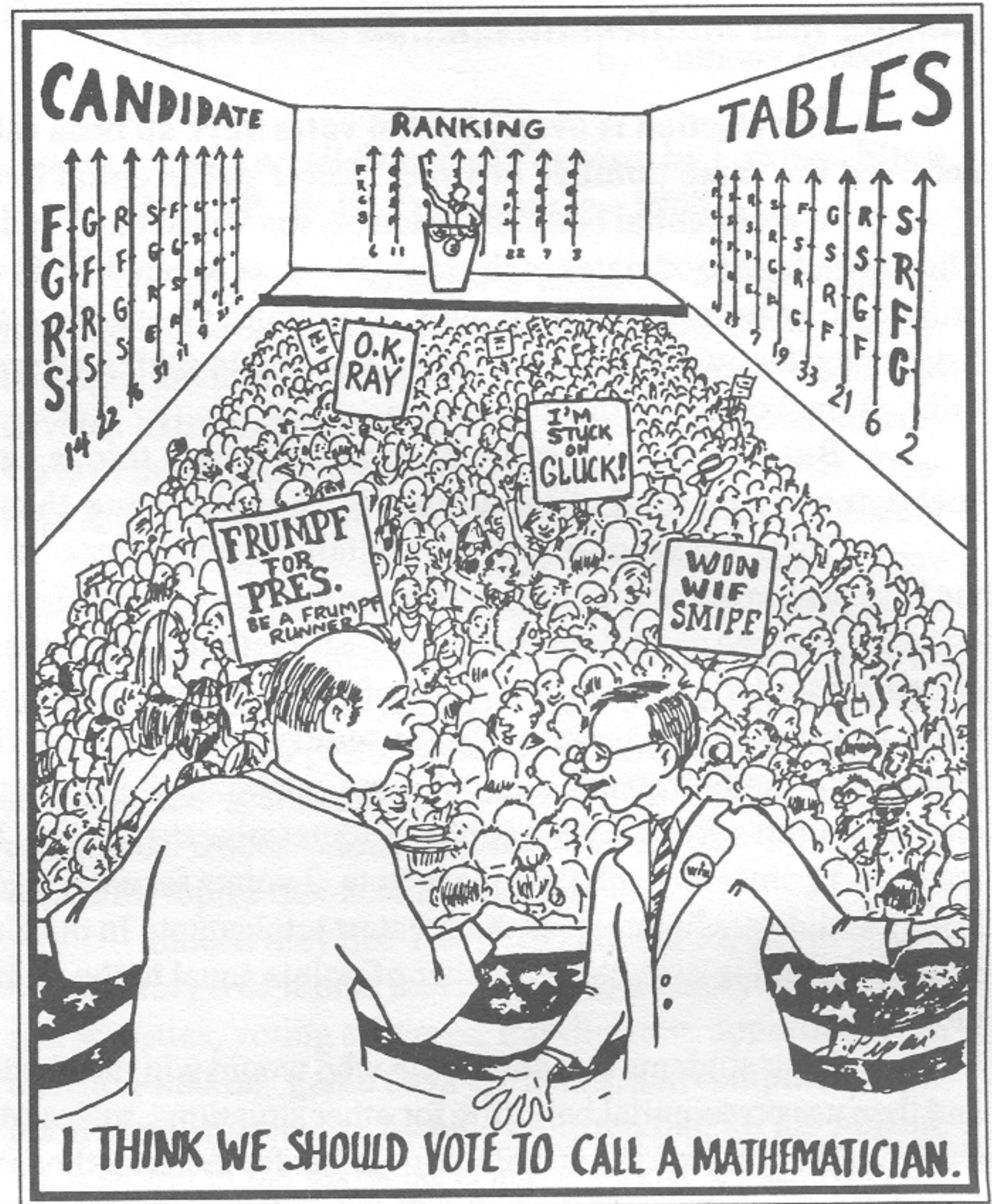


What Do Mathematicians Do?

If one asks the "person on the street" what plumbers, electricians, chemists, or geologists do, they are likely to give you a reasonable answer. Put in more dramatic terms, when home-owners see water cascading through the ceiling, they do not call a carpenter or a mathematician. But few people on the street know when to call a mathematician.

One thing that we can do about mathematics' image problem is to discuss how mathematics affects people's lives, even if we cannot always do proper justice to the mathematics involved. For example, we can say that mathematicians (not chemists or plumbers) study waiting lines, and show that this can be applied at banks, airports, and in computers. Or, we can say that mathematicians find shortest paths and networks, and show that this can be applied to travel arrangements and telephone connections.

The above paragraphs are adapted from "Mathematics' Image Problem" by Joseph Malkevitch (see address on page 11). The cartoon on the right was drawn by Joe Pipari one of whose colleagues at Thomas McKean High School (Wilmington, Delaware) participated in a discussion with Malkevitch at the 1990 Leadership Program in Discrete Mathematics. The situation presented in the cartoon is discussed on page 11. ■



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