

Consensual decision-making

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Consensual decision-making requires that all participants agree on an option before it is adopted. Consensual decision-making can be contrasted with nonparticipatory forms of decision-making (i.e., by representatives or experts) and with majority voting. In a typical consensus process, an issue is introduced and discussed and a proposal is formulated; then the facilitator or a participant calls for consensus. Participants may signal their agreement with the proposal, may “stand aside” if they do not agree but do not want to block the proposal’s adoption, or may voice objections to the proposal. Participants discuss dissenters’ concerns and may amend the proposal before calling for consensus once again. The process may continue until participants reach consensus or decide to table the issue. In some processes, a single veto may prevent the adoption of a proposal; in others, near but not complete unanimity is required.

Organizations relying on consensus have been a prominent feature of pre- and post-World War II pacifism, the American civil rights movement, antiwar, antinuclear, and environmental movements, gay and lesbian activism, and the Global Justice Movement. Organizations using consensus tend to be more radical, less mainstream, and often smaller than those that do not, and they tend to espouse broader commitments to radical democracy, nonviolence, and direct action (although none of these is always true).

Organizations vary, however, not only in how they practice consensus, but also in why they do so. Although Quakers, who have been active in a number of movements, understand consensual decision-making as an expression of

their religious faith, many activists see it rather as a prefigurative commitment to enacting a radically egalitarian society in the here and now. For still other activists, the instrumental purposes of consensual decision-making have been more salient. For example, proponents of civil disobedience have relied on consensus to increase each participant’s commitment to follow through on the course of action they decided on. The Southern black student sit-inners who formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 insisted that their organization operate by consensus as a way to discourage Northern students from using parliamentary maneuvers to gain control of the organization. Later, when the SNCC moved into political organizing in the Deep South, it used consensual decision-making as a way to train local black residents to evaluate political strategies collectively. This pedagogical rationale for consensus continues today in faith-based community organizing, where citizens’ assemblies make decisions about program and leadership by consensus. In contrast with late-1960s conceptions of consensus, this version of consensual decision-making is not at odds with the existence of leaders. To the contrary, it is intended to develop leaders, as well as to develop the habits of dialogue that will keep leaders accountable.

Differences in purposes thus account for some of the variation in activists’ practice of consensual decision-making. In addition, broad processes of organizational learning have transformed the practice. Activists today are indisputably more comfortable with rules than they were in the 1960s. Many have taken to heart feminist Jo Freeman’s (1973) charge that consensus processes could easily produce a “tyranny of structurelessness” in which informal cliques made decisions in spite of their egalitarian ethos. Roles of vibes-watcher, facilitator, spokescouncils, and affinity groups have formalized the consensus process in a way

2 CONSENSUAL DECISION-MAKING

that minimizes unacknowledged disparities in influence.

Activists have responded to another frequent criticism of consensual decision-making, that it is inherently inefficient, by showing that it can work even in situations such as mass demonstrations, where there are large numbers of people, multiple organizations, and little time for deliberation. At the same time, organizations that have been pressed to adopt more conventional organizational structures, in particular by federal funding agencies, have found that they could effectively combine consensual decision-making with other ways of making decisions without sacrificing their democratic commitments. For example, feminist organizations have sometimes reserved consensual decision-making for issues deemed critical rather than routine or have combined majority voting with the informal consultation of all members. These arrangements have preserved consensual decision-making's capacity to elicit a range of ideas and to ensure that decisions, once made, are implemented.

Creating mechanisms to switch from consensus to majority or supermajority vote responds to a third frequent criticism of consensual decision-making: that it depends on a commonality of interests that is rare in most groups. In this view, consensus processes provide no means for adjudicating fundamental conflicts of interests. The alternative, which many organizations have adopted, is to shift to majority or supermajority voting when decisions cannot be made by consensus nor can they be postponed.

A quite different response to the foregoing criticism has been to resist consensus altogether. Some global justice activists today believe that bids to achieve consensus invariably require a coercive unity. Accordingly, participants in the World Social Forum

are barred from adopting unified positions. Instead, the Forum provides activists with an opportunity to share experiences, analyses, and strategies; and to undertake collaborative projects among themselves. Although critics charge that Forum organizers have thereby surrendered opportunities to craft an organized challenge to neoliberalism, organizers insist that respecting difference is more important than forging an inevitably constrained consensus.

These trends suggest that consensual decision-making will continue to be associated with progressive movements, even as the forms it takes continue to change.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism; Co-operative movement; Countercultures; Democracy inside social movements; Direct democracy; Participatory democracy in social movements.

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