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Snippet #155 Plurality – The Popular Vote

When the option with the most votes wins, it's called a plurality. But plurality voting is the easy way out.

The standard for making decisions or taking actions has long been a majority – that is, more than half of the votes cast by those entitled to vote. When there are only two candidates, the one with the most votes will have more than half of the votes cast. But when there are three or more candidates or choices, the votes are more widely distributed and the one with the most votes might have substantially less than a majority. A majority vote gives a mandate – the most people want a certain outcome. A plurality winner might not have enough support to be an effective leader – it cannot be considered a mandate.

Plurality voting is most common for situations in which there are multiple candidates for multiple positions, such as six candidates for three director positions on a board. Simply count all the votes and the top three candidates win. Plurality voting has two big things going for it: it's fast and it's easy to explain. Unless there's a tie, there will be no need for more than one ballot. If there is a tie you have an incomplete election and balloting will have to be repeated. The best way to prevent a second (or third) ballot is to put in your bylaws the following statement: "Election shall be by plurality, and ties shall be broken by lot." That's all the detail your bylaws need; then, in the case of a tie, a method can be chosen that makes sense: pulling names out of a hat at a meeting, flipping a coin, drawing straws – anything that is by chance and is fair to the candidates.

About this time every presidential election year we begin to hear complaints about the Electoral College and how the U.S. president should be elected by the "popular vote" – that is, by plurality. This is not nearly as simple as it seems, and it's not nearly as representative as what we have now. At present, each state is allocated the same number of electoral votes as their representation in the U.S. Congress: one vote for each Senate and House seat. This means that the electoral votes are spread throughout the country, resulting in a distribution of influence that takes into account both population centers and rural areas. To achieve a majority in the Electoral College, a candidate must achieve more than half of 538, or 270 votes, which can't be achieved by concentrating on the heavily populated areas alone. If the popular vote was adopted (requiring an amendment to the U.S. Constitution) candidates would not spend much time in Iowa, New Hampshire, or Nebraska. They could stick to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other urban areas, ignoring the needs of those who live in smaller or more rural areas.

The popular vote does influence the Electoral College, though. All but two states have a "winner take all" system for awarding their electoral votes. A candidate could get the slightest of majorities in a state and win all of its electoral votes. Nebraska and Maine award their electoral votes based on the proportion of votes each candidate receives: the overall winner for the state wins the two senate seat votes and the popular winner in each district gets that vote. This system results in a more accurate representation of the popular vote for the state.

Preferential voting, or ranking all choices in order of preference, gives a more accurate result of the preferences but is more complicated to tally, so plurality will likely be the method of choice in associations for many years to come. As for the U.S. presidential elections – we'll have this discussion again in four more years.

For more information on the U.S. Electoral College, visit <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/>