

Consensus voting as a tool of peace-making

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ABBREVIATIONS

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FA	Football Association
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
BC	Modified Borda Count
QBS	Quota Borda System

INTRODUCTION

Consensus voting is doing rather well at the moment. We had an article in *The Guardian* on 4th March.¹ Irish Political Studies published an analysis of the Modified Borda Count, MBC, (or Borda preferendum, as we used to call it) in their April edition.² We even got an invitation to write this piece for INNATE – how's that for a breakthrough? In addition, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust funded a joint project on consensus voting throughout these islands between the de Borda Institute and the New Economics Foundation. What's more, Mediation Northern Ireland commissioned us to help resolve an industrial dispute, and consensus voting worked well there too. And I have just come back from a lecture tour in the States where I made over a dozen presentations in universities and other organisations such as the Carter Centre and IFES.

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIAL CHOICE

There has long been a debate in Social Choice theory as to which of many voting procedures is the best. Nothing, of course, is perfect – Arrow's theorem – but lots of systems are better than the two-option majority vote, the most inaccurate measure of collective opinion ever invented. In contrast the binary vote, the best systems allow the voters a fair degree of choice and in the vote, they may cast their preferences for as many options as they wish; while in the count, all of these cast preferences are taken into account. 'There are 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 the option that on average stands highest in the voters' rankings.'³

Despite findings such as these, many practitioners still rely on the 2,500-year-old majority vote, but this is partly because this allows those in charge to reduce the debate to a choice of two, a dichotomy, so to control the agenda: "Are you with me or against me?" were the words of George W, and Franklin D, not to mention a few communist leaders... and they're also in St. Luke. Given a belief in majority rule, which in so far as it goes is fine; but given then the completely mistaken idea that a majority opinion can be identified by a majority vote,⁴ it is hardly surprising that politics has come to be a very adversarial process, where the winner takes all and the loser gets nought. As it stands at the moment, therefore, the political process is ill-suited to any conflict resolution work.

MORE THEORY

So, back to the theory. You can compare voting to a sports competition, if you like. If you have lots of teams and you want to know which one is the champion, then you can arrange a competition. Either you have a knock-out such as the FA cup... but that type of contest can be a bit capricious, for so much depends on the luck of the draw. Or you can run a league and let every team play every other team; do you then add up all the wins (and draws), to see which team wins the most matches, (Condorcet)? or do you count the goals scored, (in a sort of Borda Count)?

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/mar/04/snp-scottish-referendum-politics>

² Baker, John (2008) 'Election of the Green Party *Cathaoirleach*, 2007', *Irish Political Studies*, 23:3,431 — 440.

³ Iain Mclean and Neil Shepherd, *A program to implement the Borda and Condorcet rules...*, Nuffield College Politics Working Paper (University of Oxford, 2004).

⁴ Obviously, a majority opinion cannot be identified in this way, for somebody will have already had to identify it in order to put it on the ballot paper.

At best a majority vote can be used to *ratify* a majority opinion, perhaps. But majority voting cannot be used to *identify* a majority opinion. To be democratic, the process must, therefore, rely on something better.

Well, both of the latter are pretty good methodologies. In most seasons, the team which wins the most matches is also the team which scores the most goals. Usually, but not always. And this year, it looks as if Liverpool might be the better team on goal difference, while Man Utd look set to win the most matches.

REAL POLITIC

So now the practice: politics. In any democracy, or at least in any plural democracy, there are invariably more than two ways of doing things. If we have lots of options 'on the table',⁵ then we could run a knock-out and take a series of majority votes; but that, as last year with the FA cup when the prize went to Portsmouth, could be capricious. Or we could ask everyone to express their preferences on the options, and then, in the count, we could compare the options two at a time to see which wins the most pairings (Condorcet), that or we could turn the preferences into points and see which option gets the most points (Borda).

Usually, in both theory and practice, the outcome of a Condorcet count is the same as the outcome of a Modified Borda Count or MBC – this is the form of Borda Count which allows for partial voting, when the voter casts some but not all of his/her preferences. Sometimes, however, the Condorcet winner is not the same as the MBC winner. So Social Choice scientists debate the various qualities of these two “defensible procedures” and, on balance, while they did prefer Condorcet, much of the literature is now more in favour of Condorcet: “it [is] arguable that only the Borda Count offers an accurate accounting of the voters’ preferences”.⁶ Which is all very nice for those of us in the de Borda Institute.

A CONSENSUAL POLITY

Furthermore, the balance in favour of Borda is not only mathematical, for an overriding advantage of the Borda methodologies lies in the fact that, unlike Condorcet, they are not majoritarian. In an MBC, the outcome depends upon the preferences of everybody, and not just upon those of a majority.

If, then, our democratic structures were based on the MBC, the political process would no longer be win-or-lose, as it is at present: it would be win-win, and thus ideally suited, not only to the purposes of mediation, but also to those of conflict prevention.

Majoritarianism was often a cause of woe. The Troubles in Northern Ireland were, at least to a certain extent, exacerbated by a belief in majority rule. In a land which has many parallels, “[A]ll the wars in the former Yugoslavia started with a [majority vote] referendum”, (*Oslobodjenje*). Majoritarianism was also one of the causes of the genocide in Rwanda.⁷ If, however, these jurisdictions had practiced a more consensual democracy, with power-sharing and so on, or better still, if they had used consensus voting – the MBC in decision-making, the Quota Borda System or QBS in elections, and the matrix vote when choosing a power-sharing executive – then maybe the above conflicts could have been avoided. We cannot, of course, change history. However, by using consensus voting in the workplace, in community groups, trades unions, company boards and so on, we might be able to change the political *modus operandi*, so to avoid future conflicts such as those which loom so menacingly in the DRC, Russia and China.

⁵ In majoritarian politics, consideration is given to amendments, one at a time, by majority vote. In consensus politics, in contrast, complete packages are laid 'on the table', each a fully comprehensive policy option, in its own right. The debate allows for amendments, composites, and even new options. And finally, on those occasions which fail to culminate in a verbal consensus, resort is made to a consensus vote, normally this is based on about six options, rarely more than ten, and never less than three.

⁶ Saari Donald, G, 2001, *Decisions and Elections*, Cambridge University Press, p 187.

⁷ The list goes on and on: Darfur, Kashmir, South Ossetia and Sri Lanka, to name but four more. Emerson, *Designing an All-Inclusive Democracy*, Springer, 2007, pp 136 *et seq.*