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Should we voters seek the winner or the one?

Everybody loves to joke around with that tongue-in-cheek line "vote early, vote often," but as the wild-and-woolly primary approaches, maybe we should be taking it seriously.

No, I mean it. Why shouldn't we be allowed to vote for more than one person – especially this year, with both parties facing an embarrassment of riches in candidates, instead of just an embarrassment?

As I noted when I wrote about this topic four years ago, there are sound reasons to think that in a race with several viable candidates, the best way to reflect the view of the electorate is to let us vote for more than one person.

The details are technical but can be boiled down to this: Multiple votes reflect the way a candidate can be the second choice of many people, a measure of voter popularity that currently gets lost in the shuffle.

"Allowing voters to name only their top choice is akin to ranking students based only on the number of A's they receive. A student with three A's and two F's would be ranked above one with two A's and three B's," is how Donald Saari put it in one of the wonkiest political books ever written, "Chaotic Elections: A Mathematician Looks at Voting."

Voting for more than one candidate sounds weird, but it is done in lots of elections. Slovenia uses a type of Borda Count; London has used the instant-runoff method for its mayoral contest; and plenty of professional societies elect leaders by the approval method.

In general, though, the "first-past-the-post" method rules worldwide, because it seems the fairest.

Saari, at the University of California in Irvine, wants us to think otherwise, or at least to think about it.

He gets pretty technical at times (he analyzes the Lincoln-Douglas election of 1860 using a flattened tetrahedron), but at the very least, he made me aware of the

various alternatives to one-vote-for-one-person, including:

- Approval voting, which lets us give equal-weight votes to as many people as we want, with all votes tallied and the plurality winner getting elected.
- Instant runoff, in which each voter lists both a first choice and second choice. If no candidate gets a pure majority from the first choice, all but the top two are eliminated and votes are counted again, with second choices coming into play.

In the teeter-totter 2000 presidential election (which prompted Saari to write "Chaotic Elections"), instant runoff would have come into play in eight states, including New Hampshire.

- Class standing votes, in which voters rank all candidates. For example, we could give each hopeful a grade from A to F, with the winner chosen in one of a variety of ways: The winner would have the most A's, or the fewest F's, or the highest cumulative score (5 points for A, 4 for B, etc.).
- Borda Count, in which voters give points to each candidate and the highest total wins. The most common method in a race with X candidates, voters could give X points to their first choice, X-1 points to their second, and so on down to 0 points.

Mathematically, the Borda Count – named after an 18th-century mathematician – is considered most representative of voters' overall preference, but it's a logistical nightmare. Imagine volunteers doing all that tallying in the school gyms in hand-count towns as national media panted for an answer.

- Pairwise comparison, in which voters compare each candidate to each other candidate and say which of the two they prefer. That's way too labor-intensive this year, however; 10 people on a ballot creates 45 choices to write down.

So which would be best for the New Hampshire primary? The answer, alas, isn't mathematical but political. It depends on what we really want an election to do.

Do we want to get the candidate who is acceptable to the highest number of people, even if not that many go crazy over him? Do we want the candidate who arouses the most passion in people, even if that passion is sometimes negative? Do we want the candidate who is despised by the fewest? Idolized by the most?

I don't know what I want, partly because it hadn't occurred to me that normal voting isn't necessarily the best way. But I'll bet that when I'm biting my pencil over next Tuesday's ballot, I'll be thinking, "How come I can't choose more than one?"

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