

A Letter to the Author

Improvements to Spitzer's Chapter on Elections

Although Spitzer (et al.), in the sixth chapter of their book *Essentials of American Politics*, are able to explain elections and the election process very well, there are a few things that are missing. They explain the way that the national elections are held, and how they work, but do not explain other ways of voting, or the districting process. Also, the authors do not explain the downsides of the current system of voting, save a brief paragraph about the downsides of current campaign financing methodology.

It is important to know how elections are currently run, but it may also prove helpful to know ways to possibly improve our system of voting. Spitzer, et al., does not discuss the other possibilities. Text added to the chapter may look something like the following.

Alternative Methods of Voting

There are three methods of voting that are different from our current system in national elections. The most obvious of these is election based on the popular vote, but other methods exist as well including instant runoff voting and fusion. These systems have all been experimented with on a smaller scale at either the state or local level, and they seem to work.

Popular Vote: This is the most obvious alternative to our current system, and most people know how this works, or even think that the current system works this way. It may be obvious how this system works: the electorate votes, and then each state counts the number of votes that it has for each candidate. The candidate with the highest number of popular votes then wins. A variation on this system is where the votes are counted and added together from each state, and finally the candidate with a majority wins the

election. If there is no majority, then there is a runoff between the two candidates with the most votes.

There are problems with this system, as there are with any, but there are also advantages. If an election is close, such that just a very few votes could turn around the results, then there is very little effective way to do a recount of the vote. If a recount is called for, then all the states must have a recount unless only a certain area is suspected. To recount all the votes in the country is daunting, and would likely be more effort than it is worth. Other than this one problem, there are no serious problems as compared with our current system. Advantages include better representation in the modern times of what the people want. Most people would also probably feel more comfortable with this system, all other factors disregarded.

In the years of the founding, there were added advantages to the Electoral College method that made the framers choose this over a straight popular vote. Such advantages came because a nation that was as separated as ours was at its founding would be hard to campaign in. It was understood that the electors on the College would understand national politics and candidates better than the average person would, so therefore an individual would just have to vote for an elector that had similar values as he did. This system no longer applies however because of the growth of the media, which allows candidates to effectively campaign over the entire country. Now, we simply vote for a candidate, and the Electoral College has become a statistic. (Lingane 2)

Instant Runoff Voting: Another voting method used in some places such as San Francisco for the city government elections in November, 2004 is Instant Runoff Voting. This method enables voters to vote for a minor party first, and if that party doesn't win,

transfer their vote to a more major party. It does this by giving the voter three identical columns of candidates. The voter then fills in the first column with their first choice, the second with their second choice, and the third with their third choice. The first choice votes are then counted, and if a majority is found, the election is decided. However if a majority is not found, then the candidate with the fewest first choice votes is eliminated. If someone voted for this candidate, then their vote is transferred to their second choice. This continues until a majority is found.

This method allows voters to vote for a less popular candidate or party without “wasting their vote” as is done in the current system. This certainly seems advantageous to the voter, but it would also devastate the major parties. If a large group of voters vote for a candidate that everyone believes would never win an election, then that candidate might actually win a large share of the votes. This could quickly overthrow the two parties that currently dominate politics. The parties have therefore successfully stopped this kind of voting from happening.

Fusion: The last alternative method of voting is called fusion. Using fusion, a third party endorses a major party candidate, so that a voter may vote for the same candidate under one of two or more parties. This method is currently being used by New York State. It allows the candidates to know what the voters want more easily, as the voters may vote for a candidate under a party that supports different causes than what the major parties may want. It also allows a third party voter to not waste their vote on an individual third party candidate, which may be thought of as helping the major party to which their views correspond least, as their third party vote counts toward a major candidate. This method is also not liked by the major parties however because it allows voters more

easily to become members of a third party, and while the voters may in the short term vote for a major candidate, if the third party suddenly endorses another candidate, a large number of votes would be taken away from the major party candidate which the third party normally endorses. For this reason, the major parties also do not like this system and have successfully kept it out of national politics.

Besides the lack of description of other possible kinds of voting methods, there is not a description of the problems with the current system of voting. The added text may appear as follows. (Haskell)

Problems with our Current System of Voting:

Although our current system of voting works generally, there are some problems with it. Some of these problems include the fact that the current system of voting does not encourage votes for the party that a voter really wants, but rather for the *major* party that the voter feels most closely connected to. In some cases, the voter may actually vote in a certain way because they want to vote *against* a party instead of for another. For example, during the 2004 presidential election, comments could be heard frequently from non-Bush supporters that can be summarized as “Anyone but Bush.” This is clearly not a healthy view to have, and instead of voting for another candidate, the voters who thus commented were merely voting against Bush. Since elections are intended to represent the will of the people, then this idea presents a problem with that intention.

Other problems spring when voters must choose between three or more options. When this situation occurs, it is impossible to determine exactly what the public wants, as

different methods of voting produce varying results. This is called the **paradox of voting**.

It is well illustrated by Haskell (p. 123), who says that

1. Whereas an individual can make a rational, logical, and coherent ordering of choices, presented to him or her, it is often impossible for a group, even one made up of well-informed and rational individuals, to order their choices coherently.
2. Majorities in party politics are really unstable coalitions of minorities that rarely if ever carry clear and comprehensive policy instructions.
3. Different legitimate and widely used methods of decision-making often produce different winners.
4. Decision making processes may be manipulated by strategic voters.
5. We can never be sure that the popular will is reflected in the result of a decision making process.

This is true especially if an election is close. One candidate may receive just under half the votes, and another may receive also just under half, but more than the first. A third candidate then receives a small fraction. In this case, it is hard to tell the popular will, since the third candidate may have taken votes away from either of the other two by drawing votes to himself that would otherwise have gone to one of the major candidates. If the candidate whose votes were taken away was the one with fewer votes, than this process could have changed the outcome of the election. In this case, the popular will was not expressed.

Another issue that the chapter does not address is that of redistricting, especially of congressional districts. In order to better address it, text that needs to be added may look like the following. (Toobin)

Redistricting of Congressional Districts

Every ten years, a census of the American population is taken. Based on this census, congressional districts are redrawn, with possible additions or removals, to reflect the new total populations in areas and states. Often, districts are drawn to best accommodate

the party currently in charge. There are no restrictions on the shape of the districts, so the party in charge can make them whatever shape they want. Often, especially in modern times with the advent of sophisticated software built for the purpose, the districts are drawn to maximize the number of seats a party can get within a state in the senate. This method is often preferred to drawing stable seats, as stable seats usually mean fewer seats for the incumbent party.

In 2003, Texas House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a republican, proposed the idea of redistricting in Texas mid-decade. There was an unofficial rule in place that did not allow redistricting mid-decade, but no official rule was yet in place. When the plan was proposed, there was much resistance to it, but eventually it passed. This opened the possibility of redistricting at *any time* to maximize the number of seats that a party won. This can be seen as legally cheating the system in order to gain the most influence in the senate, but it is legal, and can greatly help the parties.

There are few things that thus need to be added to this sixth chapter in Spitzer's book, although generally it is complete in the things it does say. Among these additions are alternative voting methods, problems with our current system of voting and the voting paradox, and a discussion of redistricting. The chapter would be more complete with these additions.

Bibliography

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