

Why not consensus?¹

Let's start with a *prima facie* attractive principle:

CONSENSUS: The body should aim at consensus. That is, the endorsement or acquiescence of all its members to the decision.

On this principle, unanimity in a decision is a sign that the decision was good. (We can imagine a stronger version which makes it a sufficient condition). Obviously, consensus will often be hard to achieve. But on this principle, we can judge decisions by how much they approximate consensus.

This is all very attractive. However, I'm going to argue that outside of small intimate groups, consensus should rarely be our aim. That is, CONSENSUS is false. Indeed, I believe that aiming at consensus is a good way to have an unjust decision process.

What does it mean for a group to have reached consensus? I can see 3 rough possibilities:

- (1) The decision fully corresponds to what each member wanted.
- (2) The decision gives each member enough of what they wanted that the parts they didn't want are outweighed.
- (3) Members who opposed the decision have been convinced to cease objecting.

I suspect (hope) that folks who want to aim for consensus envision (1) or

(2), depending on their idealism. If the group is more than a few friends, I think (3) is much more likely.

So what? What's wrong with (3)? There's a few ways it can happen, *inter alia*:

(3a) Members opposing the decision don't care as much about the matter as its proponents. They are willing to allow it to go ahead since they can see how much it matters to their colleagues.

(3b) Members opposing the decision are substantially fewer and recognize that there's no chance they will change the minds of everyone else, so decide to get out of the way.

(3c) Members opposing the decision are intimidated, browbeaten, or harassed into silence.

(3a) and (3b) are fine, indeed, they are examples of collegiality. But if we care about justice, (3c) is anathema.

I won't guess about the relative incidence of these. But I invite you to imagine a meeting where something important and controversial is at stake. After a couple hours of discussion, there's one holdout. If their assent is needed to proceed, I suspect I'm not the only one who would feel frustrated and ready to engage in some rhetorical arm-twisting.

In summary, CONSENSUS is fine when:

- The group is small
- The members are friends
- The matter is relatively unimportant.
- A few members care a lot about the matter and everyone else is

relatively indifferent.

But it is prone to breaking down in profoundly unjust ways exactly in the cases where we need it to guide us to a just decision. That's why not consensus.

¹ Suggestions and comments very much appreciated: adam.swenson@csun.edu