

Why Voters Elect Presidents They Oppose

By Roy Minet (Rev. – 2023/05/12)

Polling data strongly indicate that our most recent two presidents *were opposed by a majority of the voters who elected them*. All signs point toward electing a president in 2024 that will again be opposed by a majority of voters. Impossible? Well, no, it's not; and it has nothing to do with the much-maligned Electoral College.

Just prior to the 2016 election, polling by Pew Research indicated that only 32% of registered voters said they were either "very warm" or "somewhat warm" for candidate Trump, while 55% indicated they were "very cold" or "somewhat cold" toward him. On the other hand, only 36% said they were either "very warm" or "somewhat warm" for candidate Clinton, while 53% said they were "very cold" or "somewhat cold" toward Hillary.

Another Pew poll revealed that only 33% were happy with the choice of candidates while a whopping 63% were not happy with their choices. Other polls (e.g. Gallup) confirmed this bleak scenario as well.

Suppose that a simple "for-or-against" referendum had been held on whether or not voters wanted Trump to be president. The data say that he would have lost decisively. If a similar "for-or-against" referendum had been held for Clinton, it appears she too would have lost.

So, if a solid majority of voters disliked Trump and also disliked Clinton, why did they elect one of them? It is because they had no way to vote against any candidate. Voters can only vote *for one* candidate. Therefore, they voted for a candidate they didn't like because they feared the election of a candidate they liked even less! It's called "voting for the lesser evil."

The main cause of these woes is hiding in plain sight: it is continued use of the Plurality voting method. For 250 years, it has been known that Plurality is truly horrible. Not only can it foster polarization, but it frequently does not choose the correct winner – the one with which voters would be most satisfied. Plurality is killing us and needs to be replaced with a very much better voting method.

Why are divisive presidential candidates nominated so often? It's largely because Plurality is employed for primary elections and is nearly worthless at identifying the correct winner when there are three or more candidates. Feckless Plurality enabled Trump defeat many competitors to become the 2020 Republican nominee and promises to do so again in 2024.

A strongly polarizing candidate also turns out to be the best strategy to win elections. Here is how that works.

Most presidential elections in key swing states are decided by less than 5 or 6 percentage points, frequently less than 2. Since voter turnout is only in the 60% range at best, political parties believe (correctly) that increasing the turnout of their "base" voters is the path to gaining that few additional percentage points needed to secure a win. With intense polarization, there is no hope of attracting voters from the opposite camp.

Thus, parties are motivated to nominate more “extreme” candidates that will draw their base voters to the polls. Voters also are strongly motivated because they mortally fear a win by the candidate at the opposite extreme. It would be hard to create a more divisive situation if that were the goal. Obviously, Plurality’s pernicious aspects adversely affect elections at all levels.

The political landscape has degenerated to Blue versus Red gangs; both ruthlessly fighting to gain and retain power at virtually any cost. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely!” Witness the disintegration of fundamental institutions and order in our society. Political polarization is so intense that it is even causing people to relocate, thereby building geographic polarization.

Many citizens seem to sense that “something” is wrong. The Gallup organization’s tracking of nationwide party affiliation reveals long-term steady declines in adherents for both the Republican Party and the Democrat Party. The most recent sample (March 1, 2023) shows only 25% each for Blue and Red. Those rejecting both gangs have grown to 49%, very nearly the majority. However, the 49% are not an effectively organized force, which makes it easy for the two gangs to neutralize and ignore them.

Apparently, no alternative candidate, however wonderful, can gain media coverage and voter consideration in the face of the intense vote-for-the-lesser-evil pressures engendered by Plurality. They are further impeded by the barriers to competition erected by the gangs (e.g. gerrymandering, exclusion from debates and high hurdles to ballot access).

To move things in a more harmonious direction – not to mention elect better leaders – elections need to function more like referenda. That is, voters must be empowered to vote both for candidates they like *and also against candidates they do not like*.

A voting method called AADV (Approve/Approve/Disapprove Voting), proposed in 2020, gives voters 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.

Thus, it is harder for divisive candidates to win. Widely 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. This levels the field and enables all candidates to obtain a fairer hearing and meaningful voter consideration.

Even with many candidates, AADV continues to far more reliably choose the candidate that maximizes voter satisfaction. The best strategy to win elections will no longer be to nominate the most polarizing and highly divisive candidate!

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