

Peter Emerson

The Punters' Guide to Democracy

What it is, Sadly;
and What it Could be, Gladly



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In Memoriam
Dr. John Robb
Founder and oft-time chair of the New Ireland Group

Foreword from Professor Katy Hayward

Although broadly taken to mean any member of the public, the term ‘punter’ properly refers to someone who has placed a bet or gambled on something. More generally, we might say, a punter is someone who has a stake of some sort in the outcome of an event or process. In this sense, *The Punter’s Guide to Democracy* is precisely what we are in need of. For we all have a stake in the outcome of democratic processes—even those who choose not to exercise their right to vote. It is only right that we should know the bare essentials.

There are few people better qualified than Peter Emerson to write such a book. Good guides don’t only point out and explain the important features of a subject, they also ‘get under’ its surface in such a way that stimulates the imagination. The very best guides can spark such a sense of revelation among punters that they cannot help but share what they have learned.

Peter Emerson has accomplished that in this little book. In some ways, his message is very simple: an electoral system (particularly a majoritarian one) does not a democracy make. But the context and the timing make this message seem all the more revelatory. Western liberal democracies facing exogenous and endogenous challenges that are potentially catastrophic if left unchecked, but elected governments are seemingly unwilling or unable to counter them. Our democratic processes do not disrupt such self-harming complacency; on the contrary, they largely perpetuate them.

We are already seeing the cracks in the edifice of our democracy. Emerson shows us that these cracks are not merely superficial but signs of a failure to have built our democratic processes and systems on much surer foundations.

We have chosen to embed an imbalance and an error in almost all our democratic processes, namely the assumption that, despite the nature of the human and natural world, complexity in decision-making is best avoided.

This book is written with wit and with a charming degree of respect for the intelligence and interest of the average punter. With the engaging fluency of a cultural polymath, Emerson draws knowledgeably upon the values and systems of different continents and generations. His technical explanations are rigorous but not laboured. And his argument for the common good is made not with any forlorn delusion but with a clear-eyed, crystal sharp assertion of what could be chosen to be done differently in order to achieve it.

‘We deserve better’ is the near-unavoidable conclusion for any reader. With this guide in hand, us punters are equipped to know how to make it so.

Belfast, UK
February 2022

Katy Hayward

Foreword from Professor 杨龙, Yáng Lóng

For years, people have been accustomed to see democracy as a majority decision, which is feasible in the case of a binary choice, but as long as more than two options exist, the binary voting system will suppress the minority or exclude a third option. In the process of a collective decision-making system, the problem of the binary voting system is more serious, because the policy alternatives are multiple in most cases, and the policy decided through the binary voting system will inevitably exclude some third choices, thus ignoring the interests or preferences of some persons.

In addition to telling us about the problems of the binary voting system, this book also generally introduces how to improve the decision-making voting system to solve the problems caused by binary voting. The method proposed by the author is to let all members who participate in the vote or decision-making to list their preferences according to the intensity of their preferences, and then select the fully accepted results after taking all preferences cast into account. This voting method can reflect the preferences of all members, and will not force anyone. The key to this approach is consensus through cooperation. To improve the efficiency of voting and improve the accuracy of preference expression, the author also introduces a method of preferential points, asking voters to score all preferences, then addition and calculation, the highest score preference becomes the collective decision.

This book presents good methods, and the next step is to design appropriate methods of decision voting based on different types of collective

decisions or voting, so that they can be used by officials of all levels of institutions. Such improvements can make our public decisions fairer and reduce the conflicts of interest between persons.

Tiānjīn, China

杨龙 Yáng Lóng

Preface

*The King is in the altogether, but all together, the altogether
He's altogether as naked as the day that he was born
And it's altogether too chilly a morn!*

The King's New Clothes
from *The Motion Picture* Hans Christian Andersen
Words and Music by Frank Loesser
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Car speedometers don't read just 'fast' or 'slow'; they're calibrated in kilometres per hour. Thermometers in ovens say more than 'high' or 'low'; they're measured in degrees. And life is full of precision instruments...

...except in politics. For in politics, we use the majority vote, a tool with only two readings: 'yes' and 'no'. Problems are complex. We all have preferences. But the instrument we use is almost always binary: 'for' or 'against', 'black' or 'white'—and not even one shade of 'grey' (let alone forty).

This blunt tool is ubiquitous, its use often iniquitous. It's in the United Nations Security Council where, to make matters worse, some countries have vetoes. It's probably in every elected chamber on the planet, from the United States Congress downwards... or should I say upwards. It was the very basis of the Soviet Union, where the term 'bolshevik' comes from the word '*bolshinstvo*' 'БОЛЬШИНСТВО' meaning 'majority'. It is used by the Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee, as for example in a crucial vote on Tiān'ānmén Square in 1989, (Sect. 6.4.2). It's in Article 97 of the

Constitution of North Korea, both simple and weighted. And it's used in political parties, trades unions, company boards, community associations and courts of law.

But this binary voting is primitive, often divisive, always Orwellian—'this' good, 'that' bad—sometimes hopelessly inaccurate, and at worst, a cause of violence. "All the wars in the former Yugoslavia started with a referendum," (*Oslobodjenje*, Sarajevo's legendary newspaper, 7.2.1999—Sect. 6.4.2), and the genocide in Rwanda began with the slogan, "*Rubanda nyamwinshi*," 'we are the majority,' (Sects. 6.2.1 and 6.4.2).

Other voting instruments for identifying a 'democratic majority opinion' have long since been available; plurality voting for example, nearly 2,000 years old, was first used at governmental level about 1,000 years ago, in China (Sects. 6.2.2 and 6.3). What's more, some of the more modern procedures are precision instruments, calibrated not just with 'for' or 'against' but in preferences. The best of them, I argue, is a preference points system: it is robust, inclusive, and above all, accurate. And if it's more accurate than binary voting, then it is also more democratic. It was devised in 1770. All we have to do is (read on... and) use it.

The Book

It is odd, but many professional texts on democracy talk at great length about numerous and various electoral systems, with hardly a word about the several different voting systems for decision-making (Sect. 6.4.1). In like manner, politicians and activists in NGOs devoted to democratic reform often advocate preferential voting systems... in elections, yes... but say little or nothing about preferential voting systems in decision-making. Yet the way decisions are taken and/or ratified determines the very system of governance, and to a greater extent than the choice of electoral system.

Accordingly, this text concentrates on decision-making; there's a synopsis for all the busy professors and other professionals in Annex I, while the book itself is for the more patient punters. The first Chapter shows that binary voting is indeed blunt, very. It is also manipulable... and we all know that some politicians are manipulative... which partly explains why they like this binary voting. Chapter 2 describes some of the other decision-making voting procedures, a few of which are inclusive, accurate... sometimes disliked and often ignored. Next, Chap. 3 outlines the procedures for using a non-adversarial decision-making voting procedure—and this I feel is what should be the foundation of a truly democratic structure.

In fact, preferential voting fits into a holistic concept of democracy, if not indeed of life. Amongst its many virtues, the preferential points methodology is actually non-majoritarian—it can identify the option with the highest *average* preference, and an average, of course, includes *every* voter, not just a majority of them. So Chap. 4 shows how this methodology could well be the basis of a more inclusive democratic structure—all-party, power-sharing, coalition governments of national unity. Just to round things off, Chap. 5 does what many of those other political books do: it compares some of the world’s electoral systems, but unlike many of those texts, it also describes what I think is the best system: a points preferential and proportional electoral system which could be the second corner stone of a consensual polity.

So far, the text has been pretty simple—it is, after all, the punters’ guide—with only a few tables, no graphs at all, and no quotations, neither technical nor historical (except for one at the end of this Preface and two in Chap. 5). In what follows, however, the book becomes a little more academic, with references and so on... because this book is not just for the punters: it is also the professionals’ guide, a handbook for politicians and decision-makers generally, for journalists and political scientists, and especially for students at both secondary and third levels. Then, looking back a little, Chap. 6 is a history of decision-making voting procedures, which is part of the history of the science of social choice—a subject that doesn’t get anything like the attention it deserves. And looking forward, Chap. 7 talks of some of the many potentially beneficial consequences that might accrue if we can but persuade the world’s politicians to use a form of decision-making which encourages, not confrontation, but cooperation.

Finally, the Epilogue. In brief, the book describes what democracy is but should not be, in Chap. 1; what it might be in Chap. 2; what and how it should be in Chaps. 3 and 4, {Chap. 5 is the little (but important) diversion into electoral systems}; how it came to be in Chap. 6, and what might be its benefits in Chap. 7. All that is left is in the Epilogue: the answer to the simple question—just what *is* democratic decision-making?

Now there are those who don’t like this ‘consensus nonsense’ (as I have often heard it called), so there are a few annexes to explain some of the mathematical stuff. Annex I we mentioned is the synopsis. Annex II shows that binary voting can be not only capricious: at times it can be just crazy—a ‘democratic’ outcome can be literally anything at all! Annex III gets a bit technical and looks at single-peaked curves; it’s well worth a glance, however, for it shows that a preferential points system can sometimes be not only extremely accurate, but also very difficult to manipulate.

Annex IV looks at partial voting and shows that, if the voting methodology uses the original Borda count BC formula {rather than the one which history has bequeathed—(Sect. 2.4)}, the voting procedure itself actually encourages all participants to vote and, in so doing, to cast all their preferences, i.e. to be truly democratic: literally everybody has a vested interest in voting; not just the majority, but also the minorities, all of them; everybody; we all like to influence the average.

The next one, Annex V, is all maths, and it gives the different consensus coefficient values involved in ballots of a different number of options. Annex VI shows what a matrix vote might look like in practice, in this instance as if in Germany. And finally, to sum up the entire book, Annex VII is a taxonomy of decision-making.

The Text

I refer to lots of unnamed persons—voters, chairpersons, Speakers, etc.—alternatively as male or female; indeed, in some instances, an individual may change from a he to a she and back again, with abandon; anything to keep the use of the rather cumbersome ‘he/she’ and ‘his/her’ combinations to a minimum.

Some authors use words for numbers less than ten, and digits for anything bigger. But I jump all over the place, in an effort—not vain I hope—to make everything more understandable.

I use the ordinals 1st and 2nd etc., to describe preferences, and occasionally results, while pretty well everything else is spelt out in full: first and second, etc. And one point of clarification: when talking about the matrix vote (in Chap. 4), I sometimes add up lots of points to get a ‘sum’, lots of sums to get a ‘score’, and lots of scores to get a ‘total’.

That’s it. In Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, a little boy is telling everyone the king is naked. Now, in these pages, this old boy is trying to say our democratic decision-making is also a sham, a dangerous sham. As Mikhail Gorbachev put it, “Not just the emperor but the entire ‘court’ [has] no clothes” (Gorbachev 1997: 264.). And politics will remain shambolic, the world will continue to suffer far too many ‘chilly morns’, for as long as the world’s democrats, theocrats and autocrats think that decision-making is, and should be, or even must be, based on crude and crazy dichotomies.

Reference

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Acknowledgements

It's quite difficult to dissent, and it was ever thus. In some countries, of course, it was and is still much more difficult: you might get arrested, as in Russia—I write these words on day fourteen of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine—imprisoned, tortured or even executed. Here in Northern Ireland, the Troubles now passed, the worst that can happen is that you just get ignored.

Some writers, like the palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin, unpublished in his own lifetime, can work without encouragement. But not I. Fortunately, in one of those many coincidences which form a part of everyone's lives, I met Dervla Murphy, and she encouraged me to write, albeit not initially on voting but about my 1974 African adventures which, like hers, were by bicycle. *NE QUITTEZ PAS LA VOITURE!* ('Don't get out of your car!') said the notice at the entrance to the Virunga game park in Zaire (now DRC), all in bold black print. But there was no advice for the cyclist.

Dervla and I met in 1977 in Belfast, where I had 'settled' two years earlier. My English Catholic mummy was not too happy about this—Africa was fine, but the wild outback of Northern Ireland? The Troubles still raging? This was because, of course, she understood the problem: she had married an Irish Protestant. And maybe it is my mixed parentage which, more than anything else, prompted my career as a dissident. So first and foremost, my thanks go to mum and dad.

‘Are you Protestant or Catholic?’ the locals asked when I arrived. (“God knows,” was my favourite response.). The question, of course, was always binary. ‘Are you British or Irish?’ was the other query. Basically, to be an Anglo-Irish agnostic was (and still is) beyond the parameters of ‘normal’ political dialogue. I nevertheless found a political home: the New Ireland Group NIG was founded in 1982 by the late John Robb—there aren’t many of us left, nowadays—but I still get good support (and even better whiskeys) from Wes Holmes.

In 1985, you may remember, Britain and Ireland signed the (long overdue) Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Rev. (sic) Ian Paisley led a huge protest of 100,000 outside Belfast City Hall: ‘Ulster says, “NO!”’ he screamed—as if the question was binary. So one week later, six of us stood at the same venue, in silence, with a banner which read, ‘We have got to say ‘yes’ to something’. Just six individuals, Roy Garland also from the NIG, two Belfast Quakers and two others (whose names, alas, I forget), each giving the others encouragement.

The obvious follow-on, I thought, would be a public meeting, so that folks could indeed say ‘yes’ to something, if not *some things*, to whatever constitutional arrangement(s) they liked: a ‘yes’ to their 1st preference, and perhaps also a 2nd preference ‘yes’ to their best compromise choice, and maybe some lower preference ‘yesses’ as well. But no ‘noes’. I suggested this idea of a conference with preferential voting to Queen’s University but... what? Republicans and Unionists in the same room? Far too dangerous! Their answer was another, though quieter, ‘no’. Corrymeela, the peace organisation, was next, but they too declined. Not however the NIG. John was brilliant, his contacts in every sector of Irish society and especially here in the North were right and left across the board. Roy was also great, not least when we travelled to Portadown together, to persuade Ulster Clubs to join in. And Wes, our faithful secretary, never stopped.

May 1986. ‘Will anyone come?’ John asked when, well ahead of time, we arrived in Mandela Hall in Queen’s Students’ Union. One hour later, with over 200 sitting in a great big, tiered circle, we started. In silence. And the late John Hewitt read his poem, *The Anglo-Irish Accord*, specially written for the occasion.