



Alternate Voting Processes Study

Background Information

PREPARED FOR LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF FLORIDA BY THE
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Alternative Voting Systems

Facts and Issues: Part V

Here continues information about various voting systems for the LWVF study adopted in May 2005. Parts 1 through 6 are from the LWV of Minnesota study of 2004 when they adopted a position on the subject. Subsequent parts will deal with Florida's voting systems. We thank LWVMN Education Fund for permission to reprint this report.

Summary

Voting Systems

Each of the voting systems in the study raises issues that vary depending on what people value and what they want to accomplish. This list summarizes the most frequently cited pro and con statements made regarding each system.

Plurality Voting System

(Voters select one candidate: candidate with most votes wins)

- Is easy for voters to understand.
- Preserves tradition.
- Requires no legislative change.
- Does not ensure majority rule when more than two candidates are running.
- Votes for third party candidates may be “wasted.”
- Is vulnerable to “spoiler” candidates.
- Is vulnerable to manipulation.

Approval Voting System

(Voters select as many candidates as they wish; candidate with most votes wins)

- Is easy for voters to understand.
- Expands voters' choices because they can vote for more than one candidate.
- Might eliminate “wasted” votes, “spoiler” candidates in some cases.
- Measures only whether or not a candidate is acceptable; does not distinguish between Intense and weak approval.
- Could lead to defeat of a candidate whom a majority support as their first choice
- Is vulnerable to manipulation.

Borda Count Voting System

(Voters rank candidates; points assigned according to rank; candidate with most points wins)

- Allows voters to express preferences among candidates.
- Considered by some mathematicians to best identify winner in three-way race.
- Is vulnerable to manipulation (may require honesty for best performance).
- Voting for one's second choice can defeat one's first choice.

Condorcet Voting System

(Voters rank candidates; winner is the one who can top each of others in a series of head-to-head contests)

- Allows voters to express preferences among candidates.
- Considered by some mathematicians to best identify winner in three-way race.
- May result in a tie that requires pre-election decision on how to break tie.
- Is vulnerable to manipulation.
- May be difficult for voters to understand.

Instant Runoff Voting System

(Voters rank candidates; votes for candidate with fewest first-choice votes are redistributed according to their second choices until one candidate achieves a majority)

- Ensures majority rule.
- Allows voters to express preferences among candidates.
- Eliminates problems of spoiler candidates knocking off major candidates.
- Eliminates need for run-off elections.
- Does not meet mathematical requirement for monotonicity.

Issues and Questions

The issues that have emerged in this study of election systems produce the following questions:

1. **Majority Rule:** Is the fact that someone may be elected with less than 50 percent of the vote important enough to change to a different election system? If it happens too frequently, will it reduce the legitimacy of Minnesota's elected officials? How important are voting paradoxes that are found in all of the systems being discussed?

2. **"Sincere Voting" vs. Strategic Voting:** How important is it for an election system to encourage citizens to vote for their true favorite rather than for someone who has a better chance of winning? Is an "insincere" or strategic vote "gaming the system" or making a compromise? Might an "insincere" or strategic vote for a candidate reduce the ability of the winner to interpret the will of the people?

3. **"Wasted" votes:** Does it matter that a vote for a third party candidate under the Plurality system might be considered "wasted" because it cannot lead to the election of the voter's preferred candidate?

4. **Intensity vs. Breadth of Support:** Should a voting system balance intensity of support with breadth of support? What kind of impact does the type of support have on the winner's ability to govern?

5. **Preferences:** Are there benefits to allowing voters to express their preferences by approving or ranking multiple candidates?

6. **Legality of Alternative Systems:** Are the benefits of alternative methods sufficient to warrant a change in the Minnesota Constitution (if determined to be necessary) and/or Minnesota Statutes?

7. **Political Parties:** Would alternative voting systems that encourage third parties upset the traditional two-party system? In the Plurality system, how important is it that third party candidates can take votes from one major party candidate, perhaps enabling the candidate from the other major party to win?

8. **Voter Education:** Is the fact that some voting systems require complex tabulation a sufficient reason to reject them? How important is it that the voters understand how votes are tabulated? Would the additional costs of a new system be too much of a burden on Minnesota election districts in terms of educating voters and election officials?

9. **Change:** Who benefits from changing to an alternative system? Who is disadvantaged? Is it possible to reduce the impact of the unintended consequences which almost always follow any institutional change?

Most of the answers to these questions will be based on values judgments and speculation. No one can really predict the outcome of changes in our voting system, but the more we know about the issues, the less likely we are to make choices that we regret. The League of Women Voters hopes that the information in this report helps League members, legislators, and citizens to understand some of the most widely discussed alternative voting systems, to sort out the claims made by supporters and critics, and to identify which of these voting methods they feel are beneficial and appropriate for use in state and/or local elections.

Glossary

Approval Voting: Voters are allowed to vote for as many candidates as they approve of; the candidate receiving the greatest number of votes wins.

Borda Count: Voters rank order candidates and assign points according to the ranking, i.e. three points for first choice, two points for second choice, one point for third choice.

Burying: Strategic voting that insincerely ranks an alternative candidate lower in the hope of defeating him or her.

Compromise: Strategic voting that insincerely ranks an alternative candidate higher in the hope of getting him or her elected.

Condorcet: A voting systems in which voters rank their choices, marking them first, second, third, and so on. The winning candidate is the person who can top each of the others in a series of head-to-head or “pairwise” contests. The Condorcet winner is considered by many mathematicians to best measure the will of the people.

Contradictory majority preferences: A case in which the majority holds contradictory opinions. Kenneth Arrow demonstrated that the collective preferences of groups cannot always be determined from the individual preferences of their members.

Cumulative voting (accumulation voting or weighted voting): This is a multiple-winner voting system intended to promote proportional representation. In this system, a voter facing multiple choices is given X number of points. The voter can then assign his or her points to one or more of the choices, thus enabling one to weight one’s vote if desired. Unlike preference voting where the numbers represent ranks of choices or candidates in some order (I.e. they are ordinal numbers), in cumulative votes the numbers represent quantities (i.e. they are cardinal numbers). This form of voting is advocated by those who argue that minorities deserve better representation, and thus could (by concentrating their votes on a small number of minority candidates) ensure some representation from the minority.

Hare system: A method of voting invented by Thomas Hare that is also known as the Single Transferable Vote system.

HAVA: Help America Vote Act is federal legislation that provides money to the states to upgrade their voting equipment.

Independent or third party candidates: Candidates from any political party organized in all or nearly all states other than the two current leading parties, which since the time of the American Civil War have always been the Democratic and the Republican parties.

Insincere voting: Occurs when a voter’s reported preference order differs from his or her true preference order.

IRV- Instant Runoff Voting: Using a preference ballot, voters go to the polls once and designate their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd choices at one time. A series of runoff elections are conducted using voters’ preferences until one candidate emerges with a majority of the votes.

Kenneth Arrow: Nobel Prize winner who proved no voting system is free from counterintuitive properties: i.e., a vote for someone can actually hurt that candidate. The idea is that no voting system is perfect.

Majority vote: A method of voting which calls for the winner to have a majority of the votes — $50\%_0 + 1$.

Monotonicity: The mathematical criterion which states that with the relative order or rating of the other candidates unchanged, voting a candidate higher should never cause the candidate to lose, nor should voting a candidate lower ever cause the candidate to win. The idea is that voting for one’s choice will help one’s candidate.

Multi-seat election (multi-member district): A district from which more than one representative is elected.

Nonmonotonicity: Voting characteristic in which voting for one’s choice may hurt one’s candidate’s chances of winning. If a voting system is not monotonic, it may encourage tactical voting.

Plurality vote: A method of voting in which the candidate with the most votes wins. In elections with three or more candidates, the winner may have considerably fewer than one-half the total votes cast.

Preference voting: A method of voting that calls for voters to rank candidates in order of their preference.

Proportional Representation: A principle of elections that says voters should win representation in proportion to their share of the electorate. Many voting methods embody the principle of proportional representation. Common to them all is that they use multi-winner districts and empower each voter to help elect a representative to the extent of theoretical limits. This method usually produces winners from each party as well as more women and minority legislators. It is used for legislative bodies. Most European parliaments have used PR since the early 20th century.

Push-overs: Candidates who are unlikely to win but selected by voters as a strategic choice to bury strong opponents.

Ranked ballot: A method of voting which calls for voters to put their choices in order of preference.

Runoff election: An election that is held if the first election does not produce a majority winner. It is usually held 1-3 weeks later and requires voters to return to the polls.

Sincere Vote: One with no falsified preferences or preferences left unspecified when the election method allows them to be specified.

Spoiler effect: Occurs when a third candidate takes enough votes away from a candidate that it causes the candidate to lose.

STV: Single transferable vote is a ranked ballot voting method designed to accurately achieve proportional representation in multi-candidate elections. When similar methods are applied to single-candidate elections they are sometimes called Instant Run-off Voting. In both systems of voting the ballot choices represent an ordinal ranking of preferences, but they are tallied differently.

Tactical or Strategic Voting: Describes any decision by the voter in marking a ballot that is intended to improve the outcome of the election from the voter's point of view; see Insincere Voting.

Voting paradox: Situation in which an election outcome is not what our common sense says it should be (see contradictory majority preferences).

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League of Women Voters of Minnesota

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League of Women Voters of Florida

Issues Related to Alternative Voting Systems for the State of Florida