



POLITICS AS USUAL

1680

Jersey Justice in the Early Days

1725

The Sheriff was in charge of elections. He appointed a clerk and inspector for each candidate and wrote down the names of each elector. The law of 1725 directed the Sheriff "to give public notice of the day and place of the election, and on the appointed day, between the hours of ten and twelve, proceed to the election," and "shall declare the choice upon the voters nor adjourn to any other place without consent of the candidates." The election continued "until all the electors had voted." If a defeated candidate questioned the result, he could examine the poll list by paying "a reasonable fee." If convicted, the briber and bribe-taker were deprived forever of the franchise or prohibited from holding public office. "Any person convicted, within a year, of drunkenness, certain 'named' immoralities, insolvency, or being a foole," was denied the vote.

Elections were "bitterly contested" and there are many instances on record of illegal voting, of violent tirades against the characters of the opponents of physical combats at the polls.

In East Jersey, only property owners could vote. Every voter was "required to own fifty acres of ground, or if living in boroughs, to own a house and three acres of attached land, or, in lieu of these, to have an estate of fifty pounds."

Under the Concessions of West Jersey, the Proprietors, freeholders and inhabitants, assembled on March 25, 1680, and chose "two able and

honest men, fit to government." Later, a full General Assembly of 100 freeholders was chosen. Under the Union of 1702, a freeholder could vote only if he owned "100 acres in his own right"; and, in the Instructions of 1709, this was increased to "1000 acres, or a personal estate of 500 pounds for members of the Assembly, and 100 acres, or personal estate of fifty pounds, for voters." The candidate must live in his voting district.

In East Jersey, the legislators were farmers or, in some cases, preachers "with little or no legal training." In 1683, the Assembly at Elizabeth-Town advised the Governor that they were going home to save "their crops of corn" which were in danger of "great damage and losse because of the wether being so wett." They said they would reconvene at "a fit and seasonable time." Then, when the country was "damnified that the deputies have not attended the writs wherewith they were summoned," the Assembly met and passed "a law fining each absentee ten shillings for each day he is wanting." Deputies living at a distance were empowered "to press any vessel, horse or man to be aiding for their passage."

Among the Quakers of West Jersey, law making, like the meeting for business, was a religious exercise. The Quaker form of worship encouraged thoughtfulness and a conscientious regard for human rights.

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