



The Great Election of 1733

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Nearly 275 years ago a wealthy landowner and a county clerk squared off on the village green at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site in an election that drew one of the largest gatherings for a political event in colonial America.

It was Monday, October 29, 1733, and the colony of New York was embroiled in a volatile political battle between the high-handed Royal Governor William Cosby and a group of prominent gentlemen headed by former Chief Justice and wealthy landowner Lewis Morris. Morris was running in a special election for Westchester's countywide seat in the colonial assembly. His opponent was the Governor's preferred candidate, County Clerk William Forester.

The colonial electorate was small enough -- usually only adult white males who owned sufficient property -- that eligible voters could gather at a central location and vote publicly. Located at the crossroads of several thoroughfares, the St. Paul's green was a major intersection of Westchester County. This election, conducted in the heated political climate of the day, drew the unprecedented turnout of more than 420 people. Supporters of both men came from across Westchester (which then included the Bronx) on horse and on foot, a fanfare of trumpets and violins announced their arrivals.

The better-organized Morris party commanded the numerical superiority, but their core support included many Quakers, easily identified by their plain dress. Since this was an important test of strength, the sheriff conducting the election, Nicholas Cooper, planned to use whatever means necessary to help the governor's candidate win the canvass. He implemented an occasionally used technique of requiring voters to swear on the Bible that they met the property qualification for suffrage, fully aware that Quaker religious belief prohibited such a procedure. As a result, Cooper was able, through the thin veil of legitimacy, to order 38 Quakers dis-enfranchised for the actual vote. That chicanery helped Forester, but Morris still won the count, rather easily, by 231-151.

In response to this blatant violation of freedom of conscience, Quaker supporters petitioned the colonial authorities for redress, and in 1734 the legislature granted the Quakers the right to affirm (rather than swear) an oath when necessary for participation in the political life of the colony. This legislation was a milestone in the development of religious freedom in America. Additionally, a lengthy account of the political theatre that was the election of 1733 appeared in the first issue of the [New York Weekly Journal](#), an opposition paper created by the Morris party as part of their campaign to tackle Governor Cosby.