Serious Election Problems Beg Fixes

By Roy Minet (Rev. 11/16/18)

Elections are the crucial mechanism by which citizens hope to maintain control over their government. Lots of countries hold elections, but the degree to which citizens actually do control their government varies widely. In Russia, as in quite a few other countries, people have elections, but no control. Not only is it important to hold regular elections, but it really matters how elections are done.

Most people lightheartedly think we do a good job of elections here in the cradle of democracy. Unfortunately, there are serious, potentially fatal, problems. Symptoms are visible, if only we pay attention to them. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.

Before examining specific problems, it would be good to have in mind a clear definition of the purpose of elections. We grant government a monopoly on the use of force for the very limited purpose of securing our individual rights to life, liberty and property. Government force is wielded by our representatives. We use elections to choose such representatives wisely and to keep the power to make these choices from gravitating to a small group (oligarchy) or an individual (dictator).

The purpose of elections, then, is to make the best possible decisions while not allowing a small faction to hijack decision-making power. This does *not* mean that everybody has to vote, or even that everybody should vote. All qualified electors certainly must have the freedom to vote if they wish. However, pushing those who are poorly informed, less motivated or not interested to vote is likely to reduce the quality of decisions, thus defeating the primary purpose.

Banish Gerrymandering This is the most obvious required fix. Politicians should never be involved in drawing electoral districts. In fact, people are problematic. The best solution is a straightforward, clinically impartial geometric algorithm which draws contiguous and maximally compact districts based only on population data and geography. A small variation (to preserve precinct boundaries) of the "splitline" method (proposed circa 2002 by Warren D. Smith) is recommended.

Replace Plurality Voting The least understood, but probably most important fix is to end use of plurality voting. There is some debate among experts as to the best replacement for plurality, but they emphatically agree that plurality is the worst possible method. Plurality is brain dead from the start because it allows each voter to indicate only a first choice. That is not enough information to enable an intelligent decision in many common circumstances. Limiting voters to one choice also causes the irresistible pressure to vote insincerely for "the lesser of two evils."

In the 2016 presidential election, a Pew Research Center poll indicated that Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had only a small number of voters (11% Trump, 12% Clinton) who truly favored them. Yet each candidate got nearly 50% of the vote. So, we had the incredible situation where only about 30% of voters voted for a candidate they like while about 65% voted for a candidate they didn't like because they liked another candidate even less! This is quite sad and symptomatic of problems. Some experts theorize that plurality is contributing to such increasing polarization.

Voters must be allowed to specify their first choice plus have the option for at least a second choice and possibly a third. This is called ranked-choice voting (RCV). The data necessary to render an intelligent decision under all circumstances is then available. Also, when voters understand that, if their first choice does not win, their second choice will count exactly as if it had been the first choice, the pressure to vote insincerely vanishes. There are many RCV methods. Best known is Instant Runoff Voting, but IRV is a poor RCV method. Much better RCV methods are known and plurality needs to be replaced with a good one.

Improve Ballot Access There are too many races for which there is only one name on the ballot. That's no choice at all. The artificial barriers that have been erected by career politicians to keep competitors off the ballot need to be greatly reduced. If and when more than five or six candidates for an office actually start appearing on the ballot with regularity, then raise the barriers again – but just slightly.

Tighten Voting Procedures If there is any way to game the system, somebody will do it. Only qualified electors can register. Only registered voters can vote (and then only once, *if* they are still alive and residing in the precinct). There must be no possibility of corrupted voting, counting or reporting. There must be an audit trail for verification.

Many things can and should be tightened, but probably the most important is to have all voting, counting and tabulating take place on Election Day inside a polling place where proper safeguards are in place (judge of elections, poll watchers from opposing factions, etc.). It is nearly impossible to ensure the integrity of anything which happens at other times or other places. Only a minimum number of absentee ballots should be issued for bona fide reasons; these should be opened and counted inside the polling place on Election Day.

In decade two of the 21st century, it is time to carefully re-engineer our voting system to better guarantee integrity, to increase competition and to yield improved decisions. It should not be possible for Florida messes to occur.

A solid election system is a crucial prerequisite. Then we can only hope for an ample supply of the "magic ingredient" – interested, informed, intelligent and rational voters.

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