The 48% Solution

There were 25 children in Jeremy McCloy's fourth grade class at school. His teacher Regina Franklin, who was a huge fan of democracy, believed that most class decisions should be made by the students. So, when the class had free-time to fill with a game, or when they had to decide what fundraiser would pave the way to that year's field trip, or even when choosing a class pet, the options were written on the board and the class voted. It was perfect. It was fair, and it was final.

However, Jeremy felt that there was one tiny problem with Ms. Franklin's "perfect" system. The results of the vote, no matter what they were voting on, were almost always the same. Jeremy and 11 other classmates who he counted as his best friends would always vote the same way, while Gina Hartsfield and her 12 best friends would vote the other way. It happened every time! Why did they always play "hide and seek" instead of "duck-duck-goose" on rainy days? Because of 13 votes for hide-and-seek and only 12 for duck-duck-goose, that's why. Why did they run a car wash fund raiser instead of the pizza sale that Jeremy had suggested? Again, 13 to 12 – the majority won fair and square and Jeremy wound up scrubbing 17 windshields in the name of his ticket to the Bronx Zoo. Now, at this point in the story, I bet you can probably guess why the class had chosen to adopt a Suriname Toad as a class pet instead of the fluffy little duck that team Jeremy voted for. That's right! The more he tried to rock the vote, the more the vote rocked him back.

Jeremy and his friends were frustrated. They were confused. They were dangerously close to becoming *gasp* disenfranchised. Some of them wanted to walk out of the next class vote in protest. Some just wanted to not vote, and one of them even secretly considered voting with Gina's group because it seemed to be the popular thing to do. Jeremy decided to go talk to Ms. Franklin about it. He found her during recess one Friday and asked if he could talk to her for a few minutes.

"Of course Jeremy. What's on your mind?" she said

"Well, I love democracy just like you do, Ms. Franklin. And I do think that voting is cool and all, but every time my friends and I vote, we lose because Gina has control over more people that vote for whatever she wants!"

"You know, I had noticed a little bit of tension between the Hartsfields and the McCloys of the classroom" said Ms. Franklin. I just don't understand why everyone doesn't vote for what they want as individuals instead of what their friends choose.

Jeremy looked her in the eye and said "It's been awhile since you were a fourth grade student, huh Ms. Franklin"

"Good point. What if we make the vote secret?"

"That would be a good start, but I think it still leaves some people feeling like their opinion doesn't matter. I mean if 13 people want one thing and 12 want the other, shouldn't there be a way for the 12 people to get at least some of what they want?"

"Okay, how would you solve this problem Jeremy?" Ms. Franklin asked

"Well, what if the next time we vote, we try to give whatever percent of the class votes for one thing, that percent of the chosen activity, and the other group gets their percent.   It won't work in every case, like I don't think we should have a class pet that's 52% Toad and 48% duck or anything, but at least it might work when choosing what game we play at recess!"

Ms. Franklin, who believed in bold new ideas almost as much as she believed in democracy, gave it a try. The next time they had indoor recess, they wound up playing hide and seek for 15.6 minutes and duck-duck-goose for 14.4 minutes. When the class had their ice cream social the next day, exactly 52 percent of the ice cream was vanilla and 48 percent wound up being chocolate.

I wonder, what would you have done if you were in this classroom? Does the solution that Jeremy came up with seem right and fair to you? What else could they have done to fix the problems of democracy? I invite you to take these questions with you to class today and into the world beyond.