Snippet #166
Preferential Voting

We all know that a majority is "more than half" and a plurality is "most votes wins." That works fine if there are two candidates because, if one candidate gets more than half of the votes, it's also the most votes – a majority and a plurality are the same thing. But what if there is a third candidate?

Often referred to as a spoiler, a third candidate might spoil the election by pulling enough votes from the other two candidates to prevent a majority. If the bylaws allow a plurality to elect, the one with the most votes will win, but without a clear mandate, and perhaps by far less than a majority. One thing associations do (contrary to the rules in Robert's Rules) is keep the majority requirement and drop the candidate with the lowest votes on subsequent ballots. However, what if the third candidate was everyone's second choice? Wouldn't that be better than one of the other two? Perhaps we should re-think our election voting process and consider preferential voting.

Preferential voting is a method by which the voters rank their choices (preferences). Instead of checking a box next to the name of their first choice, they put numbers on a line next to each name: 1 for the first choice, 2 for the second choice, 3 for the third choice, and so on. This is also called instant run-off voting, because it answers the question "If your first choice doesn't get a majority, who's your second choice?" Preferential voting eliminates the need for subsequent ballots because it answers all of those questions on one ballot.

There are several different ways to tally preferential ballots, depending on how many positions are to be filled. If there's one position, the tellers open all of the ballots, place them in stacks according to the marked first choice, and count the ballots in each stack. If one person has enough first place votes to equal a majority of the ballots cast by the legal voters, the count is complete – although in a situation with three or more candidates, highly unlikely. Now the stack with the fewest votes is re-sorted by the second choices, placed with the corresponding candidates' stacks, and re-counted. If there is no majority, the stack with the fewest votes is redistributed by the next choice until one candidate receives a majority. (If there is a tie between the top two candidates, the one with the highest number of first place votes wins.)

Things get a little more complicated when there is more than one position to be filled, such as two or three director positions. For that situation, a system called the Borda count, named for Jean-Charles de Borda, a French mathematician, works well. Under this system, the ballots are marked for preferences the same as above, but they are tallied differently. A point score is awarded for each placement. One easy way is to use the number of candidates as the top score. For example, when there are five candidates, a first place receives five points, second receives four points, third receives three points, fourth receives two point, and fifth receives one point. This is easily calculated by first sorting the ballots by first choice and counting them; then sorting by second choice and counting those, and so on until all of the counts are complete. The candidates with the highest number of points are declared the winners. (It's easy to set up a spreadsheet for this.)

Preferential ballots can make a long, painful election process – or one in which the winner has no majority and no mandate – a faster, fairer, and easier experience for everyone.