

# Book Reviews

## A Proposal for Elections

**Approval Voting.** STEVEN J. BRAMS and PETER C. FISHBURN. Birkhäuser, Boston, 1983. xx, 200 pp. Cloth, \$24.95; paper, \$14.95.

It has been said that liberals form a firing squad by making a circle. A good example was the 1980 Senate race in New York, in which two liberals, Jacob Javits, the incumbent, and Elizabeth Holtzman ran against a conservative, Alphonse D'Amato. D'Amato won the election with 45 percent of the vote to Holtzman's 44 percent and Javits's 11 percent. Polls indicated that in a two-person race Holtzman would probably have won easily over D'Amato.

According to Brams and Fishburn, results like this occur all too frequently under plurality voting, a system that allows voters to make only one choice among a list of candidates. As a consequence, people often vote strategically instead of sincerely, candidates with a minority of votes sometimes become winners instead of losers, and elections as a whole lose their credibility with the public. The plurality system works reasonably well when there are only two candidates but is less satisfactory when, as is increasingly the case these days, there are more than two names to choose from.

The authors of this short, closely reasoned book offer a simple reform: approval voting. Unlike present methods, approval voting permits a citizen to vote for (approve of) as many candidates as he or she wishes, the winner being the candidate with the most votes. (Although it would presumably be legal, voting for everyone would have the same effect on the outcome as abstaining.) Thus, in the New York contest, a liberal could have voted for both Holtzman and Javits instead of being forced to choose between them. (Incidentally, the authors cite a study showing that, had their system been used, Holtzman would have won with 60 percent approval, D'Amato would have had 56 percent, and Javits would have had 49 percent.)

It is a simple idea. Yet what is unique about Brams and Fishburn's proposal is that its justification relies heavily on a formal model of voting and elections. The authors rigorously define their terms, clearly state assumptions, and

deductively prove a number of theorems to support their claims. Whenever possible they test their theorizing with empirical data. And at several points they ingeniously reconstruct past elections to see how the results would have changed under approval voting.

One could, of course, quibble with their assumptions and logic. On the whole, however, they are rather convincing in showing that approval voting has a number of advantages over the current plurality system. They demonstrate, for instance, that it discourages "insincere" voting; that is, voting for a less preferred candidate in hopes of preventing an even less preferred one from winning. In an age of multi-candidate contests and widely published polls, voters are often tempted to ignore the candidates they favor who might have a small chance of winning in hopes of obtaining at least a satisfactory result by supporting someone else. Many Anderson supporters in the 1980 presidential election ultimately voted for Carter or Reagan because they did not want to waste their votes or wanted to deny victory to one of the main contenders. Whatever the case, the authors point out, these citizens were encouraged to vote for someone other than their first choices. Under approval voting citizens could have their cake and eat it.

Similarly, approval voting might somewhat alleviate the "paradox of voting" problem, which occurs in an election involving three or more candidates, only one of whom is to be elected. The paradox of voting arises if in contests among all possible pairs there is no candidate with a simple majority. Approval voting does not eliminate the paradox but rather skirts it by finding the candidate acceptable to most voters. In this sense, Brams and Fishburn believe, theirs outperforms most other voting schemes.

In these and other ways Brams and Fishburn show their plan to be superior or at least equal to plurality voting. Beyond these advantages, however, the authors perhaps claim more for it than it can deliver. In fact, for all its logical and mathematical sophistication, the book seems out of touch with the realities of contemporary political life.

At one point, for example, the authors assert that under approval voting the

electorate will participate more frequently than it does now because it will have a greater opportunity to express its opinions. Yet in a work purporting to be scientifically rigorous they offer no support for this claim. Furthermore, many observers believe that Americans want more real choices, not more candidates. Simply giving people a chance to pick more than one name on a list does little to invigorate the electoral process. Instead, what is needed are candidates and parties that offer the electorate a meaningful choice.

In some respects approval voting could even make the situation worse. The authors admit that their system might encourage more candidates and parties to enter elections. One can easily see why, since aspirants to office would have an incentive to seek approval votes in order to build legitimacy and support for future races. But is this what we want? Do we want candidates who are looking for approval or candidates who represent truly distinctive ideological positions?

Moreover, consider party platforms. Although Brams and Fishburn are a bit equivocal on the point, one wonders if middle-of-the-road strategies would become even more appealing than they are today. The goal after all is to win approval. What better platform than one that avoids offending anyone? The temptation to be all things to all people would be irresistible.

In defense of their proposal, the authors also point to its usefulness in party primaries, which frequently attract more than two candidates. (A half-dozen men are already running for the Democratic presidential nomination.) Once again, however, the gain may be more apparent than real, for it is widely believed that primaries hurt the party system and that whatever leads to the proliferation of primaries ultimately weakens electoral democracy. Needless to say, one can argue this matter, but at a minimum the authors ought to at least consider the role of primaries in American government before devising ways of making them even stronger.

Finally, one wonders if the proposed system would not work to the long-run disadvantage of racial and other minorities. Although there is no empirical evidence available, it seems likely that Harold Washington, a black, would have finished second to one of his two white opponents in the Democratic primary for mayor of Chicago in 1983. True, by one standard of democracy that might have been reasonable. But looked at from another point of view, such an outcome,

if it were repeated again and again across the nation, would have much less desirable consequences. After all, maneuvering in electoral politics has always been one way minorities have improved their lot in society. Close off that avenue and one loses an important path for social advancement.

The point, then, is that, despite its simplicity and seeming fairness, approval voting might create as many problems as it solves. Nevertheless, Brams and Fishburn are sufficiently convincing that one believes the idea deserves a try. One of the benefits of federalism is that states can serve as laboratories for reforms. It would certainly make sense to test approval voting in, say, New York's statewide elections. One might then have grounds for deciding whether it will enhance or detract from electoral democracy.

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## An Environmental Campaign

**The Fight to Save the Redwoods.** A History of Environmental Reform, 1917–1978. SUSAN R. SCHREPFER. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1983. xviii, 340 pp., illus. \$22.50.

For 60 years, from the founding in 1918 of the Save-the-Redwoods League to the enlargement of the Redwood National Park in 1978, the monumental stands of virgin redwoods in northern California have provided a major focus of wilderness preservation in California. In the turbulent 1960's, with the Sierra Club beating the drum of militant preservationism, the movement to halt redwood logging and establish a national redwood park seemed to raise environmentalism to a moment of political apocalypse. Scientists and scientific knowledge played central roles in this dramatic struggle over land-use policy. John Campbell Merriam, a paleontologist at the University of California at Berkeley and later president of the Carnegie Institution, was a founder of the Save-the-Redwoods League and a continuing influence on its official philosophy. After the Second World War, scientists, such as Loren Eiseley, filled the rhetorical coffers of the Sierra Club. Particularly in the movement to enlarge the Redwood National Park, scientists' studies of the impact of logging on hydrology and forest ecology were important in the interpretation of statutes and in shifts of policy.

Susan Schrepfer has thoroughly mined the organizational papers of the two major preservation advocacy groups and numerous other collections and has conducted interviews with participants to provide a detailed and important narrative of the redwoods fight. She sees the establishment of the redwood park as involving a major shift in popular consciousness about nature and the entrance into politics of a new class constituency. Prior to the First World War, the Save-the-Redwoods League guided preservation of the trees with a reform Darwinist ideology stressing the value of the virgin redwood stands as educational museums of evolution and the importance of private initiative and philanthropic donation for the purchase and protection of reserves. In the 1950's, the Sierra Club seized leadership of the redwoods fight, basing its appeal upon an ideology of wilderness and its politics upon confrontation with the federal government and with the logging industry, rather than upon cooperation. Strident rhetoric and the politics of no compromise, under the executive directorship of David Brower, capped the wave of environmentalist concern of the decade of the 1960's and appeared to work; at least, the nation got its redwood park.

Schrepfer maintains two important theses. The first is that a fundamental shift in scientific knowledge regarding

the theory of evolution motivated a fundamental shift in political behavior and ideology. The second is that preservationism after the Second World War represented a fundamental discontinuity with prewar preservationism, in political constituencies, citizen activism, and reform ideology. As a consequence of this discontinuity, preservationists were generationally divided, and the division blunted their political effectiveness, eventually causing the loss of virgin redwoods and delay in the establishment of the park. Through detailed and well-researched analysis, Schrepfer demonstrates that the complicated politics of public resources policy exacerbated ideological difference. Preservationists must share the blame for the loss of much of the redwood forest they sought to preserve.

Both of Schrepfer's theses enrich our understanding of the role of scientists and the use of scientific knowledge in the arena of national politics. Unhappily, not all aspects of her lines of argument are equally credible. She does not sufficiently distinguish between scientific micro-paradigms, which provide research programs for practicing scientists, paradigms that carry universalistic values, and scientific ideology, which is the political employment of scientific values in defense of the interests of scientists. Consequently, in developing her first



Dedication of Redwood National Park, 27 August 1969. The ceremony was held in Lady Bird Johnson Grove, "one of the few large groves of old growth actually saved by the park. Lady Bird played little role in the establishment of the park, but its formation was a credit to her husband's administration." Left to right: the Reverend Billy Graham, Governor Ronald Reagan, Congressman Don Clausen, Lady Bird Johnson, Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel, President Richard M. Nixon, Pat Nixon, former President Lyndon B. Johnson, Julie Eisenhower, David Eisenhower, Luci Nugent, Patrick Nugent, Lynda Robb, Charles Robb, Senator George Murphy. [From *The Fight to Save the Redwoods*; courtesy of the Save-the-Redwoods League]