

# University Lab Reveals Methods for Plants and Animals to Participate in US Elections

*Innovative Approach to Environmental Justice Shown in Simultaneous San Francisco and San José Exhibitions in Preparation for November 5th*

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-- In the tumultuous final days of the US election, with many contests too close to call, a university lab is asking undecided voters to consider the perspective of nonhuman species in their choice of candidates. Based at San José State University, the Future Democracies Laboratory is developing methods for citizens to determine the political preferences of plants and animals, in order to make decisions that will be beneficial to all. "It can be as easy as walking into your garden or visiting your local park and asking the trees: 'Are you better off now than you were four years ago?'" says lab director Jonathon Keats.



Courtesy of Jonathon Keats

To show voters how to engage a multispecies body politic, and to explain why it matters, the Future Democracies Laboratory has recently opened a [showroom in San Francisco's Modernism Gallery](#) and an [interactive exhibition space at the Institute of Contemporary Art San José](#). Both locations were chosen to maximize public engagement at a critical moment. "Academia can be a good place to explore new ideas," Keats says. "But it's vital that those principles reach people who can act on them, especially when a failure to do so could result in more heat waves and floods and other punishing conditions."

A large body of research shows that humans cannot stand alone, and that loss of biodiversity is bad for everyone. "People suffer when other life forms suffer, and vice versa," says Keats, who also serves as principal philosopher at [Earth Law Center](#). "The problem is that we scarcely take

other species into account when we choose our mayors and senators and presidents. Individuals aren't going to be better off unless the planet is better off. Our air conditioned lives prevent us from looking at self-interest at the appropriate scale. An easy way to begin is to assess the wellbeing of nonhuman kin we encounter every day."

The Future Democracies Laboratory has focused primarily on interspecies stress. An increase in stress over time indicates that political conditions are suboptimal, and signals disapproval of the political status quo. Because all species respond to stress in ways that can be observed, and because their stress response can reveal

environmental consequences of policies more swiftly and accurately than people can observe on their own, their inclusion in political decisions promises to improve the law of the land, ultimately increasing planetary homeostasis.

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*Jonathon Keats*

“Since other species are not enfranchised, it comes down to us to take notice of their stress response, and to integrate it into our choice of representatives,” Keats says. As an example, the lab suggests observing whether trees have less foliage than they did in the same season in years past. Birdsong is another good measure. Research has shown that songs decrease in complexity as birds grow more stressed.

Keats argues that nonhuman participation in politics is crucial not only from the standpoint of addressing climate change and environmental degradation, but also on a moral level. “Democracy depends on collective self-determination,” he says. “Everyone impacted by a policy has a right to decide on it. Given that our policies impact all life on Earth – and that the impact has recently been mostly adverse – we need to include each and every creature in our political system.

“Ultimately we'll need to pass laws or even a constitutional amendment to make nonhuman positions binding. That's going to be challenging. But we can start this critical political



Modernism Gallery exhibits a novel voting booth for plants. The voting booth uses bananas to monitor release of the plant stress hormone ethylene, which is also a ripening agent | Courtesy of Asa Perryman

transformation by spending the early hours of November 5th in a garden."

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Jonathon Keats poses with the banana differential voting booth | Courtesy of Asa Perryman

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