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Throwing your weight behind a vote

After all the struggles for universale suffrage, we should continue to improve democratic elections with weighted voting

Several days ago, I listened to a concert in a music hall that is normally full to the rafters but on that day was half-empty. The concert however was magnificent and when it ended the audience stood up to give prolonged applause to the musicians.

What we were trying to do was not only to make up for the missing public but to use the applause as a gauge of our appreciation. We were not using polite clapping as if it were a digital, 1-0 variable — applauding or not — but going beyond that to show the strength of our emotion.

Currently, in democracies, people are each given one vote in every election or referendum. The vote, if we decide to use it, is binary: it shows that we prefer one option rather than another. But it gives no clue as to how much we prefer it.

Weighted voting

Weighted voting tries to remedy this. Should not people who feel very strongly about an issue have a chance to express that — to give a sign that they feel much more strongly about that issue than another issue; or much more strongly than another person who may be indifferent between the options or between the issues? In principle this is desirable, but how can it be reconciled with an equal voting power for all? If people were simply allowed to choose the number of votes they claim reflected the strength of their preferences, one person might take five or ten votes, whereas another person might have only one.

The solution lies in giving people the same amount of total votes over a number of elections, but giving them the freedom to use these votes in accordance with how strongly they feel about individual elections. It is like, in a casino, being given 10 tokens each: you can decide to use all of them in the first round or play one in each of ten rounds. Equality among

voters is thus maintained, while they are allowed to make the strength of their preferences known.

Early democracies were weighted — but in a very different sense: only some categories of people had the right of vote. In both Greek city states and the *ante-bellum* United States, the franchise was limited to free (non-slave) men. In some US states, it was additionally limited by a wealth census (amount of property owned or taxes paid). The same census-based voting rights existed in all countries vaguely considered democratic in the 19th century. Women moreover were excluded in all developed countries until the end of World War I. In such weighted systems, preserved today only in some international organisations such as the IMF, the weights were used so as *not* to give every individual (or relevant unit, the country) the same importance.

The system of quadratic voting would ensure equality among citizens and enable expression of the strength of preferences while penalising a focus on only one (or a few) issues.

In modern democracies, we have a one-person-one-vote system (1p1v). But that system, while egalitarian, does not allow the expression of the strength of preferences. A system of weighted voting — one person, n votes — should solve that problem.

And it is not a minor problem. Whether (in the US) you are a strong Donald Trump supporter or equally strongly his opponent, or (in the UK) a Leaver or Remainer, it is clear, I think, that you wish you had a chance to express your conviction more strongly. In a weighted system you would be able to do so: you might skip voting in local elections, or in a referendum about which you did not care, keeping all your votes to cast them in favour of or against Trump or 'Brexit'.

Rebellion or revolution

Short of such a possibility of weighted voting, what are the alternatives for those who really feel strongly about some issues? Basically, nothing but civil disobedience, rebellion or revolution.

It is often said that revolutions are minority affairs. Neither the US war of independence nor the Russian revolution would (probably) have happened with a 1p1v system. The reason they happened is because to those to whom the issue really mattered only violence remained — unlike the fence-sitters, the revolutionaries were willing to die for their cause, which is, in a way, the ultimate weighted vote. But nowadays we should be able to do it better—without spilling blood.

In an excellent recent book, *Radical Markets: Uprooting Capitalism and Democracy for a Just Society*, Eric Posner and Glen Weyl propose a special form of weighted voting, 'quadratic voting', where everyone has *n* votes but if he or she decides to hoard them and use them for only one election the voting power of such votes is less.

Suppose that you and I each have nine votes but I decide to use them in nine elections while you hoard them to use in one election about which you care. According to quadratic voting, my overall voting power would be nine (nine times one); yours would be only three (square root of nine—hence the term 'quadratic').

The system of quadratic voting would ensure equality among citizens and enable expression of the strength of preferences while penalising a focus on only one (or a few) issues. Many alternative forms of weighted voting are of course possible, including the simplest where each vote carries the same voting power.

The difficulties

The difficulties lie elsewhere: should people be given equal numbers of votes for (say) a four-year period or longer? And then, as voters do not know what future elections are coming — or (say) who would be the candidates in the US presidential election in 2020 — how can they judge the relative importance of one election *versus* another?

Similarly, weighted voting does not solve the problem of who is entitled to vote in the first place.

Suppose hypothetically that you were a strong anti-Trump voter but had already used all your votes in the 2016 election and so had none left for 2020. Thus, you would no longer count at all. Or suppose that you were an indifferent voter then and had by now accumulated a bunch of votes which, in a very tight 2020 election, might be very valuable. What should you do? You alone, indifferent as you are, could be worth ten other committed but voteless individuals.

Similarly, weighted voting does not solve the problem of who is entitled to vote in the first place. The political status of territories that aspire to independence cannot be solved by weighted voting prior to agreeing who has the right to vote (basically, only the concerned territory or the larger unit).

There are many other problems one can imagine. Yet the fundamental truth of weighted voting is still incontrovertible: we should be able to devise a system which enables preferences to be expressed not only as binary choices but fully, including the underlying strength of our sentiment. Going back to the example of the concert hall, we should be able to reward those whom we admire with longer than usual applause.

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