The More, Not Necessarily the Merrier

Disclaimer: It is not my intention to hastily generalize that all popular candidates are incompetent. It all depends on the source and reason for their popularity. In a society where real public service is given value, a popular candidate is most likely competent. However, when popularity is measured by 'trivial' achievements that are not indicative of one's potential and sincerity in improving society's welfare, it is highly probable that popular candidates of this type are indeed incompetent.

I roughly recall a friend's MSN signature as "development expands people's choices." Though this statement might not be that controversial and debatable, I would like to explore the validity of its converse. To some extent, I agree that freedom as manifested through having more choices and having the capacity to choose among these alternatives is an important condition for the development of a country and its citizens. However, under certain circumstances, this 'freedom' can be detrimental to society. More specifically, having more choices in an electoral process characterized by a *first-past-the-post* or *Single-member Plurality System* under a Presidential form of governance with a dominant (popular) yet controversial 'presidentiable', can do more harm to society than good.

Assume that there are two types of people in our fictional society namely, rational[1] and non-rational voters, both with the same type of utility function. Furthermore, let us assume that the specific utility function is independent of whether an individual's vote 'counts' or not. In other words, a person would not have an increase in utility when the person he or she votes for, wins. This means that this type of utility is independent of the 'politics' of the state and is only due to the social and economic outcomes of the legitimized government. Utility is thus measured at the end of the government's term and not in the beginning. One can imagine this by considering two extreme scenarios where everyone dies because the 'incompetent yet popular' candidate won and was extremely incompetent in running the country, and where everyone survives because the 'competent yet unpopular candidate' won and was considerably competent in his endeavors. For simplicity, the utility specification is a simple binary function where utility is equal to 1 if a 'competent yet unpopular' candidate wins and 0 if the 'incompetent yet popular' candidate wins. At first, one might view a certain contradiction in this kind of specification because if non-rational voters have this utility specification, they do not in fact have any intention on maximizing or even merely increasing their utility since they will vote for the 'incompetent yet popular' candidate and might get 0 utility instead of 1 if indeed, the 'incompetent' wins. An explanation for this is that non-rational voters do not know 'what is good for them' (as most advocates of *positive* freedom would say). This is the core 'anomaly' that would make my proposition valid. There are empirical evidences for this 'anomaly.' A significant proportion of voters in the Philippines tend to support and vote a popular public figure with unknown credentials in public service[2]. The possible reasons for this anomaly might be more psychological and sociological in nature and would be beyond the scope of this essay.

Our basic model involves an exogenous variable, $0 < b < 1$, indicating the percentage of non-rational votes. b basically indicates the percentage of votes for the 'incompetent yet popular' candidate. A direct implication of its exogeneity is that non-rational voters will vote for the 'incompetent' no matter what the circumstances are. Thus, these non-rational voters can be described as some sort of loyalists. Furthermore, the decision variable of our model is n, the number of 'competent yet unpopular' candidates.
Let $V(n)$ denote the percentage of votes for a certain 'competent yet unpopular' candidate. If $V(n)$ is greater than b then a 'competent' candidate wins and thus, utility of every citizen will be equal to 1. If b is greater than $V(n)$ then utility of every citizen is equal to 0.

To formulate $V(n)$ we need to make an important assumption that all 'competent yet unpopular candidates' are homogenous[3] candidates and thus cannot be differentiated. This means that rational voters face a certain type of *battle of sexes* simultaneous game wherein each rational voter has a payoff of 1 if they have a certain configuration of votes (an example of this is that everyone would agree to vote for only one 'competent' candidate amidst many other homogenous alternatives) such that $V(n) > b$. Deriving the Mixed Strategy Nash Equilibrium of this kind of game[4], we can see that the percentage of rational votes is uniformly distributed among the 'competent' candidates. Therefore,

$$V(n) = \frac{1-b}{n} \qquad (1)$$

Furthermore, we can derive the following results:

$$\frac{\partial V}{\partial n} = \frac{b-1}{n^2} \qquad (2)$$

$$\lim_{n \to \infty} V(n) = 0 \qquad (3)$$

$$n < \frac{1-b}{b} \qquad (4)$$

(from $b < V(n)$)

From (2), since $0 < b < 1$, we know that $V(n)$ decreases as n increases and in fact, as n becomes increasingly larger, the percentage of votes for the 'competent' candidate would approach 0 as can be seen in (3). Also, the utility maximizing range for n^* can be solved by evaluating (4) with a given value for b. To illustrate, if $b = 0.4$, then in order to beat the

'incompetent' there should be at most, 2 'competent' candidates.

Intuitively, as the number of choices of 'competent' candidates increases, a coordination problem will occur among the rational voters and the chance 'to beat' the 'incompetent' decreases. Therefore, my early proposition—more choices may be detrimental to society under certain circumstances—is valid. However, we must not forget the assumptions of the model specifically the type of electoral process, the type of voters, and the existence of a dominantly popular presidential candidate. Though most of you who have read this essay might say that these assumptions are far-fetched, remember that there are empirical evidences of this extreme form of 'popularity-voting' phenomenon. In fact, let us just wait and observe the results of the up-coming Presidential elections in the Philippines in May 2004.

References:

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(Footnotes)

[1] The terms rational and non-rational refer to whether a person is aware of the utility specification I gave or not. Thus, a rational voter will try to maximize utility while the non-rational voter will not be able to do so because he or she is not aware of the specification.

[2] Look at the 1998 Presidential Election results in http://www.ppower.org/rp_elections/past_pres.html, the recent Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey were 'Action-King' Fernando Poe Jr. and well-known T.V. personality, Noli de Castro top the charts (www.sws.org.ph), and the number of actors, actresses, T.V. personalities, and basketball players currently in public office.

[3] One might argue that if 'competent' candidates are homogenous, then one does not face 'real' choices or alternatives. However, we must be reminded that this homogeneity might have been a result of some competitive market mechanism wherein a 'slightly less competent' candidate would easily be weeded out by the rational voter and thus, if a multiple 'competent' alternatives situation where to exist, then most likely the 'competent' candidates will tend to be 'non—differentiable' and at a certain extent, homogenous. Therefore, in this kind of equilibrium, there can only be one type of 'competent' candidate and this consequently goes against the idea of 'choice' assumed by a person who might give the discussed argument against homogeneity.

[4] Assume the payoff matrix of each rational voter is some sort of identity matrix and thus the game is symmetrical. This is the extreme case where in order to have $V(n) > b$, every rational voter must agree to vote the same 'competent' candidate (there exists a pure symmetric Nash Equilibrium in this case)

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Interesting Economics:
The Paradox of Buridan's Ass

An ass, standing equidistant from two identical bales of hay, is simply unable to decide which hay stack to go to. As a result, he starves to death. What's wrong?

Jean Buridan, who held a theory of determinism, contended that the will must choose the greater good. This example, whose idea was first conceived by Buridan, was later used by theorists to justify the use of Indifference curves in Economics Analysis.

According to the problem- A rationally sound animal was placed midway between two indistinguishable, equally delectable and accessible stacks of hay. It could not rationally choose between the two. The unfortunate animal died due to hunger. Any argument it could find in favour or moving toward one bale was exactly offset by an equivalent argument in favour of moving toward the other. In simple terms- the ass was totally 'indifferent', and therefore could not act.

From a logical point of view, there are actually three choices1, the last being to starve where he is. Clearly this third choice is ranked lower in the donkey's revealed preferences than the other two on the donkey's value scale. Buridan claimed that a man must choose the one which his reason tells him is the greater good, but that he may delay making a decision until his reason has had sufficient time to gather all the information it needs.

If both left and right bales of hay are equally preferable, the donkey will allow pure chance to decide on either one. It will take the ass long to decide but it is absurd to deny the animal sufficient reason to choose at random2.

Ken Binmore in his book 'Playing Fair: Game Theory and the Social Contract' has assessed the logic of Buridan's burden:

'Buridan's conclusion is absurd, not because his argument involves any logical fallacy. If one denies the ass access to any device that might be used to break the symmetry, like tossing a coin, then it does seem to follow that the ass will starve. The conclusion is fantastic because the hypothesis is fantastic.....'

(Footnotes)

[1] Schumpter: History of Economic Analysis. OUP

[2] Rothbard: Man, Economy and State. Nash Publishing.

Adapted from "Puzzles and Paradoxes in Economics" by Mark Skousen and Kenna C. Taylor, Edward Elgar Publishing