PICK YOUR NEXT CEO THE VATICAN WAY: Voting system used to choose the Pope sorts out electable candidates and minimises arguments afterwards

If you're selecting a new chief executive and want to get the job done with a minimum of backbiting, the best idea may be to copy the ancient voting system used by cardinals in the Vatican to choose a new Pope. That's according to research by Clara Ponsati and Jan Zapal, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016.

The Pope is elected by a repeated ballots until a two-thirds majority for one candidate is reached, and during which candidates are successively eliminated. It is a process that could be applied to other situations where repeated votes are possible – for example, the choice of a company CEO.

By identifying how voting systems select ‘electable’ candidates – those who could possibly be supported by a majority of the electorate – and the ‘core’ candidates – those whose election could not be successfully challenged by a rival afterwards – the authors show that there is a strong rationale for adopting the Vatican's system.

The authors say that: ‘The Vatican method simultaneously avoids a gridlocked electorate and minimises the chances that the authority of the elected candidate will be challenged.’

More...

The researchers explain their work: elections to appoint a pope/president/chief executive take place by repeated ballots over time. We examine a model where an electorate must vote to select an alternative from a finite set of candidates.

Starting from the set of candidates that receive some support at the onset, repeated ballots take place over time and the set of candidates decreases over time until one receives (super)majoritarian support. Our motivating example is the election of the pope, and other CEOs in organisations. The analysis applies generally to collective decisions where constructing a (super)majoritarian coalition is a dynamic process.

We show that identifying two main subsets of alternatives – the electable candidates and the core – is fundamental to determine the outcome of each election. A candidate is electable if it is conceivable, given the preferences of the electorate, that this candidate can gain (super)majoritarian support. A candidate is in the core if her victory is ex-post stable – that is, if there does not exist another candidate that can, successfully, challenge the core candidate in a binary vote.

Electorates with at most two electable candidates that possess unique electable and core candidate elect this unique candidate immediately. Elections with two electable candidates both of which are in the core are not resolved immediately but a core candidate must win.

For those electorates we characterise the equilibrium with tools and insights borrowed from the war of attrition literature. We also display electorate with a unique core candidate for which the election is delayed, and non-core candidates are elected with
positive probability. A non-core candidate can be elected only if there are three or more electable candidates.

Since we study all quota voting rules between simple majority and unanimity, our results provide a strong rationale supporting the Vatican voting rule – that is, demanding a supermajority of just over two-thirds.

The Vatican voting rule minimises the chance of a non-core candidate being elected while ensuring that some candidate is electable. That is, it simultaneously avoids gridlocked electorate (conclave) and it minimises the chance that the authority of the elected candidate (of the new Pope) is challenged.

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Contacts (both attending the EEA-ESEM in Geneva):

Clara Ponsati (University of St Andrews and IAE-CSIC Barcelona)  
Email: clara.ponsati@st-andrews.ac.uk  
Phone: +34 618 308 967

Jan Zapal (CERGE-EI Prague and IAE-CSIC Barcelona)  
Email: j.zapal@cerge-ei.cz  
Phone: +420 604 835 209