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## Vote: The Final Secret?

It's maybe the only aspect of American life that remains secret, inaccessible, something we maintain a rigorous politeness about even as we leave the polls. After we huddled over our ballots with pen or pencil, or pushed the buttons on an electronic machine, we left the sanctity of the metal partitions, or the curtains of the booth, and faced the people waiting.

But no one jumps up and down and says who they voted for. We don't do that. We walk out with our sticker, which doesn't say I Voted for McCain or I Voted for Obama or anything else except: I Voted, with an American flag rippling over the words.

And that's all anyone needs to know, unless you tell them.

Think about it -- in contemporary America, with YouTube and blogs and Jerry Springer and Dr. Phil, with people who spill about everything from their daily diet to their sex lives to their innermost feelings about total strangers, this is the sole time when we bow to secrecy.

And in the ceaseless polling, with considerations of race, age, party affiliation, and regional preferences, everyone knows damn well that we are absolutely alone in the voting booth, with no one to influence us, monitor us, yell at us, or even glimpse what we do. Crazy, right? I've always told my children that Americans will tell you pretty much anything, but that convention dictates that we don't like to talk money or politics. "Huh?" they used to say, and I used to break it down: "Never ask anyone how much they make or who they voted for. That's private."

We are less alone when we are at the bank teller window, or even giving birth. (I never felt less alone than when in labor -- hooked up to monitors, subjected to constant inspection.) But in the voting booth, we make our mark in total secrecy. People who say they would never vote for a Republican might actually do so, and people who have told pollsters that they would never vote for a black man might actually do so. With no one to ever know - not spouse, minister, child, or best friend.

Election night numbers are huge and vague and never spill specifics, unless voters are willing to spill.

This morning at 7:08 am, I voted alone for the first time in twenty years. I walked the four blocks to my polling place at a local church without my usual entourage - at least one or two kids and a dog. I have always voted after work and school, walking in balmy weather with my children first in strollers, then holding my hand, and finally cruising along with eyes rolling. But I was worried about long lines, so I went in the morning.

My eldest voted, for the first time, in Ohio where she attends college. My middle kid is a high school senior who was off to school, and my thirteen year old was terminally grumpy. It was raining. I didn't bring the dog.

Our southern California neighborhood is a microcosm of America, all packed tightly into narrow streets of old wooden bungalows, stucco pre-War homes, and a few new houses. I passed manicured gardens, dirt yards, houses of two stories and houses of 800 square feet.

At 6:50, there were already 32 people lined up in the rain outside the church, and of course, many of us recognized each other. Some people are those I see almost daily, and some I see every two or four years at this place, as is common on election day here in America. And we visit happily but circumspectly. I realized this morning, amid our chatter of retirement and work and children, that we never, never, talk politics here. No one even jokes about it. I saw my friends and neighbors dressed for work - contractors, teachers, secretaries, office workers, realtors, and many others I don't know - and plenty of retirees. The elderly woman who always has trouble finding my name still did. I took my ballot, entered the flimsy silver walls of my "booth," and voted.

That was it.

I waved goodbye to a few neighbors, people smiled the post-election noncommittal and American polite smile, and then I lingered in the doorway to get my sticker. My ex-husband walked up then, exhausted after a night shift at the juvenile prison, wearing his correctional officer uniform, and I said, "Talk to you later," knowing he would call me in an hour. He nodded, smiled the same polite smile, and ducked inside to visit with a neighbor who wanted to talk about the new addition to his bungalow. Even though this was a historic election for my ex-husband, as an African American man, a son whose father had just died two weeks prior and would miss voting in this election he had so looked forward to, we would never dream of speaking aloud who we voted for. No fist bumps, no nothing.

I walked home in the rain, carrying my sample ballot, the one I'd had rolled up in my pocket. I missed my father-in-law, who had only one rule: Everyone in this house votes. Everyone. Even though he's gone, his edict lives on.

And every time I walk home this way, I feel as though I've performed a sacred act, because I have - no one watching, as happens in other countries, and no one grilling me, because as Americans, we know better, and we might like having that feeling of utter secrecy in a nothing-held-back world. It's a small power, but that's what it is, I felt this morning for the first time. If I didn't choose to tell my children or co-workers what I'd done, I didn't have to. No explanations. Just my own hand, in the three-sided cave, with the studiously-averted gazes of the people in line behind me to write their own covert power.