**SO, WHAT IS DEMOCRACY ANYWAY?**

1 British democratic leadership. Chinese democratic centralism. German Democratic Republic, GDR. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, (North Korea). So what *is* democracy?

2 Many think it is majority rule. So in parliaments and referendums, nearly every decision is taken by a majority vote. And even if only by 50% + 1, the winner wins everything and the loser gets nothing. Is this wise? After all, majority rule was (not *the* but) *a* cause of conflict in Northern Ireland and, for example…

3 …in the Balkans, where “all the wars in the former Yugoslavia started with a referendum,” (*Oslobodjenje,* 7.2.1999).

Now electoral systems vary. But in decision-making, most countries, democratic and undemocratic, use just majority voting. It is often hopelessly inaccurate, and not least because…

4 …as in Brexit, taking a single two-option vote in a multi-option debate is illogical if not crazy. There were four options: the UK in the EU, the EEA, the Customs Union or the WTO.

5 There was only one majority vote, and it lost. But, as we shall see, majority votes on the other options would probably have lost as well. So today I’m talking only about voting in decision-making: majority voting; and then preferential voting.

My mum was an English Catholic – a member of the minority one might say. Dad was an Irish Protestant, the same. I was conceived in Ireland, born in England and live in Belfast, a minority of about one. “Are you Protestant or Catholic?” they asked. “Neither.” “Are you British or Irish?” “Both.”

Democracy, however, is majority voting, and in conflict zones, people ask these terrible questions: “Are you Serb or Croat?” “Sunni or Shia?” “Arab or Jew?” “Hutu or Tutsi?” But ‘ordinary’ politics does the same: “For-or-against?” “Left-wing-or-right?” “Communist or capitalist?” And because of this similarity between the Northern Ireland conflict and the Cold War, I went to Moscow in 1984.

First, then, majority voting. As in Brexit, majority voting often means that the political leader can choose the question. And in many instances, but not with Brexit, the question is the answer. Indeed, a binary ballot often identifies not the collective will, not even the majority will, but the will of he – it’s usually a he – who wrote the question…

6 … like Napoléon; he had three referendums, he was the only candidate and, by the way, he won.

7 Lenin did not get a majority at all but only the larger minority. He nevertheless called himself a ‘*bolshevik’* – the word means ‘member of the majority’ (*bolshinstvo*) – while those of the smaller minority, (*menshinstvo*), he called the ‘mensheviks’.

8 Next came Hitler with 88, 98 and, as you all know, 99% for his *Anschluss*.

9 Despite this appalling history, people still use majority voting. Take Iran for example: they voted for socialism, 99%, brilliant; then capitalism, 99%, brilliant; and then neither, 99%! Brilliant?

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So now let’s consider preferential voting, and in a pluralist democracy, contentious debates should always allow for more than two possible solutions. After all, there are more than two ways of drafting a constitution, drawing up a budget, and so on.

Secondly, you cannot get the *collective* will if people don’t tell you their *individual* wills, if some say only what they don’t want, if (as in Brexit) they vote only ‘no’. But if everyone states what they do want, “I want in the EU, the EEA, whatever,” then it *should* be possible to identify the most popular option. And it *would* be possibleif the voters expressed their opinions accurately, which means casting their preferences; more of this in a moment.

10-13 But how should voters’ preferences be analysed? Well, consider nine party-goers choosing a barrel of drink on the basis of three options, “ALE, BEER or CIDER, ***A, B*** or ***C***?” Let us assume 4 of them think ***A***le is delicious – that’s their 1st preference – ***C***ider is ok – their 2nd – but ***B***eer not so good – their 3rd**.** In like manner, 3 of them choose ***Beer-Cider-Ale*** and 2 opt for ***Cider-Beer-Ale***.

**Table I A Voters’ Profile**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Preferences | 9 voters | | |
| 4 | 3 | 2 |
| 1st | ***A*** | ***B*** | ***C*** |
| 2nd | ***C*** | ***C*** | ***B*** |
| 3rd | ***B*** | ***A*** | ***A*** |

14 Opinions on ***Ale***, it seems, are divided; on ***Beer*** rather mixed; so maybe ***Cider*** best represents the democratic will. Well…

1. …in **a plurality vote**, all the information in the grey is ignored, and the winner is ***A*** with a score of 4.
2. A **two-round system** is like the Austrian presidential election system: if nothing gets 50% in the first round, the two leading options, ***A*** and ***B,*** go into the second round and, if the voters’ preferences stay the same, ***B*** wins with 5 votes.
3. A **points system** is like the Eurovision song contest, and if a 1st preference gets 3 points, a 2nd 2, and a 3rd 1, the popular choice is now ***C***.

18 The outcome, then, the *totally* democratic will, is either ***A*** or ***B*** or ***C***. Brilliant?

**Table II The ‘Democratic’ Choice(s)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Voting  system | The Results | | |
| The winner | Runner-  up | Third |
| Plurality voting | ***A 4*** | ***B 3*** | ***C 2*** |
| Two-round system | ***B 5*** | ***A 4*** | ***-*** |
| Borda count | ***C 17*** | ***B 17*** | ***A 20*** |

So plurality and majority voting can indeed be hopelessly inaccurate, while a points system is invariably more precise.

\* \* \* \* \*

19 Once upon a time, many years ago, in a far distant land, there was an unelected ‘democratic’ chamber called the British House of Lords.

20 In 2003, some thought it should be elected; others said no, no, keep the status quo, all appointed; a few wanted a compromise. So there were 5 options, ***A-B-C-D-E***: “All elected, 80/20, 50/50, 20/80 or all appointed?”

21 Well a hypothetical Lord ***J***, whose 1st preference is ***A*** – so that gets 5 points ***–*** would probably have a 2nd preference of ***B*** – 4 points – and so on.

22 While Lady ***K,*** whose favourite is ***C,*** 5 points, might have a 2nd preference of ***D,*** 4 points, and a 3rd of ***B*** etc***.***, 3 points, or maybe…

23 …like Lady ***L***, a 2nd of ***B,*** a 3rd of ***A***, and so on.

**Table III Three Sets of Preferences**

24 If another member, Lord ***M***, has an illogical set of preferences, like ***B-D-A-E-C*** with two peaks, he has probably been bribed, threatened or seduced.

**Table V A Mixed-up Lord**

25 But if everyone does have a logical set of preferences, then the collective opinion – you just collect, add up all the points – will also be logical, always…

**Table IV The Collective Will**

…and this one-sided peak represents a precise outcome of 62% elected and 38% appointed.

Just to finish the fairy story, the ancient Lords believe in ancient majority voting. So they took five majority votes… and lost all of them!

26 Brexit, we said, was another multi-option debate, but as noted earlier they took only one majority vote – “In the eu, yes-or-no?” – and it lost. But, as in the Lords, majority votes on the other options would doubtless have lost as well, and by even bigger margins. With a multi-option vote, however, “‘remain’ in the eu” would probably have won.

\* \* \* \* \*

Preferential points voting has two other main advantages.

27 If you vote for only 1 option, it gets 1 point.

28 If you vote for 2 options, your favourite gets 2 points. And so on.

29 So, in a 4-option ballot, if you want your favourite to win, to get 4 points, it is best to cast all 4 preferences, but nobody ever votes ‘no’.

Success depends not only on a good number of high preferences and a few middle ones perhaps, but also on a small number of low preferences; so here’s the second big advantage: protagonists are incentivised to talk nicely with their opponents.

\* \* \* \* \*

30 A preferential points system\* is inclusive *and* non-majoritarian. It identifies the option with the highest *average* preference, so it involves everyone who votes, not just a majority of them. If, therefore, preferential voting were the international democratic norm, there would be no further justification for majority rule, and certainly not for the current concoction in the UK with the Democratic Unionist Party.

31 Democracy should be inclusive. Not only should parliament represent *all* the people but, in like manner, the government should represent the *entire* parliament. This is not what we practice; it is only what we preach… to Bosnia, Iraq, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Syria, Ukraine, etc..

\* \* \* \* \*

32 Majority voting is a cause of division, majority rule can be a cause of conflict. Bizarrely, academia and the media – the bbc, for example – rarely if ever critique binary decision-making.

By all means take a majority vote on an unserious subject. If the matter is serious, however, any ballot should be multi-optional. Like the one in New Zealand in 1992, where an independent commission drew up a five-option referendum[[1]](#footnote-1) and, surprise surprise, the people chose a compromise. Brilliant!

33 So what is democracy? When Mahatma Gandhi arrived in England in 1931, he was asked, “What do you think of English civilization?” To which he replied, it *would* be good. And democracy *would* be good if it were inclusive; if everyone were involved or represented in formulating the list of options, voting; and implementing whichever decisions gained consensus support. That would require a preferential points system of voting in decision-making,\* and all-party power-sharing. Thank you.

\* It’s called a Modified Borda Count, mbc. In a vote on *n* options, a voter may cast *m* preferences, where *1≤ m ≤ n*. Points are awarded to (*1st , 2nd, … last*) preferences according to the rule:

*(m, m-1, … 1)*

Some people use a slightly different rule, which is called a Borda Count, bc:

*(n, n-1, … 1)*

If every voter submits a full list of *n* preferences, (i.e., if *n = m*), there is no difference. If, however, some voters have submitted truncated ballots, voting for just some or perhaps only one preference, the difference can be huge. Indeed, if every voter casts just one preference, a bc is no better than a plurality vote, which M de Borda bitterly opposed.

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1. The methodology used was a form of two-round system. If they had used a preferential points system, the whole process could have been done at half the price in just one ballot! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)