

Runoffs Not Enough To Fix Primary Elections

By Roy Minet (Rev. – 2023/06/02)

Pennsylvania State Senators Ryan Aument (R36 Lancaster) and Frank Farry (R6 Bucks) propose requiring a runoff election whenever the winner of a primary election has not received a majority of the votes. They argue that candidates receiving less than 50% are not likely to win in the general election. Hopefully, the senators are not suggesting that obtaining 50% in a runoff necessarily means that a candidate's support has increased. One *must* get at least 50% simply because there are only two candidates.

However, thank you so much, Senators Aument and Farry, for recognizing a serious problem and taking the initiative to fix it.

We utilize the Plurality voting method for nearly all our elections in Pennsylvania, including primaries. Plurality is sometimes called "First Past The Post" (FPTP). It limits each voter to just one input: the candidate that the voter hopes will win.

Unfortunately, some rather serious problems with Plurality were pointed out by two French scholars 250 years ago. Since then, additional serious problems have been identified. Experts now almost universally agree that Plurality is the worst of all voting methods.

The task of a voting method is straightforward: collect some information from voters and use it to select, as the correct winner, the candidate with whom the voters would be most satisfied. At a glance, it would seem that Plurality should be able to do this, but it is instead a colossal flop.

There are almost always more than two candidates, especially so for primaries. Plurality is close to worthless in this situation. The most obvious case is when a Plurality "winner" receives less than a majority of the votes and so very clearly may not be the correct winner. But it's much worse.

Every voter has experienced the extreme pressure to "vote for the lesser evil" that is engendered by Plurality. If voters vote insincerely or strategically instead of indicating their honest first choice, there simply is no way to tell which candidate would result in the highest voter satisfaction. Even if there is a majority winner it may not be the correct winner. And if no candidate receives a majority of the votes, it is not even guaranteed that the correct winner will be one of the two candidates that received the most votes; so the candidate that voters most want might not make it into a runoff election! Though perhaps counterintuitive, this nevertheless can happen.

Plurality simply does not gather enough information from voters to enable it to consistently identify the correct winner, and it is highly vulnerable to strategic voting. It exacerbates the horrible and divisive polarization that is endangering our country by making extreme candidates the likely winners and handicapping broadly acceptable candidates.

So, would runoff elections "fix" primary elections? Does it make sense to try to patch up the problems of an awful voting method using the same awful voting method? No doubt it would slightly increase our chances of electing the right candidate. But it would be far better to fix the

fundamental problem. Utilizing a very much better voting method that can consistently identify the correct winner with *any* number of candidates would eliminate the need for costly and disruptive runoffs.

Hundreds of alternative methods have been proposed. Designing a good voting method seems like it should be simple, but has turned out to be trickier and more confusing than expected. Only fairly recently has a comprehensive understanding been achieved.

The missing “magic ingredient” that greatly improves a voting method’s ability to identify the correct winner in all types of elections is to empower voters to vote *both for* candidates they like *and against* candidates they don’t like. In other words, elections need to work more like a referendum. (We do use referenda for judge retention elections, where voters either approve or disapprove of a sitting judge.)

Minimizing insincere or strategic voting also is crucial. There is no way to reliably identify the correct winner using bogus information from voters. In addition to the options to vote both for and against candidates, voters must have the option to vote for at least two candidates. This removes the motivation to vote for “the lesser evil” instead of a true first choice.

The simplest voting method to incorporate all these required features is called AADV (Approve/Approve/Disapprove Voting). Voters have the options to approve of either one or two candidates and also to disapprove of one. Each candidate’s disapprovals subtract from its approvals; the candidate with the highest (positive) net total of approvals is elected.

No voting method can be perfect, but AADV makes *radically* fewer errors than Plurality or IRV (Instant Runoff Voting). It is much better than any of the RCV (Ranked Choice Voting) methods or even AV (Approval Voting) and STAR (Score Then Automatic Runoff).

AADV makes it harder for divisive candidates to win. Broadly acceptable candidates with few negatives become the more likely winners. Polarization is reduced rather than exacerbated.

With the option of two approvals, you can always vote for your true favorite and still weigh in on the lesser evil whenever that may be important. This levels the field and enables all candidates to obtain a fairer hearing and meaningful voter consideration.

It is hoped that our legislators will improve primary elections by fixing the root problem rather than applying the band aid of runoff elections. They should bear in mind that precisely the same problems also afflict our general elections.

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