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At the last general election, 723 out of 1272 registered voters in Irion County went to the polls. Further calculations showed this less than 57 percent turnout left 549 people to find better means of exerting their influence on the way the country is run. Such power plays as filibustering coffee house sessions or threatening to write letters to newspapers are thought to be among the alternatives.

For the two-week period of absentee balloting and the 12-hour polling day, the non-voters surrendered their proxies to the ones of us who voted without signing over a thing. The best part about not voting is the ease of inaction. It takes about 20 minutes to vote in such a small town. I spend a little over half an hour to drive from the ranch to Mertzon. Three and a half more minutes are needed to strike the offenders and check my choices. Voting straight ticket is faster. Hotheads who draw bullseyes around their enemies' names, or want to trace off a skull and crossbones by an offending party's label use a few more minutes to complete their artwork. Citizens over 65 may vote by mail, offering another big time-saving procedure. We also only have to register once in Texas to be franchised for life.

The state's constitution may not say so in exact words, but somewhere in that hefty document of hundreds of amendments rests an inalienable right to complain, whether

we vote or not. Voting or staying home makes no difference; Texans have the right to find fault with any and all levels of government and any and all capacities of office.

How pollsters cull the voters from the paralyzed majority is a mystery. Hard to say how they tell over the telephone if a citizen is bluffing or plans on voting. Terms like "swing vote" are still used, but who knows who is on the swing?

In the days when I hit the cafe every morning in Mertz on at opening time, we knew most of each other's secrets and all of our stories several times over. Fellow from up at Barnhart was a regular customer. On one of many morning of caffeine-inspired political caucuses, he voiced a strong volley of support for a candidate named Barefoot Sanders. At the time, Mr. Sanders was running a tight race for U.S. Senator on the Democratic ticket. (One reason I keep retelling this story is because "Barefoot" was the president of the student body at the University in my college days. He might have spoken to me one day walking across the campus before a student election. I can't be sure. Even then, 18,000 of us swarmed the place.)

But the Barnhart coffee drinker reared way back and said, "By gawd, ol' Barefoot is my man. When ol' Ed and me were hauled up in district court for underestimating the talent of the audit division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture on checking the drouth feed certificates for our feed store, ol' Barefoot was the prosecuting attorney for

the government. He seen right off Ed and me was guilty as hell."

He was the same guy I wrote of once, who every Thanksgiving used to bring up the matter of his wife refusing to eat turkey because turkeys were second cousins to buzzards. He must have been raised next to a testing ground or a bombing target; he shouted when he talked. The theory of the turkey's second cousin grew tiresome, but his delivery always entertained everybody in the cafe from the cook back in the kitchen to route men parked in the street waiting for the stores to open.

In December, a run-off between candidates for state senator drew 150 votes in the county. Because it was more a decision on which party would rule the Texas Senate next term than an ideological battle, few citizens bothered to vote. Before I ever unfolded my ballot I could feel the wallop my pencil was going to yield. I felt plenty important, in that being the number 10 voter at 6 p.m. I was making the choice for 50 or 60 citizens.

Might be the last chance for a herder to be in power. I sure miss hanging out at the cafe. I know those guys would have had a man in the race ...