

Doodling Good: Thinking Outside the Box to Improve Electoral Practices

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[Note: I have also applied to address the committee at a future hearing in Ottawa. This written submission makes the same points, as I have no guarantee I will be invited to appear.].

Introduction: I became fascinated with voting system in university when my student council used a voting system called “fractional redistribution” to ensure voter comfort and proper support for elected representatives. Later, in Ottawa, in the 1970s, I experienced its system which allowed multiple choices for races that elected more than one person (councillor, two per ward, and controllers, of which there were four elected). Even my work with the Green Party introduced me to NOTA, “none-of-the-above,” and to arguments about “strategic voting” which “stole” supporters at each federal and provincial election to candidates of other larger parties with a better chance of winning the seat. My presentation on electoral reform on behalf of smaller federal parties, is cited under sources, at the end.

I have become fascinated with other voting systems, and have come to the conclusion that mankind has not yet invented the ideal electoral system. The one I think comes close is approval – or acceptance – voting for 75% of seats representing constituencies, with the other 25% used to fill regional seats (with “clusters of constituencies) for parties who are under-represented in constituency results.

I conclude with a proposal for “Twittering,” in which every voter would be given 140 characters to express their priorities for government action over the new parliament’s term of office. It might cause pause for the elected government if priorities emerged that they did not deal with in their platform (or dealt with in a way different from what the Twittering produced.) Each elected person would have – front and centre – a reference for what the voters will consider before voting for – or against – him/her at the *next* election – which is only fair and logical. The input could also provide an explanation for why they voted as they did, including any resentments.

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I support the goals of proportionality, but want to retain local constituencies (cf, Former U.S. Speaker, ‘Tip’ O’Neill’s 1995 book *All Politics is Local*). I also want a ballot that asks less of voters, specifically for voters to identify the multiple choices they find acceptable, rather than the one choice that is “best.” Although it is ideal to elect “the best” candidate, it is not necessary for each voter to try to identify which candidate is best for all voters in the constituency; it is enough for each voter to identify which candidates are acceptable to him/her, that meet his/her own thresholds of relevance and competency – or whatever. Remember, *best* is made harder when choices consist of a combination of a candidate and a party with its different kind of identity and history.

This distinction between “best” and “good enough” was the basis of the 1955 Nobel-Prize-winning work of cybernetician Herbert Simon, when he studied human decision-making and concluded that most personal decisions are preceded by a process that merely finds the option that is *satisfactory* and meets one’s own *threshold* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satisficing>). It requires less research and effort than *optimizing*. The present voting system, by providing only one choice, demands that voters go the extra ‘kilometre’ to find the *best* choice. But most voters will not make the effort to determine the best, rather than the less onerous task of simply determining which choices are acceptable or of which they approve. I believe that many people who don’t vote simply feel intimidated by the task of finding which candidate is “best.” Simons opened up the field of economics to an alternative view of behavioural economics, a challenge to rational-man economics, as further elucidated by Daniel Kahnemann who also won the Nobel Prize in Economics (his book: *Thinking, Fast and Slow*).

What is much easier is for each voter to consider the candidate-party combinations one at a time as to whether each meets his/her own standard for representation of them; others will speak for themselves. If more than one is acceptable, that becomes another difficulty deciding which one gets the voter’s endorsement, *unless* the voting system simply allows multiple candidates/parties to be marked. Approval/acceptance voting allows this.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Approval_voting: “Approval voting was used for papal conclaves between 1294 and 1621, with an average of about forty cardinals engaging in repeated rounds of voting until one candidate was listed on at least two-thirds of ballots.” This voting, as it pre-dated democracy as we know it, can be considered the earliest form of voting in the world.] Note that, despite our electoral laws requirement to mark only one choice, they don’t bar voters from supporting more than one candidate with their words, labour, display of lawn signs, or financial support. Why limit them in the voting booth when doing so doesn’t give them any extra agency than any other voter?

I should first explain that there will be people who, at this point in my submission will object, saying that by marking more than one candidate who are all given the voter’s support is anti-democratic. They point out that the *alternative vote*, which allows multiple designations if they are rank-ordered and counted in separate tallies, does not violate the principle (also called “instant run-off elections”). The reason that a ballot with several choices marked as co-equal in value is democratic is that the ballot doesn’t affect the *relative standing* of the candidates-parties by more than “unity” (one). Approval voting is used in a number of organizations, mostly large associations that value winners with majorities.

It is also used when voting for something other than people. A good example of this is the ubiquitous process of “polling” to determine the best date-and-time of a future meeting of a committee of which one is a member. There is now on-line software for this, the most common being [Doodle.com](https://www.doodle.com). The chairperson or secretary lists the dates/times that the two can both attend, and asks the rest of the committee – and any guests – to indicate which of these each could attend. To limit them to one choice would ensure failure at finding any date that could be attended by a majority; and asking the members to mark multiple choices with a number to

designate each's rank-order would be hard to calculate and even harder to explain to members, losing transparency. It is quite satisfactory to simply know which date-time choices each member could attend. There is no need to treat the choices as competing with each other. The officers aren't looking only for the option that will allow a majority to attend, but *all* members.

Another use of approval voting is in public-opinion polls, in which the question asks respondents to rate each choice, one-by-one, against a metric like trust, experience, etc. rather than "the most trusted" or "the most experienced." A final example: Canadian political parties, seeking leaders with majorities, don't use FPTP, but rather a *series* of ballots allowing only one choice to be marked. How much faster and easier to allow Approval Voting on the first ballot, perhaps with a super-majority requirement, like 60%! Approval voting is used by the U.N. to elect each secretary-general.

The use of Approval Voting changes a number of things from First-Past-The-Post and all alternatives to it:

- » More than one candidate can achieve a majority, and the one that gets the most approvals (the one elected) will often be *acceptable* to more than 70-80 percent. This will end the accusations that winners with less than a majority were "opposed" by a majority.
- » The candidates are no longer competing for something that is scarce: each voter's blessing in terms of being "best." This will completely change campaigns: candidates will aim for being acceptable, not "the best." This will produce far less negative campaigning, better, I believe, than the ranked-order ballot.
- » It will greatly reduce "strategic voting," which usually aims at finding a way to keep a disliked candidate from winning, even if it means supporting a competitor the voters likes little better. Strategic voting is a form of negative voting; Acceptance voting allow this without contrivance (by voting for all choices except the one opposed). To be used properly, strategic voting requires the voters who uses it to *predict* how all other voters, in preponderance, will vote – an unknowable – and this leaves candidate's representatives to refer voters to their own "polling."
- » One of the chief criteria for "acceptance" will be the ability to work with others. Even though the candidate will have a 100% mandate, they will also represent those who did not find them acceptable, and that in itself requires agreeable manners and openness to other's perspectives, something all legislatures require.
- » Spoiled ballots are essentially not possible, since there are really no rules to be broken. Voting for all or none of the choices is completely acceptable and legitimate; the former constitute the equivalent of the Green Party, for its internal elections, using "NOTA," or none of the above, and the latter being "All of the above." Both count toward calculating the number of approvals constitute a majority.
- » Voter participation will go up. Voting for candidates that are acceptable simply is less

onerous. The “best” is an ideal that is usually not possible without voters *bending* their own sense of dignity. It is simpler to simply consider each choice and decide whether to give it a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down. In my 2002 speech to the Institute for Research in Public Policy on electoral reform on behalf of smaller parties, I even suggested the decline in voter participation – the result of FPTP and the strategic voting and negative campaigning it engenders, could be partly countered by paying MPs the percentage of the stipulated salary equal to voter participation in their riding.

[NOTE: If it is decided that voters should be able to rate each choice as to the *degree* of approval/acceptance, as in rank-ordering them with numbers, the counting system can be expanded slightly to accommodate that. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Condorcet_method). It requires treating each ballot as a series of binary choices (each candidate in a “race” with each other candidate alone). One advantage over rank-ordered ballots alone: on a ballot with a long list of candidates, a ballot can be spoiled if the voter gives two choices the same ranking. A combined system will legitimize this, whether intentional or a mistake.]

Winning Local Constituencies and Filling the Cluster Seats

Although my proposal is like MMP, it doesn’t require giving each voter two ballots. It is also like STV by creating “cluster seats” (although much larger “clusters.”). The allocation of the 25% of seats is determined by the tally of all “approvals” not garnered by the winners in each constituency race, thus giving each “approval” a second chance to “count.” Each voter will therefore have a local MP plus one “cluster” MP for *each* party they “approve” of. I also propose that local constituencies that fail to give *any* choice a majority have its seat, until the next election, transferred to the cluster-seat pool for distribution. The Chief Electoral Office will determine the # of cluster seats allocated to each party. The party then will do the clustering (ridings must be in the same region, or adjacent regions), These “clusterings” will then be submitted to the CEO who will name that party’s constituency candidate in that cluster which got the highest % of vote in his/her respective riding? No lists, and therefore no need for a second ballot, or to decide if lists are “open” or “closed.”

Related to the determination of a majority, I would propose that local constituency winners be required to win approval/acceptance of at least 55 percent of voters. (This is far more likely when multiple candidates can be voted for; in fact several might exceed thus “super-majority” standard – but not if a large number of voters don’t mark several choices in their ballot).

Another way of allocating cluster seats would be to consider each party’s share of all “approvals” nationally, and compare them to the constituency seats each party actually won. The CEO could then allocate not seats to each party, but require that they choose the cluster MPs, but must have regard to not just candidate approval-garnering, but their gender and/or visible-minority status, the quantity of each would be stipulated. This would ensure that parties, in their nomination process for constituency races, have a reasonable level of diversity.

We must realize that our current regime is pretty much created by “politicos,” and thus reflects their needs and desires, such as besting the opposition by winning a scarce good, getting a “blank

cheque” for four years of power/prerogative. [“. . . Brams[4] who notes that 'The chief reason for its non-adoption in public elections, and by some societies, seems to be a lack of key "insider" support.'" cf. Wikipedia: "Voting systems:] Winning your vote means they want you a treat their "enemies" as yours and to support every plank in their platform. They are "a package." Voters can't pick and choose, or mix-and-match. Think about how that thinking would go over in a supermarket? [Watch what happens if you phone a campaign office, asking for the candidates sign for your front lawn. But you already have the sign for a competitor displayed. What does the party working who delivers it – and expects to install it – do? Just watch.] ["When candidates see a vote for another candidate as being a lost vote for himself, it induces attempts to get voters to dislike the alternatives; and failing that, to at least discourage the voter from casting a ballot at all! There is too much winner-take-all attitude in politics; only the most partisan voters subscribe to that principle; the rest are just turned off by it and by the behaviour of politicians and their supporters to gain – or stay in – power at all costs. Voter participation is hurt by this." 2007 submission on hearthhealth]

Conclusion:

A few hours on Wikipedia looking at what “advances” have been discovered about electoral systems will make your mind feel scrambled. It is a hobby with politicians with mathematical propensities. Yes, even approval voting can be used strategically. But that is not the point. It is simply the voting system for the rest of us, the citizens who want to help guide the ship of state, but without contrivance or feeling challenged to do the superhuman. Let us look at the candidates one-by-one and render our thumbs-up or thumbs-down on each, based on whatever we glean from the supercharged atmosphere that is created for about a month – please, no longer than that! – to support us in discharging our citizen’s duty.

We want a system that is simple and can't be “spoiled.” We want fairness and a reasonably direct connection between what we and others decide on our ballots and the outcome. We want the winner to work together, despite the collective “fate” the election produced. And we want some say in *what* the blokes accomplish during their term of office.

Approval voting allows us to vote positively and negatively, and to not have to treat our vote as being a scarce resource. We don't even want to feel bad that we are partial to more than one candidate and party. And we don't want to use advance polls to escape the inner doubting that comes in the later stages of the campaign.

Yes, approval voting can be combined with alternative (ranked-order) voting and still produce clear results, but they are very hard to understand. Let's keep it sweet and simple. And let all the people of Canada feel comfortable again to discharge their duties to elect their legislative minions.

Finally, I suggest consideration of a compromise approach: offer voters a hybrid system of multiple electoral apparati: let them choose one of say, three or four ballots, each for a cluster of seats to be allocated as per one of the electoral systems. Each succeeding election would reallocate the seats between the clusters based on voter selection of systems/ballots in the

previous election (see it listed below).

Sources:

IRPP speech (published in *Policy Option* in August 2001):

<https://hearthhealth.wordpress.com/about/previously-published-works/governance-public-participation-electoral-systems/small-federal-parties-and-the-voting-system-2001/>

My brief to the Law Reform Commission of Canada:

<https://hearthhealth.wordpress.com/about/previously-published-works/governance-public-participation-electoral-systems/approval-voting-pitch-to-law-reform-commission-of-canada-2003/>

Previous brief: to Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform in Ontario

(<https://hearthhealth.wordpress.com/about/previously-published-works/governance-public-participation-electoral-systems/approval-voting-with-cluster-seats-avcs-2007/>)

<https://hearthhealth.wordpress.com/about/previously-published-works/governance-public-participation-electoral-systems/a-hybrid-multi-ballot-electoral-option/>

This submission:

<https://hearthhealth.wordpress.com/about/previously-published-works/governance-public-participation-electoral-systems/doodling-good-electoral-reform/>

Finally, another supporter of Approval Voting, Alex Boston, chair of the Philosophy Department at Langara College in Vancouver, B.C., wrote an op-ed article that was published by the *Ottawa Citizen*, on July 8, 2016.