

Political Animals



Filibustering and gerrymandering are classic examples of the eccentric words politics ushers into the English language, but there are many, many more—some with clear origins and some more mysterious. Test your knowledge of the origins of these examples of colorful political slang.

1. The phrase "lunatic fringe" refers to extremists at either of the far ends of the political spectrum, but most often to those on the far left. The national politician who coined the phrase, with this meaning, was:

- Theodore Roosevelt
- Herbert Hoover
- Richard Nixon
- Ronald Reagan

2. A "bellwether" is a leading indicator of a political (or other) trend. Originally, the word meant:

- The bell in a coastal town that was rung to warn of an impending storm
- The male sheep that led the flock, with a bell tied around its neck
- The first clear break in an overcast sky, through which rays of sunlight could penetrate
- The planted, head-down stance of a bull, indicating in which direction it is about to charge

3. "Barnburners" were pitted against "Hunkers":

- As two factions in the Republican Party leading up the election of 1884, when one group bolted from the choice of the party elders, who supported the corrupt James Blaine for the presidential nomination. Those who bolted met separately and threw their support to the Democratic nominee, Grover Cleveland.
- As two factions in the Democratic Party in the period leading up to the election of 1840, when radical populists and labor supporters opposed the regular, established party organization centered at Tammany Hall in New York City
- As two factions in the Democratic Party leading up to the presidential election of 1848, when the radical anti-slavery faction opposed the conservatives who did not wish to support the anti-slavery Wilmot Proviso
- As two factions in the Republican Party leading up to the election of 1900, one of which supported incumbent president William McKinley, and the other, an anti-imperialist faction, which did not because they were angry with McKinley over his having led the U.S. into the Spanish-American War



4. A Democrat who would rather vote for no one at all rather than a candidate who is not a Democrat is known as a:

- Yellow Dog Democrat
- Blue Dog Democrat
- Red Dog Democrat
- Woodpile Dog Democrat

Sources:

Safire, William. *Safire's Political Dictionary*. Revised ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.

Barrett, Grant. *The Oxford Dictionary of American Political Slang*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.

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