



## Lab 4 - Making votes count more

*Moderator:*

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*Initiatives:*

Balanced Ballot (China) by Mr Sam CHANG, President, Negative Vote Association (NVA)

President 21 (Czech Republic) by Mr Jonáš **VNOUČEK**, Community Manager and Analyst at the Institute for Democracy 21

*Discussants:*

Mr Nicolas K. BLANCHARD, Random Sample Voting Project and Public Opinion Platform

Ms Adele GAMBARO, Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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## The lab in brief

Making votes count more means giving more weight to each vote, by assessing the impact of existing and new voting methods both on voter turnout and political legitimacy. Electoral systems have a different effect not only on the number of competing candidates, but also on the probability for each of them to be elected. Such probability, in turn, affects voters' attitudes (tactical voting, protest voting, abstentionism, etc.), and so the quality of the vote.

It is widely agreed that a democratic system institutionalised pluralism by creating parties that represent diverse groups of voters with distinct ideas. Within that range, some candidates divide more than others. Some candidates polarised the debate to very extreme positions: although a large majority of voters do not share their ideas at all, with the existing electoral rules they can be elected.

To guarantee a higher and better consensus, it is possible to act on the way candidates are selected, with the purpose to make them more "acceptable" for a larger part of the electorate. Is it possible to change the voting systems in place to assure that the ones who divide the most the society won't stand any chance to be elected on the D-day? Can a new voting system reduce such a risk? Will changing the math change the result? The answer to all these questions is YES.

To fight populism efficiently a possible solution could be to invent an equation that provides a strong incentive to reach consensus. As populism is not based on consensus, but on divide, we should not elect the candidate that has more votes casted for him but the one who is the most easily accepted by everyone.

Someone, who does not see own favorite candidate elected, will easier accept electoral defeat, if the new political leader is moderate. Therefore, adding the option of a negative vote could depolarise the political spectrum. The main consequence could be a moderation in the political platforms and a consequent decrease of most hateful words, radical or violent solutions. Could it wreck down the incentives for populism? If yes, what would be the most appropriate equation to make it happen?

This lab looked into alternative voting rules and systems and explored their potential impact on voter turnout. The panel discussed the advantages and challenges of negative and plural voting. They underlined the effect that it could have on the political landscape by reducing the vote in favor of extremist parties.

## About the initiatives

### Balanced Ballot (China)

A Balanced Ballot is a ballot where voters have the option to vote AGAINST or FOR a candidate. The AGAINST vote would be counted as minus one. The winner is the person who receives higher net positive votes. Each voter still has only one vote. The initiative aims at improving all election systems in the world by incorporating the option to vote against. Researchers have shown that this would increase voter participation significantly, and that so-called "populist" candidates would receive net negative votes. Some elections, such as the one of the UN Secretary General, make already use of such an option. The result is considered to be more transparent and trustful, as the winner cannot proclaim to own the majority of the electorate's support.

### President 21 (Czech Republic)

This online civic game is a real time voting app, where citizens can nominate and vote for their ideal presidential candidate using the Democracy 21 voting system. As of now, the game has over 100.000 active users and it is expected to produce an ideal candidate, acceptable for the majority of voters due to the nature of the system. Each voter can cast up to three positive votes of equal value and up to one negative vote. The voter must use at least two positive votes to be able to cast the negative vote.

## Key points issues by the debate

Potential impact on populism. An election survey in the United States of America, sponsored by the Negative Vote Association, measured the potential impact of negative vote. Respondents were asked to imagine if each voter can cast an "against" vote instead of just "for", how they might vote. Each voter still has only one vote. The "against" vote is counted as minus one and is called a "negative vote". The survey results clearly established that voter participation will increase when voters have the option to vote "no". As a matter of fact, only 16.6% of respondents reported zero intention of voting in the presidential election. When voters are given the option to cast a negative vote, 12.2% report no intention of voting. This is a statistically significant reduction in nonvoting (of 4.4 percentage points). Without the option to vote "against", the survey showed Clinton leading with 38.2%, Trump 27.0%. With this kind of voting system, Donald J. Trump would not have been elected in the US against Hillary Clinton. In fact, Hillary Clinton would only receive 6.7% net positive votes and Trump would have more votes "against" him than "for" him. Mathematical modalities change results, making them better. As a matter of fact, extreme rhetoric will be reduced and so will populism.

The same potential impact is confirmed by Democracy 21. While traditional voting systems only looks for winners and losers, systems, such as the one promoted by the Institute for Democracy 21, value voter satisfaction, which means real preferences. If we focus on satisfaction, those who cleave public opinion will lose because of the high number of

rejections against them. In brief, extremist opinion would suffer from the democracy 21 system because more preferences would be expressed.

Functionality, legitimacy and governability. What would happen if every candidate has a negative vote? Corrective measures can be introduced, as the option to vote again if no one has the right number of votes in favor. The introduction of new system poses also possible problems in terms of functionality: as new to voters, there could be a malpractice, but citizens should quickly learn how to use it.

Cultural change. Traditional liberal democratic theory stresses not only one person, one vote, but also that this vote is indivisible. It is hard to convince citizens that they can have a multiple choice. Indeed, the rule of "one voter, one vote, one candidate" is still well rooted and is quite intuitive. Nonetheless, experimental works prove that people endorse this new paradigm. The evaluative vote is another interesting option, but do citizens have the sufficient knowledge and interest to do so? It's important to embrace a flexible approach. Negative vote is already a tendency in our traditional voting systems, because voters adopt strategic behaviors to vote.

## Recommendations

- ✓ To test new voting rules (e.g. negative voting, evaluative voting, etc.) in more and different contexts and to measure their effective impact on electoral turnout.
- ✓ To encourage and monitor experiments in real political elections, while accompanying voters on their functioning in order to avoid malpractices.