

Preface

I am honored to write a preface to this remarkably broad and comprehensive volume on approval voting (AV). It has been almost 35 years since Peter C. Fishburn and I met in 1976 and began research on AV. Besides my 30-year collaboration with Fishburn, I have collaborated with several other scholars – including D. Marc Kilgour, Samuel Merrill, Jack H. Nagel, M. Remzi Sanver, and William S. Zwicker – on AV-related research. Over these years there has been a profusion of articles and books reporting on empirical and theoretical aspects of AV and their normative implications. This volume touches on all aspects of this research and will be a very helpful sourcebook to scholars who want to carry this research forward.

In Brams and Fishburn (1983/2007, p. 172), Fishburn and I were unabashed in our support of AV:

Approval voting strikes at the heart of how political debate is resolved. It offers a new approach to the realization of democratic principles by redefining what constitutes a democratic choice. Indeed, the foundation on which representative government is built is periodic elections, and the central problem of elections today is how to translate voter preferences, with as little distortion as possible, into consensus choices in multicandidate races. We believe that approval voting is the best practical way for amalgamating these preferences, fairly and impartially, to produce a winner and thereby ameliorate the multicandidate problem.

We added that “more than intellectual issues are at stake,” pointing out that “there are some 500,000 elected officials serving in approximately 80,000 governments in the United States” (p. 171). Earlier I had brazenly predicted that AV “would be the election reform of the twentieth century” (Brams 1980, p. 105).

This was not to be, for reasons described in Brams and Fishburn (2005; reprinted in this volume); indeed, as we indicated, AV’s success has been decidedly mixed. Consequently, I take this opportunity to move up the deadline for the widespread adoption of AV to the twenty-first century!

Of course, not everyone believes this should come to pass; AV, to say the least, remains controversial. In part, this is because AV is a radical reform – even if it does not require a constitutional amendment to implement in most democracies of the world - because the idea of judging each and every candidate as acceptable or not is fundamentally different from either

- Restricting a voter's approval to just one candidate, as under plurality voting; or
- Allowing voters to rank candidates – as under preference systems like the Hare system of single transferable vote (STV) or the Borda count – but not indicate where they would draw the line between those who are acceptable and those who are not

In my opinion, the advantages of AV over plurality voting, or plurality voting with a runoff, are compelling: AV is as simple as the former and less burdensome and costly than the latter, not to mention its appealing theoretical properties, such as its propensity to elect Condorcet winners (when they exist), its robustness against manipulation, and its monotonicity (STV fails this property). Less clear, however, is whether AV's merits extend to electing multiple winners to, say, a council or legislature.

In several chapters of Brams (2008), I analyze alternative methods of aggregating approval ballots – a subject that Kilgour, and Laffond and Lainé, also discuss in this volume – which would, among other things, facilitate the proportional representation (PR) of different factions in an electorate. While almost all parliamentary democracies seek to achieve PR, most limit the choice of voters to voting for parties, not candidates, and only one party at that. More research is clearly needed to assess the benefits of using AV ballots to elect representative committees.

Another direction that AV-related research has taken is to allow voters to rate candidates or other alternatives in terms of more than two grades. Range voting, which has been championed by Warren D. Smith (see <http://rangevoting.org>), lets voters grade candidates on a scale that might include as few as 3 gradations or as many as 100; the candidate with the highest overall rating, when all voters' ratings are summed up, is the winner. Under majority judgment voting, Balinski and Laraki (2010) suggest a 6-tier scale, but they emphasize that the ratings should not be numerical but verbal (e.g., from “excellent” to “poor”), provided that the voters share a common language that enables them to make similar judgments. Under their scheme, the winner is the candidate with the highest median ranking, not the highest overall (or average) ranking, as range voting prescribes.

While range voting and majority-judgment voting enable voters to make more nuanced judgments than does AV, they also have some less-than-desirable properties. Paradoxically, each voting system can elect a candidate preferred – based on the ratings – by only one voter when all the other voters favor a different candidate. Moreover, under range voting, voters may have a strategic incentive to dichotomize their ratings, giving their highest ratings to favored candidates and their lowest to nonfavored candidates, making it equivalent to AV. Under majority judgment voting, a voter can sometimes do better by not voting than by giving his or her favorite candidate the highest possible rating (the so-called no-show paradox). In sum, these more sophisticated variants of AV carry their own troublesome baggage (Brams 2009).

Besides these refinements of AV, an intellectual and practical challenge is to extend AV to new situations, such as voting on bills in a legislature, wherein there might be multiple alternatives to be voted upon (e.g., an original bill, amendments, and substitute amendments, which are allowed under different parliamentary rules).

Instead of voting on these alternatives serially, where the order of voting on these alternatives can critically affect the outcome, it would seem sensible to use AV to vote on these alternatives all at once.

As a case in point, there can be up to five alternatives on the floor in the US Congress and the United Nations. If a majority of members considered, say, three of five alternatives acceptable, one might declare this package to be the social choice - assuming that the different alternatives are consistent (i.e., one alternative in the package does not nullify another). I know of almost no research on this kind of AV application.

To conclude, I believe that empirical and theoretical research on AV, and the kinds of emendations and applications I have discussed, will continue apace and may even accelerate. But, as I have ruefully discovered, it is hard to predict when and where a new idea like AV will take hold and be implemented.

I have not lost hope and still feel that AV will be tried out in significant public elections. If so, we will learn quickly of any overlooked flaws. But the research over the past third of a century suggests, at least to me, that there are more likely to be some pleasant surprises, resulting in the election of consensus candidates who are better able to formulate and enact public policy. If so, then the contributors to this volume can – as academics whose contributions are not always taken seriously by policy makers – glow in the pride of making an intellectual contribution to an important public good.

Steven J. Brams

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