Dead Heat: The 2006 Public Choice Society Election

Steven J. Brams · Michael W. Hansen · Michael E. Orrison

Received: 12 June 2006 / Accepted: 12 June 2006
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Abstract In 2006, the Public Choice Society chose a new president using approval voting. There were five candidates, and the election was extremely close. We indicate the sources of support of the different candidates, based in part on spectral analysis, by voters who cast between one and five votes. Using preference information that was also gathered, we show that two candidates different from the approval voting winner, including the apparent Condorcet winner, might have won under different voting systems. Because most voters did not indicate their complete preference rankings, however, these differences are hardly robust, especially since the outcome was essentially a dead heat.

Keywords Public Choice Society · Approval voting · Spectral analysis · Condorcet winner · Borda count · Hare system

Introduction

For the first time in its nearly 40-year history, the Public Choice Society (PCS) asked its members to vote on a new president for the term 2006–2008. Previous presidents had been selected every two years by an executive committee, mostly comprising former presidents of the PCS.

When one of us (Brams), who was president in 2004–2006, proposed at the 2005 annual meeting that members elect the next president, the executive committee concurred. The
committee also supported the use of approval voting (AV) as the method of election if there were more than two candidates. The PCS joins about a dozen other professional societies, some with membership rosters numbering in the tens of thousands, that have adopted AV in the past 20 years (Brams & Fishburn, 2005).

The executive committee decided to continue the practice of alternating between economists and political scientists as president. Because 2006–2008 was the turn of economists, only economists would be eligible as candidates in the presidential election. Nominations were solicited from the membership in the fall of 2005, and five candidates agreed to run (four nominees declined).

Prior to the 2006 election, the PCS was informally defined by the people who came to its annual meeting and subscribed to, or wrote articles for, Public Choice, the unofficial journal of the PCS. To give official status to membership in the PCS, all those on the mailing list (now an e-mail list) were asked to pay a nominal fee of $30 to become members ($15 for students), which would make them eligible to vote in the presidential election.

Relatively few became members and sent in their ballots prior to the December 2005 election deadline. (Many more became members at, or just prior to, the 2006 annual meeting in New Orleans, March 31–April 2, in part because their registration fees were reduced by the amount of the membership fee.) In the end, 37 people became members and voted before the deadline.

Under AV, voters can vote for as many candidates as they like; the candidate with the most approval votes wins. On the AV ballot, voters were also asked, “in the spirit of research on public choice,” to participate in an experiment by ranking the five candidates from best to worst.

The ballot instructions made clear, however, that the rankings would have no effect on the election outcome. But they enabled us to incorporate preference information into our analysis that the approval votes, by themselves, did not reveal. We begin by reporting the AV results and the patterns of support that different sets of candidates received.

The AV outcome

Because one voter, in ranking the five candidates, did not indicate approval of any (perhaps an oversight), we based the AV outcome on the 36 ballots that indicated approval of between one and five candidates, whom we identify as A, B, C, D, and E. As is evident from the table below, the approval totals could hardly have been closer, with a tie for winner and the third candidate just one vote behind (later we will indicate how a winner was chosen):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Votes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 73 approval votes cast by the 36 voters translate into the voters’ approving of an average of 2.03 candidates. The numbers of voters casting different numbers of votes is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approvals</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of voters</td>
<td>15 (42%)</td>
<td>10 (28%)</td>
<td>7 (19%)</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>