, J. (eds.) (Ashgate, 2015): 229-34.

Author's version. Please do not quote or cite.

¹ *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, online edition (<http://ordnet.dk/ods/>).

policies or laws (*i*), judging or criticizing these publicly (*ii*), taking an oath for government service (*iii*), casting a vote (*iv*). As far as we can tell pre-state Denmark (before c. 900 A.D.) had a mixed system of government,² meaning that a chieftain or king usually took the lead in public affairs but since his authority or power wasn't meant to be absolute he always had to rely on the active support of the aristocracy and the common people. The public arenas for this mutual trust were deliberative and general assemblies. Every free man who could carry a weapon basically had the right to attend the latter. Even if only the King and the aristocrats could speak on matters of policy and law here, ordinary people had a voice too, making their judgment heard by shouts of approval or dissent (cf. (*i*)).³ With state-formation and the coming of Christianity there's an ideological shift towards absolute monarchy, but the Danish king remained quite weak for a long time and still had to rely a great deal on the consent of his subjects. Representative assemblies were set up, a state assembly (*Rigsdag*) above all, with broad veto powers and the participation of all estates of the land (church, nobility, ordinary people). Peasant farmers and artisans remained free for a long time therefore, enjoying a political and economical standing unheard of even by Western European standards. It's only after the Reformation and with the emergence of the Modern bureaucratic state really (c. 1600-1800 A.D.) that Denmark turns into an absolute monarchy, with the Danish king becoming one of

² See A. R. Meyers, *Parliaments and Estates in Europe to 1789*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. 1975, for the general political trajectory of Europe and Denmark.

³ Cf. also Tacitus, *Germ.* c. 11, 40.

the most absolute rulers in all of Europe (cf. *(iii)*).⁴ By this time, however, the Enlightenment sets in and events out in Europe are starting to put pressure on the Danish Crown to allow freedom of the press (cf. *(ii)*) and universal male suffrage (cf. *(iv)*). This leads to the establishing of constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary system in 1849, making Denmark into one of the most liberal democracies in Europe at that time (cf. *(i)-(iv)*). This is the Denmark of Kierkegaard's lifetime, a society and culture he remained largely at odds with as we'll see.

You don't find a fully thought-out concept of voting in the Kierkegaardian corpus. The words appear most often in the *Nachlass* by far. A quick survey reveals a negative and even disparaging take on the notion and practice of voting itself, as well as most of its semantic range. By cross-referencing "voting" with words like "The Numerical", "The Majority", and "Democracy" one gets a sense of *why* that is: Voting stands opposed to single individuality (1). The most eloquent attack is found in his review of the *Two Ages* however. Here Kierkegaard charges contemporary society with being worldly-wise and shallow in its thinking and for lacking true passion. He blames Modern, representational government and the rise of the public and the printing press for this general lack of spirit, all of which are tied up with voting (2). Kierkegaard thinks active citizenship and single individuality cancel each other out somehow, and he seems to have preferred

⁴ See also Philip S. Gorski, "The Protestant Ethic and the Bureaucratic Revolution: Ascetic Protestantism and Administrative Rationalization in Early Modern Europe", in *Max Weber's 'Economy and Society'*, ed. by Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski, and David M. Trubek, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005, pp. 267-296.

going back to absolute monarchy instead. This bent for personal, non-reciprocal ties over public ones also comes out well in his ethico-religious writings (3). What the Kierkegaardian corpus is trying to do basically is to criticize or else get beyond the Danish—European—political tradition. This raises the question of what his stance towards politics actually is (4).

(1) *The Journals, Papers, Notebooks*: If we turn to the places where voting is mentioned, we see the uses are all negative (or else literary or reporting only).

(a) Truth isn't decided by mass vote or public opinion, but by individuals basically.⁵

(b) Nothing infinite, nothing of real weight and significance in fact, can ever be settled this way.⁶

(c) There's no real learning or character formation that happens by discussion or balloting either.⁷

(d) Voting is a form of dispersion, a nonsensical (*Nonsens*) way of reaching a decision (*Afgjørelses Middel*).⁸ To think one can achieve anything by voting is irresponsible (*Uforsvarligt*).⁹

(e) To deny any of this or to submit real matters to majority judgment is to confuse and externalize everything. Truth is exchanged for mere need and gain;¹⁰ majority rule turns into a

⁵ SKS 20, 127 / KJN 4, 127-8; SKS 24, 224/ JP 4, 4875.

⁶ SKS 17, 295 / KJN 1, 286-7; SKS 24, 224, 227, 230-1 / JP 4, 4875, 4199, 4201.

⁷ SKS 24, 224-5/ JP 6, 6728; SKS 24, 256 / JP 4, 4208.

⁸ SKS 23, 246; SKS 24, 239-40 / JP 4, 4203.

⁹ SKS 24, 224-5 / JP 6, 6728.

¹⁰ SKS 23, 59-60 / JP 1, 986.

kind of idolatry—evil. The Christian has a positive duty to stay away from all this.¹¹

There's a general slide here (a)-(d) that's kind of hard to track. It's difficult to see how (e) follows too. What is it about voting, exactly, that makes it so trivial yet highly dangerous at the same time?

(f) Voting is based on the principle of multiplicity or number (*Det Numeriske*), which means rule by the majority (*Majoriteten*) and the crowd (*Mængden*). Where there are many, there is relativity. This is directly opposed to the single individual.¹²

(g) Democracy (*Demokratiet, Folkeregjeringen*) has multiplicity as its basic, organizing principle. This means the downfall of everything great, everything holy. The demand for positive participation and recognition from everybody makes it the most tyrannical form of government, certainly the most void of spirit (*aandløseste*).¹³ Democracy is the true image of hell.¹⁴

It's tempting to see all this as a piece of hyperbole: To take Kierkegaard's negative comments about voting and majority rule (a)-(g) as a healthy corrective

¹¹ SKS 23, 37-38.

¹² SKS 20, 371-2 / KJN 4, 371-2; SKS 24, 97 / JP 4, 4190.

¹³ SKS 20, 371-2 / KJN 4, 371-2; *Pap.* VIII A 557 / JP 4, 4144. Cf. SKS 7, 563 / CUP 1, 620-1.

¹⁴ *Pap.* VIII A 557.

to mixing up politics with either morality or religion, or as a warning perhaps against giving clear priority to the former over the latter two in our lives. This guarding against the tyranny of majority *opinion* as well as majority rule makes good liberal sense and Kierkegaard is one of the first Modern thinkers to do this actually. There's still a sense in which voting *is* disparaged here though, indeed political life as a whole (cf. (i)-(iv)).

(2) *Two Ages*: The same deep misgivings are found here, a work also written under his real name. First we get a brilliant lesson on the dangers of Modern, representative rule:

(a) There's a real difference between reflection (*Reflexion*) or deliberation (*Overveielse*) on the one hand, and decision (*Afgjørelse*) and action (*Handling*) on the other. This must always be kept in mind.¹⁵

(b) Every form of reflection or deliberation that doesn't lead to real decision and action isn't only an abstraction, but a kind of evasion and dodging of real, individual responsibility.¹⁶

(c) Modern democracy is based on representation, which means it tends to restrict the scope for real decision-making and action on the part of the many, the ordinary citizens.¹⁷

(d) This is closely tied to the rise of the public (*Publikum*) and a printing press (*Pressen*) devoted to public opinion (*Publikums Mening*). Both the public itself and its opinions are abstractions that tend to foster

¹⁵ SKS 8, 62-6, 74 / TA, 64-8; 77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ SKS 8, 66-7, 72-3, 76 / TA, 68-9, 74-5, 79.

calculation (*Beregning*); a worldly-wise (*Forstandighed, Klogskab*) and at bottom *irresponsible* way of thinking and behaving.¹⁸

(e) This leads to a general leveling (*Nivellering*) of all meaningful distinctions again. The tearing-down of the wall between the public and the private spheres isn't only damaging to government, but to real learning and character formation as well.¹⁹

(f) It's the reciprocal recognition (*gjensidig Anerkjendelse*) underlying this kind of shallow, shared deliberation (*gjensidig Klogskab*) that's to blame for all this.²⁰

(g) That and the purely numerical, arithmetic way of gauging public opinion and deciding things in general.²¹

The reason Kierkegaard is highly critical of Modern democracy then is that it confuses key distinctions in human life and that it tends to encourage irresponsibility (cf. (1e) over). If it's objected that this might be true of the masses perhaps but that their representatives still have room for real decision-making here and therefore for genuine reflection or deliberation as well, then Kierkegaard would answer back: Since they're ultimately bound by public opinion and the decision of the voters, they tend to hide or avoid real authority and leadership. So

¹⁸ SKS 8, 66ff. / TA, 68ff.

¹⁹ SKS 8, 80ff. / TA, 84ff.

²⁰ SKS 8, 69 / TA, 72.

²¹ SKS 8, 80, 95ff. / TA, 84, 100ff.

their deliberation is bound to be shallow as well.²² This is a deep and original point about Modern democracy. Irresponsibility it seems is a structural trait about representational rule. It's no secret that it's voting that lies at the root of all this for Kierkegaard. That's also why he seems to think you can't have more authentic forms of public reason under this form of government either (cf. (i)-(ii)).

(3) *The Ethico-Religious Writings*: To get a sharper sense how that's a given for Kierkegaard, we need to link this up with his thoughts on the human being in general. Why is it that more authentic forms of deliberation and active citizenship can't be combined with a system of government based on voting? The quick answer:

(a) Because there's no such thing as positive or real reciprocity among humans.²³ Reciprocity is fake, or only acceptable in a Pickwickian sense. Voting assumes the contrary, which is why it's the root of all evil for Kierkegaard.

(4) *Kierkegaard and the Political*: It would seem that insofar as democracy is based on voting it's not a legitimate form of government in Kierkegaard's eyes. It's hard to see how the new-fangled parliamentary democracy of 1849 in Denmark or the Liberal democracy we have today—or any democracy we can imagine for that matter—can be kept or reformed if Kierkegaard is right. One gets the sense it's the very mutuality of the trust itself, and the freedom and equality of

²² SKS 8, 100ff. / TA, 106ff.

²³ This is always assumed, but never argued, in the Kierkegaardian corpus. [See also Narve Strand, "World that Matters", *In the Shadow of Kierkegaard*, ed. by Roman Kralik et al., Toronto, Acta Kierkegaardiana 2011]

active citizens that goes with it, that troubles Kierkegaard most. It's this he thinks has led to the present order of things, and which stands in the way of a more single, inward form of human existence. That's why a preference for absolute monarchy is in the cards, being that form of government which has the least amount of citizen participation and which isn't based on voting, allowing thereby for the maximum amount of privacy to its subjects.²⁴ The ideal for Kierkegaard, it seems, would be a world without politics.

To sum up: The notion and practice of voting is tied up with political participation, public deliberation, and office-holding. It's a purely extensive, inauthentic means of reaching decisions for Kierkegaard; being based, he thinks, on an illusory idea of positive, reciprocal freedom and equality. At best it tends to foster shallow reflection and irresponsibility. At worst, it simply levels the distinction between the public and the private spheres. This means it's directly opposed to single individuality (and to religious life). Voting is the organizing principle in a democracy, which makes it the worst form of government from a religious existentialist point of view. The ideal would be a world where voting, citizen politics itself, played little or no part. Absolute monarchy then is the best form of government to live under for a Christian.

²⁴ SKS 7, 563/ CUP 1, 620; *Pap.* VIII A 557 / JP 4, 4144.

See also: common man; crowd, the/public, the; decision/resolve; individual;
law; leveling; politics; press, the/journalism; Protestantism/Reformation; society;
state, the; truth; will.

Narve Strand