

The Last Shall Be First:
a Historical Illustration of Sequential Run-off

by Michael Ecsedy

In a multi-candidate election, one way to determine the winner is by the sequential run-off method. The voting proceeds in phases; after each phase, if there is no majority winner, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. Voting is continued until some candidate has a majority of the votes. It is known that insincere voting can influence the outcome, although we rarely see this in practice. This article is about such an election which occurred four years ago [1].

The Republican party of Connecticut's fifth Congressional district was to nominate a contender for the seat being vacated by the incumbent, who was making a run for governor. The district was blessed with 5 candidates for the position, whom we shall label A, B, C, D, and E.¹

The delegates began the voting at 7:00 PM. The first three rounds of balloting produced no winner and little shifting of candidate strength between rounds. The voting went as follows:

Round 1:	Round 2:	Round 3:
A 36	A 37	A 36
B 33	B 35	B 37
C 30	C 30	C 32
D 22	D 19	D 16
E 21	E 21	E 21

Convention rules dictate that no candidate can be chosen without receiving votes from the majority of the 142 delegates assembled. If only a plurality were required, Candidate A would have won on the first ballot.

After the third round, candidate D noted his vote totals decreasing, read the handwriting on the wall, and dropped out of the race, releasing his delegates. His support was scattered among the four remaining candidates through the next three ballots.

Round 4:	Round 5:	Round 6:
A 39	A 39	A 38
B 43	B 42	B 42
C 36	C 33	C 33
E 24	E 28	E 29

At this point (1:15 AM), the exhausted and exasperated conventioners decided to adopt the sequential run-off procedure to break the deadlock. This is where strategic insincere voting played a role. Candidate B knew he wouldn't be eliminated on the next ballot and instructed some of his delegates to vote for Candidate E, fearing that Candidate C would ultimately be his strongest foe in the final rounds and knowing that he would not get any of candidate E's delegates. He felt that if he could knock out Candidate C at this

point, he could ultimately win the nomination. The totals for Round 7 read:

Round 7:
A 37
B 36
C 34
E 35

and Candidate C was eliminated. It is worth noting that on this ballot any one of the 4 remaining candidates could have been eliminated with a switch of just a few votes.

Candidate C was incensed at Candidate B's gamesmanship, and instructed his delegates to vote for Candidate A. However, 14 of the 34 decided to support Candidate E instead, enough to eliminate B rather than E. (Was their motive to exact revenge on Candidate B?) The 8th ballot totals read:

Round 8:
A 57
B 38
E 47

and Candidate B was eliminated. B threw his support to E, and at 2:45 A.M. the balloting was completed, with the final totals showing:

Round 9:
A 61
E 81

and E won the nomination.

Candidate E was Gary Franks, a formerly obscure Waterbury alderman who went on to win the election and rose to fame as the only black Republican in the 1991-1995 House of Representatives. He was frequently cited by the Bush administration as a black man who could win running as a Republican. The remarkable distinction of this election is that the man who was preferred by the least number of delegates on the first ballot became the eventual winner. He who would have been last ... under the plurality method ... finished first!

1. Steve Watson (A), Alan Schlesinger (B), Warren Sarasin (C), James McLaughlin (D), and Gary Franks (E).

References

[1] *The Waterbury Republican* and *The Danbury News-Times* newspapers, July 19-20, 1990.