

# Cambridge municipal election: Peoples' Republic or Too Much Democracy?

On my way to the polls, today, I ran into a neighbor who had just voted. She is well-educated (has a PhD) and is a responsible citizen. I asked her how she had handled having to rank 25 candidates for City Council...not to mention 9 for the School Committee... on the paper ballot. "There were two names I recognized," she said. "I voted for them; the rest I chose at random," she said.

Great. I'd written down my choices—but the crush of candidates and their supporters in front of the school where I vote felt overwhelming.

The school committee candidate I'd planned to place fifth gave me a crushing handshake and said he hoped I'd put him first.

The self-proclaimed "best friend" of a city council candidate said she'd really appreciate my vote.

A lackluster fellow had spoken to me at my doorstep weeks earlier—suggesting that the frontrunner did not need my number 1 so I should give it to him.

In researching the school committee field, I'd been unimpressed with the school candidate who had put his kid in private school...Had decided to give my number 1 vote to a recent business school grad who attended the Cambridge public schools—after several of his uncles—all of whom worked in m—had been killed in the candidate's native African homeland...

Anyway, I'd written down my choices but with so many names on the ballot, in the voting booth, I somehow skipped a school committee candidate I favored and had to request a new

ballot...Goofed again on my city council ballot....When I returned, again, for a new one, a poll watcher asked if I understood how to vote and did I need help. On my second city council ballot try, I found myself voting for incumbents, figuring they, at least, knew what they were doing.

When I went to check out, the voting machine refused my school committee ballot—the tip of the pen had touched one of the boxes when I was considering whom to mark as number 5. I requested yet another school committee ballot. The poll watcher remarked, “Luckily this doesn’t happen often.”

I asked if she meant that most people don’t goof up like I had or that there aren’t usually so many candidates.

“I meant it’s lucky we only vote once a year,” she said.

On my third school committee ballot I somehow missed giving the young African my number one vote. I was too embarrassed to ask for a fourth ballot so gave him number three—and a couple of others—mostly incumbents, the rest of my votes—pretty much at random.

The ballot went through. I remarked to another poll watcher that I’d goofed, yet again and that perhaps the system should be changed. “It’s historically correct,” she assured me. “It dates from the 1700s.”

I do wonder if, in the 1700s, voters had to rank 25 people for the same office—or if the system was designed —or remains— to ensure that incumbents remain in office. I also wonder if, as a British colleague remarked when I told him about our ranking system, there is such a thing as “too much democracy.”

—Anita M. Harris

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