

DECISION-MAKING

DEFINITIONS

Representative Democracy - One in which the people elect representatives who then take most of the decisions, albeit, in many instances, by use of the adversarial and inaccurate system of majority voting. The people, however, remain sovereign and some decisions are indeed referred to the electorate.

Methodologies for determining public opinion:

Referendums - Two-option or occasionally multi-option (but invariably non-preferential) ballots which range from the non-participative (where the government chooses the option) to the more participative (the citizens' initiative).

Opinion poll - A survey. Some of these are commissioned by government; very few are based on preference voting. If the outcome is to be considered valid, the minimum number of participants must be over 1,000 persons chosen in electronic random sample.

Deliberative opinion poll - As above, but the persons involved first discuss the problem, normally in person but for less than a day. It usually involves fewer people.

Focus group - As above, with an even smaller but still representative number of individuals who may spend a weekend or even longer together, initially in person and/or subsequently on the web. They listen to expert witnesses and hear all the arguments, before then drawing their conclusions.

Public enquiry - A body established by (local or central) government to investigate a particular problem; the public is allowed to make representations, but the final decisions or recommendations are taken by only the commissioner(s).

Consultation - A time-limited session during which the public and others may make submissions to government, but the latter reserves the final decision-making process to itself. Reasons are sometimes given; preferences seldom if ever stated.

Decisions: *binding or advisory*

The conclusions of referendums are normally considered to be binding; some, however, are only advisory. Outcomes to opinion polls, deliberative polls, focus groups and public enquiries are normally regarded as advisory.

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

In a participatory democracy, any debate of must involve a system of robust and fair decision-making at the end of that debate. Secondly, any good system of decision-making should be capable of being used when those involved identify:

- i) their "social choice" – a single decision;
 - ii) their "social ranking" – a 'shopping list', a prioritisation, a list of targets;
 - iii) society's views in public opinion polls.
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MAJORITARIANISM: WIN-OR-LOSE

Before advocating a suitable methodology, I wish first to criticise the ubiquitous two-option majority vote.

+ It is adversarial, as seen in countless parliaments and many international gatherings like the 2009 UN Climate Change conference in Copenhagen. Furthermore, in societies already divided, as in the former Yugoslavia, it exacerbates already existing ethno-religious divisions.

+ It is often not participatory. Indeed, on many occasions, those in power choose either the two options, or maybe just the single question and, usually, the question is the answer. This methodology has been used by numerous dictators, starting with Napoleon.

+ It is hopelessly inaccurate, not least because the two options chosen may not reflect the complexity of the problem in question. In the 2002 UN Security Council debate on Iraq, for example, France and Germany did not like, but nevertheless voted for, Resolution 1441.

+ And lastly, of utter relevance to our current task, in any process of target setting, majority voting is inadequate and inappropriate.

THE MODIFIED BORDA COUNT, (MBC): WIN-WIN

A more inclusive procedure would allow the participants to engage in the process, throughout: firstly, they help formulate the options; secondly, all may join in the debate; thirdly, they help draft the ballot paper; and finally they vote, that is, they all make the final decision: the result is/are the option(s) with the highest number of points or, in other words, the highest average preference(s).

In a ballot of let's say five options, those voting may cast up to five preferences. It works like this:

He who votes for only one option gives his favourite 1 point;
she who votes for two options gives her favourite 2 points, (and her second choice 1 point);
he who votes for three options gives his favourite 3 points, (his second choice 2 points and his third choice 1 point);
and so on; therefore,
she who votes for all five options gives her favourite 5 points, (her second choice 4 points, her third three points, etc.).

The Voter

The voter therefore has the incentive to state his/her compromise options; and if everyone states their individual compromise, it will be possible to identify the collective compromise.

The Protagonist

If Mr/Ms X wants his/her option to win – in the present scenario, to be included among the chosen targets – this option will need lots of high, some middle, and very few lower preferences. The result – the social choice or ranking – depends on the highest average scores, and, of course, averages involve *everybody*, not just a majority. Therefore X should talk to any erstwhile opponents, to try to persuade them to give his/her option a higher preference than originally intended. In effect, the MBC can be and often is the very catalyst of consensus.

THE MBC¹

Both in decision-making and in target setting, the entire process involves the following stages. Let us take the example of resolving a controversy in a particular region or country, or even in an international setting, as in adjusting the targets listed in Annex 1 from Article 6 of the Aarhus Convention.

The process starts with the identification of the final decision-makers, those who will actually make the decision after the consultations and discussions. In a regional/national debate, this could be a focus group, with the participants chosen by random sample from the given constituency. These participants should first hear representations from experts in academia and relevant NGOs; next should come arguments – and preferences – from relevant stakeholders, the likes of Central and/or Local Government, local community groups, local businesses and so on; finally, they would come to their conclusions, but before that, they should be know:

- i) the methodology, whether discussions and the final decision-making vote can be conducted on the web.
- ii) the minimum levels of consensus required for the decision to be (a) advisory and (b) binding.

Before initiating the process:

- + The participants elect a team of (normally three) consensors – three impartial, non-voting facilitators. Next:
- + The participants suggest and then debate each controversy in turn; on each one they may propose options, which the consensors summarise and display either *in situ* and/or on the web.
- + As the debate continues, more ideas may emerge, some amendments may arise, some suggestions may become redundant – so the consensors maintain an accurate list to represent the entire debate.
- + The consensors then convert this list into a draft ballot paper;
- + with the agreement of the participants, all then proceed to the preference MBC vote, which
- + the consensors then count and analyse. Both the voters' profile and the results are displayed.

¹ A full description of the MBC is to be found in the author's *Designing an All-Inclusive Democracy*, Springer, 2007, pp 15 *et seq.*

SOCIAL CHOICE AND SOCIAL RANKING

When making a prioritisation, drawing up a budget or setting a list of targets, a larger number of options may be involved.² If the number of options is ten or less, in say an 8-option ballot, participants may be asked to submit a full slate of eight preferences. If the number of options is greater than ten, then those voting may be asked to identify a fixed number of, let us say, just their top six preferences; in which case, any seventh or subsequent preferences cast will not be counted.

In analysing the outcome of a vote on target setting, the consensors identify those options which receive the highest number of points. If, in a 8-option ballot, a bunch of say five options all receive a very high score while the bottom three options get a relatively low score, then the outcome should be a target list of the top five options.

CONCLUSION

All relevant ideas are included. Nobody votes *against* anybody, all vote only *for*. So people vote in favour of other people's suggestions, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. And depending on the scores received, the consensus coefficients³ as they are called, the outcome may well be, if not the best possible compromise, then the general consensus if not indeed the collective wisdom. In a word, democracy is for everybody, not just a majority, and the MBC is democratic.

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² When making a social choice on a relatively complex topic, the recommended maximum number of options is usually 6.

³ See the author's *Designing an All-Inclusive Democracy*, Springer, 2007, p 17.