

VILLAGE VIEW

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If you'd been planning to be out-of-town this past November 2, Election Day, would you have requested an absentee ballot? I was, and I did. It's not a complicated procedure.

You call the Town Clerk's office, give your name and address, and ask that an application for an absentee ballot be sent to you. When it comes a few days later, you fill out and return the application. A few weeks before Election Day you receive your ballot, a bent paper clip to use as a punch, complete instructions, and a return envelope.

The instructions say you should mark your ballot only in the presence of a Notary; while the Notary must be aware you are voting, he is not supposed to watch, influence your choices, nor discuss your decisions. With the bent paper clip, you punch holes in the ballot opposite the names of candidates you want elected. You do the same to answer referendum questions. The Notary fills out his affidavit and signs. He is not permitted to charge for this service.

Then you place your ballot in the envelope provided, affix postage, and drop it in the mail. Simple? Sure. That's how it's supposed to be.

Now let's see what can happen if you're disabled and need an absentee ballot because you can't get to the polls. Suppose you're laid up or crippled with arthritis. If you're housebound, someone (perhaps a political party member) may bring your ballot to your house. Unless he, himself, is a Notary, he will bring one along to attest to your vote.

Picture this scene. There you are, say your leg is in a cast. You can't get around easily even at home. You must use your walker to answer the knock at your door. On the doorstep stand two people, only one of whom you know; the other is introduced as a Notary. They've brought your absentee ballot. You, of course, invite them in. Not only are you happy to have your ballot, you're glad to see a couple of friendly faces.

The three of you sit at the kitchen table. They produce your ballot. If you have questions, they are ready to answer them. You look at your ballot, read the instructions, chat about the questions and the candidates.

A kitchen table doesn't provide much privacy; what's more, your company is more than willing to share their opinions and suggest what yours should be, as well.

"Jane Jones is running for re-election...she's held her job since she got out of high school. Wouldn't you think it time someone else had a shot at it?"

"The bottle bill? If that goes through a lot of people might lose their jobs."

"The death penalty? I hope no innocent person ends up on Death Row if they bring back the death penalty."

"Nuclear weapons freeze? Just what all those Commies want!"

What's going on here around the kitchen table? Well, it's not Democracy-in-Action, that's for sure. The voter isn't getting a chance to mark his ballot in secret. Neither is he making up his own mind. He's being influenced by the two people sitting a few feet away, watching what he does with his bent paper clip, watching where his punch marks go.

What's happening isn't exactly coercion; the voter isn't browbeaten or threatened. No. But neither is he making his free choice. He's being swayed to vote for candidates he might not choose were he alone. He's coaxed to support a question he might otherwise vote against.

Does the scene described really happen? Believe it. This does happen; it happened in this last election and will probably happen in the next one.

If you think about it, you can see how easy it would be. A lonely shut-in welcomes visitors, almost any visitors, and most particularly, friendly visitors doing him a favor. In return, he's anxious to please them. Furthermore, when they enter his home, they become his guests. As host, he feels an obligation to be cordial, even agreeable to their suggestions. He allows himself to be cajoled; in so doing he allows himself to be disenfranchised.

Once his ballot is marked and notarized, the visitors prepare to leave. They offer one final favor. They will turn in his ballot. And they take it away with them. Do they turn it in? Maybe. They certainly will if the voter succumbed to their blandishments.

When they've gone, the citizen may wonder how the episode came about as it did, may realize his secret ballot has been denied him. He may feel resentment that he was deprived of his rights. If he does, is he going to say so? Of course not. To admit he was duped would be an embarrassment to him.

He thinks to himself, "Well, it won't make any difference in the final outcome, anyhow. My one vote doesn't count for much." Thus self-comsoled, he keeps quiet. A natural inclination; one we can all understand.

On the other hand, many an election, especially at the local level, has been won by a handful of voters. And a ballot mis-cast is not only a vote for an unwanted candidate, it's a lack of a vote for the one of choice. Every vote of this kind is really two ballots gone astray. multiply this by the many absentee ballots cast, and you begin to see why someone might take the time and trouble to bring shut-ins their absentee ballots.

Is this the American system is action?

Prior to elections, campaigns run hot and heavy. All candidates and their supporters do everything possible to convince citizens to vote for them. Wild promises, ones that can't possibly be kept, are made. Groundless accusations are hurled at opponents by all candidates. The citizen must sort truth from fiction to determine the best man for the job. The bottom line comes in the privacy of the polling booth. No campaigning is permitted within 400 feet of the polls. Not even husbands and wives know, for certain, how their spouses mark their ballots. Yet the disabled person, who casts an absentee ballot at home under the eyes of these kind and thoughtful visitors, has no such protection of his privacy.

How can such un-American practices be prevented? Perhaps by exposing them. Disabled and housebound citizens may be forewarned and better prepared to deal with the situation when it arises in the future. If you fit the description, plan ahead to handle your voting properly. Every registered voter gets a sample ballot in the mail. Before your ballot arrives, decide where you stand on each question and each candidate. Mark your choices on the sample ballot, based on your own opinions, and keep the sample ballot handy.

When your ballot is delivered, seat your visitors where they cannot supervise your vote. With your sample ballot as a guide, transfer your choices to the punch card. You need not respond specifically to any discussion of the issues. And you need not be discourteous: simply excuse yourself for the few minutes it takes to vote. Should your visitors offer to deliver your ballot, thank them, but hold into it and give it to your mailman or a disinterested person to mail for you.

Your right to vote is precious and worth far more than the 20 cents you must pay for postage.