

The County Election, 1852

The County Election pictures the American democratic system in progress. The story takes place in a small Midwestern town in the mid-nineteenth century, when the rituals of voting were still taking shape, particularly on the frontier. George Caleb Bingham, known as “the Missouri artist” for the state where he lived and worked, recognized the responsibilities as well as the rights of citizenship; and because he played an active part in Missouri politics, he gained a personal perspective on the contemporary electoral process. In *The County Election*, Bingham presents a raucous voting party as an enactment of democracy, bringing together a variety of residents in a rural community to make decisions for the common good.

In this crowded composition, Bingham suggests the inclusiveness of a democracy with representatives of every age and social stratum — except, of course, African Americans, who would not enjoy the right to vote until after the Civil War, and women, whose right to participate would not be recognized for another seventy years. The painting reveals other irregularities in the electoral system that would not be tolerated today. Because there was no system of voter registration, the man in red at the top of the courthouse steps swears on the Bible that he hasn't already cast a vote. Because there was no secret (or even paper) ballot, a voter calls out his choice to the election clerks behind the judge, who openly record it in a ledger. Because there were no restrictions on electioneering, the well-dressed gentleman behind the voter — evidently one of the candidates — is free to hand his card to citizens just before they cast their vote. Yet none of this appears to dull the spirit of the voting process.

The lack of a single dramatic focus in *The County Election* is an expression of the democratic ideal: all men appear as equals, with no one vote worth more than another. Several members of the electorate engage in serious discussion, perhaps debating the candidates' qualifications. Another group clusters around a newspaper, a potent tool of democracy. Nevertheless, Bingham seems to question the integrity of an election conducted so casually. In the left foreground, a portly man already sprawled in his chair accepts more hard cider from an African American precinct worker, presumably in exchange for a vote. Behind him, a well-to-do gentleman literally drags a slumping body to the polls as he casts a meaningful glance toward the candidate in blue. A figure beside the courthouse steps (directly below the man giving an oath) tosses a coin, as though the winner of this contest might as well be determined by luck (or money) as by an orderly election; and in the foreground, the actions of two boys, absorbed in a childhood pastime in which a knife thrown into the ground determines the winner, suggest that the political process is little more than a game of chance. More ominously, a tattered figure in the front right corner hangs his bandaged head, perhaps to imply that for all the apparent good will of the crowd, violence lies just beneath the surface.

Besides commenting on American electioneering in general, *The County Election* records a particular political event. As many of Bingham's contemporaries would have known, the painting depicts Election Day 1850 in Saline County, Missouri, when the artist himself was running for a place in the State Legislature. Bingham lost that election to E. D. Sappington, whom he represents as the unprincipled candidate in the shiny top hat. Sappington, with his workers, did try to buy votes with liquor, and because he was related to the judge and one of the clerks, the election's outcome naturally aroused suspicion. Bingham did not contest the results, but *The County Election* makes an obvious indictment of his political opponent. The artist himself makes an appearance in the picture as the figure in the stovepipe hat seated on the courthouse steps, attended by a friendly dog and two men in white hats who pause to look over his shoulder. Bingham's quiet concentration sets him apart from the crowd, and we can only wonder whether he is keeping track of the votes in order to tally them for himself, or sketching the unruly practices of a young democracy.



7-B George Caleb Bingham (1811 – 1879), *The County Election*, 1852. Oil on canvas, 38 x 52 in. (96.5 x 132.1 cm.). Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Mo., Gift of Bank of America.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this painting and notice the many different things people are doing.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Ask students to guess what is happening in this painting. Look for clues. It's Election Day, 1852.

Most of these people are voters.

Ask students to find these elements.

A white dog: *It is located in the center.*

A seated man in a top hat who might be sketching or writing: *He is located in the center — that's the artist.*

A man pouring drinks: *He is on the left.*

A man with a bandaged head and a horse and rider: *They are in the center distance.*

E | M | S

Where is this scene taking place?

It is located on the courthouse steps in a small Missouri town.

M | S

Ask students to describe how Bingham unified this scene so that many figures form a connected group.

He repeated shapes and colors and overlapped the bodies.

M | S

How did Bingham create an illusion of depth?

He made shapes overlap and made objects in the distance smaller. Parallel lines in the buildings and table slant up and get closer in the distance. Distant objects are much lighter and bluer.

INTERPRET E | M | S

Why are there no women in this scene?

American women could not vote in 1852.

E | M | S

Ask students to describe the different shapes of hats in this painting. What do the hats suggest about the occupations of these individuals?

The tall stiff hats with the small brims (top hats) probably belong to the politicians. Farmers and laborers wear hats with softer crowns and wider brims.

S

What message does Bingham give in this crowded scene about the election process in American democracy?

A whole community of men, from rich to poor, comes together to vote. Notice how no one figure is emphasized or made larger than others in this crowd. That suggests that all the votes are equal.

S

Have students compare this election scene with a contemporary American voting scene.

Today Americans vote with secret ballots in private booths rather than declaring their votes while surrounded by fellow citizens. Women and African Americans would be among the voters. Today campaigners are kept a legal distance from the actual polling place.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: American frontier; Jacksonian era

Historical Figures: Andrew Jackson; Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton; Lucretia Mott; Sojourner Truth; Lyndon B. Johnson

Civics: U.S. Constitution; elections (local, state, federal); Voting Rights Act of 1965; Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *Vote!*, Eileen Christelow (elementary); *Democracy in America*, Volume I (1835) and Volume II (1839), Alexis de Tocqueville (secondary); Susan B. Anthony's speech at her trial of 1873 (middle, secondary); *The Ballot or the Bullet*, Malcolm X (secondary)
Arts: American Realism; genre painting