

Chapter 2

Pluralist Decision-Making

It is a superstition and an ungodly thing to believe that an act of a majority binds a minority.
Mohandas K Gandhi. (Sigmund 1966: 81)

Abstract Chapter 1 showed that, in many circumstances, majority voting is both inadequate and inaccurate. It is ‘fit for purpose’ (a) if the subject is not controversial and the minority is willing to accept the outcome; (b) if and when only two options are possible, and such occasions should be rare in any democracy which aspires to be plural. Accordingly, this chapter starts by trying to define decision-making.

There are better ways of resolving disputes. The text first looks at the theory and practice of improved forms of majority voting, before next conducting a similar analysis of the best known methodologies of multi-option voting. Then consensus voting in all its roles is examined. Finally, the text offers a draft definition of democratic decision-making.

2.1 Decision-Making: the Ideal Defined

If democracy is for everybody and not just a majority, if in other words it is more than just majority rule, and if a democratic opinion can best be *identified* by something more accurate than a two-option majority vote, then what *should* be the basis of a democracy, and how best should its principles be effected?

In his 1863 Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln famously said that ‘Government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.’ The phrase ‘of, by and for’ refers to everyone, not just the largest faction. In theory, therefore, democratic decisions should be in line with public opinion, *vox populi*, or what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the general will, *la volonté générale*. Unfortunately, however, ‘Though he was at pains to stress that the general will was not

Fig. 2.1 A voters' profile

-	Preferences							
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th
Ms J	<i>F</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>E</i>
Mr K	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>C</i>
Ms L	<i>C</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>F</i>

necessarily the will of the majority, the term passed quickly into normal usage as meaning just that.' (Doyle 1990: 53)

A general will or common consensus often involves an accommodation or a compromise, and it is probably fair to say that in questions which do not involve a stark choice between right and wrong – in other words, in numerous if not indeed most political controversies – an accommodation should be both feasible and advisable. To take a hypothetical example, consider a committee of three people, Messrs J, K and L, choosing one of eight possible options: *A, B, C, D, E, F, G* and *H*, and let us suppose their preferences are as shown in Fig. 2.1.

Because Ms J's second preference is the same as Mr K's third preference and Ms L's fourth, that particular option, *D*, shown in tint, would seem to be the obvious choice.

In theory, the democratic process should allow all participants, (a) to freely express their opinions, and (b) to have an equal influence on the final decision. In the above example, with Messrs J, K and L all having their say, such a process should lead to the most acceptable outcome, where perhaps nobody wins everything but everybody wins something.

This sort of outcome can sometimes be achieved without voting at all, by just talking the matter through "under the big tree" until all agree to a compromise, a process sometimes known as a verbal consensus. As will be shown below, it can also be expedited by a voting process. Either procedure is feasible; they are both democratic; and, if done correctly, both should facilitate the identification of (roughly) the same outcome.

These principles prompt the following definition of democratic decision-making. Subject to certain limitations which should be laid down in human rights legislation, democratic decision-making is a process which identifies:

- (a) either the unanimous viewpoint (where such exists);
- (b) or, on more controversial issues, the average opinion or consensus;
- (c) or, on very contentious issues and especially in any plural society, the most acceptable compromise.

In (b) and (c), the process involves both a willingness to compromise and a degree of give and take. So those who believe that "politics is the art of the possible" should find a consensus democracy fairly attractive. Accordingly, consideration

will now be given, first to some improvements on the simple, two-option majority vote, and secondly, to some multi-option voting procedures. The best of these might indeed form part of a consensual polity.

2.2 Majority Voting: Theory and Practice

As noted in the conclusions to Chap. 1, majority voting *can* work, when those who set the question are benevolent and/or intuitive, or when the question is posed by a neutral player such as a really independent commission – some independent commissions are not quite as independent as they should be¹ – or via a group of concerned individuals mounting their own citizens' initiative. This last-named procedure consists of a petition which, if sufficiently well supported, then goes to a binding referendum on the issue raised.

In these citizens' initiatives, there is little to stop certain interests, including the political ones, from getting involved as well. Indeed, experience suggests they often do exactly that. Nevertheless, on balance, it seems the availability of the initiative is a very useful adjunct to a healthy democracy, not least because it tends to dissuade the politicians from passing laws in their own rather than the people's interests. After all, in a democracy, the people are sovereign. If, therefore, the political structure is to allow for checks and balances, it would seem logical enough to allow for this additional measure.

Legislating in Switzerland is the art of avoiding the referendum. (Koback 1994: 150)

Both the logic of the referendum-plus-initiative and the example of how it has worked in Switzerland support the conclusion that it can be seen as a strong consensus-inducing mechanism... (Lijphart 1999: 231)

Only Italy and Switzerland plus a few states in the US have these citizens' initiatives, although lots of other countries have other variations on the referendum theme. Several allow for constitutional referendums, for any proposed changes thereto. Some have positive referendums, where the proposer asks for a new law to be introduced. And a few have negative ones, by which the people may demand that certain measures be repealed.² Finally, while some referendums are binding, others are only advisory.

¹ In 1997, for example, the British government asked Lord Jenkins to chair a supposedly independent commission for a referendum on Britain's electoral system. As stipulated by the terms of reference, he was told to make only one proposal. A more independent commission would have allowed for a multi-option approach, as was the case in New Zealand. (Sect. 2.6 and the epilogue.)

² This sometimes leads to the rather confusing situation where those in favour of something vote "no" and those against vote "yes", for that is what you have to do when you want to retain or repeal that something in what is called an abrogative referendum, as in Italy.

2.2.1 *Variations on the Majoritarian Theme*

It would be even better if the electorate were offered a multi-option referendum. Some countries already cater for such, and three Scandinavian countries use multi-option voting in their parliaments (Fig. 2.8). These are huge improvements on simple majority voting, if only because they allow the debate to revert from an *A* versus *B* argument into an *A* or *B* or *C* or *D* discussion.

Multi-option voting is dealt with in Sect. 2.3; first comes an examination of those better forms of the two-option vote in current use, either in national/regional referendums and/or in parliaments and committees.

2.2.1.1 A Weighted Majority

Reference was made earlier to the vote of no-confidence in situations where, in theory, no one policy enjoys majority support (Sect. 1.1.2.3). In other circumstances, there might be some similar or even different majorities in favour of several different policies. That is, there could well be a majority in favour of option *A*, another majority in favour of option *B*, and so on.

In Northern Ireland, for example, there is probably a majority in favour of staying in the UK. There could also be a different but no less valid majority for the main provisions of the Belfast Agreement under a form of joint authority. There might even be a majority in favour of some well-conceived federal Ireland, as long as such a structure gave the North a considerable measure of autonomy. So which majority, if any, represents the general will?

Another example is Kosova where there is definitely a huge majority in favour of independence (Sect. 1.2.4.1); if a different question were posed, there could well be another huge majority in favour of a united Albania, or yet another in support of a greater Albania. As implied in Sect. 1.1.2.8, the answer depends upon the question, and the outcome of a majority vote may indeed mean next to nothing.

One way to be a little more certain of the general will is to use a weighted majority vote when, say, a 67% or 75% majority is required.³ The advantage – if we take the 75% model – is that in a divided society with, let us say, 60% belonging to “this” group and 40% to “that” faction, any 75% majority would clearly consist of voters from both “this” and “that” community. The disadvantage is equally apparent: any minority of 25% or so could veto any or even everything.

³ The largest weighting in use is a five-sixths majority, the requirement for certain constitutional amendments and/or fiscal policies in the Finnish parliament (McRae 1997: 290).

2.2.1.2 A Minimum Majority

In some parliaments and committee meetings, decisions can be taken only if a certain minimum number of members, a quorum, is present. Similarly, in some countries like Denmark, certain minimum levels of participation are laid down by law for referendums. In such instances, any proposal will be adopted only if it enjoys the support of a majority of the voters *and* if the turnout passes a certain minimum percentage of the electorate. The Danish requirement is 40%.

2.2.1.3 A Double Majority

In a few countries such as those constituted on federal lines, referendums depend not only upon a majority of votes cast, but also on the support of a majority of regions or cantons, to take the Swiss example.

2.2.1.4 The Veto

The greater the number of majoritarian provisos imposed on the use of a majority vote, the more likely it is that one or other group may resort to a veto. If a minority party which chooses to veto does so by an internal party majority vote then, while the majority of the minority might indeed want to veto, the minority of the minority might prefer to veto that veto. This is another inherent snag in any majoritarian process: the minority of the minority of the minority... (Sects. 1.1.2.2 and 1.2.5)

2.2.1.5 A Consociational Majority

Another form of majority voting is the consociational vote, a method of decision-making which has been used in a politically divided society at peace (Austria), in societies divided by different nationalities (Czechoslovakia)⁴ and (Belgium), and in a post-communist plural society in transition (Bosnia).⁵ It is also a part of the Belfast Agreement. For many of the politicians involved, consociationalism is a quantum leap beyond the simple majority vote.

To take the Czechoslovak example, any vote would have been conducted simultaneously in the two constituencies and, if a majority of the Czechs *and*

⁴ Interestingly enough, the Czechoslovak model was initiated by one Joseph Stalin, a politician not always associated with democratic reforms. Furthermore, throughout Stalin's reign, this system of decision-making never failed because, in those grim days, no major decisions were taken in Prague anyway; everything of importance was decided in the Kremlin.

⁵ 'The three national parties had secretly agreed before the [1990] elections to form a coalition government. . .' (Silber and Little 1995: 232), so to exclude the non-sectarian parties.

a majority of the Slovaks had both said ‘yes’, then ‘yes’ it would have been. The biggest disadvantage of this process is that it is still majoritarian: in many instances those involved, both people and politicians, continue to think in terms of just two alternatives: **A** or **B**.

A second defect of consociational voting lies in the fact that it is prone to the use of the veto. In NI, both ‘sides’ have one, so the future of the Belfast Agreement is dependent on at least the majority of the majority *and* the majority of the minority; in practice, the survival of the Agreement is subject to even smaller groupings (Sect. 1.1.2.2). Meanwhile in Bosnia, it was all the more complicated because of three possible vetoes, and in ‘its 18-month-long existence, the [1990-2] Bosnia parliament failed to pass a single law. . .’ (Glenny 1996: 148). Sure enough, where there is the possibility of a veto, sooner or later, it will be exercised.

A third defect relates to the constituencies themselves, for somebody has to know to which constituency each voter belongs. In Czechoslovakia, the constituencies were geographical and therefore separate electoral registers would have been possible, even if the Moravians, located between the two, were just assumed to be Czech.

In NI, where the geographical divisions are both numerous and confused, separate electoral registers based on nationality or religion would be both unacceptable and unworkable. For this reason, the Belfast Agreement stipulates consociational voting for use in the elected chamber only, and not for general use in referendums. To put it into effect, all members of the Legislative Assembly, MLAs, have to designate themselves as “unionist”, “nationalist” or “other,” and the very sectarianism the Agreement was meant to overcome is thereby perpetuated and entrenched (see also Sect. 5.1.5.4). Nevertheless, consociational voting is still a significant advance on the simple majority vote.

2.3 Multi-Option Decision-Making: Theory

There are several ways of voting on a multi-option ballot, and even more ways of counting those votes. The theory will be considered first, the different counting procedures will be examined towards the end of the chapter.

‘The truth of an Assembly’s decisions depends as much on the form by which they are reached as on the enlightenment of its members.’ Le Marquis de Condorcet. (McLean and Urken 1995: 113)

2.3.1 A Three-Option Continuum

Consider a committee of just three persons – Ms J, Mr K and Ms L again – who have decided to hold a party. Let us buy a barrel, says one, bulk-buying would be

Fig. 2.2 A profile of tastes

-	Ms J	Mr K	Ms L
1 st preference	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>
2 nd preference	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>
3 rd preference	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>

cheaper; so they all agree to that as well. Then comes the question: a barrel of what? Ms J suggests ale, option *A*. Mr K likes his bitter, *B*. And Ms L prefers cider, *C*. A debate ensues and it soon becomes clear that each of them has their own preferences, as shown in Fig. 2.2: Ms J likes *A B C*, in that order; Mr K's preferences are *B C A*; and Ms L goes for *C A B*.

Given their differences on these three options, they agree to resolve the matter democratically, and for those who believe in majority voting, this necessitates two majority votes. Ms J suggests a first round vote of *B* versus *C*, with the winner going through to the second round, (*B* or *C*) v *A*. Mr K argues for (*A* or *C*) v *B*. And Ms L proposes a third plan: (*A* or *B*) v *C*. Their motives soon become apparent.

In the first round vote according to Ms J, *B* versus *C*, both J and K prefer *B* to *C*, so the second round is *B* v *A*, where both J and L prefer *A* to *B*, so the winner is *A*.

In Mr K's first round version of *A* versus *C*, both K and L prefer *C* to *A*, and in the second round contest of *C* v *B*, two of them, J and K, prefer *B* to *C*, so the winner is *B*.

And in Ms L's first round contest choice of *A* or *B*, both J and L prefer *A*, while in the *A* v *C* final, a majority of K and L prefer *C*, so the winner is now *C*.

In such circumstances, everything depends upon the order of voting. This is because *A* is preferred by a majority to *B* which is preferred by a majority to *C* which is preferred by a majority to *A* which. . . and this goes round and round in circles, for ever! In voting terminology, it is called a cycle or the paradox of voting. *A* is more popular than *B* is more popular than *C* is more popular than *A*. . . which is written as *A > B > C > A*. . .

So now back to politics. One of the simplest pluralist debates consists of a motion and just one proposed amendment. In this setting, there are in fact three possible outcomes: *A*, *B* and *C*.

- A* the motion, unamended
- B* the motion, amended and
- C* nothing, the *status quo ante*

If no one group has an absolute majority, the chair can do anything at all: he may just arrange a knock-out competition – a binary decision-making procedure – and he can thus get whatever answer he wants.

As shown in Chap. 1, in two-option majority voting the outcome depends on the wording of the motion (Sect. 1.1.2.8). It is now clear that, in any binary voting

procedure, the outcome also depends on the order of business, the agenda. Which proposal comes first? Which amendment takes precedence? The possibilities for fixing the debate in any complex majoritarian scenario are almost limitless.

Even in a two-option setting, the chair has quite a few choices of action. As implied in Sect. 1.1.2.10, she could follow the precedent of M Calonne and “adjust” the majority; or she could resort to the most ancient of all procedures and foment an *A* and *A'* split in the opposing camp – (Sect. 1.1.2.13) – the game of divide and rule. Then, as soon as she has the options on the table and as long as no one option enjoys an absolute majority, she can fix the order of voting to her own advantage and get the outcome she wants.

2.3.2 A Four-Option Conundrum

Just to prove the point, imagine a second scenario in which the same trio – Messrs J, K and L – decide to have another party. Initially, in this example, there are only two options on the table, *A* and *D*, ale and draught. Furthermore, there is to be no argument about the order of voting, for all three are under the strict chairpersonship of no less a democrat than myself.

Now as it happens, Ms J prefers *D* to *A*, Mr K prefers *D* to *A*, and Ms L prefers *D* to *A*. You might think, therefore, that the collective decision of this threesome is in unanimous support of *D*. Ah, but you forget one important consideration: I, the impartial, non-voting but very democratic chairperson, want *A*.

So I proceed as follows. I introduce bitter and cider into the discussion, options *B* and *C*, because I wish to divide and rule. I know that Ms J has preferences *A B C*, so she now has *D A B C*; meanwhile, Mr K (*B C A*) likes *B C D A* and Ms L (*C A B*) opts for *C D A B*. Please note that all three still prefer *D* to *A*, as shown in Fig. 2.3: no-one has changed their mind.

I then ask all to vote in a democratic way, by majority vote of course and, as chair, I insist on the following fair, logical order:

D v *C*, which *C* wins due to K and L

C v *B*, which *B* wins, because J and K prefer *B*; and then

-	Ms J	Mr K	Ms L
1 st preference	<i>D</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>
2 nd preference	<i>A</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>
3 rd preference	<i>B</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A</i>
4 th preference	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>

Fig. 2.3 A more complex profile

A v B , which with votes from J and L , is a clear victory for A . Thus the committee has chosen option A , the ale.⁶ I might add that this sort of manipulation can take place, not only by a chairperson so structuring the vote, but also in a purely verbal process, by a facilitator “navigating” a group discussion in a direction of his own choosing.

In a vain attempt to bring some semblance of order to the democratic process – assuming, that is, that the only way to vote is via this form of majoritarian or binary decision-making – a number of theorists have long since written certain specific rules and standing orders. ‘When the *ekklesia* met. . . the first day was given over to a presentation of the problem or a statement of the case. The second day was taken up with formulation of motions and with debate. On the third day, the vote was taken. . . In practice. . . when the political leaders agreed, they presented their program and had it approved; when they disagreed, the voters chose between the proposals of rival leaders.’ (Larsen 1955: 97–8)

This all dates from about 200 BC, by which time the Greeks were well used to notions such as quorums, limited terms of office, extraordinary meetings and so on. So it was utterly reasonable for Pliny the Younger to write in AD 105, ‘In ancient times. . . men learned. . . the powers of the proposer, the rights of expressing an opinion, the authority of office holders, and the privileges of ordinary members; they learned when to give way and when to stand firm, how long to speak and when to keep silence, how to distinguish between conflicting proposals and how to introduce an amendment, in short the whole of senatorial procedure.’ (McLean and Urken 1995: 67)

A modern set of rules and procedures contains little which is new, for it too is based firmly on the old, two-option majority vote (Citrine and Cannell 1982: 53 *et seq.*).

2.3.3 The Wording of Motions

In multi-option voting, the choice of options is still crucial. Accordingly, let us now consider how the options on a multi-option ballot should be expressed. Returning to the earlier topic of dog licenses, we could choose a three-option ballot paper in a number of different ways: Does this House want the cost (in pounds) of a dog license to be option A , B or C , as in Fig. 2.4?

Well, people could get a little suspicious of such a limited choice, so in this and many other debates, perhaps it would be better to go for a few more options, as in Fig. 2.5:

⁶This example is an adaptation of one used by (Saari 2001: 13–14). If instead of just three members, the committee consisted of 11 persons who favoured $D A B C$, 10 who preferred $C D A B$ and 9 who liked $B C D A$, the three votes would have been passed with comfortable, convincing and compelling majorities of 63%, 67% and 70%.

-	Option <i>A</i>	Option <i>B</i>	Option <i>C</i>
One possibility	39 or less	40	41 or more
A variation	34 or less	between 35 and 45	46 or more
Another sort	nothing	between 1 and 79	80 or more

Fig. 2.4 A choice of questions

Option <i>A</i>	Option <i>B</i>	Option <i>C</i>	Option <i>D</i>	Option <i>E</i>	Option <i>F</i>	Option <i>G</i>
x = 0	0 < x < 20	20 ≤ x < 40	40 ≤ x < 60	60 ≤ x < 80	80 ≤ x < 100	x = 100

Fig. 2.5 A seven-option ballot

In such a vote, if I wanted a license fee of £45, I could vote: *D, C, E, B, F, A, G* if on the other hand I thought £55 would be better, I could say: *D, E, C, F, B, G, A* and if I wanted exactly £50, I could vote *D, E, C, B, F, A, G* or *D, C, E, F, B, G, A*

The voting procedure is not perfect, of course, but a seven-option range is obviously better than a three-option choice, and definitely better than any two-option dilemma.

Alas, in adversarial politics, politicians fight their corners. Some want a so-called ideology to prevail, such as communism, socialism, capitalism or whatever (although, in practice, it is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish between these various “philosophies”). Others support unionism or nationalism, and again these two may not be as mutually exclusive as their protagonists pretend.

There are those politicians and members of the electorate who take a more altruistic view and who campaign for the general good. Instead, therefore, of individual Welsh people voting for what each of them would like the Welsh constitution to be, they could vote for what they judge to be the Welsh consensus. Alas, with the introduction of party politics, such idealistic democratic behaviour has to a large extent disappeared. For many people nowadays, it’s a case of “I vote for me” (Sect. 3.2.1.8).

At this stage, however, we are considering only the format of the ballot paper and, so far as dog licenses are concerned, seven options should be more than adequate. Then, when everyone has voted, it should be possible to calculate a reasonably accurate answer provided, that is, the number of voters was fairly high, and the options were well balanced over an appropriately wide range.

The range of options would probably be something like Fig. 2.6, especially if the format of the ballot paper were a vital part of the debate.

Option <i>A</i>	Option <i>B</i>	Option <i>C</i>	Option <i>D</i>	Option <i>E</i>	Option <i>F</i>	Option <i>G</i>
$x < 20$	$20 \leq x < 30$	$30 \leq x < 40$	$40 \leq x < 50$	$50 \leq x < 60$	$60 \leq x < 70$	$70 \leq x$

Fig. 2.6 Another seven-option ballot

As already stated, the MPs could be asked to give their answer to the nearest pound. (The question would be the equivalent of a 100-option single-preference vote, with a rather unusual count.) This would facilitate a fairly accurate calculation of the consensus opinion (the mathematical mean). With a more practical seven-option preference ballot, especially if the voters list all seven preferences, a similar degree of accuracy is still possible.

If the MPs adopt the more altruistic view of politics, they should be able to submit a complete ballot. If I list *G* as my last preference, I make it pretty clear that I do not like anything more than £70. I am, nevertheless, expressing my opinion to the full. I am also acknowledging the fact that the consensus opinion *may* be over £70, that someone in the debate has actually suggested such an option (for otherwise, presumably, it would not have been included on the ballot paper), and I thus accept both the validity of that option and the right of its proposer to hold such an aspiration.

2.3.4 Single-Peaked Preferences

The above sets of preferences – *D-C-E-B-F-A-G*, *D-E-C-F-B-G-A*, *D-E-C-B-F-A-G* and *D-C-E-F-B-G-A* – are examples of single-peaked preferences. Thus, if the voter thinks £45 is best, option *D* will be her highest preference, and all license fees to either side of option *D* will be on descending scales of lower preferences, with those the furthest away from *D* getting the lowest preferences of all. The example shown overleaf in Fig. 2.7 is for the first set of preferences: *D-C-E-B-F-A-G*.

Alas, when it comes to politics, “there’s nowt as queer as folks” as they say, and so too in Wales. Section 1.1.2.8 implied that in a three-option poll, *Plaid Cymru* supporters would probably vote *C B A* (independence, devolution, *status quo*); the unionists would no doubt be their opposites *A B C*; and only those in favour of devolution would be split in their subsequent preferences, *B A C* or *B C A*. In the present scenario, these sets of preferences are all single-peaked. There is, however, another point of view, that of those who are opposed to the introduction of any additional level of government, and these voters might want to give *B* their last preference: *A C B* or *C A B*. In the present scenario, these preferences are not single-peaked.

In debates on relatively simple issues like dog licenses, there may indeed be a single peak in the voters’ preferences and therefore a single peak in their collective preferences. On more complex topics, single-peaked preferences are not so common.

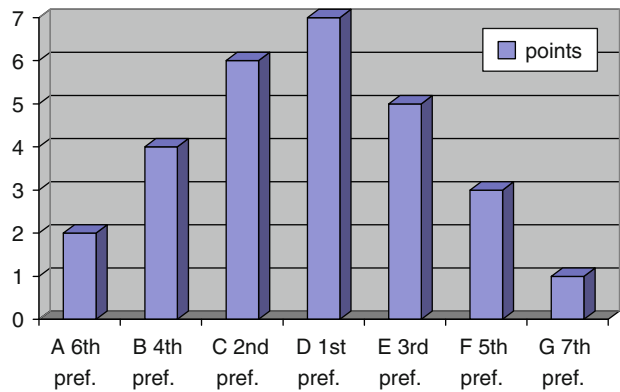


Fig. 2.7 Single-peaked preferences: *D-C-E-B-F-A-G*

2.4 Multi-Option Decision-Making: Practice

Awareness of the paradox of voting (Sect. 2.3.1) is vital to any understanding of the following voting procedures:

- Plurality voting
- Two-round system of voting, TRS
- Approval voting
- Serial voting
- Alternative vote, AV*
- Pairings, Condorcet
- Points system, usually a BC
- Modified Borda Count, MBC

The relative merits of these procedures will now be considered, both in diagrammatic form in Fig. 2.8 and in written argument. The MBC will then be discussed in rather more detail.

2.4.1 Plurality Voting

In a plurality vote, voters cast only one preference, usually by writing an “×”. In a six-option ballot – with options *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E* and *F* – if the result is *A* 30%, *B* and *C* 20%, *D*, *E* and *F* just 10%, then *A* wins on 30%, even though a majority of 70% did not vote for *A*. Thus a plurality vote can be a very inaccurate measure of the collective will.

*This is actually a single transferable vote, STV, or to give it its American name, instant run-off voting, IRV.

		CLOSED QUESTIONS	SEMI-OPEN QUESTIONS	OPEN QUESTIONS
		binary	multi-optional	
↑ C O U N T	all preferences	-	-	BC/MBC Condorcet
	some preferences	-	-	approval voting
		only first preferences	weighted majority South Africa [∞] simple majority	consociational Belgium, NI twin majority Switzerland§ Voter chooses one of two options
		single preference voting		Voter chooses one, some or all of several options
		VOTERS' CHOICE		→ →

* a series of majority votes.
** one plurality vote plus, if need be, one majority vote.
[∞] the simple majority vote is used ubiquitously.
§ in referendums.

Fig. 2.8 Decision-making systems

Plurality voting has sometimes been used in multi-option referendums, as summarized in App. D. At the very least, the provision of more than two options suggests to the voters (a) that they do have a real choice, and (b), that if the vote is binding, the executive will execute whatever the people decide. Thus, in theory, plurality voting is a big improvement on a two-option vote. Unfortunately, in practice, the improvement is often marginal, because a multi-option choice is often reduced to two or at best three favourites, often by sections of the media.

2.4.2 The Two-Round System, TRS

The first round is a plurality vote and, if no option gains 50%, a second round majority vote is held between the two leading options from the first round. Norway has provision for TRS in its parliament.

2.4.3 Approval Voting

In a ballot of six options, voters can indicate their “approval” by giving an “×” to either one or many options. The option with the most “approvals” is the winner. They may “approve” of the options as they wish, up to a maximum of one less than the total of six; (in effect, a vote for all six options would be a wasted vote). A major disadvantage of approval voting is that those who are more consensual may vote for up to five options, while the intransigent may vote for only their favourite option. In some scenarios, one of the latter sets of voters might therefore be more likely to enjoy success.

2.4.4 Serial Voting

If, in debate, the six options “on the table” can be listed, in order, let us say from cheap to expensive, then MPS may take a series of two-option votes, initially between the two “extremes.” The option which loses is dropped, while the one which wins goes into the second round, another majority vote between the two new extremes; and so it continues. It is a bit like the game of musical chairs: after five votes, there is only one option left, the winner. If everyone has single-peaked preferences (Sect. 2.3.4) and if everyone votes sincerely, the system works fairly well. Furthermore, on those occasions when there is a Condorcet winner (Sect. 2.4.6) – namely, when there is no paradox – the serial winner will be the Condorcet winner.

This methodology is sometimes used in the Finnish and Swedish parliaments, usually when there is a choice of two or more possible amendments (Nurmi 1987: 163).

2.4.5 *AV, STV or IRV*

In AV, voters are asked to place their options in order of preference, giving a “1” to their first preference, a “2” to their second, and so on, for as many options as they wish; people usually vote for just some options although they may cast all their preferences, if they want to. If one option gets at least 50% of the first preferences, then it wins. If not, the least popular option according to the first stage plurality count is eliminated, and its votes are transferred according to the respective voters’ second preferences. The process continues until one option gets 50% of the votes, or until there is only one option left.⁷

One weakness of AV lies in the fact that the system can be capricious and sometimes inaccurate. If option *E* is eliminated first, option *D* may win; but just a few more first preference votes for *E* could mean a different elimination and an altogether different winner.⁸

* * * * *

As mentioned in Sect. 2.4.1, a plurality vote can be inaccurate. We may therefore conclude that any methodology which starts with a plurality vote may also be inaccurate: this applies to TRS and AV.

2.4.6 *Pairings, a Condorcet Count*

In a Condorcet count, as in AV, voters cast one, some, or all of their preferences. In the count, pairs of options are examined separately. In a six-option ballot, when all the pairings have been examined, if *A* is more popular than *B* and if *A* is more popular than *C*, and more popular than *D*, and *E* and *F*, then *A* wins; i.e. *A* is the Condorcet winner. The trouble is, as we now know, there may be a paradox, and this is especially true if some people do not have single-peaked preferences. Nevertheless, on many occasions, a Condorcet count is an accurate measure of the wishes of the majority, and sometimes too of the overall consensus.

2.4.7 *Points System or Borda Count, BC*

In a BC, voters express their preferences, as in AV or a Condorcet count. In a six-option ballot, if the voter has submitted a full ballot, a first preference gets 6 points, a second preference 5 points, a third 4 points, and so on. The option with the most points is the winner.

⁷ It is often said that AV ensures that the winning option enjoys majority support. If, however, many voters cast only a few preferences, many votes might become non-transferable (Chap. 4, note 7).

⁸ AV/STV is not monotonic (see glossary and Emerson P 1998: 87–8).

Now if I want option *A* to win while at the same time I think option *D*, my second preference, is a close rival, I might vote tactically and give *A* my first preference and *D* my last preference, with intermediate preferences going to the other options. There again, if lots of people think and act in this way, they may all finish up with their third preference, or something even less popular.

Guessing the first preferences of everyone can be problematic; guessing *all* of their preferences might be impossible. In practice, then, manipulating a BC is very difficult and the BC is usually an accurate measure of the collective will of those voting; this is even more likely if a modified BC, the MBC, is used (see below). In many instances, the BC gives the same outcome as a Condorcet count, and this is because a *well-measured* majority opinion is often (but not always) the same as the accurately identified consensus opinion. To use a sporting analogy, the winner of the football league is the team which wins the most matches (Condorcet); and in most years, it is this team which also has the best goal difference (a sort of BC) (Emerson P 2007: 86).

2.5 Consensus Voting: The Modified Borda Count, MBC

Consensus voting involves not only a multi-option vote but also a multi-option debate. As will be seen in Chap. 6, this debate should allow for the formation of a (short) list of all proposals aired, (as long as they conform to some agreed norm such as the UN Charter on Human Rights). If in debate a verbal consensus proves to be elusive, this list becomes the basis of the ballot paper, whereupon the participants shall be asked to state their preferences, as in a BC.

Now there may be those who submit only a partial vote. In a BC of n options, points may be awarded as follows:

a first preference gets n points
 a second preference gets $n-1$ points
 a third preference gets $n-2$ points. . . and so on, until
 a last preference gets 1 point.⁹

If a first preference were to get n points, even when the voter has cast only one preference, people might be tempted to do just that: cast only a first preference. If everyone did this, the vote would revert to a plurality vote. Accordingly, in consensus voting, the rules are such that, if someone casts m preferences – where $1 \leq m \leq n$ – points shall be awarded like this:

a first preference gets m points
 a second preference gets $m-1$ points
 a third preference gets $m-2$ points. . . and so on, until
 a last preference gets 1 point.

⁹ Some people prefer a slightly different rule: instead of $(n, n-1, \dots, 1)$, they use $(n-1, n-2, \dots, 0)$. If all the voters have submitted full ballots, the outcome will be the same.

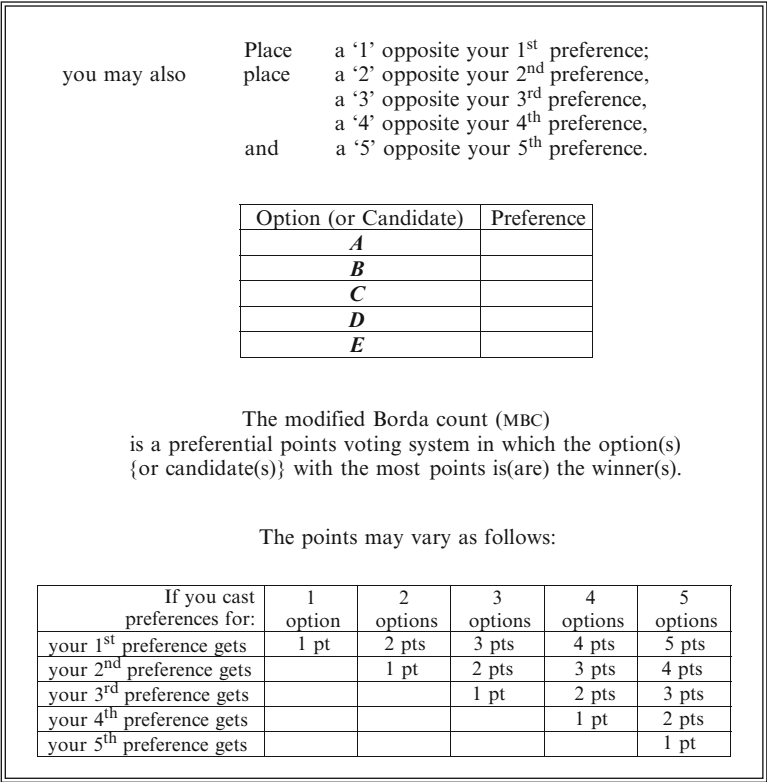


Fig. 2.9 An MBC five-option ballot

If, then, a voter casts only a first preference, he will exercise only one point. If another casts two preferences, her first preference gets two points. If someone else casts all n preferences, then his first preference gets n points. In other words, if in a six-option ballot, someone says something about one option, and nothing at all about any of the other options, he will exercise $1 + 0 + 0 + 0 + 0 + 0$ points. She who casts two preferences will exercise $2 + 1 + 0 + 0 + 0 + 0$ points. While those who submit a full ballot will exercise $6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1$ points.

In summary, a voter's x^{th} preference, if cast, will always get one more point than that voter's $(x + 1)^{\text{th}}$ preference, whether or not the latter has been cast. In an MBC, there is no especial weighting. An example of an MBC ballot paper is shown in Fig. 2.9.

2.5.1 The MBC: Theory and Practice

In a majoritarian decision-making process, the protagonist who wants his particular option to win will try to maximize his support from those he considers to be on his side; at the same time, he will care little about those he knows to be of the opposite viewpoint.

In an MBC, it is all very different. When his final total depends not only on those whom he considers to be his supporters, but also on those who in a majoritarian milieu would have been his adversaries, it would pay him both to word his proposal so that it appeals to everybody, and to campaign right across the political spectrum. Success depends not only on getting a large number of high preferences, but also perhaps in gaining lots of middle preferences and a minimal number of low preferences. Thus the system itself encourages greater dialogue – or “polylogue” – amongst all concerned.

In general, the more choice there is in a voting system, the more difficult it is to manipulate. Furthermore, of the systems discussed so far, only one set is not majoritarian: the BC. If, therefore, the word “democracy” implies the identification of the consensus described at the beginning of the chapter (Sect. 2.1.1), this methodology would seem to be the most appropriate.

The principle underlying Borda’s criterion... is that majorities are of no importance in themselves... (Dummett 1997: 63)

Its main advantage is of exceptional merit: it is a win-win procedure. In debates of great controversy, it should bring forth the best compromise. In discourses of great sophistication, it may give the collective wisdom. Furthermore, as adapted into the MBC¹⁰ – and this may well have been what Jean-Charles de Borda himself intended (Saari 2008: 197 note 6)¹¹ – it allows for the participation of everyone.

Another advantage of the MBC lies in the fact that, if a voter wishes to abstain and rely on the consensus of everybody else, he may do so without fear of distorting the outcome. There are no dramatic swings to worry about in consensus voting. Secondly, if the single-minded wish to participate to a certain degree only (i.e., voting only for their own options), then their preferences will be counted but only to a correspondingly limited extent. In this way, the more extreme elements in society may still play their part.

In majoritarian politics, some people are left outside the tent, at least until the next vote. In consensus politics, in contrast, all are inside, and *every* voter influences the average. If one MP changes his mind, the average opinion may change a little. But the consensus of all is not and cannot be drastically altered by the vacillations of just one individual. When decisions are based on majority votes, however, as shown in App. C, the rôle of just one MP can sometimes change the course of history.

¹⁰ This procedure is sometimes called a preferendum.

¹¹ Jean-Charles de Borda proposed that the voter’s last preference should get one point, his penultimate two points, and so on. Mathematically, this is the same as the $(m, m-1, \dots, 1)$ rule. Unfortunately, many social choice scientists, and in their wake political scientists, have adopted the $(n-1, n-2, \dots, 0)$ rule, which does not cater for partial voting. I think the source of this mistake was Duncan Black. (Black 1958: 59) (See also Emerson forthcoming.)

2.5.2 *An Example*

In the Oct. 2002 debate in the UN Security Council on Iraq (Sect. 1.1.2.4) France did not like the phrase, ‘serious consequences’.¹² Nevertheless, France voted in favour. Now why would any country vote in favour of something that she did not like? Was it because she thought it was better than nothing? Or was it because of the need for international solidarity?

All this begs a further question: why did France go along with the practice of majority voting? If the US/UK option had been called option **A**, France could have drafted its own alternative phrase and put this on the table as well, option **B**, probably with German support. Syria was a member of the Council at that time, and with her specialist knowledge of the Middle East, maybe she would have had another idea: option **C**. Ireland, a neutral country, could have moved a distinctly pacifist alternative, option **D**, and so on.

With all these options, participants could then have engaged in open debate, asking questions, making suggestions, and perhaps having new ideas. In short, the debate could have been allowed to develop in whichever way the delegates wanted it to.

On such a topic, coming to a verbal agreement is bound to be difficult. Let us therefore assume that, when everything has been said but nothing decided, there are indeed five options on the table: **A**, **B**, **C**, **D** and **E**. The chair calls for a vote. Let us also assume that all 15 members cast a full ballot of five preferences.

Consider first a hypothetical situation: if option **D**, say, gets 15 first preferences, then **D** will get $(15 \times 5) = 75$ points, the maximum; if all 15 give option **C** their fifth preference, then **C** will get only $(15 \times 1) = 15$ points; and if all give option **A** their third preference, then **A** will get $(15 \times 3) = 45$ points, which is of course the mean.

In practice, with 15 members casting five preferences on the five options, doubtless some option(s) will be above the mean, and some other option(s) below. ‘The Borda count... always gives a definite result.’ (Reilly 2002: 358) If the winning option gets more than 70 points, the observer can talk of (near) unanimity; if more than 60, of consensus; and if between 50 and 60, of the best possible compromise. If however the leading option scores less than 50 points, then obviously the other options will also be close to the mean score (45 points), in which case it would be better to accept that there is no agreement and resume the debate, just as they would in Africa.

2.5.3 *Other Applications of the MBC*

As in the above example, the MBC can be used to identify the participants’ social choice – their most popular option – or, in a prioritization, their social ranking –

¹² In Article 13, the Security Council ‘*Recalls*... that the Council has repeatedly warned Iraq that it will face serious consequences as a result of its continued violations of its obligations.’

their collective preferences. While it may be difficult to manipulate an MBC when identifying a social choice, it is definitely problematic when identifying the social ranking. Accordingly, the MBC can also be used in surveys and opinion polls, in focus groups and other forms of deliberative democracy.

To take a simple example, committee members could decide on an agenda by voting on any suggested items, in which case the relative scores would indicate the priority with which those items should be considered; furthermore, the relative strengths of the points totals would indicate whether extended times should be scheduled for the more important items. In like manner, members could agree on a prioritization, a short list of say six from a longer initial list, by asking each to record their top six options in order of preference.

A similar degree of sophistication may be applicable to such complex debates as the budget, where the allocation of more funds to one ministerial department cannot be considered without taking into account the effect such a re-allocation would have on other proposed expenditures. Without such a sophisticated voting procedure, it would be almost impossible for a group of MPs to come to a collective decision on such a topic. It would be even more difficult in an instance of direct democracy, as in participatory budgeting.

2.6 Conclusions

Democratic decision-making could be so much more than divisive debates and majority votes. There are voting procedures by which collective opinions *can* be accurately identified. The Condorcet system can be used to identify a *majority* opinion; the MBC can be used to identify a *consensus* opinion; and the true majority opinion and the consensus opinion will often coincide (Sect. 2.4.7). When they do, all concerned can be reasonably sure the outcome is indeed the will of the voters.¹³

¹³ Nothing, of course, is perfect. Condorcet might produce a paradox, but not the BC/MBC; the latter, but not Condorcet, is subject to clones and irrelevant alternatives (see glossary).

Imagine three voters are voting on two options, *A* and *B*, with two voters having preferences *A B* and one voter preferring *B A*. In this situation, *A* wins the Borda count with 5 points to *B*'s 4 points. If we now introduce a third option, a clone, *B'*, such that *everyone* prefers *B* to *B'*, the voters' profiles are two of *A B B'* and one of *B B' A*, and the BC scores are now *A* 7, *B* 7 and *B'* 4. Add another clone, option *B''*, such that the profiles are two of *A B B' B''* and one of *B B' B'' A*, and the scores are *A* 9, *B* 10, *B'* 7 and *B''* 4. In other words, the introduction of two clones could turn an *A* Borda victory into an *A* Borda defeat.

An irrelevant alternative, option *D*, may also have this effect. If two people have preferences *A-B-C* and one prefers *B-C-A* then, as above, the scores are *A* 7, *B* 7, *C* 4. If there is an option *D* on the ballot paper as well, such that two prefer *A-B-D-C* and one favours *B-C-D-A*, then the scores will be *A* 9, *B* 10, *C* 5, *D* 6, and again, *A* is no longer the joint winner. In all of these examples, however, *A* remains the Condorcet winner.

Given these two defects of the BC/MBC and the paradox of Condorcet, many experts, often working independently, have come to the conclusion that the best possible methodology is indeed a combined Condorcet/Borda count. (Emerson P 2007: 17 note 6)

In societies polarized on really divisive issues – constitutional questions in Kosova, for example – the chances of such a Borda/Condorcet coincidence are minimal. There again, in such a society, majority voting would not work well either. The MBC at least offers the best prospects of reaching an agreement via a voting procedure and, in places like NI and Bosnia, consideration should be given to its use. The MBC, after all, is inclusive, in the best sense of the word. In Kosova, on the other hand, it will probably be better to rely on talks under “the big tree.”

Of the many voting procedures by which a democratic decision may be taken, the most primitive methodology is the simple majority vote where the government chooses the policy it wants, and then asks parliament or the country to want it too. A better format involves the government, at its own or someone else’s behest, asking an independent body – either all-party or even non-party – to study the matter, to facilitate a proper debate on the subject and, if appropriate, to draw up a number of options. These could then be put to the people or the parliament in a multi-option vote. Such a procedure was used in 1992 in New Zealand, where the people were first asked in a non-binding ballot if they wanted to change the electoral system and, if so, to which one of four proposed alternatives. There then followed a binding two option referendum, in which the people chose to ratify that earlier non-binding outcome (see App. D, D.1).

As the reader will now realize, there are even better ways of making decisions, and these could be incorporated into a more sophisticated government structure, which shall be considered in Part III. At this stage, it must be emphasized that multi-option voting procedures should definitely be used whenever there is to be a controversial plebiscite on sovereignty. Consequently, no “people” should be able to determine itself on the basis of only a majority of itself. Instead, all concerned should come to a consensus, both internally within any proposed new borders, and externally with their future neighbours. Such should have been the case in Yugoslavia; and such should now apply to Scotland (Emerson P 2010c) and Quebec, etc., and not just to former conflict zones like Kashmir,¹⁴ Northern Ireland, or islands/regions in Indonesia (Sect. 1.2.3) and districts in Sudan. (Sect. 1.2.4.2) Equally problematic, perhaps, would be a referendum in Tibet (Xīzàng), which has witnessed large-scale Han immigration, as too has Xīnjiāng. Most fragile of all are probably the disputed regions in Iraq such as Kirkuk, where an oft-delayed referendum, originally scheduled for 2007, has still to be held.

‘A referendum is not the answer. Victor and vanquished cannot be a solution in such an explosive region. The two sides need to sit down and hammer out an arrangement.’
Abraham Serfaty, a Moroccan leader talking on the future of Western Sahara.
(The Guardian, 3.2.2000)

¹⁴ The 1947 UN resolution on Kashmir called for a referendum but none has yet been held.

2.7 Democratic Decision-Making Defined

With two chapters completed, it is now possible to define democratic decision-making. A democratic decision should represent the will of parliament and therefore, if the parliament is truly representative, the will of the people. Accordingly, decisions may be taken by either the parliament and/or the electorate, although clearly the latter remains sovereign.

As submitted in Sect. 2.1.1, the will of the people is either their unanimous viewpoint, where such exists, or on more controversial issues their average opinion or consensus, or on really contentious matters and especially in any plural society, their best possible compromise.

Accordingly, in a democracy – be it a nation or just an association – all decisions should be taken using an inclusive procedure, so as best to encapsulate that society’s consensus. Such a procedure should therefore include some or all of the following features.

1. All votes shall be “free,” i.e. without the application of any party whip. Ballot papers may include a blank option. All parliamentary legislation and non-urgent decisions shall be taken in consensus, either verbally or by a consensus vote.
2. On all controversial matters, a team of independent “consensors” (Sect. 6.2.1) or an independent commission shall determine exactly how many options are appropriate and which voting procedure is advisable. In the absence of any verbal consensus, the policy in question shall be put to a preference vote of at least three options.
3. Non-contentious issues may be resolved by a majority/plurality vote, and a minimum weighted majority of 75% will serve to emphasize its uncontroversial nature.

Contentious matters shall be resolved by an MBC, and the proposal which receives a pre-determined minimum level of support as measured by a consensus coefficient (see Sect. 6.3.2) may be regarded as the best possible approximation to “the will of the people.”

4. In the event of no one option attaining the required degree of support, the debate shall be resumed, alternative options shall be considered, and a further vote held. If at the end of, say, three votes, the pre-determined level has still not been achieved, the option with the highest level of consensus, even if it is the *status quo ante*, shall stand in lieu of the consensus, until such time as a consensus *can* be achieved.

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