

Deputy Vice Chancellor,

I wish that it were unnecessary for me to speak at this Discussion. However, I cannot ignore an important matter, arising in connection with the decisions that are in the process of being taken on the Governance reforms mentioned in paragraphs 3 to 7 of this Report, that has unfortunately only recently come to my attention. As someone who is not a member of the Regent House, I had been following the Governance debate with a rather lazy eye and, I am afraid to say, only a small fraction of my brain. I hope that I may be permitted a maiden speech to set out briefly some of the results of a mathematically-minded engineer's researches into the voting system we currently use.

A vague suspicion that there might be a problem with the system of voting used for ballots surfaced briefly when the results of the the ballots on Conduct of Discussions and on the Report of the Council on the Principal Administrative Officers were published in December. Fears were expressed that there was some ambiguity in the ballot papers and that some people might not have been fully aware of what they were voting for.

Ten days ago, the issue was forcibly returned to my attention as a result of a message in the newsgroup `ucam.change.governance` asking for an expert explanation of the workings of the Single Transferrable Vote method. The reason for this was a general state of unease about the current ballots, particularly those on Graces 5 and 6. People were uncertain as to how best to order their choices to avoid undesirable outcomes; people were uncertain as to whether putting down more than two options was desirable, or even permissible; people were confused by the design of the ballot papers and could not understand why the options (a) and (b), and the options (c) and (d) came in nicely paired sets – email allowed, or not – whilst the two options (e) and (f) were so differently worded. In short, confusion reigned.

My interest piqued, I decided to carry out a little research, both on voting methods, and on the history of their use within the University. It was not long before I discovered some problems with their use in cases similar to this one.

Using straw votes to simplify the ultimate voting options

In the Report of the Council of the Senate on the Procedure for Considering the Recommendations of the Syndicate on the Government of the University ¹, some interesting statements appear. “The Council are aware that the holding of a ballot to choose between a number of options has been attended by controversy on some occasions in the past. However they note that the procedure which was called in question was the use of such a ballot to authorise legislative change, and that no objection was raised to the holding of a ballot as a “straw vote”; on the present occasion the process of taking opinion is essentially a straw vote, and this would be followed by a definitive Grace to confirm the result of the ballot.” The Report carries on: “For example, in the case of recommendation 18, which deals with the number of signatures required to support a request for a ballot, the Wass syndicate recommended 100 and various other figures have since been suggested, ranging from 10 (the present requirement) to 50. All the alternatives that have been suggested would feature in the ballot, and voters would be asked to express a preference between them. When the result of the ballot was known, a Grace would be put forward to confirm the result of this expression of opinion.”

This all sounds most reasonable. So, what actually happened in that particular ballot ? The number of first preference votes for 10 signatures was 299, for 20 signatures 108, for 25 signatures 139, for 50 signatures 260 and for 100 signatures 100. After redistribution of votes from the less popular options,

¹Reporter, 1989–1990, p448

the 50-signature option was preferred with 403 votes as opposed to the 386 votes of the 10-signature option. Voters were outraged by the result, and when the resulting Grace came before them rejected it emphatically. Thus it had been made possible for people to see clearly what their options were before an irrevocable decision had been taken.

The statement on behalf of the Wass syndicate ² defends the voting system against some criticisms: “It is true, as the signatories of flysheet (iii) point out, that in the November ballot the largest number of first preference votes was for ten signatures, so that ten would have been the preferred number in a first-past-the-post system. However, the University has long recognized the inadequacy of a first-past-the-post system, and uses the more sophisticated single transferrable vote procedure.” Impolitic to mention, perhaps, that when the Ordinances were changed in 1926, no-one came forth to speak at the Discussion about the change. Perhaps the academics of that era fully understood the advantages of the single transferrable vote procedure, and the mechanics of its operation, but I hope that you will forgive me if I say that, given repeated complaints over the succeeding decades about inability to comprehend it, I remain unconvinced.

In 1985, the Syndicate on elections to the council of the Senate reported ³ that “they were aware of some feeling among members of the Regent House that the STV Regulations in their present form were unduly difficult to follow and that a simpler, more perspicuous procedure should if possible be adopted.” They were much concerned by fairness, although if one takes a strict interpretation of “fair”, it was proved by Kenneth Arrow around 1950 that an ideal election method does not exist. The Syndicate consulted the Electoral Reform Society: “The Electoral Reform Society have recommended the adoption of a more modern form of STV Regulations which in their view is technically superior and will more faithfully reflect the balance of opinion in the voters.” Unfortunately, the explanation of how they work, whilst detailed, is considerably more complex and opaque than that of the previous regulations. There is the added disadvantage that, in the case of ballots rather than elections to the Council, I am hard pressed to think of a reason why one might wish to be transferring surpluses (which is where the main change lay), so these new regulations brought no improvement, only confusion.

The matter of selecting an appropriate method of voting for ballots is a serious one, but little attention seems to have been given to it. It has become urgent given the present surge of ballots of immense importance to the future Constitution of the university. Should one return to straw polls prior to Graces as (for example) in the early 1990s ? Should one adopt a different voting method, for example that of pair-wise comparisons (which breaks the options down into pairs, and sees which would win a two-horse race, with the option that never loses a two-horse race being declared the winner) ? Or some other system ? It is time that some serious consideration was given to this matter, preferably by a group of people far more knowledgeable and experienced in these matters than I. As long ago as 1985, Anthony Edwards was voicing *his* doubts⁴:

“As to the Syndicate’s actual recommendations, I would not like my support to be interpreted as an endorsement of the STV system under all circumstances, for I think it has three broad features which makes its general use, for example in national elections, questionable. First it offers the electorate so great a choice of options as to be bewildering [...]; secondly, most people do not *in fact* take the trouble to understand it sufficiently to benefit from its merits; and thirdly the *amount* of information published when the results are declared is discriminatory as between candidates.”

How sensible. How prophetic. I do rather wonder what the second choice votes of those 490 people who voted for option (c) in the Conduct of Discussions ballot were.

²Reporter 1991–1992, p438

³Reporter 1984–1985, p415–416

⁴Reporter 1984–1985, p505