Cumulative Voting: Is It Wrong?

Perspectives on a voting change that could ensure a stronger minority voice at the polls

Daniel R. Ortiz

Many corporations choose their boards of directors in an interesting way called cumulative voting. Shareholders get 1 vote for each share of stock they own and may distribute their votes any way they wish to candidates. For example, in an election to pick 8 directors, a shareholder holding 10 shares of stock could cast all 10 of her votes for 1 favorite candidate, or she could cast 5 votes for her favorite candidate and only 1 vote for each of 5 other candidates. Once everyone had voted, the 8 candidates receiving the most votes overall would each win a seat.

Several people have suggested that we should use cumulative voting in political elections, as well. For example, cumulative voting could be used in elections in which multiple candidates are running to fill multiple seats on a municipal board, commission, or council. Since everyone is entitled to the same voting power in political elections, each voter would have the same number of votes—say 10. Each voter would then give each of his favorite candidates as many of the 10 votes as he wishes. For example, a voter could give his 5 favorite candidates 2 votes apiece, or he could give 6 votes to his favorite candidate and 1 vote apiece to each of the next 4 candidates he likes. The only restriction is that the total votes he casts may be no more than 10.

Such a system may seem strange, and it would take a little getting used to, but it might have several advantages over the present system. First, enabling individual voters to cumulate their votes any way they wish permits them to say not only which candidates they prefer, but also what the intensity of their preference is for different candidates. In an ordinary election, where voters have only 1 vote, all they can express is that they prefer one candidate over another. The fact that they may have greatly preferred one candidate over another is lost.

Second, taking intensity of preference into account changes the kind of candidates elected. No longer can candidates rely solely on the breadth of their support. If everyone mildly likes a particular candidate, that candidate may not win. Instead, victory could go to someone fewer people like, but like intensely. Say each of 10 voters has 10 votes, and a candidate liked by all voters receives 1 vote from each. That candidate will have 10 votes, but she will be defeated by a candidate whom only 5 voters liked, but liked so well that they gave her 5 votes each, for a total of 25 votes. In this way, cumulative voting makes how much people like a candidate as important as how many people like a candidate.

Third, this change in voting rules will often allow people who are otherwise not numerous enough to elect a representative to achieve some representation. If people in a group feel intensely about a certain candidate, they may be able to elect him even if they don’t comprise a majority of the voting population. A racial or religious minority group, for example, that would usually be outvoted by the majority might be able to win a seat if they focus their votes on a few favorite candidates.

Assume that a city has two groups of people living in it, the As and the Bs. The As make up 60 percent of the population, and the Bs the remaining 40 percent. Under ordinary voting rules, if the As and Bs vote in solid blocks against each other, the candidates that the As support will all win. Even though the Bs make up nearly half the voting population, they will elect none of the candidates they favor. By contrast, under cumulative voting, the Bs could get some degree of representation, depending upon how well they focus their voting. If they vote in a solid block for the same candidate, that candidate will be elected. If they all vote carefully, in fact, they might elect around 40 percent of the representatives.

This fact bothers some people. Shouldn’t majorities win? they argue. That’s surely correct. The only question is whether majorities should win all the seats or only some majority of them. By allowing voters to express the intensity of their preferences, cumulative voting would occasionally allow the defeat of a numerical majority that doesn’t feel strongly about some of its candidates.

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Cumulative Voting: A Controversy
Gayle Mertz

Objectives
At the completion of this lesson, students will
• Recognize the inherently controversial nature of legal issues related to cultural diversity and voting rights
• Identify the historical foundations of controversies related to extending full citizenship rights to diverse peoples
• Compare, contrast, and analyze varied responses to similar questions
• Identify one position on an issue and the reasoning behind it

Target Group: Secondary students
Time Needed: 7–8 days
Materials Needed: Photocopies of Gelfand’s article on pages 25–27 for half the class; Ortiz’s article on page 38 for the other half; the Student Handout on page 40 for the entire class.

Procedures
1. Prior to the first class period devoted to this activity, ask half the class to read Gelfand’s article, and the other half to read Ortiz’s article. If possible, ask students to research and read supplementary material about voter rights. Devise a system that will insure that different students read about voter rights in different eras of U.S. history.
2. Ask students to work together in groups of four or six, with each group consisting of equal numbers of students who have read the two articles. Ask students to work together to complete the Student Handout.
3. As a class, discuss each group’s answers to the handout questions. Compare and contrast their answers. Ask students if their group’s answers differed greatly from the answers they would have given as individuals. How much did they learn from one another, and how much were they influenced by one another? Did the cultural background of students (or students’ families, friends, or ancestors) influence how students felt about the questions?
4. Ask students what laws have contributed to extending voting rights to all U.S. citizens. (Examples: Emancipation Proclamation, Fifteenth Amendment, Nineteenth Amendment, 1964 Voting Rights Act, Twenty-sixth Amendment). Ask students to work in pairs or small groups to research how different perspectives encouraged or delayed the passage of each of these (or other) measures. Ask students why, if this nation was founded on the principle of equality, has there been so much controversy regarding extending the right to vote to all citizens.
5. Explain that controversies about voting rights and voting equity exist today, and that different people who support voting rights may respond very differently to a standard set of questions about the topic.
6. Ask students to distribute the handout to people with culturally diverse backgrounds in their school, families, or community. Allow one week for students to return the completed worksheets to class. It is unnecessary for respondents to identify themselves. (Students will probably need to explain cumulative voting to the individuals being surveyed; an alternative is to furnish respondents with a copy of Ortiz’s article).
7. As a class, review and analyze the responses.

Teacher’s Note
This exercise can be used with any of the topics discussed in this journal or elsewhere. Devise a new set of questions about your topic, and repeat the procedure. Use these guidelines for formulating your questions: Question 1—Set your first question in a historical context; Question 2—Highlight one solution that has been used, and ask students about its effectiveness; Question 3—Ask students to consider a new, unconventional approach to solving a problem, and ask their opinions; Question 4—Ask students to offer innovative solutions for the future.

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Student Handout

Voters Rights Survey

Directions: Work together as a group to answer the following questions. Share the material you have read for this activity and any other information or opinion you may have about voting rights. Use your combined knowledge to write the best possible answers to these questions.

1. Americans generally agree that many of our citizens have been denied an equal opportunity to participate in the voting process throughout the nation’s history. Do you believe that, once registered voters have voted, each vote has carried equal weight and equal opportunity to influence our political process? Why or why not?

2. Does equal access to the polls ensure equal participation in the voting process? Why or why not?

3. What does cumulative voting mean to you? Is cumulative voting a reasonable and effective remedy for past inequities?

4. Many individuals and groups worked hard to enhance the rights of all voters. Yet many people believe that inequities still exist. What would you do to better equalize the rights of all voters?