STAR *from page 1A*

Overall, the May electorate is partisan and not exactly representative of the entire electorate. Young voters, independent voters, or those disinterested in who wins a party's nomination, may not get their voice heard.

But it's in that arena where the final candidates for non-partisan races, such as Lane County Commissioner, are chosen. Technically, winners aren't chosen in the May primaries. If a candidate has over 50 percent of the vote, their name moves on to the November ballot. In the case of Lane County Commissioner Jay Bozievich, who won with 55.75 percent of the vote, will be the only name available to choose for the West Lane County position.

But the winner isn't always declared in May. This is what happened in the East Lane County Commissioner race. Out of six candidates, none received 50 percent. The two highest candidates received 31.25 percent and 30.69 percent. Per Lane County rules, those top two vote getters will spill into a runoff in the November election.

The problem is, those candidates didn't get there based on any large swell of public support. Thirty percent is a far cry from a majority. Even though one will eventually win a plurality of votes in November, the candidates got to that opportunity through a minority of partisan electors in May.

There are also issues of cost with this: Those two candidates, who had already put in a considerable amount of funds to campaign in May, now have to raise funds for the November election.

The STAR Voting measure would help to alleviate this dilemma by holding the primary in November, which would widen the pool of potential voters, allow more diverse voices to vote and save candidates money.

The second part to the STAR Voting measure is how people will vote: Score Then Automatic Runoff (STAR). Instead of choosing just one candidate, the voter gets to rate each candidate between 0-5, with 5 being a score in favor, and 0 being a score of no-confidence. It's akin to rating a business on Yelp or giving a star rating for a movie.

"The main advantage is you get the opportunity to vote honestly for whichever candidates you like," Roberts said. "You can give whichever candidate you want a five, and then give your second favorite candidate a four or a three. Or you can give your least favorite candidate a zero, and you give the one that's just slightly better than that a one. So, every step along the way, you show your preference."

The theory goes, if a person is faced with two candidates that they like, they're not forced to vote one over the other. With STAR, a person can show approval for both candidates without compromising their vote.

After the initial vote is completed, the top two candidates are put into an automatic runoff. It's there that votes will be reexamined, where the candidate who scored higher most often is given the win.

"It's about voting honestly and non-strategically," Roberts said about the runoff.

She stated that without the runoff, it's possible that people would just rate who they like with fives, and who they don't like zeros. This is known as "bullet voting."

"They'll just try to 'bullet vote' all candidates they want to advance, and zero for candidates they don't want to advance," she said. "So, the automatic runoff is a step that incentivizes honest voting. If you know there is going to be a runoff, and if you give one candidate higher than another, and that one person gets your vote, that will inspire people to vote more honestly."

Many consider strategic voting a bane to American politics, with the most common example being the 2000 presidential race, where Green Party candidate Ralph Nader was considered a spoiler.

The last, major battleground for that election was in Florida, where only 537 votes separated Al Gore and George Bush, who would go on to win the election. That contentious election saw arguments on multiple fronts regarding how votes were tabulated, how people were registered and the readability of the voting cards. But some of the blame was placed solely on Nader being in the race.

In a 2007 study in the Quarterly Journal of Political Science, Floridian votes were examined and found that if Nader had not been in the race, Gore could have carried the state, thus giving him enough electoral votes to win the presidency. In all, 97,488 Floridians voted for Nader.

The study estimated that 60 percent of Nader voters would have voted for Gore, thus giving him in the presidency. If those estimates are true, Nader being in the race "spoiled" the election for Gore.

It's these kinds of shenanigans that STAR voting hopes to put an end to.

An example of how STAR works can be seen in the recent Whiteaker Community Council election in Eugene, where the system was given its first (and so far, only) live test.

The Whiteaker Community Council used the STAR method for its non-partisan, at-large seats. There were 11 positions open, with 14 people running for the seats.

Did the voting process create any major shifts in how the vote ended up?

"It's possible for there to have been some changes in the last seat or two, but the first nine or so all had very solid support," Brad Foster of the Whiteaker council said. "If I had to bet, I'd say it ended up pretty much as it would have."

Foster does see promise in the system and believes it's ready for a larger trial in Lane County.

"I also think STAR voting might help bring more diversity into local politics," he said. "Races with multiple candidates from the same party are somewhat rare and appear to be actively discouraged by party activists. Under the STAR format, it wouldn't matter if several people with similar, but slightly different, platforms ran in those races since voters could fine-tune their votes."

Foster also found some unexpected results.

"The software gave us a bit of interesting data," he said. "It ranked the candidates by their total points. It also looked at the election as though each seat was independent and compared the top two point-getters in the pool head-to-head. Those two methods of ranking have a couple of differences. So, Candidate A might get more points than Candidate B in the score portion, but Candidate B might win the automatic run-off. I think it worked that way for two of the 11."

What happened in the Whiteaker race was that for two candidates, the initial voting score was higher than their adjusted runoff score.

To explain, we'll call "Candidate A" dogs, and "Candidate B" cats.

Dogs were very polarizing to the voters in the initial voting stage. Out of six votes, two voters really loved them, giving them a score of five.

Two voters were rather lukewarm on the animals, giving them a three. Two more voters absolutely hated dogs, giving them a big zero. On the whole, dogs gained 16 points.

Cat support was a little broader. Two people gave them a four, two people gave them a three, one person gave them a one and only a single voter gave felines a zero. The total vote for cats was 15.

In plurality voting, dogs would have come up the winner of the race, 16-15.

But was that vote actually indicative of how voters were feeling about the choices of household pets? Yes, some people really loved dogs, but just as many people hated them. For man's best friend, they were pretty polarizing.

Cats, on the other hand, actually had broader support of the public. Sure, people weren't as passionate about cats, but people also didn't hate them as much. Felines appealed to a broader population of voters.

This is where the importance of STAR's runoff comes in. It takes the top two winners of the initial election, then counts how many times each voter scored one animal over the other.

In two instances, dogs scored higher over cats. In one instance, dogs scored lower. But in three instances, cats actually scored higher.

"We believe that STAR voting will help us elect representatives with a broader base of support," Roberts said. "You're going to see candidates winning that have lots of threes and fours, those candidates that everyone can say, 'Wow, I think they're good candidates,' rather than the polar extremes."

Is it possible that candidates who receive a majority of initial votes will lose an election? Yes, as was shown in Whiteaker.

Nonpartisan organization FairVote, which champions electoral reforms, stated that because of this possibility, STAR runs the risk of violating fundamental democratic principles.

STAR proponents believe that without the rating and runoff of STAR, the intricacies that go into a person's reasoning when it comes to voting is lost in the numbers. Even though the initial tally may equal a majority vote, that doesn't necessarily mean the majority wholeheartedly agrees with the choice.

"Using data to choose your representative leads to the more scientifically or mathematically based result," Roberts said. "The data shows what you prefer compared to the other candidates, and that information is used to elect the representatives to support the people that they want the most."

It should be noted that while FairVote had multiple concerns regarding STAR, it remained neutral on the system, neither condemning nor endorsing it.

"We don't see STAR Voting as politically viable nor likely to work like its advocates believe," FairVote wrote in December 2017. Instead of continuing to look at STAR, the organization stated they would continue to look at Rank Choice Voting, another form of alternative voting.

Another issue with STAR voting is that it can be confusing. The "pick one" system is simple to explain: Vote for the person one wants to win and see what happens. STAR voting is more complex, with the electorate requiring a modicum of faith that the algorithm that supports the system is correct.

However, faith in the voting system America currently has is generally weak. According to a September USA Today article, only half of American voters believe elections are "fair and open," with only 15 percent of voters "strongly agreeing" with that sentiment.

Reasons for mistrust run the gamut from aging voting machines to cyberattacks, as well as concerns over gerrymandering, limited voting access in states that do not allow vote by mail and adding restrictions to those who can vote.

No matter what type of alternative voting solution someone supports, the point is that, in many cases, existing plurality voting can inhibit people from electing representatives that voters like the most.

Will STAR voting be the fix America's ills regarding voting? Lane County will weigh in this election day.

Coverage of these topics and more from the Nov. 6 General Election will be featured in a special election coverage page at TheSiuslawNews.com.

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