# Debates and Decisions

Peter Emerson

In any debate, the purpose of which is to take a collective decision, the decision-making process to be used at the end of those deliberations will determine the nature of that debate. If that process is dichotomous, participants are likely to take sides and divide into two opposing camps; thus the atmosphere in debate is likely to become (perhaps bitterly) polarised.

If however, the final decision-making process is non-majoritarian; if, in other words, the outcome is to be that option which gets the highest average preference (and an average, of course, involves every voter, not just a majority of them), then the debate may well take place in a more convivial atmosphere.

This article first considers some of the disadvantages of majority voting before then describing a more inclusive measure of the collective will. The latter, it is suggested, will facilitate not only a more constructive milieu, but also a more accurate and therefore more democratic outcome. Accordingly, the article goes on to describe the nature and structure of a consensual debate.

Key words: consensor, consensus, consensus coefficient, inclusive polity, Modified Borda Count, win-win

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Peter Emerson is Director of not-for-profit NGO the de Borda Institute. His latest publication – *Defining Democracy* – was published by Springer in 2012.

## Abbreviations

AGM     annual general meeting
AV      alternative vote
BC      Borda count
FPP     first-past-the-post
IOC     International Olympic Committee
MBC     modified Borda count
OUP     Official Unionist Party
PR      proportional representation
SF      Sinn Féin
SMS     short message service (texting)
TRS     two-round system
UDA     Ulster Defence Association
UUP     Ulster Unionist Party

## Introduction

*'Words like 'winning' and 'losing' have to be banished from the political vocabulary of a plural society.'*
Sir W Arthur Lewis (1965, 66-7).

Be it in the local community or in a national or even international forum, the democratic process should be a means by which all may participate in coming to an accommodation. This may happen directly, in the staff meeting, company board, neighbourhood association or whatever; or it may happen indirectly, as in the political sphere, via elected representatives. In the latter scenario, the collective will of those elected should, in theory, be a fair representation of the collective will of their electorate.

The procedures may vary. Participants may rely on a purely verbal process, or they may resort to additional practices such as straw polls and votes. No matter what procedure is employed, however, given the fact that the collective consensus or public opinion (if one exists) is fixed, the outcomes of whatever procedures should be (roughly) the same. Accordingly, in any debate, among any one set of participants, if there is such a thing as a best possible compromise waiting, as it were, to be identified, the process by which it is precisely described and defined should not too severely affect its final character.

In today's world, many people use the purely verbal approach, and the outcome invariably enjoys a fair degree of *overall consent*; this is called their consensus. Such a process can, however, be very protracted and in many international gatherings, talks often continue well into the night. Furthermore, such a process inherently

limits the number of participants. In other settings, many politicians and others use a process which is its opposite: a (simple or weighted)[1] majority vote. This methodology, however, can *not* measure the degree of *overall consent*; in fact, it measures the very opposite – so many 'for' and so many 'against' – the degree of dissent. These two procedures might well, therefore, produce two entirely different outcomes; so at least one of them must be an inaccurate measure of the collective will.

What is needed, then, is a voting procedure (a) which can be used by groups no matter how large; and (b) by which can be identified, even in the most fractious of gatherings, the best possible compromise (if, that is, one exists), or, in more congenial scenarios, the consensus if not indeed the collective wisdom.

Having first defined the democratic process, this article talks about how a discussion, if it is to conclude with a divisive decision-making process, can deteriorate into an argument. Next, it describes a more inclusive voting procedure, the nature of its vote and count, the psychological effects on those involved, and then the means by which can be measured the degree of *overall consent*: the so-called consensus coefficient (para 3.3). Finally, it lays out the structure for and benefits of a consensus debate.

## The Democratic Process

In conflict resolution work, the professional mediator tries to avoid questions which are closed. Instead, in talks with all concerned, via questions which are open, she first identifies all the possible options. Next, in that which in political circles is often called shuttle diplomacy, she seeks the co-operation of the protagonists to tweak these various options, so to cater for the other participants. And then she tries to identify that option which is the most acceptable for all concerned.

Now in theory, the democratic process is the means by which problems can be resolved without resort to war. Violent decision-making processes are invariably based on closed questions: are you communist or capitalist? Serb or Croat? etc.. In contrast with mediation work, politics often relies on questions which are equally closed – are you left or right? etc. – because unfortunately, many people are 'imbued with the mystique of the majority,' (Dummett 1984, 178). The consequences have sometimes been horrific: not only has the democratic process sometimes failed to facilitate the resolution of a given problem, in the worst case scenarios, it has exacerbated the situation and provoked some to violence. As Sarajevo's now famous newspaper *Oslobodjenje* (1999) commented '…all the wars in the former Yugoslavia

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1    For definitions of various forms of majority voting, see 'A More Inclusive Voting Procedure', below.

started with a referendum.'

In theory, democracy is for *all* the people. If such is indeed the case, everyone has a responsibility to engage in a process of give-and-take with their neighbours. So decision-making should be win-win. Alas, for various historical reasons, it has evolved into an adversarial win-or-lose process, which is then justified by such exclusive concepts as the rights (a) of a majority to rule, and (b) of a minority to veto. It is thus true to point out, as did Carl von Clausewitz, that 'War is a mere continuation of politics by other means.' But it need not be so.

### The Divisive Debate

In any society which aspires to be plural, on any contentious issue, there will always be, or there *should* always be, more than two options 'on the table'. On all sorts of questions – on structuring the next AGM, on drawing up a policy document, on choosing an annual budget, or, to take an example from abroad, on accepting a new Egyptian constitution – there are bound to be more than two possibilities… if, that is, the question has been asked correctly. There are of course a few exceptions, like the question: "which side of the road shall we drive on?" Yet even here, there may be more than two ways of voting. The only country ever to hold a referendum on this topic – Sweden, in 1955 – had three options on the ballot paper: "left", "right" and "blank", so to enable those committed democrats who were actually indifferent on this matter to just "go with the flow" (Emerson 2012a, 15).

In a court of law, on matters of right and wrong, there is often a case for a majority vote: is the accused guilty or not guilty? In other settings, many issues are not so intimately concerned with moral values, and day-to-day business in community groups, company boards, local councils and national parliaments is often less so. In such instances, the use of a majority vote may be inappropriate.

Take, for instance, the debate held in the International Olympic Committee, (IOC), when it was choosing the venue for the 2012 Olympics. There were five options on the agenda: London, Madrid, Moscow, New York and Paris. In such a setting, any single option majority vote – Madrid, yes-or-no? – or any binary choice – Moscow or Paris? – would have been rather unwise, causing all New York supporters, for example, to consider perhaps some rather dubious tactics of tactical voting. In a plural society, in a plural debate, therefore, the decision-making process must be multi-optional.[2]

Or consider another example: the 1997 debate in Wales on devolution. There were

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2    The IOC uses a knock-out system. Given the mathematical frailties of such a methodology, the results of all but the final round are not published.

three options on the table: independence (*I*), devolution (*D*) and status quo (*S*). Tony Blair decided the question should be *D* v *S*? *D* won by 50.3% to 49.7%. If, however, there had been a three-option referendum, if *I* had also been on the ballot, and if just 0.7% had voted for *I*, then maybe *S* would have won. The only *logical* conclusion of that vote, therefore, is not that the Welsh people wanted *D*, not even that a majority wanted *D*, it is that Tony Blair wanted the (majority of the) Welsh people to want *D*.[3]

In effect, then, majority voting is often a means by which an electorate can be manipulated; in many instances, the agenda both of the decision-making process itself and of the debate which precedes it, is determined by those who write the question. (The obvious exception is the citizens' initiative, as in Switzerland.) Little wonder, then, that the two-option majority vote has been the chosen instrument of so many dictators, from Napoleon, Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler to those of a more contemporary notoriety, Gaddafi, Duvalier and Saddam Hussein (Emerson 2012a, 143-50).

Debates on any topics posed as binary questions can be very divisive: the Irish referendums on divorce and abortion were classic examples.[4] Furthermore, the prospective use of a divisive process tends not only to divide the given electorate into two opposing camps; in many instances, it also causes divisions within those camps. If the final choice of options to be voted on has not been pre-determined, participants often argue in the hope that their particular option will be dominant on one or other side of the argument. Hence, for example, the split amongst one or other set of protagonists. Perhaps the starkest example of this occurred in the inter-war years in Germany, when 'the split between the Social Democrats… and the Communists… paralysed the political strength of the German working class when it alone could have barred Hitler's road to power… Stalin must be held to bear his share of responsibility for… Hitler's triumph.' (Deutscher 1982, 400-1)

In summary, then, if and when the subject of debate is complex and/or contentious, any proposed use of a majority vote may either create division or exacerbate existing divisions. What's more, it may well render powerless those who do not support either of the two given options: in the Croatian referendum in 1990, partners in and children of mixed marriages, those of other ethno-religious groupings and, most importantly, all those who might have wanted to vote for compromise were,

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3   The same argument holds even when the majority is much larger. In 1991, 99% of the people of Kosova voted for independence; but maybe a majority would also have supported integration with Albania.

4   Prior to the referendums, 'the debate became bitter and polarised' (Irish Government n.d., 126).

in effect, disenfranchised. A further disadvantage of majoritarianism is that it does not encourage participation. As the saying goes, turkeys do not vote for Christmas. In the Northern Ireland border poll of 1973, the Protestants voted, but the Catholics organised a boycott. Similarly, in 1990 in Croatia, the Serbs abstained; in the *Krajina*,[5] the Croats stayed at home. This picture was repeated all over the former Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus (Emerson 2012b, 158-9).

## A More Inclusive Voting Procedure

There are many ways by which an electorate may choose their representatives – the UK's first-past-the-post (FPP), the French two-round system (TRS), proportional representation (PR), or even mixtures of the two – FPP plus PR – as in Germany. All of these methodologies are regarded as democratic. When it comes to decision-making, however, nearly everyone practices majority voting. It may be a simple majority vote, in which case the winner is that option with more than 50% of the valid vote; it may be weighted, such that a higher threshold, 67% or whatever, is required; it may be qualified, as in the European Parliament, such that different countries have different numbers of votes with again a minimum weighting overall; or it may be consociational, as in Belgium and Northern Ireland, such that votes are held in more than one electorate, and that, for a motion to be successful, majorities are required among both the Flemings and the Walloons, both the Unionists and the Nationalists. Sadly, there is indeed a 'mystique of the majority' not only among the politicians, for there is also *'a surprisingly strong and persistent tendency in political science to equate democracy solely with majoritarian democracy and to fail to recognise consensual democracy as an alternative and equally legitimate type,'*[6] (Lijphart 1999, 6).

In other words, in decision-making, the process is nearly always dichotomous, and the question is nearly always resolved (or not, as the case may be) by a binary vote or a series thereof. Other more plural methodologies – plurality voting, which is like FPP; two-round voting, TRS, which is a plurality vote followed if necessary by a majority vote; approval voting, in which participants 'approve' of as many options as they wish (but obviously not all); the alternative vote, (AV), which is a series of plurality votes, each round eliminating the option with the lowest score; and two other methodologies, the Borda and Condorcet rules, both of which do not restrict the voter's choice but allow the participants to cast all of their preferences. 'There are [therefore] two defensible procedures for aggregating votes: the Condorcet rule and the Borda rule. The Condorcet rule selects the option (if one exists) that beats each other option in exhaustive pairwise comparisons. The Borda rule selects

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5    Three areas of Croatia which, before the 1990 war, were inhabited largely by those of the Orthodox faith.

6    Lijphart is here talking of a consociational democracy.

the option that on average stands highest in the voters' rankings.' (McLean and Shepherd 2004, WII)

In other words, if either the Borda or Condorcet rules are to be used at the end of the debate, everything is 'on the table'. The methodology is inclusive, so the debate which precedes a Borda or Condorcet count need not be restrictive; secondly, there need be no splits among the various protagonists. The two rules are a bit like a sports league. If people want to identify the best football team, or the most popular policy, they can ask every team to play every other team or, after a preference vote, compare the popularities of the various options. In a Condorcet count, the winner would be the team which wins the most matches or the option which wins the most pairings; under a sort of Borda rule, it would be the team with the most goals, or the option with the most points. In most sports seasons, the Condorcet winner, the league champion, is also the Borda winner, the team with the best goal difference, but not always. Similarly, in many ballots, the Borda winner is often the same as the Condorcet winner.

The Borda rule is non-majoritarian, and is therefore the chosen methodology of this article. It is indeed a 'voting rule that captures the will of the voters,' (Saari 2008, 170).

### The Vote and the Count

In the Modified Borda Count, (MBC),[7] as it is called, everything is 'on the table' and also, if need be in a short list, on the ballot paper. If there are five options on that ballot, and if the voter casts her preferences on all of them, her 1st preference gets 5 points, her 2nd gets 4, her 3rd 3, and so on.

Now she may abstain, or cast a partial ballot, or submit a full one. The rule for a five-option ballot is as shown in Table 1.

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7    In a vote on $n$ options, the voter may cast $m$ preferences, where $1 \leq m \leq n$. Points are awarded to (1st, 2nd … $m$th) preferences cast according to the rule ($m, m-1 … 1$). Research suggests that this formula is actually closer to what Jean-Charles de Borda actually envisaged, when in 1771 he proposed that which has come to be known as the Borda count, (BC). (Saari 2008, 197 and Emerson 2013, 353-8.)

### Table 1. Partial Voting in an MBC

He who casts only a 1st preferences gives his favourite only 1 point;
She who casts two preferences gives her favourite 2 points (and her 2nd preference 1 point);
He who casts three preferences gives his favourite 3 points (his 2nd preference 2 points and his 3rd preference 1 point);
and so forth; so best of all:
She who casts all five preferences gives her favourite 5 points (her 2nd preference 4 points, etc.).

In effect, then, the MBC encourages the voter to submit a full ballot. It can be used to identify the social choice or the social ranking, and the winning option(s) is (are) those with the most points. It should be pointed out that a voter's $x^{th}$ preference always gets one point more than his/her $(x+1)^{th}$ preference, regardless of whether or not he/she has cast that $(x+1)^{th}$ preference; there is no especial weighting.

### The Psychological Benefits of Consensus Voting

No-one votes 'against' anybody or anything. Every voter votes only 'for', albeit with various degrees of enthusiasm. And if she does cast a full ballot, she definitely supports her favourite option in so far as she can, but she also states her compromise position. Even with her $5^{th}$ preference, while admitting that she does not like it very much, she nevertheless acknowledges its validity and implicitly accepts, if this option is in fact the overall favourite, that she will support this outcome.

Meanwhile, in the debate which precedes the vote, the protagonist will know that success depends on getting a large number of high preferences, some middle ones perhaps, but very few low ones. It is therefore worth his while to talk to his erstwhile opponents, so to persuade them to give his particular option not a $5^{th}$ but a $4^{th}$, a $3^{rd}$ or even a $2^{nd}$ preference. There is much to be gained, therefore, from being inclusive. Indeed, the MBC can be the very catalyst of consensus. That which, in a majoritarian milieu, is at best a dialogue, becomes a 'polylogue'.

### The Degree of Overall Consent – the Consensus Coefficient

Consider an electorate of 100 persons casting their preferences on a ballot of five options. If all of them submit full ballots and all give option *A* their 1st preference, *A* will get a total of (100 x 5 =) 500 points. If at the same time everyone gives option *B* their last preference, then *B* will get a total of (100 x 1 =) 100 points. If all give *C* their 3rd preference, *C* will get a total of (100 x 3 =) 300 points, which is of course the mean. And if 50 voters give option *D* a 2nd preference while the other 50 give it a 4th, then *D* will get a total of (50 x 4 + 50 x 2 = 200 + 100 =) 300 points, the mean again.

Now consider another highly hypothetical scenario, again on five options. If all 100 voters give option *A* a 1ˢᵗ preference only, then *A* will get a total of (100 x 1 =) 100 points, with all the other four options getting a score of 0.

With the ᴍʙᴄ, every option is given a consensus coefficient: for any one option, this is defined as the total score of that option divided by the maximum possible score it could have received. In the first example, option *A* gets 500 points which is of course, the maximum; so *A* gets a consensus coefficient of 1.0. Option *B*, meanwhile, gets a consensus coefficient of 100 / 500 = 0.2. While options *C, D* (and *E*) all get a consensus coefficient of 300 / 500 = 0.6.

In the second example, option *A* gets just 100 points, so *A* gets a consensus coefficient of 0.2, while the other four options get scores of 0. The consensus coefficient of any one option, then, is a measure, not only of the overall support shown for that option, but also of the degree to which the voters concerned have participated in the process of choosing that option.

With majority voting, as was noted above, people often tend to abstain, boycott or worse. With the ᴍʙᴄ, in contrast, it is worth participating. If someone who detests option *A* abstains, the turnout is not as high as it otherwise would be, but the vote is almost always still valid, and the outcome still holds. If that individual participates and casts only a 1ˢᵗ preference for his own favourite, *B*, then *A*'s consensus coefficient will be less. So it is definitely worth participating. And, as noted above, if one is going to participate, to vote, then it is worth participating to the full.

### *The Analysis*

If 100 persons are voting on five options, or even if only 10 people are voting, the chances of all five options getting exactly the same consensus coefficient are minimal. Something(s) will be above the mean, others below. If the winning option is way above the mean then, *ipso facto*, the others have much smaller totals, and so it is the winner. Indeed, if the consensus coefficient is very high, above 0.8 say, it may be called the 'near unanimous position'; if a little less, 0.75 – 0.8, perhaps 'consensus' is the better term; if less again, 0.7 – 0.75, then maybe 'the best possible compromise' is the appropriate description. And if it is even less, between 0.6 and 0.7, then obviously, some if not all of the other options have rather similar scores, in which case it must be assumed that there is no consensus. Accordingly, this last ballot may be regarded as a straw poll, and the debate resumed on those options on which it might seem an eventual agreement may be more likely.

There is one further advantage to the ᴍʙᴄ. In a majoritarian milieu, options are sometimes regarded as mutually exclusive opposites – as in the closed questions

noted above, are you communist or capitalist? Serb or Croat? – (even though there is often much in common between the supposed opposites: in the words of A P Semenov-tian-shanski, the former dichotomy talks of two creeds both 'grounded in base self-interest', (Weiner 1951, 35); the latter refers to persons both Christian and Slav).

In consensus voting, when there are, say, five options on the table, not all five can all be mutually exclusive of all the other four. In which case, if two options are neck and neck but well ahead of the rest, then it might be possible to form a composite of the two (para 4.1).

As noted above, there is likely to be a degree of compromise from the protagonist, as he tries to woo his erstwhile opponents; there will often be acts of compromise from the voter, as she seeks to give her favourite the maximum score; and now here too, in the final analysis, there may well be further scope for compromise, an essential component, this author argues, of a successful inclusive decision-making debate.

### A Consensus Debate

Consider the scenario: a problem has arisen, a decision needs to be taken, and so a meeting has been called. When the people gather, they take their seats in what is a three-sector circular or horseshoe arrangement, with a computer screen placed, as it were, at the horse's heel. The chairperson is seated in the inner circle in one of the sectors, a time-keeper is in a second sector, and a team of three consensors – three elected, non-voting and impartial 'referees' who are to assist the chair – are in the third. The chair opens the proceedings and reminds all concerned that, in order for a decision to be enacted, a minimum consensus coefficient of, let us say, 0.65 is required, as per standing orders.

If a draft resolution has already been submitted, and if any proposed amendments have been forwarded (in the form of complete policy options, even if the proposed amendment relates to only one clause), the consensors will display a summary thereof both on the computer screen and, if appropriate, on a dedicated web page.

After an optional moment's silence, the chair will ask for the first speaker to take the floor. Each speaker will be given a certain pre-determined time allocation, and the time-keeper will indicate that he/she is free to speak via a green light, that 30 seconds remain (amber), and that time is up (red). There will be one further light on top of these 'traffic lights', a question-mark light, (see below), operated by the consensors.

The debate commences. If a speaker proposes yet another alternative resolution, the

consensors will add this to the list, as long as it, like all the others, is relevant and complies with a pre-agreed norm such as the UN Charter of Human Rights.

If at any time the consensors feel that a speaker has erred on some historical fact, has misquoted another participant, or has been disrespectful to another person, they may switch on the 'question-mark'. The chair will immediately halt proceedings, seek a clarification if need be from the consensors, and then an explanation if not a correction and/or apology from the speaker. The advantage of such an arrangement is obvious: you cannot shout out a light. Such arrangements may only be necessary in really fraught circumstances;[8] there again, it is always advisable to have a 'fire-extinguisher'.

As the debate proceeds, the consensors' list may get a bit longer. That said, if there comes a time when all, including the original proposer(s), are agreed that a certain draft resolution may now be withdrawn, or that two or more may be formed into a composite, then the list might actually get smaller.

If, at the end of the day, there is only one draft resolution on the table and computer screen, this may be taken to be the outcome, a verbal consensus. In most scenarios, such a conclusion is highly unlikely. In the event, then, that there are still a number of drafts under discussion, the chair may call for a preference vote. The consensors' list of drafts will be presented to the participants, either as a full albeit edited list, or if the topic is very complex and the list quite long, as a short list to represent the full debate. In such settings, the optimal number of options on the ballot is between four and six.

The chair now asks all concerned if every party present is content that their particular proposal has been included in the final list, if not verbatim then at least in composite. When that is agreed, everyone proceeds to the vote which, in this day and age, could easily be done by SMS. On a five-option list, the options may be lettered *A, B, C, D* and *E;* so the voter merely zaps in his/her preferences: *A* 3, *B* 2, *C* 0, *D* 1, *E* 0, or maybe just 3-2-0-1-0.[9] The consensors now display both the voters' profile and their social ranking, and then, once they (the consensors) have come to a collective agreement on the outcome, the voters' social choice.

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8    They were first deployed in a public meeting in Belfast in 1986, just one year after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, when tensions in society were high. Over 200 participants were present; they included members of the Official (now Ulster) Unionist Party (OUP, UUP) and Sinn Féin (SF), as well as everything in between and even a few from outside that spectrum: the political wing of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA); and all this, still eight years *before* the cease-fire.

9    The author first used electronic preference voting in another cross-community meeting in Belfast in 1991.

*Composites*

To take a very simple example, if the debate were on the subject of dog licences, if the two most popular options were for £5 and £10, then the consensors might well decide on a composite answer of £7.50. This depends on two factors, however: (a) on whether the two most popular options, if placed on a 'cheap-expensive' spectrum, were adjacent; and (b) on whether the social ranking was a single-peaked curve, that is, on whether all the other options further from the peak were of decreasing popularity (Emerson 2007: 22-3).

As noted above, the Condorcet rule is also a very accurate measure of the collective will. Little wonder, then, that in many profiles, the MBC winner will also be the Condorcet winner; indeed, on some occasions, the MBC and the Condorcet social rankings will be similar if not identical. But not always. In order to ensure that the outcome of a debate is indeed an accurate measure, it is suggested that both a Borda and a Condorcet count should be undertaken. If the two outcomes do coincide, all concerned may rest assured, the outcome does indeed represent the collective will. If not, the chair might consider a resumption of the debate.

## Conclusion

In the human condition, it sometimes happens that we ourselves determine that which then determines us. If the decision-making process is to be adversarial, the preceding debate will probably be equally adversarial, and the consequences perhaps even more so. If, however, the decision-making process is to be inclusive, then the debate itself will also be more inclusive, and more civilised. Furthermore, the outcome of that debate and decision-making process will be a much more accurate representation of the collective will. That is, it will be more democratic.

The *principle* of majority rule is fair. As this article has shown, the *practice* of majority voting, however, both use and abuse, is often unfair. On uncontroversial issues, a majority vote may indeed be taken. If and when a minority expresses reservations, however, and/or when the topic is complex and/or contentious, a multi-option preference vote, MBC, may be the necessary catalyst of a successful debate.

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