

Informed Voters and Minority Interests

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First, thank you to the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform for the opportunity to make these comments.

I'll begin with comments on electoral and governance systems that go beyond the usual scope of the debate, and I'll finish with my positions on more 'standard' issues. (The recommendations are found in numbered lists in the text and supported by arguments in the body of the text. The ideas below are treated briefly; contact me if you wish more comprehensive and rigorous versions of these arguments.)

1. Introduction

The debate over what electoral and governance systems are best is essentially about what kind of distribution of power we want. How should individual voters voices be translated into the voices of representatives? In practice, some voices are heard more or less than others depending such factors as whether they vote for losing candidates and which electoral district they live in – and of course, whether they come out to vote at all. But there are some other important features of voting and governing we need to focus on. I will suggest some areas for discussion that I know will be controversial – but I promise the debate will be worth your while. Thank you for the opportunity to bring these ideas to your agenda.

I'll argue first that we must focus not only on improving voting and governing systemic structures, but, importantly, also on making sure voters are well-informed. I'll look at the role incentives play in this. Then I'll look at how we can protect the rights and interests of minorities through our choice of electoral system.

2. The Key to Effective Democracy: Informed Voters

There is a danger in allowing individuals to vote: they just might actually do it. Scary, isn't it. I'll be more specific: some voters, even *many* voters, will vote without being well-informed. This is not surprising: an economist, for example, analyzing the situation would probably say that there isn't enough incentive for many voters to become informed. In fact, (always a contrary bunch!) some economists in the past have found it surprising that so many people even bother to vote. The individual thinks: "Why should I bother? My voice is only one among 20 thousand, or 100 thousand or 30 million or whatever. It'll make very little difference whether I vote or not. It's not worth my time and energy. I'll watch the hockey game instead." Don't act so shocked, now – even those who actually do get out to the polls often have thoughts along the same lines. Since

our vote is just one tiny anonymous drop in the vast electoral ocean, we don't usually feel very strongly motivated to get deeply informed about political issues and candidates. Frankly, most people spend a lot more time and effort researching and deliberating and pondering what kind of car to buy, for example, than they do on deciding who to vote for. And it's not surprising: they just don't see the pay-off for all that trouble.

This is a standard 'collective action problem'. Luckily, the solution is simple and straightforward (though not necessarily easy to actually design and implement): create incentives for individuals. Make it worth my while to get informed and to vote, in other words. Improving electoral and governing systems is an excellent first step. However, for many individuals, an improved voting and governing system may not be enough incentive. At this point, we may throw up our hands and say: "Well, if they're so darn recalcitrant, we didn't want their vote anyway. They're just not interested in participating, and we can't make them." Now, let's not give up so easily. It's true that you can't force an individual to make an informed vote, but if we want a society where more individuals actively participate in shaping our politics – that is, if we want a participatory democracy – we need to work to build such a society. And if individuals lack incentive to participate, the solution is simple: we need to create incentives.

Mandatory voting is one powerful incentive we can implement. This is a great way of getting people out to the polls, but people won't necessarily inform themselves more deeply. I leave this as an open question then: what incentives can we implement so more voters become more informed? I'll list some suggestions immediately below (some may seem extravagant or problematic, but I don't necessarily endorse any of these in their current form – they are only discussion starters).

Ensuring Voters are Well-Informed

- (1) Before an election, hold community forums or workshops, etc., where citizens discuss political issues; participation is rewarded as noted below (see 'Incentives')
- (2) Before an election, individuals can take some kind of test (!) on relevant political issues, where participation and/or performance is rewarded as noted below (see 'Incentives')
- (3) Individuals can participate in round-tables or other policy-recommending or policy-making bodies, where participation and/or performance is rewarded as noted below (see 'Incentives')

Incentives

- (1) For many individuals, participating in such processes as listed above will be sufficient incentive and reward in itself.
- (2) In general, participating individuals should at least be compensated for their time in lost wages.
- (3) Monetary rewards may be appropriate: cash stipends, tax deductions, etc.
- (4) Participating individuals can be awarded a more heavily weighed vote, that is, their vote could be worth 20% more, or 50% more, for arbitrary example. I know this idea might seem anathema to our usual understanding of democracy, so I'll explain it briefly.

- (5) Participating individuals can be rewarded with a position on a policy-recommending or policy-making body (as described above in ‘Ensuring Voters are Well-Informed (3)’)
- (6) Negative incentives for non-participation – drop and give me 20 pushups, for example.

2.1. Weighted Votes? Are You Serious?

It might sound strange at first, but weighted votes are definitely worth considering (I am being serious here). In practice, individual voices in our society are not usually given equal weight in creating our government. Many advocates of electoral reform are working to correct this, since in many cases unequal voice is not justified, legitimate or desirable. However, in some cases, it is indeed justified, legitimate and desirable.

One example where we usually see limitations on electoral power to be justified is when an individual is less than the minimum voting age. Why? Presumably because we think younger people aren’t mature enough for the responsibility of voting. Now, most of us probably know many young people who are, in fact, mature and responsible enough to vote. How can we justify giving these people no electoral voice whatsoever? Are these people less mature and responsible than criminals who are allowed to vote, for example?

The act of voting is both a right and a responsibility. The act of driving a vehicle is similarly so. When behind the wheel, we can create undesirable consequences for others and ourselves if we don’t know what we’re doing – so we take driver’s tests and must meet other requirements. Similarly, if we’re not informed when we get behind the voting booth, we can also create undesirable consequences. We may object that uninformed voting is less of a problem than dangerous driving, so we needn’t subject it to similarly stringent checks. If that is true, then to be consistent, we should probably adjust the minimum voting age to be considerably younger than the minimum driving age. On the other hand, if we do accept that voting is a responsibility on a par with driving, for example, then we should probably implement similar ‘public safety’ standards against uninformed voting as we do against ‘uninformed’ driving. This latter conclusion is demanded by the reality that voters shape our political reality. We have mandatory driver education, let’s have mandatory voter education.

In keeping with these arguments, we can suggest other possible changes to the voting system:

- (1) we should decrease minimum voting age concomitant with measures and incentives to ensure that voting individuals are informed.
- (2) individuals can ‘learn’ to vote when they are young: instead of giving mature and responsible young people no voice at all, we can give them ‘partial’ votes, for example: if young people want to vote, and if they are able to demonstrate that they are informed and responsible, they could be awarded a vote which is weighted at 70% of normal, for arbitrary example. Yes, this makes different ‘classes’ of voters. Remember, though, that these young people would now have

at least some voice where they previously had none, which makes for a far less stark difference in classes of voters.

Another advantage to this reduction in voting age is that people would learn the ‘voting habit’ early, with the result that voting participation as adults should increase.

Now, if today we accept that some mature and responsible individuals have no electoral voice whatsoever, it’s obvious that they would have more voice if they had a ‘partial’ vote. In that case, as we do now, we would consider acceptable that some individuals should have more or less voting power based on some criteria of merit. If that is the case, and if informedness is a key criterion we wish voters to meet, then it would make sense to award more voting power to more informed individuals. This is how we can justify weighting the votes of informed voters more heavily than those of uninformed individuals. It is important to recognize that *we already differentially weight the votes of different individuals*, but we do so in an extremely crude way, and according to an extremely crude criterion. The weighting is all-or-nothing – either you get one vote or you get zero – and the criteria are factors like age, not more relevant factors such as proven competence or maturity. The result is that many voters are uninformed, and many who are relatively better-informed are not permitted to vote. We should make at least some improvements to this clumsy system.

3. Minorities and Preventing the ‘Tyranny of the Majority’

There is a tension in societies like ours: tension between the principle that each individual should have an equal say and the principle that individual rights and lives should be respected. The well-known phrase ‘tyranny of the majority’ vividly illustrates a danger inherent in democracy: a majority, if unchecked in its power, may govern without concern for the best interests of minorities. If we think these interests are worth protecting, we need somehow to create bounds on the power of the majority.

As I mentioned earlier, the debate over electoral and governance systems is essentially about what kind of distribution of power we want. If we in fact want to distribute power equally for every voter, then it is clear enough: we need a system of proportional representation. No other system guarantees that each person’s vote is directly translated into representation in the legislature (though we shouldn’t pretend that representation is *perfectly* proportional: there’s always some ‘rounding off’ of figures, of course).

Nevertheless, not everyone supports proportional representation. What could be wrong with equal representation for each voter? (Earlier, in section 2, I listed some reasons why unequal weighting of votes can be justified and desirable, but let’s leave those reasons aside for now.) One reason some people oppose proportional representation is that less populous geographic regions will be less represented than more populous regions. In other words, certain regions will tend to be represented by minorities in the government compared to how other regions are represented. Some fear that this means, for example,

that the voices of people living in small towns or rural areas would be scarcely heard against the voices of those living in large cities.

It's obviously true that a smaller voting population would mean fewer representatives in a proportional representation system. Therefore, some people argue for a system where certain regions are guaranteed a minimum amount of representation, no matter how small the population. This may or may not be acceptable; but we should look at alternative ways of protecting minority populations against possible abuses by majority power-holders.

Here are some open-ended suggestions (as before, I don't necessarily endorse any of these in their current form, they are discussion-starters only):

- (1) A proportional representation system should be implemented, along with a clear set of 'regional rights' or other 'minority group rights', say, that ensure that the interests of those with fewer representatives are respected. In other words, we can protect minorities by an explicit system of checks and balances on the legislative process; minorities need not have a higher ratio of elected-officials-to-voters in order to be protected.
- (2) A proportional representation system should be implemented, along with a parallel elected governing body with one (or some constant number) of representative per distinct geographic region or per distinct minority group; this body would have some level of veto power, or advisory power, on the activity of the main governing body.

The practical difficulty here is obviously that we would need to demarcate the boundaries of geographic regions or of other minority groups.

4. **Conclusion**

I have argued that we need to ensure that voters are well-informed, and to do so, we need in particular to implement incentive structures. One such incentive is a weighted vote; an idea which may seem *prima facie* counter to our standard notions of democracy, but when we look more closely, we find in fact that we do already weigh votes, only in a far cruder fashion. I also argued that it would be beneficial to combine a weighted vote with a reduced minimum voting age. I closed by arguing we can protect the interests of minority populations (whether of given regions, or other kinds of minorities) in a proportional representation system either by implementing checks and balances or by implementing a parallel governing body where distinct groups, especially minorities, are represented.

All of the ideas here are to be taken as suggestions and as a springboard for discussion.