

Post-consensus, cooperative decision-making

[Doug Webb](#)

Last updated: 2018-08-06

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- **Why** it's important
- **What** it is precisely
- **How** it can be done

Why

The race for cooperation

Growing movement towards cooperation...

- permaculture, commons, coops
- lean, agile, scrum, teal, sociocracy,
- activists, collectives, grassroots groups

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...many of which are symptoms of

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- majority-rule
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Critical question for alternatives:

- **how do we make decisions?**

Decision-making as principle

Cooperatives are a form of association with legally enshrined member equality. Principle 2 of 7:

"2. Democratic Member Control. ... members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) ..."

—[ICA Co-operative Principles](#)

Commons are associations formed around the sustainable use of a resource. Principle 3 of 8:

"3. Collective-choice arrangements. Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules."

—Elinor Ostrom, [Governing the Commons](#)

Consensus decision-making

Consensus is often subconsciously synonymous with 'cooperative decision-making' after decades of use in activist/coop contexts.

Step 1: Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided ...

Step 2: Explore the issue and look for ideas ...

Step 3: Look for emerging proposals ...

Step 4: Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal ...

Step 5: Test for agreement ... **Consensus: No blocks, not too many stand asides or reservations? Active agreement? Then we have a decision!** [else back to Step 3]

Step 6: Implement the decision ...

—Seeds for Change, [Consensus Flowchart](#) (emphasis added)

Consensus: When it is good

- Deep listening
 - often a first time experience for participants
- Promotes the understanding of others
 - encourages the confrontation of awkward topics
- Ethic of care
 - trying to find something everyone can accept
- Social function
 - meetings are a regular, social interaction
- Creative
 - dialogue brings up novel ideas

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'When it is good,

It is very good indeed,

But when it is bad it is horrid'

Consensus: When it is bad

- Take ages
 - survival of the fittest, burnout, frustration
- Conceals hierarchy
 - charisma, eloquence, appeal (race, sex)
- Reduces group intelligence
 - anchoring, groupthink, pluralistic ignorance
- Conservative dictators
 - sociopaths can keep things the way they are
- Philosophical crises when unachievable
 - *"we're not cooperative any more"*

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These disadvantages are mostly due to process, not participants!

Consensus: casualties

Historical

- Collapse of [Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth](#) ~1650-1750

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Contemporary

- Progress stifled in [Anti-nuclear movement](#) ~1970-1980
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Present

- many users I've talked to
 - *"meetings go on for so long, I've stopped attending"*
 - *"only the confident block, the power imbalance remains"*
 - *"one person kept blocking: gradually everyone left"*
 - ...

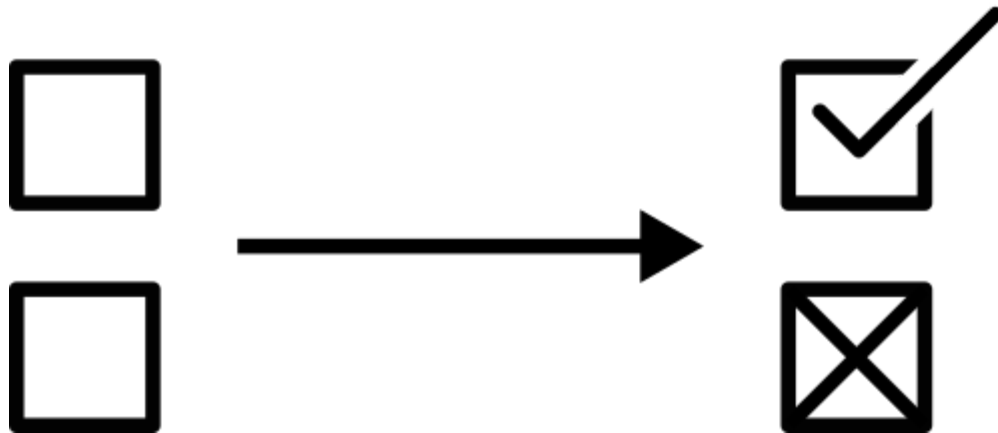
Why: summary

- movement towards cooperation
- decision-making is critical
- consensus not always cooperative
- cooperative alternative to consensus required

What

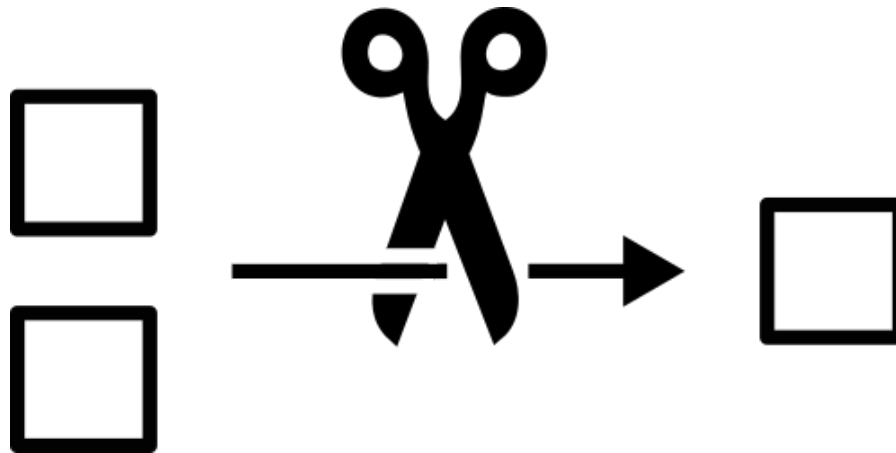
Decision-making: as selection

We often think of deciding as selecting...



Decision-making: as cutting

... but it's clearer to think of it as eliminating.

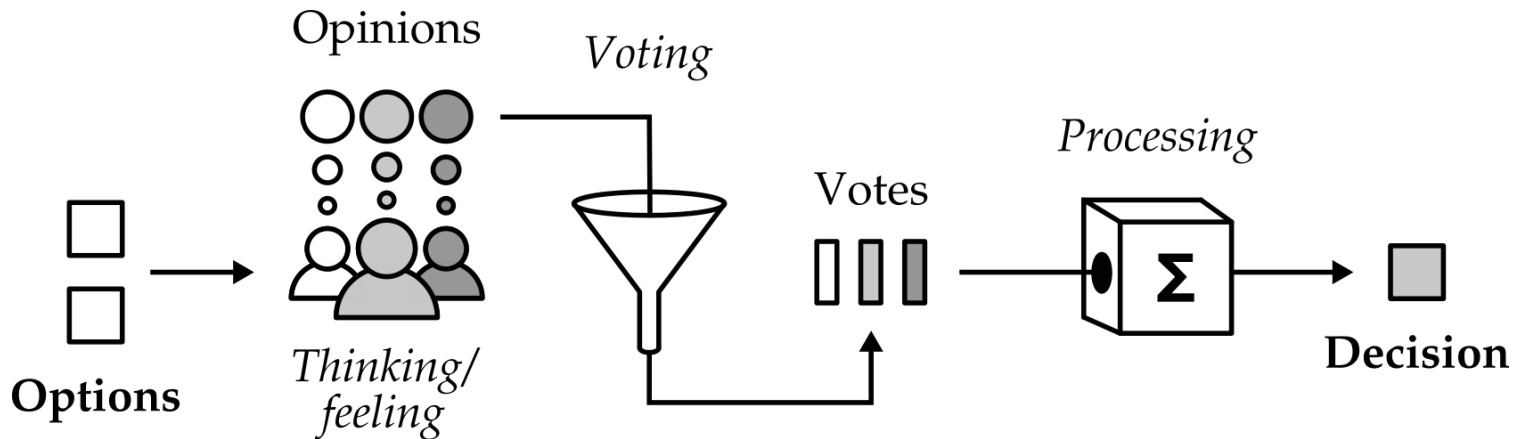


"decide (v.) ... from Latin decidere ... literally "to cut off"

—[Online Etymology Dictionary](#).

Decision-making: in detail

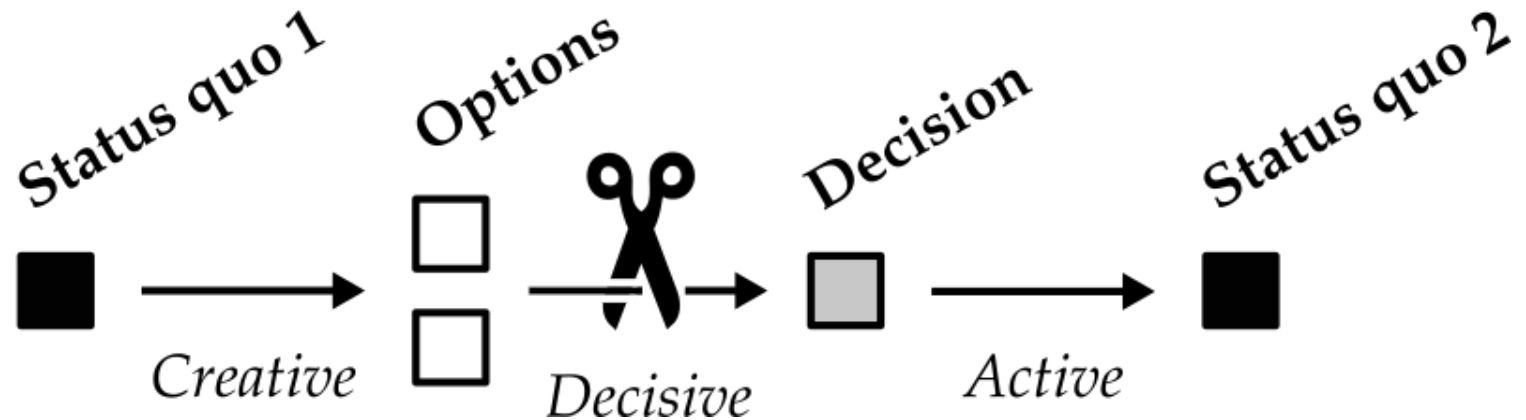
A basic model for the sub-processes during collective decision-making



1. forming opinions (*outwith process scope*)
2. compressing opinions (a.k.a. voting (*yes, there is voting in consensus*))
3. combining opinions

Decision-making: in context

Antecedes option creation, precedes decision implementation.



Cooperation

- subjective: no fixed definition
- philosophy of consensus seems to be:
 - "one for all, all for one"
 - "acceptable for everyone"
- what about philosophy of cooperation?

Cooperation

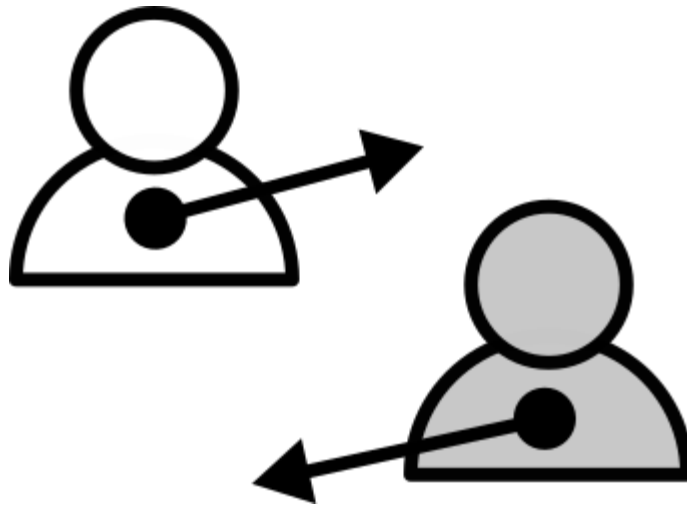
- subjective: no fixed definition
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- what about philosophy of cooperation?

I'm putting forward a philosophy of cooperation based on 3 values:

- autonomy
- equivalence
- mutual-interest

Cooperation: autonomy

a.k.a. **Freedom, self-determination, *Liberté***

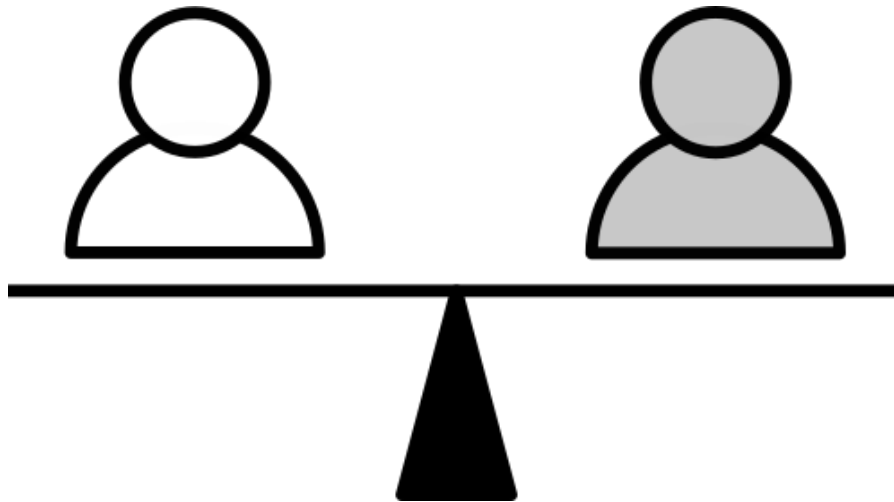


For decision-making:

- people determine outcome (vs. chance, lottery)
- people can participate honestly (i.e. don't have to lie)

Cooperation: equivalence

a.k.a. Equality of worth, *Égalité*

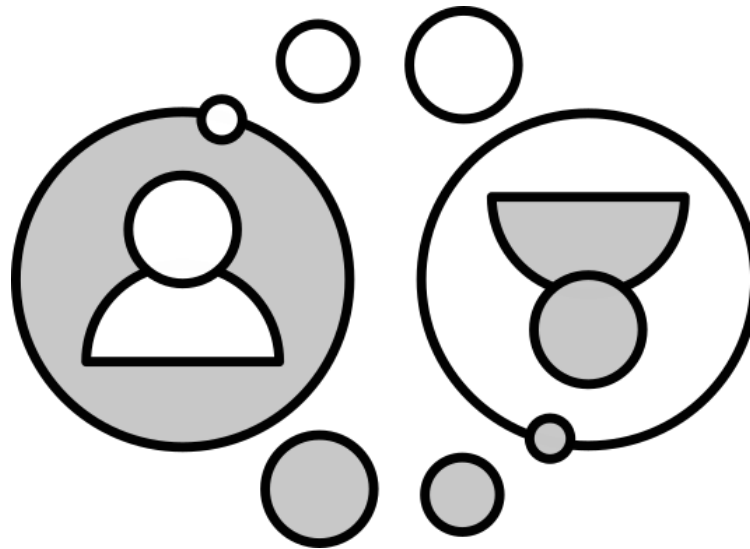


For decision-making:

- 'one person, one vote'
- vs. one-£-one vote, dictatorship, racism, etc

Cooperation: mutual-interest

a.k.a. **Care for others, mutual-aid, *Fraternité***



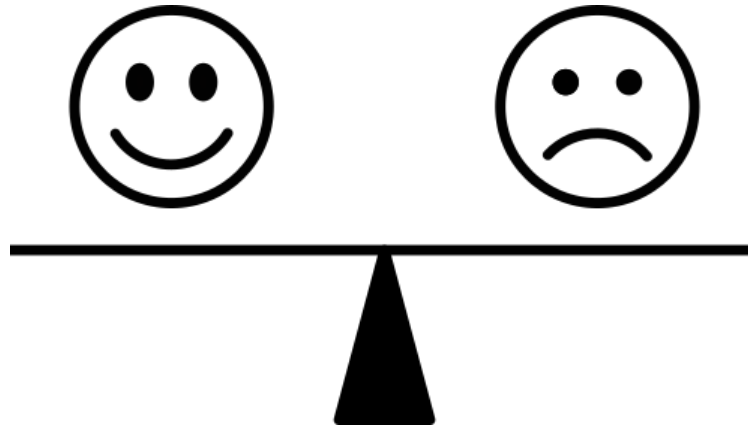
For decision-making:

- ?

Utilitarianism

"... it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."

—Jeremy Bentham, 1776. *A fragment on Government*

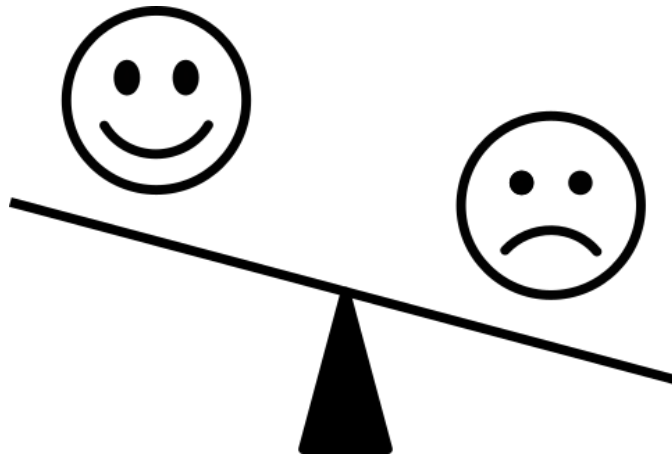


- increasing happiness = reducing suffering
- would you give a cake to:
 - starving person (reduce suffering)
 - person who just ate dinner (increase happiness)

Asymmetric utilitarianism

"... the promotion of happiness is in any case much less urgent than the rendering of help to those who suffer, and the attempt to prevent suffering."

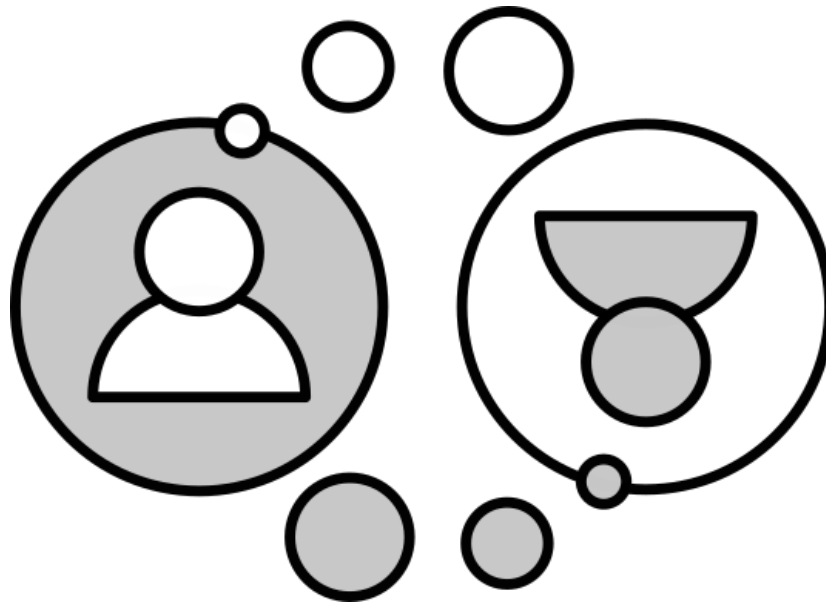
—Karl Popper, 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*



- increasing happiness < reducing suffering
- would you give a cake to:
 - **starving person**
 - ~~person who just ate dinner~~

Cooperation: mutual-interest

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For decision-making:

- select the **most acceptable, achievable option**
- vs. majority preference

Post-consensus

Failure to reach consensus, often due to group being...

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- too diverse
 - perception
 - ethics, norms, culture

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 - people coming and leaving
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- too big
 - numbers
 - distributed in space

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However diversity, dynamism and scale are often desirable!

Small, stable, similar groups: consensus possible

Scrum teams

*"Having more than **nine** members requires too much coordination. Large Development Teams generate too much complexity for an empirical process to be useful."*

—[The Scrum Guide™](#)

Affinity groups

*"The size of an affinity group can range from **two to, say, fifteen** ... no group should be so numerous that an informal conversation about pressing matters is impossible."*

—[Destructables tutorial](#)

Bible study groups

*"the ideal size of a small group is **six to fifteen** people."*

—[Small Group Churches article](#)

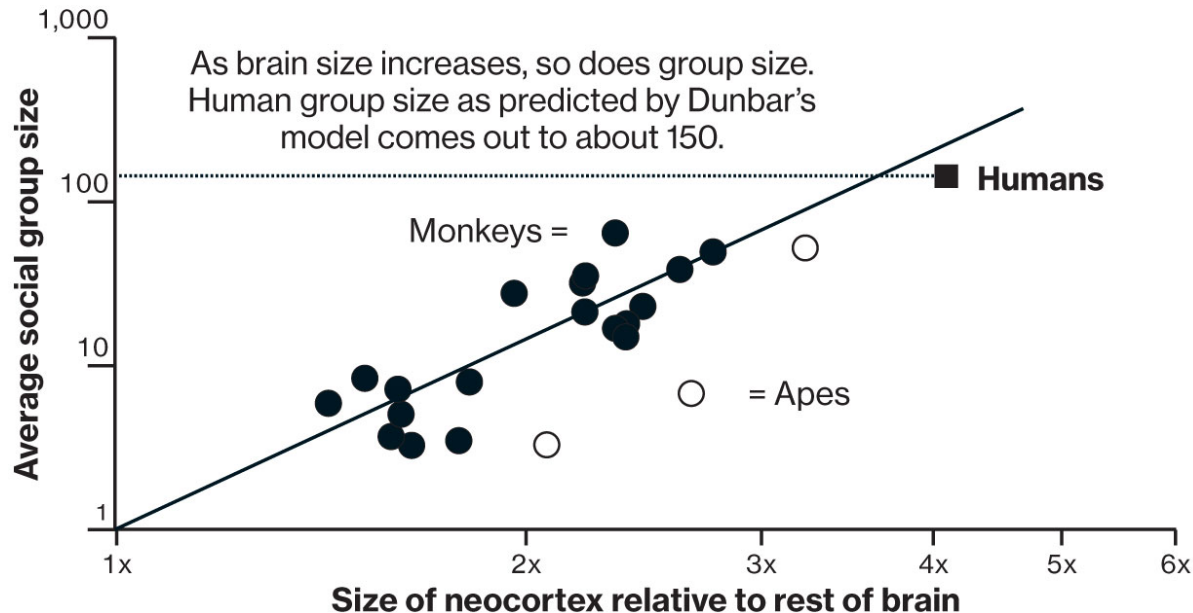
Dunbar's estimate

Study on front-brain vs group size suggests a cognitive limit to social relations

--> limit to shared perception

--> limit on consensus.

The Social Cortex



What: summary

Decision-making:

- selecting by cutting

Cooperative:

- autonomous, equivalent and mutually-interested
- most acceptable, achievable option

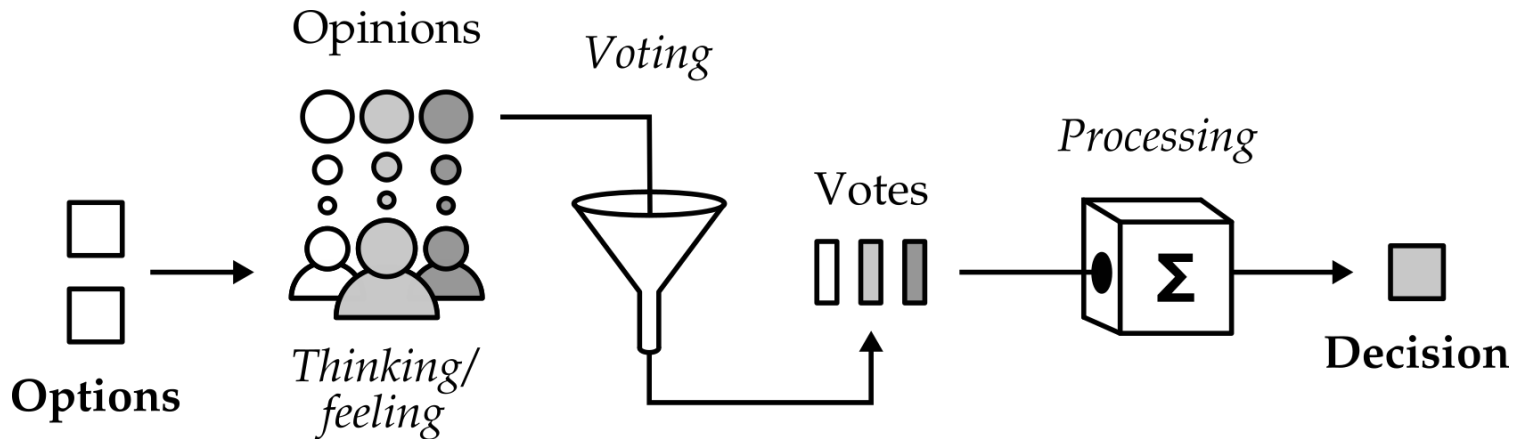
Post-consensus:

- failure to reach consensus
- too big, diverse or dynamic for consensus

How

Decision-making in detail

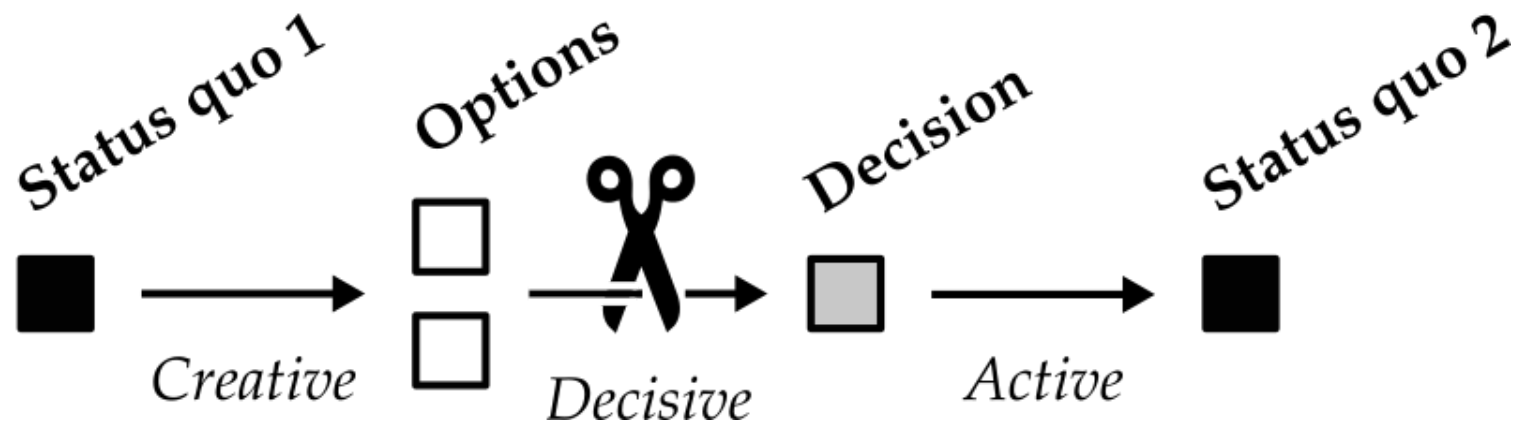
Examination of how each element can support cooperation.



1. options
2. voting
3. combining

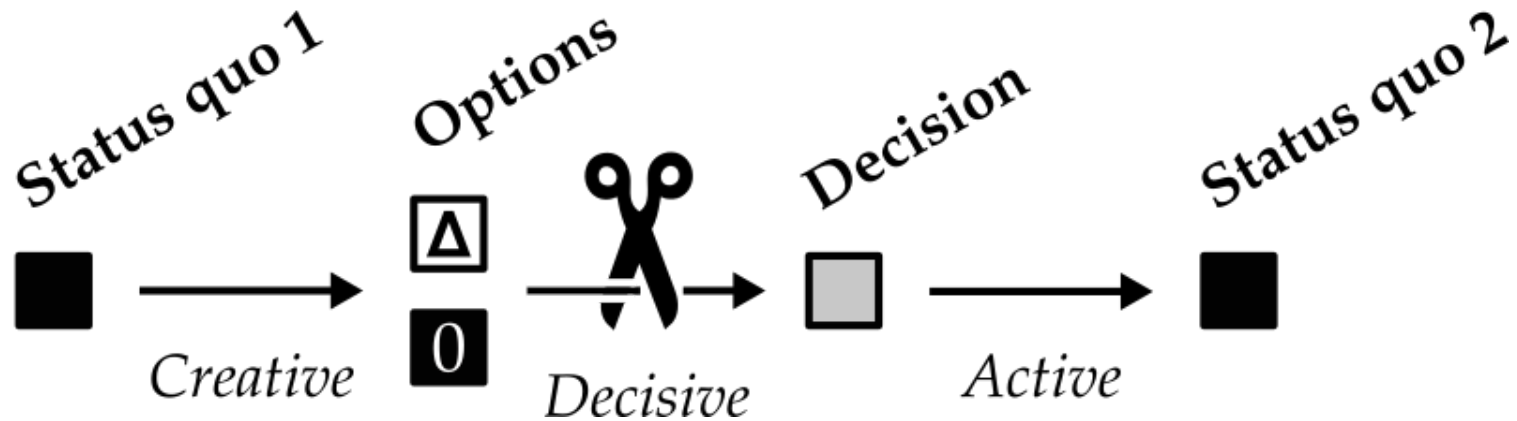
Options: you need at least two

Otherwise there is nothing to 'decide' on.



Options: something or nothing


One option must be to *change something* (a specific proposal, Δ).
There is always the option to *change nothing* (the current status quo, 0).



(The counter-proposal in consensus is what happens if proposal fails, usually further discussion.)




Options: wait, binary is bad

You probably want *more* than two.

Referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union	
Vote only once by putting a cross  in the box next to your choice	
Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?	
Remain a member of the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leave the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>

Options: wait, binary is bad

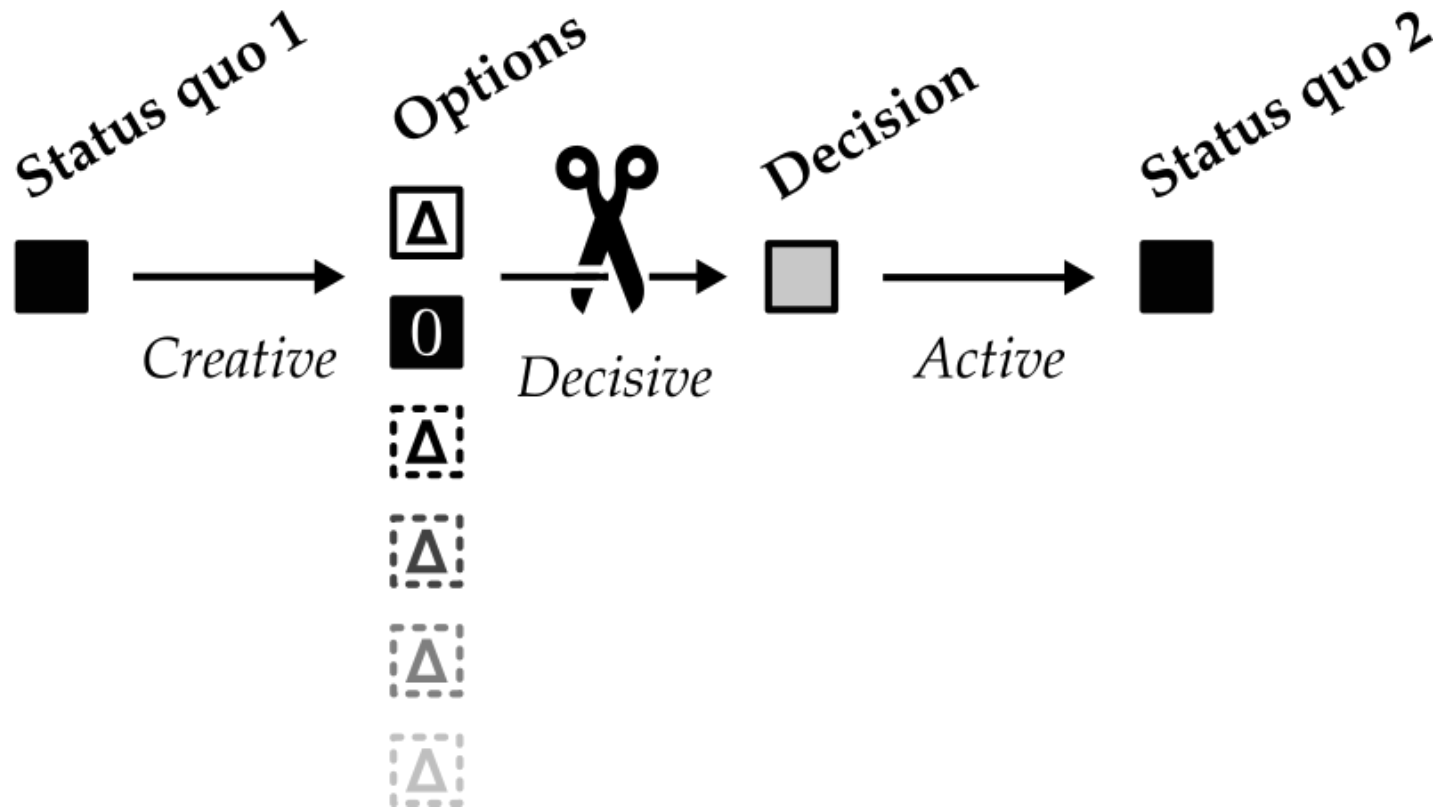
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- Vague proposals lead to conflict if selected
- Specific proposals are polarizing

Options: more, but not too many

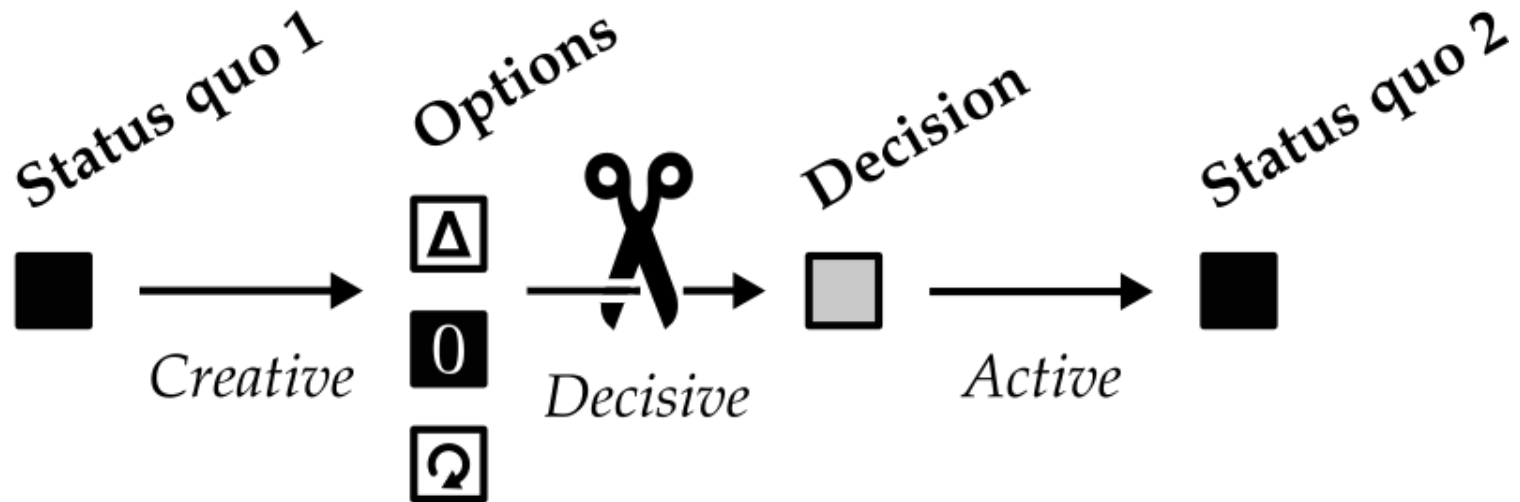
Having more options increases the likelihood of acceptable option for all...



...and participant overload.

Options: revote on other options

Having "*Revote on other options*" ensures an acceptable option for all without overloading.

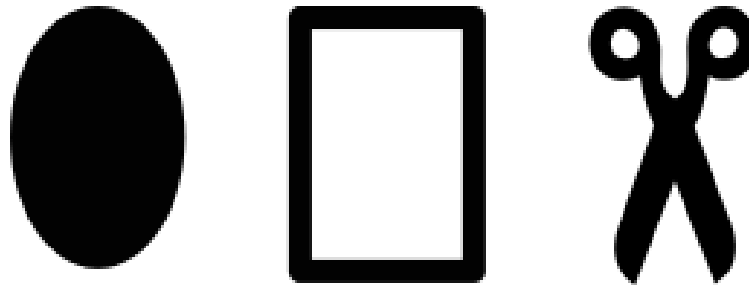


Should outline:

- arrangements for adding new options, and
- arrangements for next vote

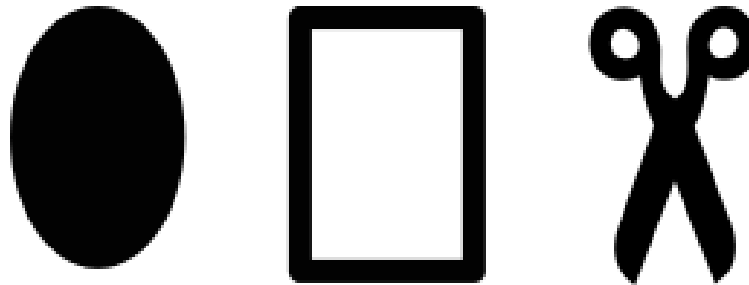
Voting: independent, not secret

In rock-paper-scissors the play is independent, not secret.



Voting: independent, not secret

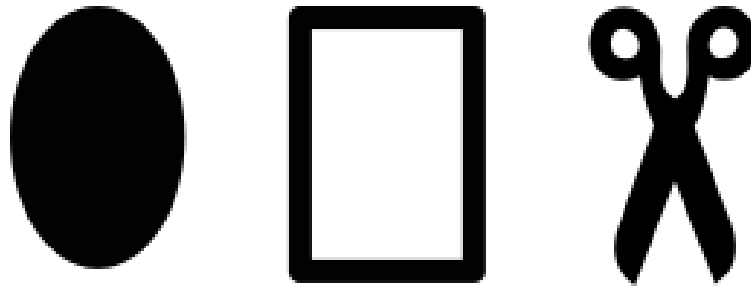
In rock-paper-scissors the play is independent, not secret.



- independent voting forces people to think for themselves
 - avoids [anchoring](#) (first person influences rest)
 - avoids [groupthink](#) (desire for harmony over-rides honesty)
 - avoids [pluralistic ignorance](#) (falsely assumed norms)

Voting: independent, not secret

In rock-paper-scissors the play is independent, not secret.



- independent voting forces people to think for themselves
 - avoids [anchoring](#) (first person influences rest)
 - avoids [groupthink](#) (desire for harmony over-rides honesty)
 - avoids [pluralistic ignorance](#) (falsely assumed norms)
- cooperative groups need not vote in secret (most cases)
 - encourages people to address issues
 - reveals the people likely to do the work

(N.b. It's possible to use voting within consensus simply to combat biases.)

Voting type: majority

Vote for favorite.



- problems: vote splitting, wasted votes, lesser evil, etc.
- can't express positive/negative opinion

Voting type: ranking

Rank options best to worst.



Better than majority, but...

Voting type: ranking

Unavoidable paradoxes and manipulation strategies present whenever there are more than 3 options, as shown by [Arrows Impossibility Theorem](#) then [Gibbard-Satterthwaite Theorem](#).

A DIFFICULTY IN THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL WELFARE

KENNETH J. ARROW¹

Stanford University

I. INTRODUCTION

IN A capitalist democracy there are essentially two methods by which social choices can be made: voting, typically used to make “political” decisions, and the market mechanism, typically used to make “economic” decisions. In the emerging democracies with mixed economic systems, Great Britain, France, and Scandinavia, the same two modes of making social choices prevail, though more scope is given to the method of voting and to decisions based directly or indirectly on it and less to the rule of the price

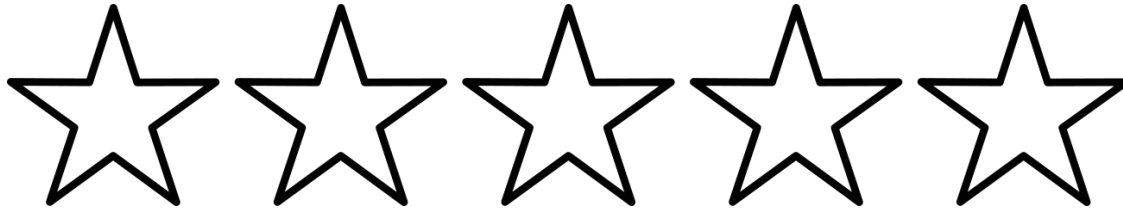
cial choice in any given situation, e.g., a religious code.

The last two methods of social choice, dictatorship and convention, have in their formal structure a certain definiteness absent from voting or the market mechanism. In an ideal dictatorship, there is but one will involved in choice; in an ideal society ruled by convention, there is but the divine will or perhaps, by assumption, a common will of all individuals concerning social decisions, so that in either case no conflict of individual wills is involved. The methods of voting and of the market, on the

- and participants *still* can't express positive/negative opinion

Voting type: scoring

Give each option a rating.



- numeric representation: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
- can (ambiguously) express positive/negative opinion

Voting type: scoring

Give each option a rating.

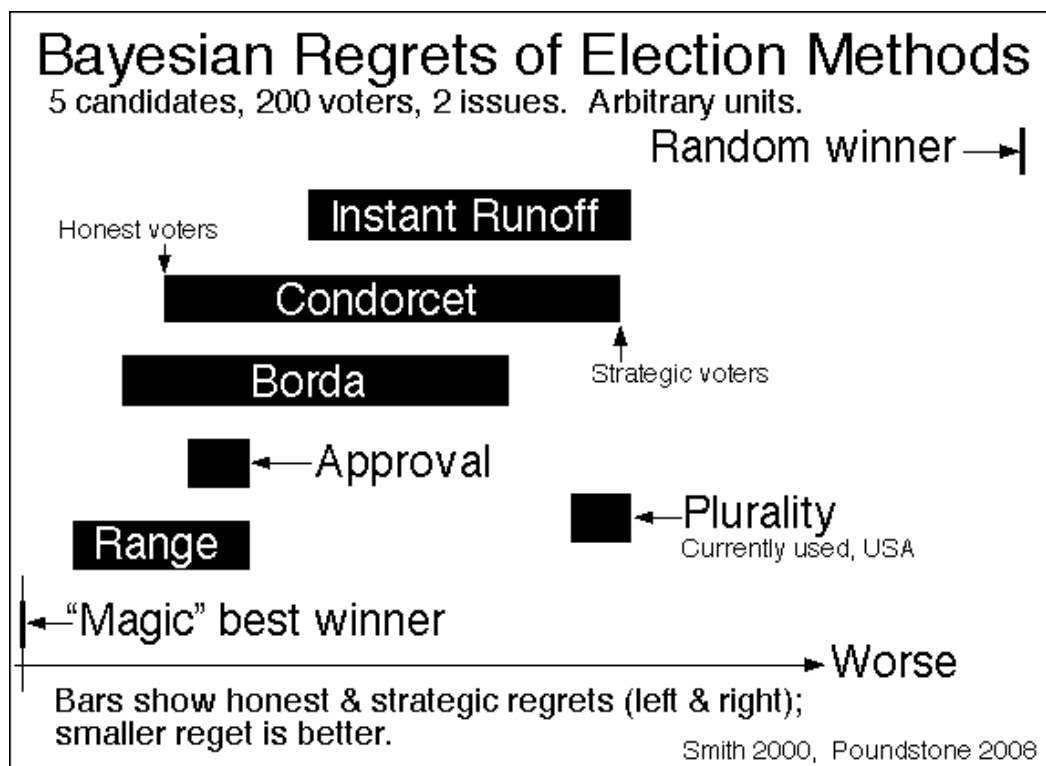


- numeric representation: -2, -1, 0, 1, 2
- can unambiguously express positive/negative opinion
- scoring range 'breaks down' after 11 points (i.e. -5 to +5)

(Consensus essentially allows you to score, but just the proposal.)

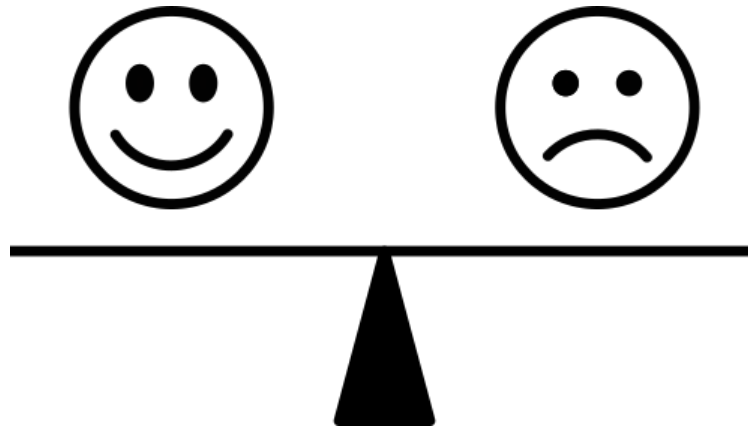
Combining: addition is OK

Statistical simulation shows scoring results in best utility outcome, even with non-cooperative participants. (Note: 'Range' = 'Score')



Combining: re mutual-interest

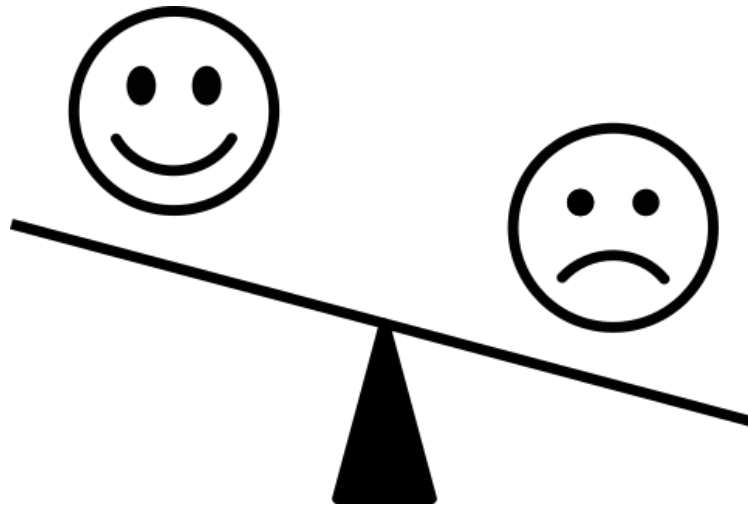
However, direct addition equates positive and negative scores...



- e.g. '*negative two*' plus '*two*' equals zero

Combining: negative score multiplication

Multiplying negative scores elevates acceptable over preferable. (e.g. "multiply negative scores by 3 before totalling")



- greater than 1
- less than ∞ (otherwise not enough motivation to do it)
- factor group dependent

(Consensus essentially has a $-\infty$ factor for the veto, again, just for the proposal!)

How: summary

Options:

- include 'change nothing' as an option
- include 'revote on other options' as an option
- allow multiple proposals (but not *too* many)

Voting:

- score each option
- positive/negative range, 3 - 11 points (e.g. -3 to +3)

Combining:

- multiply negative scores before totalling
- greater than 1, less than ∞

Within a decision-making stack

Formal procedures take effort! Score voting comes after more fluid methods.

Individual

- subconscious
- norms
- executive decisions from role-bearers
- [doocracy](#)
- [advice process](#)

Sub-group

- informal
- consensus
- [consent](#)

Entire group

- consensus
- consent
- **weighted score voting with control options**

Examples in the wild

kanthaus constitution

Decision-making procedure outlined which includes all features described above

- free, cc0
- in use for over a year... still prototype

<https://kanthaus.online/en/governance/constitution>

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ukuvota

Simple web-app with all features described above

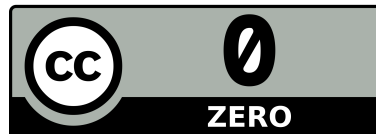
- free, open-source
- prototype! Not safe for critical info

<https://ukuvota.world/>

Thanks for listening/reading!

License: [cc0](#)

- please use my work*; use it as you please
- don't ask for permission
- attribution is nice, not necessary
 - **not my work: Brexit, Arrows Theorem, Dunbar and Bayesian Regret images; all quoted text.*



Contact: questions, corrections, feedback...

- site: duginamug.gitlab.io
- [@duginamug](#) for Mastodon/ActivityPub,
- dm"hotel"webb@gmail.com for email (where "hotel" is a letter)
- [@duginamug](#) on Twitter
- 'Doug Webb' on Facebook

Let's cooperate

I 'need':

- critical feedback
- couches to crash on
- contact to other governance hackerzzz
- advice on CSR and Effective Altruism
- a bit of cash

I can give:

- talks, workshops, consultation
- other organizational topics
- financial hyper-minimalism advice
- a place to stay in Germany
- hugs

What do you need? What can you give?