Dear Editor,

So, the cardinals are to elect a new pope.  Well, it is difficult to choose someone who is excellent when everyone is already very good, and a lot depends on the agenda: who do you vote for first?  In 1179, they introduced weighted majority voting, but that still meant the agenda was open to manipulation.  So in 1435, Cardinal Nicholas Cusanus proposed a preferential vote: every cardinal is a candidate; each cardinal chooses his top ten in order of preference; and the candidate with the highest average preference is the winner.  Perfect, “and believe me,” said the same Nicholas of Cusa, “no more perfect system can be found”.

The Borda count as this voting mechanism is called is difficult to predict, the outcome difficult to control; in other words, the procedure is very democratic.  Alas, his suggestion was rejected, and still they use binary votes – yes or no, for or against – the most inaccurate measure of collective opinion ever invented.

 Yours…