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## Approval Voting: The Case of the 1968 Election\*

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### I. Introduction

For most of this nation's history, electoral democracy has consisted mainly of competition between the candidates of two major national parties. Thus in most elections for national office the present method of categorical voting, that is, voters vote for one candidate only, has served adequately. Except for the electoral college, this method satisfies a simple democratic criterion—the winner is preferred to the loser by a simple majority of the voters.

However, when more than two candidates are running, there is no simple democratic criterion for selecting the winner. The plurality winner may fall far short of a majority, especially as the number of candidates increases. Furthermore, the plurality winner, that is, the candidate preferred by the largest number of voters, may be least preferred by even more voters. A number of alternative methods of voting exist, which rely upon different criteria for selecting a winner.<sup>1</sup> Probably the most compelling principle, normatively and logically, for selecting a winner is the Condorcet criterion.<sup>2</sup> This criterion requires that the winner be the candidate who would defeat all other candidates in pairwise contests against them, provided that such a majority candidate exists. For example, if there are three candidates, *A*, *B*, and *C*, *A* is the Condorcet winner if *A* defeats *B* and *C* in separate, pairwise contests. Of course, if there are many candidates, such a series of pairwise contests becomes impractical.

While the Condorcet criterion was first proposed in 1785, students of politics have been slow in developing voting methods that satisfy it consistently and efficiently. However, recently Brams and Fishburn have

\* I would like to thank Steven J. Brams, C. Anthony Broh, Robert Hoyer, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful advice and criticism.

1. For a detailed discussion of voting methods and criteria for winning see Duncan Black, *The Theory of Committees and Elections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

2. Marquis de Condorcet, *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix* (Paris, 1785). Modern democratic theorists who favor the Condorcet criterion include Black, *The Theory of Committees and Elections*; and Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956), p. 43.

shown one method, which they call “approval voting,” to be superior in this regard to a number of others.<sup>3</sup> According to this method voters cast one vote each for as many candidates as they wish, but do not cast more than one vote for any one candidate. The candidate receiving the most votes wins. Unlike the present “one vote only” method, approval voting allows voters to express a choice (yes or no, approve or disapprove) for every candidate in the election. At the same time, approval voting is simpler than the Borda and similar methods in that voters do not need to rank their preferences.

Brams and Fishburn also show that approval voting, besides reflecting voters’ preferences more accurately than plurality voting and several other alternatives, is much more “strategy-proof.” If, under plurality voting, the candidate most preferred by some voters has no chance of winning, voters are impelled to vote “sophisticatedly” instead of “sincerely,” that is, to vote for a less preferred candidate who has a good chance of winning in order to oppose a more objectionable candidate. Otherwise, voters, finding all the viable candidates distasteful, may not vote at all. Under approval voting, however, voters could vote for both their sincere and their strategic choices and thus avoid “wasting” their vote. By allowing voters a way out of this dilemma, approval voting, Brams and Fishburn feel, would encourage a higher voter turnout.

Brams and Fishburn have described the mathematical properties of approval voting elsewhere in considerable detail.<sup>4</sup> It is my purpose here to use data on voting behavior and the distribution of candidate preferences to gauge how this system would operate in the American political environment. The data are taken from the SRC-CPS National Election Study of 1968.<sup>5</sup> In 1968 George Wallace challenged the two regular party nominees. Under the auspices of the American Independent Party he won 13.5 percent of the popular vote and 46 electoral votes. Nixon’s narrow majority of the electoral vote rested on a slim popular plural-

3. Steven J. Brams, “One Man, N Votes,” (Mimeo), Module in Applied Mathematics, (Mathematical Association of America, 1976); Steven J. Brams and Peter C. Fishburn, “Approval Voting” (Paper presented at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 1–4, 1977); Steven J. Brams and Peter C. Fishburn, “Approval Voting,” *American Political Science Review* 72 (1978): 831–847.

4. Ibid.

5. The data were collected by the Political Behavior Program of the Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research, which made these data available, bears any responsibility for the interpretations presented here.

ity (43.4 percent to Humphrey's 42.7 percent), as well as slim pluralities in a number of states.

More specifically, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent was Wallace disadvantaged by the present "one vote only" method?
2. Was Nixon the Condorcet winner?
3. What would have been the outcome if the election had been held under approval voting?
4. What general consequences for presidential elections and the party system might approval voting have if it were to replace the present method of voting?

## II. The Wallace Vote

The inclination of voters to vote for a less preferred candidate with a reasonable chance of winning may have hurt Wallace's candidacy, as many of his supporters may have voted for their second choice. In fact, the Gallup Poll shows that Wallace's support dropped precipitously during the last month of the campaign—from 21 percent to 13 percent. The concern that a vote for Wallace would be wasted may have damaged his candidacy in still another way: knowing that Wallace could not win, and unwilling to vote for another candidate, many Wallace supporters may simply have stayed home.

The evidence supported the first hypothesis—that Wallace was hurt by defections to other candidates for strategic reasons. I found that 42 percent of the voters whose first preference was Wallace, as indicated by the familiar "feeling thermometer" measures, believed that he had no chance of winning. Those who believed he could win showed a significantly higher rate of loyalty—88 percent to 67 percent. If the doubters had shown the same degree of loyalty, Wallace would have raised his share of the vote from 13.5 percent to 14.7 percent. There was far less support for the second hypotheses—that Wallace's poor chances discouraged some of his supporters from going to the polls. I found that 71 percent of the Wallace supporters who believed he could win voted, but so did 66 percent of those who believed he could not. Losses due to strategic defections or abstention, then, amounted to around 12 percent of his total vote.

Two major reasons probably mitigated against an even more serious erosion of support. First, like almost every other third party challenger in this century, Wallace entertained no real hope of winning the election. Rather, he sought to deadlock the electoral college and thus throw the

election to the House of Representatives. There he might have traded votes for certain policies, such as a ban on busing or a slow-down in enforcing civil rights legislation. Second, a vote for Wallace was a protest vote. Wallace did not exhort his followers to elect him president, but rather to "Send a Message." And a vote for Wallace was often a protest against the offerings of the two established parties. To the extent that his supporters agreed with him—that there was not a dime's worth of difference between the Democrats and Republicans—they were unlikely to defect to either Nixon or Humphrey.

However, even small shifts in the distribution of votes can be crucial in presidential elections. Nixon's margin in popular votes, after all, was exceedingly small. And the operation of the electoral college makes small shifts even more crucial. Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats won only 2.4 percent of the popular vote in 1948, but that yielded 39 electoral votes. And the 0.9 percent of total of the national vote won by Eugene McCarthy in 1976 is no measure of his impact, especially upon the Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter.<sup>6</sup>

### III. Determination of the Condorcet Winner

Another point of interest is whether or not Nixon, the plurality winner under the present "one vote only" system, was also the Condorcet winner. To answer this question it is necessary to estimate the outcomes of the three hypothetical pairwise contests between Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace.

In each hypothetical contest the candidates were first assigned the votes of those respondents who reported voting for them in the actual election. The votes of respondents who reported voting for the candidate not included in the particular pairwise contests were assigned to the two other candidates in accordance with the preference they indicated on the "feeling thermometer" measures. (Ties were divided evenly between the candidates involved.) The results are shown in Table I.

As Table I indicates, Nixon was the Condorcet winner; he would have won a hypothetical pairwise contest with Humphrey by about 7 percentage points, and both he and Humphrey would have far outdis-

6. Although McCarthy had no chance of winning, pre-election polls indicated that nearly all his support was drawn from Carter. And while McCarthy garnered only about 1 percent of the national vote, his candidacy very likely cost Carter four states. Furthermore, McCarthy's challenge may have forced Carter to tack farther to the liberal side on many issues and thus to lose many more conservative voters to Ford.

**Table I** Results of Hypothetical Pairwise Contests Between Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace

	<i>N</i>	%
Humphrey	786	75.7
Wallace	252	24.3
Nixon	846	81.5
Wallace	192	18.5
Nixon	554	53.4
Humphrey	484	46.6

tanced Wallace.<sup>7</sup> However, in the actual three-way contest the single vote, plurality method came within 1 percent of not selecting the Condorcet winner. Nixon's clear victories in the pairwise contests indicate that he was the second choice of many voters, but this was of little help in an election in which voters could register only one preference. Apparently Nixon, not Wallace, was hurt most by the "one vote only" method of voting. Nixon, then, would have fared better, as I will show, under a system in which voters could cast more than a single vote—namely, approval voting.

#### IV. Approval Voting

Voting behavior and feeling thermometer ratings of the candidates were again used to estimate what the 1968 totals would have been under the approval voting system. A comprehensive set of rules was formulated to assign approval votes to the candidates. As in the previous analysis, the candidates were always assigned the votes of respondents who reported having voted for them in the actual election.

In nearly 90 percent of the cases, respondents voted for the candidate whom they had rated highest on the feeling thermometer. This high degree of correspondence between thermometer ratings and vote choice

7. As a result of sophisticated voting, Wallace's vote totals in the hypothetical pairwise contests with Nixon and Humphrey were probably slightly reduced, and Nixon's and Humphrey's totals slightly exaggerated. The effect on the outcomes is, of course, negligible. Secondly, the more sophisticated Wallace supporters were somewhat more likely to vote for Nixon than for Humphrey, but the sample is too small to be of great importance. This paper shows, however, that Nixon was hurt by the present "one vote only" system, even though he may have benefited marginally from the support of sophisticated Wallacites.

indicates that the ratings are a good basis for judging "vote intention" in this hypothetical election. The major decision, then, was whether or not to assign an approval vote to the second choice. Fortunately, the question wording of the feeling thermometer items strongly suggested that the 50th degree should be the cutting point in assigning approval votes; if respondents approved of a candidate, they were to rate him above 50; if they were unfavorable, the rating was to be below 50. Thus when their second choice was greater than 50 and their third choice was not, an approval vote was assigned to their second choice. But if their first choice was rated above 50 and their second choice was below 50, their second choice was not awarded an approval vote.

When all three ratings were above 50 or below 50, this method obviously could not use the 50th degree as a cutting point. When all three were below 50, an approval vote was assigned only to the respondent's first choice; if they were unfavorably disposed toward their first choice, they were probably choosing the least of three evils. When all three were above 50, the relative size of the intervals between the ratings determined whether or not an approval vote was assigned to the second choice. Thus, if a respondent's second choice was rated closer to his first choice than to his third choice, an approval vote was assigned to his second choice; otherwise, no approval vote was awarded. In a few cases, respondents voted for the candidate whom they had ranked second on the feeling thermometers. Here an approval vote was also assigned to the candidate whom they had ranked first.

A summary of these rules is in Table II below. The preference order of *A*, *B*, *C*, where *A* is most preferred and *C* is the least preferred, is based upon the thermometer ratings of the candidates. The letters are thus not symbols for particular candidates. A bar over a letter indicates a thermometer rating greater than 50. These rules cover virtually all cases in the sample.

Table III compares totals of the approval vote estimated according to these rules and the reported voting behavior of the respondents in the actual election.

Under approval voting, Nixon, the Condorcet winner, would have won by a comfortable margin. While Nixon received 58 percent more votes under approval voting than under single plurality, Humphrey increased his total by only 43 percent, and thus would have lost ground to Nixon. Table III indicates that Wallace also would have made a more impressive showing under approval voting. He, too, would have garnered 58 percent more votes in the hypothetical approval voting contest than he did in the actual election.

The distribution of the estimated approval voting figures illustrates

**Table II** Assignment of Approval Votes

ACTUAL VOTE	PREFERENCE ORDER	APPROVAL VOTES
A	A, B, C	A
A	$\bar{A}$ , B, C	A
A	$\bar{A}$ , $\bar{B}$ , C	A, B
A	$\bar{A}$ , $\bar{B}$ , $\bar{C}$ , (AB $\geq$ BC)	A
A	$\bar{A}$ , $\bar{B}$ , $\bar{C}$ (AB < BC)	A, B
B	A, B, C	A, B
B	$\bar{A}$ , B, C	A, B
B	$\bar{A}$ , $\bar{B}$ , C	A, B
B	$\bar{A}$ , $\bar{B}$ , $\bar{C}$	A, B

**Table III** Comparison of Reported Voting Behavior and Estimates of Approval Votes

	REPORTED VOTING BEHAVIOR		ESTIMATED APPROVAL VOTES	
	N	%	N	%
Nixon	458	44.1	725	69.8
Humphrey	440	42.3	631	60.8
Wallace	140	13.5	221	21.3

the basis of Nixon's success in the hypothetical election. As Table IV indicates, roughly the same proportion of each candidate's supporters would have cast approval votes for other candidates as well. But while Humphrey voters gave almost all their additional approval votes to Nixon, Nixon voters did not fully reciprocate; they gave a substantially larger share of their approval votes to Wallace. Furthermore, Wallace supporters would have cast more than twice as many approval votes for Nixon than for Humphrey. The distribution of preferences, then, would clearly have favored Nixon in an election held under approval voting. According to the rules outlined earlier, a large share of both Wallace and Humphrey supporters would also have voted for Nixon as an acceptable second choice.

One potential problem with the estimate of approval vote totals results from the timing of the feeling thermometer measure, which was administered during the period immediately following the election. Apparently, the public increases its support for the winning presidential candidate upon his election, a phenomenon known as the "*fait accompli*" effect.<sup>8</sup>

8. S. J. Korchin, "Restructuration of Attitude following a National Election: the *Fait accompli* Effect," *American Psychologist* 3 (1948): 272; I. H. Paul, "Impressions, of Personality, Authoritarianism, and the *Fait-accomplis* Effect," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 53 (1956): 338-344.

**Table IV** Sources of Approval Votes

RECEIVED BY	FROM NIXON VOTERS	FROM HUMPHREY VOTERS	FROM WALLACE VOTERS
Nixon	—	89.9% (214)	70.6% (53)
Humphrey	74.8% (169)	—	29.4% (22)
Wallace	25.2% (57)	10.1% (24)	—
	100% (226)	100% (238)	100% (75)

Such an effect would, of course, bias the results in Nixon's favor.

Fortunately, this is probably only half the story, for some voters may also view the losing candidate more favorably after the election.<sup>9</sup> The reason for a positive re-evaluation of the candidates probably is the more tolerant appraisal of the opposing candidate once the rough-and-tumble of the campaign is over. Secondly, the *fait accompli* effect does not occur automatically after every election. A comparison of pre-election and post-election feeling thermometer ratings of the candidates in the 1972 election shows that, if anything, voters viewed both Nixon and McGovern less favorably after the balloting.<sup>10</sup> Thus the *fait accompli* effect, if it in fact occurred in 1968, may have slightly inflated approval voting estimates of all candidates, but it is doubtful that it seriously biased them in Nixon's favor.

A more important problem is that the assignment rules assume that all voters were voting sincerely; that their votes were governed solely by their relative evaluations of the candidates and were totally free of any strategic considerations. As Brams points out, under an approval voting system voters can make their votes more effective by distinguishing between candidates who are likely to win and those who have little chance of winning.<sup>11</sup> Thus the estimates fail to take into account a central fea-

9. B. H. Raven and P. S. Gallo, "The Effects of Nominating Conventions, Elections, and Reference Group Identification upon the Perception of Political Leaders," *Human Relations* 18 (1965): 217-229; D. O. Sears and J. L. Freedman, "Organizational Judgemental Modes of Cognitive Conflict Resolution," *American Psychologist* 16 (1961): 407.

10. While the ratings McGovern and Nixon supporters gave their man after the election were virtually identical to their pre-election ratings, both groups lowered their average ratings of the opposition candidate by about 4 degrees.

11. Brams, "One Man, N Votes," p. 15.

ture of the 1968 campaign—that only Humphrey and Nixon had a reasonable chance of winning. Pre-election polls made this perfectly clear. Under approval voting, then, voters would presumably adopt the following strategies to make their vote(s) more effective:

1. Those favoring Nixon would never cast an approval vote for Humphrey, but would cast an approval vote for Wallace if they approved of him.
2. Those favoring Humphrey would never cast an approval vote for Nixon, but would cast an approval vote for Wallace if they approved of him.
3. Those favoring Wallace would cast an approval vote for him and would also cast an approval vote for their preference between Nixon and Humphrey.

In short, only the following strategies would be admissible (a slash divides those candidates receiving approval votes and those not): N/H W; N/W H; N W/H; H/N W; H/W N; H W/N; W H/N; W N/H.

In effect a poll indicating that Wallace had no chance of winning would, under approval voting, turn the election into two elections: first, a pairwise contest between Nixon and Humphrey, wherein all voters would choose one or the other; second, a kind of referendum for Wallace, who would receive approval votes from voters supporting him even though he could not win the election.

In this manner, voters were “forced” to be rational. More specifically, Nixon and Humphrey voters were assumed to cast an approval vote for their actual vote choice and for Wallace if he was their second choice and his thermometer rating exceeded 50. Wallace voters were constrained to cast an approval vote for Wallace and a vote for either Nixon or Humphrey, depending on which of the two had the higher thermometer rating. This is true regardless of how low their ratings of Nixon and/or Humphrey might be—Wallace voters had to choose between the two evils that had a chance of winning. (Eighteen Wallace voters gave identical ratings to Nixon and Humphrey, so it was assumed that they would split evenly between them—nine to each candidate.) New estimates of approval vote totals, which account for the impact of pre-election polls showing that Wallace could not win, are given in Table v.

We see that Nixon, the Condorcet winner, would have won anyway despite the voters’ knowledge that Wallace did not have a chance. This knowledge did, however, stop rational voters supporting Humphrey from casting approval votes for Nixon, and vice versa. Because voters continued to vote sincerely in regard to Wallace, his total was unchanged. The end effect of strategic voting in this case was thus to lower

**Table V** Comparison of Sincere and Strategic Approval Voting

	SINCERE VOTING*		STRATEGIC VOTING	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Nixon	725	69.8	554	53.4
Humphrey	631	60.8	484	46.6
Wallace	221	21.3	221	21.3

\* From Table III.

Nixon's and Humphrey's totals and to reduce Nixon's margin over Humphrey. Again, Wallace voters would have greatly aided Nixon: they would have given him 118 percent more approval votes than Humphrey (96 to 44 in the sample).

Assuming that all voters were voting strategically, Nixon's and Humphrey's totals were identical to their totals in the hypothetical pairwise contest. The reason is that the two contests are identical—Nixon and Humphrey voters continued to vote for their favorite, while Wallace voters opted for their second choice. But as indicated earlier, approval voting would incorporate another “election” into the election—the de facto referendum on Wallace. By allowing voters to cast only one vote, the present system presented Wallace voters with the dilemma of having to decide which “election” to participate in, that is, whether to vote sincerely or strategically. Under approval voting, Wallace voters could have voted both for their favorite and for their second choice without feeling forced to vote contrary to their true preferences if they wanted their vote to count.

To be sure, both sets of approval vote totals—the first assuming wholly sincere voting, the second wholly strategic voting—are only reasonable estimates. Had there actually been approval voting in 1968, voters would probably have exhibited some mixture of sincere and sophisticated voting, and thus the two sets of estimates for Humphrey and Nixon probably indicate the upper and lower limits of what they would actually have received. But whichever set is more accurate, the upshot of the figures remains the same—Nixon clearly would have been the winner.

## V. The Political Consequences of Approval Voting

Although the hypothetical contest presented here refers only to one particular multi-candidate election, it is sufficiently compelling to help

us anticipate what the political consequences of approval voting would be in general.

First, this system would be far more likely to elect Condorcet winners, that is, widely acceptable if not fervently loved (or hated) individuals. Nixon, the Condorcet winner, barely succeeded in 1968 but probably would have won easily under approval voting. This advantage would make approval voting especially desirable for presidential primaries. If the two major parties are truly interested in nominating candidates who appeal to a broad spectrum of voters, approval voting would serve well. As of now, candidates often win in primaries with a plurality of less than 30 percent as they did in the Democratic primaries in New Hampshire and Massachusetts in 1976. The present method is ill-suited to produce widely acceptable nominees. In his analysis of the impact of different decision rules, Joslyn found that, in fully one-third of the 1972 Democratic primaries he investigated, the plurality winner was probably not the Condorcet winner.<sup>12</sup>

However, approval voting would probably not alter the campaign strategies of major party candidates very greatly. Most spatial models of electoral competition indicate that the best strategy for a candidate is to take the median position, and political pundits have long argued that presidential candidates must capture the “strategic center” in order to win. But if this is sound advice under the present system of voting, it would be even more so under approval voting. Nixon’s strong performance in a hypothetical approval voting election was in large part due to the approval votes cast by voters whose first choice was Wallace or Humphrey. It seems clear that under approval voting a candidate is better off with lukewarm support that is widespread than with enthusiastic support that is not.

Strategic considerations might of course become more complicated if voters were to adopt sophisticated voting strategies. In 1968, for example, Humphrey supporters, if they were sophisticated, would not have cast an approval vote for Nixon. Nixon would then have been well-advised to move closer to the Wallace camp in search of approval votes and write off the Humphreyites. However, many voters were truly indifferent to the choice between Nixon and Humphrey, and it is doubtful that purely strategic voting would occur. Thus Nixon would not have been able wholly to discount second choice approval votes from Humphreyites, and any significant shift toward the Wallace flank would alien-

12. Richard A. Joslyn, “The Impact of Decision Rules in Multi-Candidate Campaigns: The Case of the 1972 Presidential Nomination,” *Public Choice* 25 (1976): 1–17.

ate some of his own supporters. Whether or not much sophisticated voting occurred, Nixon's best strategy would be the same as he followed in the actual election under the present system—staying close to the center, while making sure that he remained more attractive to Wallace supporters than Humphrey.

Many people, of course, would not welcome any reinforcement of the already strong centripetal pressures present in electoral politics. The desire not to alienate any potential source of support might further increase the already prodigious ambiguity in campaign rhetoric and further debase the quality of information upon which voters must rely. In this view, approval voting would only hinder electoral democracy by adding even more static to this already noisy channel of elite mass communication.

However, the other major feature of approval voting should allay these fears. For while the stabilizing, centripetal pressures of the present system would remain, approval voting unlike the present system, does not discourage more extreme or unconventional candidates. Rather, it allows a sort of referendum on a candidate or candidates who do not have a serious chance of winning. One constraint on the expression of dissenting or unorthodox views would thus be removed. Those who feel ignored by the major parties, or who can perceive no important differences between them, would be more likely to find a spokesman. Of course other powerful constraints, such as the difficulties of obtaining public financing or simply getting on the ballot, would remain. And at least for the near future, the candidates of the two major parties would probably continue to be the leading favorites. A system that would allow voters to choose between them and also to support other candidates would also reflect the degree to which the major parties are addressing the problems that most concern the American people.