Stop Electing Politicians

Disliked By The Majority of Voters

By Roy Minet (Rev. 10/02/20)

Heading into the 2016 presidential election, polling by the Pew Research Center revealed that only 33% of registered voters were satisfied with the selection of candidates while 63% were not satisfied. Other polling showed enthusiastic Trump supporters at only 11% and Clinton 12%. Quite clearly, a majority of voters disliked Clinton; a majority of voters also disliked Trump but he was nevertheless elected.

Surely, electing a candidate most people dislike cannot be a good thing. Yet, it can happen and likely does happen fairly often. The 2020 presidential contest looks a lot like an even more divisive rerun where, once again, the lesser of two "evil" candidates will be elected. This is just one of the serious problems that result from use of the Plurality voting method.

Plurality is simple: the candidate receiving the most votes wins. It's too simple. Voters are allowed to indicate only their choice of the best candidate. That is not enough information to make determination of the correct winner possible in many elections. Further, this one meager piece of information frequently is bogus – it does not represent the voter's actual opinion.

All too often, there are two very polarizing "main" candidates. Many voters do not like either, yet they feel powerfully compelled to insincerely vote for a candidate they don't like because they despise the other candidate. This effect is so intense that most voters don't bother to learn anything about any other candidates who may also be running. Such other candidates receive effectively zero coverage by the media for the same reason. Most experts also agree that Plurality voting is a significant cause of the increasing polarization and divisiveness which is reaching uncomfortable, even dangerous, levels.

The failures of Plurality were pointed out nearly 250 years ago. Since then, a menagerie of hundreds of "improved" voting methods have been proposed and debated. However, the problem has turned out to be trickier than expected with no consensus replacement for Plurality emerging.

The challenge that designing a good voting method presents is to collect enough valid information from voters to enable good decisions to be made in all kinds of elections, while minimizing strategic or insincere inputs from voters which degrade decision making. The best outcome for an election is that winner which maximizes the total satisfaction (net of dissatisfaction) of all those who voted.

Recently, an election simulation project has enabled much better understanding of the problem. Many different voting methods were evaluated and their ability to choose the correct winner was quantified for all possible kinds of election; millions of them.

Some old ideas were discredited. Notably, IRV (Instant Runoff Voting, which is just one of many Ranked Choice Voting methods) offers only a very small improvement over Plurality. Sorry, Maine. (Maine will use IRV in the 2020 election.) There are way better RCV methods than IRV, but even the best RCV method cannot achieve the best performance.

The most important new revelation is that, while each voter's choice of the best candidate (as is used by Plurality) is indeed the most important single datum, the second most important single datum is each voter's choice of the worst candidate. To achieve the best results, it appears that a voting method must allow voters to indicate which candidate they most dislike. (This will be therapeutic for voters!) In retrospect, this should not be surprising as any method which looks only at which candidates voters like will be unable to avoid the blunder of sometimes electing candidates disliked by the majority.

Based on the much deeper understanding, two new voting methods have been proposed: BAWV (Best/Alternate/Worst Voting) and AADV (Approve/Approve/Disapprove Voting). BAWV is solidly the best. AADV performs nearly as well with sincere voter inputs, but is not quite as good as BAWV at obtaining sincere data from voters. Both are easy for voters, but BAWV requires a more involved procedure to tally the vote (not at all a problem with modern technology).

Both the new methods work by, in essence, conducting a separate Yes/No referendum on each candidate. The candidate that wins its referendum by the largest majority is the overall winner. Note that candidates with "high negatives" are much less likely to win. Therefore, nomination of less divisive, more broadly acceptable candidates is strongly encouraged! Polarization should relax to lower levels.

Continued use of Plurality is a serious problem hiding in plain sight. The critical question now is: will it take another 250 years to replace Plurality with BAWV? If we keep electing politicians disliked by the majority, our cherished experiment in democratic self-governance may crash and burn long before then.