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Approval Voting and the Good Society

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Proposed independently by several analysts in the 1970s, *approval voting* (AV) is a voting procedure in which voters can vote for, or approve of, as many candidates as they wish in multicandidate elections--that is, elections with more than two candidates. Each candidate approved of receives one vote, and the candidate with the most votes wins. In the United States, the case for AV seems particularly strong in primary and nonpartisan elections, which often draw large fields of candidates.

AV has several compelling advantages over other voting procedures:

- 1. It gives voters more flexible options.* They can do everything they can under plurality voting (PV)--vote for a single favorite--but if they have no strong preference for one candidate, they can express this fact by voting for all candidates they find acceptable. In addition, if a voter's most preferred candidate has little chance of winning, that voter can vote for both a first choice *and* a more viable candidate without worrying about wasting his or her vote on the less popular candidate.
- 2. It helps elect the strongest candidate.* Today the candidate supported by the largest minority often wins, or at least makes the runoff if there is one. Under AV, by contrast, the candidate with the greatest overall support will generally win. In particular, 'Condorcet candidates,' who can defeat every other candidate in separate pairwise contests, almost invariably win under AV, whereas under PV they often lose because they split the vote with one or more other centrist candidates.
- 3. It will reduce negative campaigning.* AV induces candidates to try to mirror the views of a majority of voters, not just cater to minorities whose voters could give them a slight edge in a crowded plurality contest. It is thus likely to cut down on negative campaigning, because candidates will have an incentive to try to broaden their appeals by reaching out for approval to voters who might have a different first choice. Lambasting such a choice would risk alienating this candidate's supporters and losing their approval.
- 4. It will increase voter turnout.* By being better able to express their preferences, voters are more likely to vote in the first place. Voters who think they might be wasting their votes, or who cannot decide which of several candidates best represents their views, will not have to despair about making a choice. By not being forced to make a single--perhaps arbitrary--choice, they will feel that the election system allows them to be more honest, which will make voting more meaningful and encourage greater participation in elections.
- 5. It will give minority candidates their proper due.* Minority candidates will not suffer under AV: their supporters will not be torn away simply because there is another candidate who, though less appealing to

them, is generally considered a stronger contender. Because AV allows these supporters to vote for *both* candidates, they will not be tempted to desert the one who is weak in the polls, as under PV. Hence, minority candidates will receive their true level of support under AV, even if they cannot win. This will make election returns a better reflection of the overall acceptability of candidates, relatively undistorted by strategic voting, which is important information often denied to voters today.

6. *It is eminently practicable.* Unlike more complicated ranking systems, which suffer from a variety of theoretical as well as practical defects, AV is simple for voters to understand and use. Although more votes must be tallied under AV than under PV, AV can readily be implemented on existing voting machines. Because AV does not violate any state constitutions in the United States (or, for that matter, the constitutions of most countries in the world), it requires only an ordinary statute to enact.

Probably the best-known official elected by AV today is the secretary-general of the United Nations. AV has been used in internal elections by the political parties in some states, such as Pennsylvania. Bills to implement AV have been introduced in several state legislatures. In 1987, a bill to enact AV in certain statewide elections passed the Senate but not the House in North Dakota. In 1990, Oregon used AV in a statewide advisory referendum on school financing, which presented voters with five different options and allowed them to vote for as many as they wished.

In 1987 and 1988, several scientific and engineering societies inaugurated the use of AV. It has worked well in finding consensus candidates, and all the societies continue to use it today. These societies are:

- * The Mathematical Association of America (MAA), with about 32,000 members;
- * The Institute of Management Science (TIMS), with about 7,000 members;
- * The American Statistical Association (ASA), with about 15,000 members;
- * The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), with about 320,000 members.

In addition, the Econometric Society has used AV (with certain emendations) to elect fellows since 1980; likewise, since 1981 the selection of members of the National Academy of Sciences at the final stage of balloting has been based on AV. Coupled with many colleges and universities that now use AV--from the departmental level to the school-wide level--it is no exaggeration to say that several hundred thousand individuals have had direct experience with AV.

Beginning in 1987, AV was used in some competitive elections in countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It continues to be used there today, where it is usually 'disapproval voting' because voters are only permitted to cross off names on ballots. But this procedure is logically equivalent to AV: candidates not crossed off are, in effect, approved of, although psychologically there is almost surely a difference between approving and disapproving of candidates.

As cherished a principle as 'one person, one vote' is in single-winner elections, such as for president, it is probably an anachronism today. Western democracies, as well as developed and developing countries in other parts of the world, could benefit more from the alternative principle of 'one candidate, one vote,' whereby voters are able to make a judgment about whether each candidate on the ballot is acceptable or not.

The latter principle makes the tie-in of a vote not to the voter but rather to the candidates, which is surely

more egalitarian than artificially restricting voters to casting only one vote in multicandidate races. This principle also affords voters an opportunity to express their intensities of preference by approving, for example, of all except the one candidate they may despise.

More than intellectual issues are at stake here. With some 500,000 elected officials serving in approximately 80,000 governments in the United States alone, and probably similar proportions in other countries, the consequences of using different election procedures to implement democratic elections are great. Procedures are not innocuous. They can make a difference not only on who is elected but also on what ultimately becomes public policy.

AV is a strikingly simple election reform for finding consensus choices in single-winner elections. On the other hand, in elections with more than one winner, such as for a council or legislature, AV would not be desirable if the goal is to mirror a diversity of views, especially of minorities. Minorities, nonetheless, will derive indirect benefit from AV, because their candidates will retain their own supporters; at the same time, more mainstream candidates will be forced to reach out to these supporters for the approval *they* need to win.

I believe a good society must be majoritarian in its choice of leaders-- at least those selected in single-winner elections. At the same time, it must make these leaders responsive to minority views. AV is an election reform that deftly accomplishes both ends in a practicable way.