

## ARTICLES

# Never Mind the Ballots

## The Edible Ballot Society and the Performance of Citizenship

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*Matthew Hayes*

**Abstract:** During the 2000 Canadian federal election, members of the Edible Ballot Society (EBS) protested what they considered to be the “futility of electoral politics” by eating their ballots. This article argues that these actions, while illegal, were performances of citizenship intended to produce a creative rupture in the given definition of the Canadian state and electoral process. The analysis is informed by critical scholarship on protest and humor, and draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival and Engin Isin’s framework of “acts of citizenship” to situate the EBS protest as a form of prefigurative politics that is embedded in and yet challenges neoliberal discourse. The EBS action attempted to highlight the Canadian state’s refusal to accept its own emergence as an ongoing political project rather than a static entity, and was push-back against the proscribed voting process designed to open up new spaces for democratic reform.

**Keywords:** carnivalesque, citizenship, culture jamming, humor, performance, prefigurative politics, protest

During the 2000 Canadian federal election, predominantly at the polls in Edmonton, Alberta, members of a group known as the Edible Ballot Society (EBS) protested what they considered to be the “futility of electoral politics” by eating their ballots. The EBS members did not merely consume their ballots. Simply placing the ballots into their mouths and proceeding to masticate the paper into a pulp was clearly insufficient. Instead, they blended their ballots into refreshing smoothies, cooked them up into tantalizing stir-fries, and inserted them into ready-made



deli-style sandwiches. These “edible balloters” engaged in what they called “election jamming” in order to draw attention to what they saw as the “superficial differences” between political parties. According to the EBS website,<sup>1</sup> “voting is not only useless, it actually undermines genuine democracy by legitimizing an inherently undemocratic process.”

The EBS protests were, I advance, performances of citizenship that drew on humor and a sense of the carnivalesque. The Canadian government took these performances seriously. A number of the edible balloters were subsequently charged with crimes under the Canada Elections Act, according to which it is an offense to destroy a ballot. Ballots are routinely rejected during the count if they are spoiled in any way, such as when they are marked in the wrong area or when a voter leaves identifying information on it. As the Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on the 2000 election mentions, it was difficult to determine whether any of these rejected ballots “represented a deliberate act of electoral protest.” The report concluded, however, that the EBS was “one group [that] left no doubt of its intentions” (Kingsley 2001a: 84). In 2006, several years after the EBS became inactive, the top frequently asked question on Elections Canada’s website was: “Is someone allowed to eat a ballot?” (Taber 2006). The question was later removed, yet it serves as an indication of the impact of these performances.

Drawing upon Engin Isin’s framework of “acts of citizenship,” this article will explore the EBS protests as performative acts that constituted EBS members as citizens. For Isin, acts of citizenship *create* citizens. They are a “rupture in the given” (2008: 25). These acts of citizenship are not necessarily founded in law. Rather, “for acts of citizenship to be acts at all they must call the law into question and, sometimes, break it” (39). During general elections, the Canadian government provides a certain script it expects its citizens to follow: visit the polls and cast your ballot, and in so doing “exercise a democratic right that is key to the democratic process of government that generations of Canadians have fought to build” (Elections Canada 2017; see also CIC 2012: 30–32). The state leaves unsaid that one may in fact choose not to vote at all, or to try doing so in an unconventional way. The EBS pushed back against this official narrative. As they concluded after the event, “political dissenters who choose to challenge existing paradigms through non-formal channels (instead of writing letters to MPs) are treated on par with state conspirators or terrorists” (EBS 2002: 11). The edible balloters in their actions broke the law with the aim of challenging it and expanding its definition. They wished for more options in the voting process, options that would have allowed them to register their discontent with

the process itself, with the political leaders, and with the institutions these leaders helm. At the core of the EBS protests was an understanding of democracy as emergent and multifaceted, as coming into being *through* the ongoing actions of everyday citizens. In this sense, voting becomes performative, being an action that contributes to the continuous negotiation of democracy as well as the definition of citizenship.

It is a legal option in five provinces to decline a ballot (although not yet in federal elections), which is an acknowledgment that the voter sees no good choice in the available candidates (Bostelaar 2014; Kingsley 2001b). Marika Schwandt, one of the edible balloters charged for her protests, believed that this was still not enough: “For me, ‘declining’ didn’t register that I was opposed to the system in its entirety. It was just a nice way to say ‘No, thank you’ to the options presented. Not a way to express my unwillingness to participate in the farce, no matter who the candidates were” (Schwandt 2016). The option to decline a ballot may exist, but it is still illegal to spoil a ballot, and this includes eating it. Herein lie the questions that this article addresses: Why is it a crime to spoil a ballot? Out of what historical circumstances did the EBS protests arise, and with what social movements did they identify? What was the significance of the use of humor in ballot eating? What is the nature of the specific definitions of citizenship used by the EBS and the Canadian government?

This article draws together conventional case study methods with two further sources of data. First among these is archived material from the now defunct EBS website. Created in the late 1990s when the EBS first emerged, the website contained a wealth of text written by a variety of members and incorporated myriad ideas and viewpoints, some of which contradicted one another. The website was intended to serve as an umbrella for diverse opinions on how to organize politics and society, as well as a means to demonstrate that underneath the humor was a serious contention about the electoral process and what representation means (see Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014). The second source of data that I draw upon here comprises semi-structured interviews with two of the original edible balloters, Marika Schwandt and Jonathan Oppenheim. The interview with Marika and the interview with Jonathan were conducted in August and November 2016, respectively. These original interviews are a qualitative contribution used in this article to further elucidate the finer details of the case in tandem with archival material from the EBS website.

The EBS positioned itself as part of the anti-globalization movement that arose alongside the emergence of a neoliberal order in North

America, beginning especially in the 1980s and accelerating in the late 1990s (Gautney 2010). The journalist Susan Delacourt argues that a significant part of the process of globalization is the increasing marketization of politics, which is causing people to become disenchanted with democracy (2013: 14). In the case of the EBS, I suggest that its members were not disenchanted with *democracy*. Rather, they were disenchanted with the specific *politicians* and *institutions* within their democracy. Edible balloters did want democracy, as they defined it. They did not necessarily wish to completely opt out of the system but instead pushed for, as Neil Nevitte has written, new forms of political participation (1996: 55).

This article offers a historical analysis of EBS actions during the 2000 Canadian federal election. It analyzes the impact of small, carnivalesque actions such as those of the EBS on trajectories of political participation and considers those actions as acts of citizenship in their own right. I argue that while the actions of the edible balloters did not necessarily effect immediate substantive changes in the Canadian electoral process, they did have a lasting impact on “longer-term trajectories of participation” (Corrigall-Brown 2011) in Canadian politics. And this impact is related to both the act of citizen-creation that was generated through the “rupture of the given,” as noted above, and the deeper understanding of political participation that has been gained as time has passed.

A significant part of what made the EBS discussion impactful in the long term was the use of carnivalesque humor. 't Hart writes that while “humour in itself never changes circumstances” (2008: 7) it certainly contributes to making the unimaginable into reality (20). Humor can play a key role in social protest by solidifying existing collective identities, as well as by assisting in the communication of key messaging in order to bring others on side (18–19). One of the most effective ways in which humor might serve these goals is through the use of the carnivalesque. The semiotician and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes performance and the carnivalesque in the context of the feast, which has always been “linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man” (1984: 9). This understanding is similar to Isin’s articulation of the rupture, and this article suggests that the power of humor and its connection with the carnivalesque and with performance becomes especially acute when understood as an act of citizenship. The ballot feast of the 2000 Canadian election was a time of carnivalesque renewal, which derived its efficacy from the intersection of “grotesque” humor and the act of creating oneself as a certain kind of citizen.

## The Origins of the Edible Ballot Society

What would become the EBS had its origins in Vancouver, British Columbia, during the 1997 federal election. Victoria Scott and Jonathan Oppenheim, two University of British Columbia (UBC) students, shredded their ballots for an advance poll on 27 May (EBS 1998). In a press release that Oppenheim posted online on 5 February 1998, he stated, “We should not take the right to vote lightly, but democracy is more than just a ceremonious event which occurs once every five years.” Elections Canada responded to the destruction of the ballots by launching an investigation, stating that the act was unlawful. Later that year, in October 1998, Scott and Oppenheim were charged under Section 167(2)(a) of the Elections Act, which states, “No person shall willfully alter, deface or destroy a ballot.” The pair were told that they faced up to three years in jail.

However, almost two years after the incident, in May 1999, the charges were dropped with no reason forthcoming from Elections Canada (EBS 1999). Buoyed by the dropped charges, and intent on repeating the success of the 1997 ballot shredding, members of the newly formed Edible Ballot Society staged their own protest during the 2000 federal election. But this time, the protest was gastronomical. As Marika Schwandt put it in our interview, “it was a very ridiculous election with many people feeling like they were choosing between dumb and dumber.” Oppenheim launched the EBS website about a year before the 2000 election, and it contained a wealth of suggestions for how to best deal with the ballot. Ripping it, burning it, using it as toilet paper, dissolving it in acid, and rolling it into a “huge joint” and smoking it were all on the list, but the “favourite method” was, of course, eating it. The website listed more than half a dozen recipes, from “Ballot Tar Tar” to “Shake and Bake Politician.” An EBS news release dated 8 November 2000 was optimistic: “In the last Federal Election a few people were charged for destroying their ballots, but this year, there will be so many people eating ballots, that the momentum is expected to be unstoppable” (EBS 2000). Though the momentum during the 2000 election was not exactly unstoppable, there were certainly many more instances of ballot destruction than during the 1997 election. News coverage of the protests ranged from national (Taber 2006) to international (Fitzgerald 2013), and reports varied from several edible balloters being involved to hundreds of them being involved. By contrast, Jonathan Oppenheim (2016) estimated that there had been only about fifty people involved in the EBS’s activities, although “it was hard to know what

the numbers were,” as it “definitely became an exaggerated thing” (see also Hudema 2004: 112).

Despite the relatively small number of participants, Oppenheim (2016) suggested that what made the actions effective was media reportage on the humor of the situation:

Any time you use humour, you can be dismissed as angry and not taken seriously. You’ll be critiqued no matter what, but I think humour is what drove the news stories. The disproportionate reaction from the state also helped drive the story. They fell for it hook, line, and sinker. It made the story funnier that the state took it so seriously. It exposed them in a way that it wouldn’t have otherwise.

Just as it had in 1997, Elections Canada took action and charged the EBS members involved. It is unclear specifically which and how many members were involved, but at least Schwandt (2016) did recall in our interview “the police showing up at my house later that day to subpoena me to court. We retained a good lawyer, pro bono, and the charges were dropped.” It was not until September 2001 that a number of edible balloters were scheduled to appear in court to face the same charges that Oppenheim and Scott had faced in 1997 (EBS 2001). But while the charges this time landed the defendants in court, they were all ultimately dismissed for lack of evidence. The EBS had more popular support after the 2000 election than did Oppenheim and Scott earlier, which may have helped sway the dismissal in court. At the time, John Dixon (2002), president of the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, condemned the charges:

The harsh and punitive actions of Elections Canada in seeking to prosecute these people, who have done nothing more than seek to express their opinions and spark debate on a matter of public importance, are incomprehensible and unjustifiable. These prosecutions are part of what we see as a disturbing trend to use prosecutorial and judicial processes to silence legitimate dissent.

## **Contextualizing the Edible Ballot Society Protests: Deference and Neoliberalism**

Daniel T. Rodgers writes that “histories of the late twentieth century now routinely point to the Arab-Israeli War and Arab nations’ oil boycott of 1973 as a critical hinge point in global economic history” (2011: 9).

It was during the 1970s that the structure of social and economic life in North America began to shift, profoundly shaping the climate in which the 1997 ballot shredding and 2000 EBS protests took place. Jonathan Oppenheim, Marika Schwandt, and the others who protested during these two elections were reacting to changing trends in politics. These trends are related to both broad shifts in ideology—a move from the welfare state to neoliberal reform—as well as more specific shifts in the way politics was understood and discussed. Politics increasingly came to be defined by the rhetoric of free market choice, which is what Susan Delacourt refers to as “the tendency by all sides to treat politics as a shopping trip” (2013: 14). The historian Christopher Dummitt writes that the “key change under way [during the 1970s was] the ‘thinning out’ of social discourse in a wash of radical individualism” (2017: xv). Those on the political left felt the “egalitarian impulse for individual rights and the desire to overturn social constraints like conventional morality and prejudice,” which those on the political right transformed into “the radical individualism of neo-liberalism” (xvi).

Before the 1973 OPEC crisis, Canadian and American economic policy enjoyed a period of relative continuity. The rise of the Canadian welfare state during and after World War II reflected a consensus among political parties in Canada to provide universal services aimed at ensuring the welfare of the nation’s citizens: “For the first time it was acknowledged that the shortcomings of the economic system itself could result in, [for example], unemployment through no fault of one’s own” (McKeen and Porter 2003: 114). The provision of social services thus proliferated, creating an economic safety net which aimed to catch all who fell (Mulvale 2008).

However, with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, and the retrenchment of the Keynesian welfare state, a new approach to welfare policy began to form. The events of the 1970s precipitated an identity crisis, a period of “cultural anxiety and moral decline” into which a new ideology penetrated. “Long gone were [sic] the New Deal order of the 1930s to the 1960s and its confident use of an activist federal government” (Borstelmann 2012: 5). Rather than maintaining a policy of direct intervention, the federal government turned to a philosophy of *laissez-faire* exchange, which was consolidated in the passing of the Canada–US Free Trade Agreement of 1988. This change was based on a principle of individualism (a principle which, when it came to the notion of an economic safety net, tended to let people fall through the cracks into poverty and then blame them for the failure). Failure to thrive in the new marketplace became the individual’s own responsibility, a “sorting

out of people in what were seen as their natural socioeconomic levels by the operation of the free market” (Borstelmann 2012: 15).

The 1997 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, held in Vancouver, marked another critical hinge point for the edible balloters. It was a moment that reflected the consolidation of the neoliberal state in Canada, providing the backdrop to the 1997 election protests in which the EBS movement had its origins. Canadian politics had been substantially altered by neoliberal reform, and Oppenheim and the EBS set up as their target a newly formalized, marketized, and consumption-based democratic process, as was manifest at the time in voting, elections, and the political parties. As Oppenheim (2016) said,

part of the reason we did it was to contest the notion that democracy means a vote every four years. It felt at the time that [eating our ballots] was the most crazy [sic] thing to do. We were getting so much flak from people. They thought we were wasting our vote. But something like this would pass almost unnoticed now. There’s no institutional critique, just a critique of the particular moment or election.

Delacourt (2013) traces the history of the relationship between marketing and politics, and concludes that, with the rise of postwar consumerism, Canadians began to desire the same freedom of choice in their politics as was available in their shopping malls. Further, beginning in the 1970s, Delacourt notices a different trend in voting patterns. Rather than voting, as had historically happened, for one’s chosen political party, preferences shifted toward personality (see Blais et al. 2003). Allegiance to the political party of one’s parents and grandparents started to become a thing of the past, as emotional responses to specific leaders’ faces and voices captured voters’ imaginations. Edible balloters similarly picked up on this change. Referring to the 2000 election, the landing page of the EBS website stated:

This election will be annoyingly typical. The differences between the political parties are relatively superficial. They will set an agenda that reinforces the current power structure, while the broader issues of how we live will never be addressed. It doesn’t matter who you vote for, the government always gets in—the government being big business, and those who can afford to fund political parties or hire lobbyists. The elected party is just the changeable mask on the face of corporate power.

Neil Nevitte, in his analysis of the Canadian values change of the 1980s, refers to this broad shift in society and people’s attitudes as



the “decline of deference.” Those individuals raised during the affluent postwar period, without direct experience of the wars and depression, developed a very different set of values than did previous generations (Nevitte 1996: 12). These values manifested themselves in a seemingly paradoxical rise of an interest in politics accompanied by a decline in identification with political parties (replaced, as mentioned above, with a preference for individual politicians). Nevitte tries to explain this paradox by suggesting that citizens became “increasingly disenchanting with their elected representatives” because the latter helmed “vehicles for citizen representation” which operated “from principles that satisfy a shrinking proportion of the public” (1996: 54; see also Borstelmann 2012: 46). The EBS website made this clear under the heading “Links from hell.” Under this heading were listed links to each political party’s website, with each party being referred to with the EBS’s version of their name: “Progressive [*sic*] Conservative Party”; “The Big Cheese” (Liberal); “CRAP” (Canadian Alliance); “Bloc Heads” (Bloc Quebecois); and the “No Difference Party” (NDP). This is all to say, Nevitte writes, that citizens “hanker for newer modes of participation” (1996: 55), voting being only one, albeit the most widespread, of these modes. The ballot-eating protests exemplified this hankering. As stated on the landing page of the EBS website, “voting is really an insignificant act compared to the greater goal of creating authentic democracy. We need to participate in forging real communities through everyday acts of resistance and community building. A vote every couple of years is not democracy, it’s repressive. Get over it.”

A disillusion with Canada’s electoral democracy had been more broadly reflected in changing voter turnout rates and patterns in the country. Voter turnout has steadily declined since the 1980s, paralleling the rise of neoliberalism. It appears that much of the decline is among youth, new generations who are experiencing the ability to vote for the first time (Howe et al. 2005: 4). Again, the EBS fell neatly into this category. Oppenheim (2016) remarked that the “conversation about destroying ballots started because there was no option to protest it appropriately. A spoiled vote doesn’t apply to what we wanted to achieve.” Extending Nevitte’s analysis, Blais and Rubenson (2013) also suggest that the reason for this turnout is value change over the last several decades. New generations lack a sense of “political efficacy,” of the ability to effect change in one’s environment and specifically in politics. Blais and Rheault find in their recent study of voting opinions in British Columbia and Quebec that there is nearly a 50-50 split: about 45 percent of voters believe that their individual vote will make a difference, and

about 45 percent have “given up hope” (2011: 80). In the face of what is perceived to be a foregone conclusion—a vote for “the least offensive candidate in a roster of known liars” (EBS 2002)—many young voters are abstaining from the vote altogether. Or, in the case of the EBS, they are protesting it in other ways.

One way to analyze the EBS would be to follow Delacourt (2013) in arguing that the increasing marketization of politics is causing people to become disenchanted with democracy. My analysis of the EBS case, however, concludes to the contrary. Rather than a turn away from democracy, there has instead been a decline of deference to and confidence in authority and government institutions, accompanied by citizens and social movements hankering for newer modes of democratic participation in political life, which has manifested itself in a rise in protest behavior. It is ironic that the EBS, and the tactics that they have used to protest these changes in politics and society, had its origins in the very movement it was resisting. For without the shift to a neo-liberal state, which has as part of its philosophy a distrust of government—resulting in the marketization of politics—the rhetoric which the EBS espoused could find no target. Edible balloters ironically shared a similar distrust of government institutions while they lobbied for very different changes. As Dummitt writes:

these individualizing metaphors were taken up by those on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, albeit in different ways. For instance, the rise of neo-liberal market ideas and an attack on the welfare state and social-citizenship ideals in the 1970s actually shared a good deal in common with the radical anti-authoritarian politics espoused by those on the left at the same time. (2017: xv)

However, as Richard Day (2005) notes with his concept of the “hegemony of hegemony,” this is not so uncommon in movements such as this. As the next section explores, falling into the trap of reinforcing a system that one is attempting to resist or change is often difficult to avoid.

## **The Edible Ballot Society as a Movement**

### *Anarchism*

The 8 October 2001 issue of the *Alberta Report* ran a short article about the 2000 general election and the edible balloters charged the next year, stating:

As one might expect from their society's name, the protesters, who are anarcho-granola types opposed to the "centralized" electoral process, put their ballots in a blender with a banana and some soy milk, liquefied the concoction, and drank it down. Sounds harmless enough—a lot more harmless than voting Liberal—but one shudders to think of other uses to which ballot papers might be put if this sort of thing were permitted. (Cosh 2001: 5)

With the comical label of "anarcho-granola types," the now defunct right-wing publication was no doubt poking fun at the EBS. The characterization was not wholly inaccurate. The EBS did present itself as a type of anarchist organization. Press releases issued on the EBS website may also be found on other anarchist websites. The EBS's rhetoric of "the illusion of democracy" and calls for "defiance" in the pursuit of "forging real communities through everyday acts of resistance and community building," as stated on the landing page of its website, certainly strikes an anarchist chord.

There was a notable contradiction between EBS rhetoric and its members' actions during the 1997 and 2000 elections. The EBS website contained an "Alternatives" page that listed a number of member-suggested ideas for reforming the political process. Among these were "minor cosmetic reforms" such as "Darts not ballots" (which would replace ballot voting with throwing darts at a board) and "Sumo Wrestling" (requiring party leaders to wrestle their way to victory). But there were also less tongue-in-cheek ideas, including "Build our own alternative structures," which advocated building grassroots movements "where decisions are made through consensus and where everyone participates fully" in recognition of the "need to engage in the political process in ways other than voting." There was also "Form and encourage alternative media"—which decried the media's emphasis "on personalities ... and polls" and instead called for independent media that does not "cover the election as if it were the Kentucky Derby." Day calls alternatives like these "conscious attempts to alter, impede, destroy or construct alternatives to dominant structures, processes, practices and identities" (2005: 4). The EBS articulated a number of these alternative ideas in anticipation of the kind of criticism that those elsewhere on the political spectrum—such as the staff of the *Alberta Report*—might level at organizations with anarchist leanings.

EBS rhetoric positioned the organization as loosely anarchistic, and members were clearly conscious of the way in which others might react to their protests. Oppenheim recalled that there had been two main critiques of the EBS at the time:

The first one went along the lines of, “my grandfather died so you could do this, and you’re thumbing your nose at it.” That’s the critique that generated the most interesting discussion. It opened up discussion on how democracy is an evolving concept. One should be fighting to make things *more* democratic, to flag dissatisfaction with the current state of democracy, to push for an even more effective system. The other critique came from the left, what you could call the Ralph Nader critique. It was particularly from the NDP [Canada’s center-left “New Democratic Party”] at the time. I think a lot of people on the left supported [the actions] but thought they were misguided, that we really just needed to support the left with actual votes. The sharpest critique from them was when they said to us: “you’re relatively privileged, and there’s a difference between you and someone who *needs* the vote.” That one was tougher to work around. (2016; emphasis in original)

The fact remains that their demonstrations, while subversive, were still a form of participation in the political system. They still participated in the voting system, even if in a non-traditional way that the state deemed illegal (but which subsequently became legitimate, as explored below). Again, on the “Alternatives” page of its website, the EBS also listed specific suggestions for changes to the state and to its electoral structure, such as “Campaign Finance Reform,” “Proportional Representation,” and “Free Votes and Recall.” The details of these suggestions indicated a desire for state control, but with modifications. In this sense, the EBS was perhaps striving to participate in a “post-anarchist” movement that uses “activist tactics that replicate the world activists wish to create” (Fletcher 2009: 231). In order to emulate formulations of anarchism that eschew the notion of the state altogether, the EBS could have adhered to the more radical alternatives that they suggested and avoided the vote altogether, what is referred to as “opting out” or the “exit” option (Blais and St-Vincent 2011; Hooghe et al. 2011). Again, as indicated in the following frequently asked question (FAQ) from its website, the EBS anticipated this objection:

**By not voting, aren’t you just playing into the hands of the ruling elite? They love having an apathetic public that lets them continue to stay in power.**

Voting is what creates the apathy that allows the elite to stay in power. People feel that by voting, they are somehow participating in the democratic process. Then they can go back to work, or their sofa, or their television sets and ignore the political process until the next election. By eating our ballots, we are not only rejecting the current

electoral system, but signaling our intention to engage in the political process in ways which are more effective than checking a box every few years.

### *Hegemony*

Seventeen years after the EBS protests at the polls during the 2000 federal election, five provinces and one territory now provide an option to satisfy this desire. It is now legal to decline a ballot in a provincial election in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, Alberta, and the Yukon (Bostelaar 2014; Kingsley 2001b). Perhaps this indicates that the EBS protests were successful in effecting change (although Oppenheim was not optimistic about this during our interview). Perhaps it was simply another extension of the marketplace ideology of contemporary politics: catering to each voter's specific desires, giving them what they want, and in so doing distracting and silencing their dissent with the illusion that they have the power to change the system. It is just another example of the malleability of power and its ability to assimilate resistance in ironic ways. Micah White, in his reflections on Occupy Wall Street, identifies such moves as a kind of "counter-tactic" that authorities develop to "neutralize the effectiveness of activism" and so "work to prevent protests from achieving social change" (2016: 3). Other examples might include offering or requiring restrictive "protest permits," the designation of "free speech zones," or the orchestration of "pre-planned voluntary arrests," all of which are used to pacify protestors (White 2016: 3, 70; see also Meyer 2005: 5). The introduction of the right to decline a ballot may in fact serve as a counter-tactic in the case of the EBS, given that only about 0.05 percent of voters actually seem to exercise this right (Bostelaar 2014). Perhaps those in power, in granting such a right, considered this an acceptable amount of lost votes in exchange for avoiding more protests of this kind. 't Hart refers to this type of self-defeating humor as a "safety valve," those kinds of jokes that run the risk of supporting "the process of social disciplining from below" (2008: 4). The EBS is no longer active, yet Oppenheim (2016) and Schwandt (2016) did not see any connection between the end of the organization and the ability to decline a ballot. Rather, they said that the EBS disbanded mostly because those involved moved away or concentrated their attention on other projects, a clear example of what Corrigan-Brown (2011) frames as "abeyance" or "transfer," which are types of engagement that are found within any individual trajectory of social movement participation.

There remains the concern that the EBS protests fell into the trap of “summit hopping,” the practice of organizing mass protests at one trade summit after another. This type of protest often involves extensive international travel and leaves little energy or time for any other kind of grassroots organization. In Richard Day’s analysis of summit protests—such as the APEC protests which Jonathan Oppenheim helped organize—he writes that while “they have helped to raise awareness of the dark side of the new world order,” they “are limited, when they ‘work’ at all, to temporarily impeding or slightly reforming existing structures. Though they may build skills and structures that prefigure alternatives, they are not capable of addressing the fundamental problems associated with the expansion and consolidation of the racist, heterosexist system of neoliberal-capitalist nation-states” (2005: 3). It might seem that while the EBS protests served to “prefigure alternatives,” they ultimately did little more than slightly reform the electoral process (if at all), as the EBS faded from view after the 2000 election. Through participation in the voting system—in their own way—EBS members accepted what Day (2005) calls the “hegemony of hegemony,” the trap of operating *counter*-hegemonically rather than *non*-hegemonically. The latter may have been achieved more effectively by opting out of the system altogether and focusing on building the alternative political structures that they suggested on their website. In other words, it might seem that their actions belied their rhetoric: their actions fell into a hegemonic trap by participating in the system that they wished to oppose, and in so doing provided the opportunity for the system to chew and swallow their efforts and expel them in its own image.

Heath and Potter in *The Rebel Sell* (2005) similarly argue that countercultural movements have been largely unsuccessful in effecting substantial change. While participants in these movements may position themselves as nonconformist threats to “the system,” they are in fact a necessary and even instrumental component of it: not at all *apart* from it, but very much a *part* of it. For example, Robinson and Bell provide evidence that the type of culture jamming used by the Yes Men—an activist organization that stages media hoaxes to draw attention to corporate wrongdoing—has been at times entirely unsuccessful. Rather than drawing attention to, in this case, the Bhopal disaster, the Yes Men’s media hoax provided mainstream news media with the opportunity to redirect attention to what they claimed was the Yes Men’s own unethical behavior, and in so doing created a diversion tactic (2013: 365).

Oppenheim (2016) was not unaware of these potential drawbacks. As he put it:

The actions clearly didn't have an effect on the actual election. Those fears were overblown. But to be effective, the thing didn't need that many people. You can imagine getting to the point where you have huge numbers of people doing it. If you had half the population doing it, then you'd force a change in the structure. Having a small number was about generating discussion: what does it take to achieve significant structural change? For me, it was about doing it enough to open up a dialogue.

As Oppenheim's statement indicates, in instances such as the EBS case the immediate outcomes of protest may matter less than the potential participation trajectories that they initiate (Corrigan-Brown 2011). Perhaps what is more importantly at stake is not the efficacy of any single action, but the way in which actions impact individuals and the movements in which they participate on a larger scale and over a longer period of time. The idea of small protests as important initiating elements in a longer trajectory of participation lends itself well to the EBS case, as the interviews with Oppenheim and Schwandt both indicated that, while they did not think the EBS protests were overly effective, they did have a more considerable impact on participants' longer-term thinking about democracy and participation. The EBS protests were part of a larger pattern of participation that still resonates with others today. Oppenheim (2016) noted that he still receives "regular interest" in them, and that it is the discussion generated by the protests that has affected him more than the actual act of eating his ballots in the 2000 election. The activist writer Micah White has similarly observed that protest and revolution are in fact extended struggles that cannot necessarily be accurately measured by looking at any one discrete event (2016: 256). The consequences of little actions like ballot eating may not be immediately visible, and only take on significance in the longer term.

## **The Edible Ballot Society as an Action**

### *The Carnavalesque*

"How do you expect anyone to take you seriously if you are being so absurd?" one of EBS's FAQs read. "Eating your ballot is no more absurd than our politicians," was the group's reply. "It's not because we laugh that it's funny. We have the democratic obligation to be absurd right back! There's plenty of absurdity to go around."

Responses such as these offer an initial hint at the sense of the carnivalesque which underlay the 2000 ballot-eating protests. Mikhail Bakhtin articulated the notion of “carnival” and “grotesque realism” in his analysis of the novels of Rabelais, many aspects of which closely parallel the actions of the edible balloters and help to explain their performativity. By “carnavalesque,” Bakhtin meant the practice of subverting norms through the use of humor. In response to the question “why humor?” Schwandt (2016) gave the following reply in our interview:

Isn't being funny reason enough in and of itself? It's great to laugh. It was a sad situation politically in the country at that time for the left and the radical center. You had to either laugh or cry. The humor made the action incredibly fun for us to plan and carry out, and also altered the media perception—any intelligent person reading about people eating their ballots had to laugh. It made police intervention laughable, too. Part of the change we worked to create was bringing about a world full of fun and humor.

As Anna Lundberg writes, “carnival laughter has a political potential, for it disregards what is deemed normal, what, by normally being taken seriously, is considered valuable and important. Carnival laughter is based on a sense of joy, activity, and affirmation. It is not destructive in any reactive way, but rather is very definitely generative” (2008: 172). One key factor that made the EBS protests enduring in their influence was that they incorporated humor and the carnivalesque into the performance of their action. It was the intersection of humor, carnival, and the act of citizenship that made the ballot eating effective.

On the surface, the EBS protests appear to be a form of spectacle; some would call it an act verging on performance art, others merely a stunt. But, as Bakhtin writes, carnival “belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it” (1984: 7). That is, the edible balloters did not simply put on a show for those around them. What they did was an act meant to involve everyone, an act designed to raise consciousness.

Integral to this endeavor was the actual act of eating the ballot, which finds its connection to Bakhtin in the significance of the feast, which has always been “linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man” (1984: 9). The feast has been historically important as an act that emphasized “becoming, change, and renewal,” and rejected all that was complete and immortal (10). The EBS performances operated on the assumption that the



state was notionally understood to occupy a position of completeness and finality. Eating a ballot—or, more ideally, multitudes of people participating in a ballot feast—was an act of resistance to the idea of the state as a completed unit, a finished project that provided rigid options for engagement. Rather, the EBS used carnivalesque performance as a means of highlighting what is actually the ongoing, unfinished nature of the Canadian state and the system of voting. The act of chewing and swallowing a ballot implies a touch of grotesque realism, as it in turn implies the defecation that inevitably occurs after consumption.

As Soyini Madison (2010: 10) notes, it is this *embodiment* that makes the act effective, that “charges” it, and that invokes the unimaginable. With their actions, the EBS members were also perhaps attempting to establish an association, on the one hand, between voting and the democratic process—and particularly the individual politicians running in the elections—and, on the other hand, fecal matter. As such, the EBS performances brought out into the open what the state considers a taboo subject: electoral reform as initiated by radical activists. This direct challenge to the ontology of the state explains the lengths to which Elections Canada went in investigating the incident and attempting to punish those who participated in it. It is a crime to spoil a ballot because the action rejects the concept of the state as a finished project and the particular means of operationalizing democracy that the Government of Canada has put in place.

Oppenheim thought it especially interesting that the federal government apparently found it even more grievous a crime that the edible balloters offered to *wash* voters as they left the polling stations. “They responded more harshly to washing people clean after voting. It was pretty innocuous: standing outside with a bucket offering to wash people as they came out. But [officials] freaked out because they thought it was interfering with the polling station” (2016). As M. Lane Bruner (2005: 148) notes, however, whereas the “humorless” state generally has “less trouble violently dealing with more “serious” forms of protest”—such as protesters in masks throwing rocks—it finds it difficult dealing with protest that uses the carnivalesque.

The EBS’s actions symbolically invoked the grotesque through humor (Inglis 2005: 74; see also Hagene 2010). These types of actions have been variously called “tactical frivolity” (Critchley 2007) and “tactical carnival” (Bogad 2010), or more generally “culture jamming” (Carducci 2006; Harold 2004; Robinson and Bell 2013; Wettergren 2009), terms which resonate with the notion of humor and performance as tactics or weapons that protestors might use against government or those in

power (see Görkem 2015). Again, there is some ambiguity here in the way in which the EBS articulated its aims. As discussed above, the EBS ostensibly positioned itself as part of wider anarchistic, social justice movements, but its actions and the words on its website also, I argue, reflected the desire for a renewed state. The fact of its participation in the elections indicated a departure from more radical models of anarchism and an affinity with what Antonio Gramsci referred to as a “concrete phantasy” of the state—that is, a “sustaining vision of the State as it should be” (Fletcher 2009: 226). To say that the state is merely the mask of corporate power, and that contemporary political parties in Canada are nearly clones of one another, implied a dissatisfaction with and rejection of capitalist states. This in turn implied a desire for a new form of government, one that perhaps would return to aspects of the welfare state, but that would be tailored more appropriately for a contemporary sense of egalitarianism. Some of the “Alternatives” on the EBS website, as noted above, did not turn completely away from state power but instead proposed reworkings of it. As Schwandt (2016) said:

Our intent was to disrupt the current power structure while also suggesting an alternative power structure. We wanted to bring light to the lack of democracy in Canadian electoral politics. Some of us advocated strongly for proportional representation. Some of us advocated a much more decentralized, local form of government or no government at all. None of us felt that there was any chance of our views and needs being represented in the House of Representatives.

### *Acts of Citizenship*

The EBS performances thus, at first, appear ambiguous, straddling the divide between various social justice movements: EBS members called for alternative structures outside of state control and yet indicated a belief in democracy and the (remodeled) state. This apparent ambiguity may perhaps be easily explained. It may simply be the case that democracies inherently “encourage differences of opinion . . . about core questions” (Fletcher 2009: 226–227), and this is reflected in the multiplicity of suggestions offered on the EBS website. Oppenheim (2016) confirmed that, when developing the EBS website, he sent draft text to members across the country and incorporated their own ideas and feedback.

Upon closer investigation, it becomes clear that there was more at play in the EBS performances, that they say more about citizenship and democracy than a simple difference of opinion. In resolving the tensions between EBS rhetoric and action, we can turn to Engin Isin’s framework

of “acts of citizenship,” which provides a crucial middle ground for their interpretation. Accompanying the rise of neoliberalism, Isin writes, are new subjectivities, including new definitions of citizenship, which understand citizenship less as “a legal status of membership in the state” and more aligned with “practices of becoming claim-making subjects” (2008: 16). Citizenship is not inherited, but learned. It is no longer a fixed, given status which the state confers upon an individual, but an active process of making oneself as a citizen, and this is done through specific acts.

An act of citizenship is a “creative break,” or a “rupture in the given” (Isin 2008: 25)—or a breaking point, as in the Bakhtinian sense. The state writes certain scripts, in this case for voting behavior, and expects its citizens to follow them accordingly. The state even goes so far as to punish those who do not obey. However, “for acts of citizenship to be acts at all they must call the law into question and, sometimes, break it” (39). An act of citizenship implies “neither arriving at a scene [voting] nor fleeing from it [not voting], but actually engaging in its creation” (27). The EBS neither voted nor refused to vote. They participated in the voting system in a creative way which ruptured, rather than subscribed to, the script (see Gan 2017: 164). The EBS “went beyond simple rejection of available options on the negotiating table . . . [but rather] instilled in people the possibility of navigating their own fate” (Romanienko 2008: 149). In so doing, its members performed an act that constituted them as citizens in the moment. Through the very act of eating the ballot, they prefigured an alternative form of political participation, attempting to proceed “beyond that of a mirror reflection to become the hammer that breaks the mirror, [and] distorts the reflection, to build a new reality” (Madison 2010: 12). As Oppenheim (2016) remarked, “it was a massive fuck-you to something that people regard as unquestionable, as sacrosanct. It’s unquestionable that we live in a democracy, they say, and so voting is important, a part of our democratic duty. Questioning that was an affront to people.”

But again, there is a touch of irony here. To say that citizenship is individually created through specific acts—that it is more of a process than a fixed state conferred upon a person—is to say that it is also part of a new neoliberal form of citizenship, one that may not be tied so closely to the Canadian state, one that may overflow the state’s boundaries (Altamirano-Jimenez 2004). As mentioned above, there are aspects of the EBS position that shared a root and affinity with neoliberal ideology. They complicated the actions and analysis of the EBS, highlighting tensions, if not contradictions in the latter’s stance.

Interpreting the EBS protests through the lens of performance and prefigurative politics may help to further resolve these contradictions. As noted above, summit hopping and culture jamming can contribute to the very project which the actions are attempting to subvert, leading to a cynical and defeatist discourse. However, this conclusion is often based on the inability to completely overthrow the system in one fell swoop. Rather than idealizing this rigid teleology, it is more productive to consider the EBS protests as a form of prefigurative politics—to concentrate not on a single demonstrable homogenous outcome but on multiple heterogeneous processes and fields of action (van de Sande 2013). It is a matter of reinterpreting democracy as a continuous process to which each act of ballot eating contributes by opening up new spaces for further discourse and action—that is, to approach the EBS protests “as more prefigurative than programmatic” (Sancho 2014) and as part of a longer pattern of participation (Corrigall-Brown 2011).

In this sense, voting is a performative act. The crime that Elections Canada charged the edible balloters with after the 2000 election was based on a conception of the state as a finished, coherent whole replete with scripts for democratic participation. It is in the state’s refusal to recognize its own emergent nature, as manifested in a general election, which set the stage for the edible balloters to perform their acts of citizenship.

## Conclusions

In his novel *Seeing*, Jose Saramago (2007) crafts a surreal situation: come election time, 83 percent of the ballots cast are blank. This mass non-vote pitches the government into panic. The government classifies the “blankers,” as the citizens are called, as terrorists and flees the capital, leaving the citizens to descend into anarchy. But the city remains peaceful. The government is not missed, and life goes on. As Terrance Rafferty (2006) writes, the blankers “are quiet and even docile, just the way a government ordinarily likes its citizens to be, but their refusal to pretend that the electoral process gives them a choice worth making is deeply subversive.” The story is like a parable, illustrating the ability of ordinary people to govern themselves. It reveals the ironies and potential shallowness of the voting process, of the system’s inability to make sense of blank votes and what this act means for the government. It takes the kind of citizen the government in power likes to see and foster—the docile, abiding individual—and uses this quality in a subversive way.

It is tempting to draw parallels between this novel and the EBS performances. There are certainly affinities. Yet they remain worlds apart. The citizens in *Seeing* are calm, content, somewhat bemused by the whole affair. In contrast, the EBS performances were full of vigor and signaled a very different approach to electoral reform and critiques of state power. Neil Nevitte writes that protest behavior, such as this, has become in Canada—perhaps surprisingly to some given the country’s ongoing reputation as a peacemaker—particularly common. In fact, he says, according to the World Values Surveys, on which he bases his conclusions, “Canadians turn out to be among the most protest oriented of all” (1996: 79). The EBS performances during the 2000 election were part of an increase in such protest behavior, which responded to broad changes in society and the economy at the time. It was preceded by the 1997 ballot shredding, but also by the 1997 APEC protests, and I believe that it shows continuity with subsequent protests, such as those at the G20 in Toronto in 2010 and those which comprised the Occupy Movement in 2011.

Indeed, the EBS, again in the FAQ section on their website, positioned their actions as part of a much longer historical trajectory:

**Women and black civil-rights activists fought long and hard for the right to vote. Where do you get off eating your ballot?**

Those who have made sacrifices for their democratic ideals were often considered naive, law-flaunting, nut-cases at the time. They were fighting for genuine democracy, not some plastic imitation of it. No doubt some of them, if they were alive today, would be chowing down on a delicious ballot sandwich. Destroying your ballot is just a continuation of their struggle. We need to keep working towards genuine democracy. Why stop now?

There almost seems to be a contradiction in saying, as Nevitte does, that as Canadians become more interested in politics their confidence in the government and state institutions decreases (1996: 75). But to find contradiction in this relationship is to assume that Canadians remain content with the image of democracy working at its fullest potential when citizens are compliant and deferential, rather than active. It has been my argument in this article that the edible balloters during the 2000 election exemplified these changing ideas. The rise of neoliberalism in North America in the 1970s and 1980s effected a shift in the structure of society toward increasing marketization, producing what the EBS called “the futility of electoral politics.” Edible balloters positioned

themselves as being continuous with anti-globalization movements, drawing on some of the rhetoric of anarchism. Some of the suggestions on their website advocated alternative structures of local governance free from state control. Yet, other suggestions advocated much more minor reforms that would preserve the existing order. As such, their ballot-eating protests might seem to occupy an ambiguous space. They appeared to reject the electoral system, mocking the process. However, I suggest that the EBS ultimately did participate in the vote, but in a creative way which signified a new form of political participation, a deviation from the script.

Through the use of carnivalesque action and humor, the ballot eating became a performance of citizenship. Edible balloters did indeed want democracy, and did advocate state control, but strove for changes to its form. Their acts of citizenship *made* them into citizens, into people who actively take up the project of negotiating what it means to live in a democracy by pointing out the faults in the state's definition thereof. This understanding of citizenship is meant to push against the definitional boundaries of the state, requiring it to rupture and expand, to recognize its own emergence and, in a symbolically grotesque way, exceed its own boundaries. The EBS actions attempted to make the Canadian state realize that it was not in fact a completed project with a finalized voting process, but acknowledge instead that space existed for change. To exceed its own boundaries, as the sense of the carnivalesque indicates, would have meant to embrace renewal rather than stagnation. It is the element of grotesque realism which made the EBS performances so potent. It evoked all that the state wished to be left unsaid. In the words of Lundberg, "all this contribute[d] to a political promise, a plausible point of exit situated in carnival laughter itself" (2008: 172).

Marika Schwandt (2016) is now a physiotherapist and theater professional. She reflected on how "those years definitely solidified" her "political tendencies and anti-capitalist analysis":

Before hearing from you, I hadn't probably thought about EBS for years—though it does cross my mind at election time. My beliefs remain the same but I have voted a few times, because I've had some great candidates who had a real chance of winning and representing me. I'd rather not vote, and sometimes I do still destroy my ballot. Every election is different. I exercise my franchise in some fashion. I would do it again in the right circumstances.

Jonathan Oppenheim (2016) is now a professor of physics at University College London, a long way from his student activist days. He says that even twenty years on he still receives regular interest in the actions: “Between voting and eating my ballot, there’s no question that eating my ballot was the far more effective political act. In terms of bang for my buck it generated the most discussion. It’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

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**Matthew Hayes** is an independent filmmaker and a PhD candidate in the Canadian Studies program at Trent University. His documentary films explore social justice issues such as poverty, homelessness, and labor. His dissertation research will contribute to the history of Cold War science through an original study of Canada’s UFO investigation. He is also drawn to topics that convey the humor and absurdity of politics and everyday life. E-mail: matthewhayes2@trentu.ca

## Note

1. The EBS website was hosted at [www. tao. ca](http://www. tao. ca). It is now defunct.

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