What cute dogs can teach us about democracy

April 22 2019, by Laura Castañón

Credit: Northeastern University

Dog lovers agree: Round and fluffy, wrinkled and snub-nosed, or skinny and sleek, dogs are cute.

The question is, how does a group of canine aficionados come to a fair consensus about which wet nose and wagging tail evokes the loudest "awww!"?

A group of students at Northeastern has spent the semester trying to find out. The Democracy and Social Choice Project, a directed study better known as the [Cute Dog Project](#), began with a simple premise: Determine who in Northeastern's philosophy and religion department has the cutest dog. And, along the way, work through the challenges of designing a democratic voting system.

"In the last presidential election, both parties went through long, exhaustive primaries," said Sam Haas, a fifth-year student with a major in philosophy, political science, and economics and minors in ethics and data science. "And at the end of it, it came out to two options, who a lot of people said didn't really represent their preferences. People were unhappy with the results, and also the process itself."

Replacing politicians with pups, the students put their heads together to find a better method for incorporating voters' preferences.

"We couldn't walk out tomorrow with a city-wide election and say, 'We think we can make a system that will do a better job of balancing the kinds of things we want in a democratic process,'" says Haas. "Running our own contest is a way to work through the philosophy and the tradeoffs, and actually try to implement them. And with [dogs](#), we had a pretty strong theory that a lot of people would want to vote."

But before the team could begin building their voting system, they had to establish some basic rules. What counts as a dog? Should dog photos be disqualified if they include props to make the dog cuter? How do you actually define cuteness?

Some submissions were easy to exclude, including a photo of a cat and an image with a dog's head photoshopped onto the body of a giraffe. Props were not allowed, but even so, the group acknowledges that the process isn't perfect.

"There's a difference between a contest to find the cutest dog and a contest to find the cutest picture of a dog," says Charlie Haviland, a fifth-year student with combined major in computer science and finance and a minor in ethics. "We tried to minimize that gap as much as we could by regulating the pictures, but maybe a dog is cuter in real life than in a picture, and that was something we had to come to terms with."

Defining cuteness was more difficult. Is it completely subjective? Could two people find different things cute and both be right, or are dogs intrinsically cuter than, say, trash cans? How do culture and language affect that definition?

"There was a lot of disagreement about what cuteness was," says Rory Smead, the Ronald L. and Linda A. Rossetti Professor for the Humanities who supervised the project. "But there was an agreement that whatever cuteness was, we could get some indication by figuring out what a lot of people thought. That's why the voting was relevant."

The group selected photos of 26 canine candidates, and set to work researching democratic practices and various theories on how groups can come to a consensus. They chose a system where dogs are shown in head-to-head matchups. Voters can indicate which dog is cuter or choose "I am indifferent." There are a possible 325 pairings, and voters are welcome to vote on as many or as few as they wish.

"We didn't want people to only be voting for one dog," said Myraeka d'Leeuwen, a second-year studying computer science and philosophy. "One of the big problems with our primary system right now is you

might have 17 candidates and you can only pick your favorite. You don't get to say what you think about the other 16."

The students also found themselves having discussions that paralleled the debates around voter ID laws. They weighed the importance of encouraging participation against security concerns and voter privacy; they wanted people to vote, but they didn't want the election results to be skewed by malicious behavior. Ultimately, they decided that keeping the barriers to participation low was more important than dodging the occasional internet troll.

Voting opened in early April, and will continue through Monday. While a few pups are clearly leading the pack, it's a close race. And the students have found that counting the votes will present its own set of challenges.

"The way that you put the votes together can matter as much as the votes themselves," says Smead, who is also an associate professor of philosophy.

There are several mechanisms for combining the votes, all of which are reasonable and democratic, but each could yield different results. For example, because a voter can say two dogs are equally cute, the dog with the most winning votes might be different than the dog with the fewest losing votes. The method for selecting a winner will vary depend on the overarching goal of the system.

"We'll be able to say, 'This is the cutest dog using win ratio' or 'This is the cutest dog if we want the fewest people to be dissatisfied,'" says Haas. "But we won't be able to end that debate definitively."

Or to put it another way: They'll have a pretty good idea of which dog is the cutest… but they won't be paws-itive.