Binary Politics Can Be Dangerous

Article by Peter Emerson
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In the aftermath of a polarised British general election that saw the Conservatives win an 80-seat majority despite only marginal increasing their overall vote share, many people are talking about Britain's voting system. Should it be first-past-the-post or proportional representation? For Peter Emerson, a Northern Irish political activist, this debate only scratches the surface. In his view, majoritarian systems, everywhere in the world, always disenfranchise somebody. Instead, what politics should do empower people and communities to come to decisions as one.

Like CO_2 emissions and the consumption of finite resources, foolish voting procedures have taken us too far. It's not just who gets into power – the likes of Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Modi, Putin, Trump, and now Johnson. Because foolish electoral systems make it more likely that these kinds of individuals are 'democratically elected'. These individuals then use divisive decision-making systems and structures of governance to take supposedly democratic but non-consensual decisions, some of which threaten the very survival of our species.

The lust for power has always dominated human history. Many leaders were tyrants and people needed a way to replace them. The wisdoms of many would be better than the whims of one, theory suggested, and democracy was born. It was a binary logic : if minority rule was bad, its opposite should be good. The practice was also binary: in ancient Greece and China, and later, after the Dark Ages, in Europe, decisions were taken by majority vote. With the emergence of political parties in England and the USA, the principle of majority rule was concocted. But when based on majority voting, majority rule can be chaotic. After all, "when there is no majority *for* any one thing, there is a majority *against* every damn thing" – a truism first noted by Pliny the Younger in AD 105.

Better than tyranny ?

Now in a pluralist democracy, there are many ways of doing things. In politics, few if any debates need be binary. Even in courts of law, dichotomies – 'guilty or not guilty ?' – are sometimes tempered with a third option, 'or not proven ?' Accordingly, Jeremy Bentham and others argued that the democratic process should identify that which gives "the greatest good to the greatest number" – the superlative of the superlative. But, to state another truism, you cannot best identify a superlative with an instrument which is only comparative. So in principle, while majority rule may be fine, but majority voting would appear to be inadequate.

Back in ancient Greece when all they had were hands (and pebbles), it seemed fairly obvious that a 'citizen' could vote for what he thought was right – they were all he's in those days – by raising his right hand. The opposite, the left, was in his opinion wrong. Politics was thought to be was 'naturally' binary. What's more, as there were no political parties in those days, this binary voting worked fairly well. When parties emerged in England, and partly because of binary voting, there were initially just two of them – the Whigs and the Tories – majority voting became problematic. It was nevertheless assumed, not least by those in power, that a majority opinion could be identified by a majority vote – 'yes-or-no ?' 'right-or-wrong ?' – if only because it suited them. After all, they chose the question and, in most instances, this question was then the answer. It was top-down politics, supposedly based on the right of a majority to rule.

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It was all to our enormous cost. There have been countless horrible majority votes, with top-down options dictated by the likes of Napoléon, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Duvalier, and Saddam Hussein – not to mention the somewhat less dictatorial David Cameron. There have also been umpteen examples of horrible majority rule : the Troubles of Northern Ireland; Sunni/Shi'a tensions in many places in the Middle East ; the genocide in Rwanda where the *Interahamwe* launched their war with the slogan, *"Rubanda nyamwinshi"* ("we are the majority people"); and the wars in Yugoslavia, all of which "started with a [binary] referendum". Before that there was bolshevism (большевизм) in Russia – the very word means majoritarianism – and the world's worst example of binary politics, China's anti-rightist campaign in the late 1950s and its associated famine.

Ask a silly question

Brexit too always was a multi-option problem. The 2016 referendum was another instance of top-down politics, a binary vote on only one option, a 'yes-or-no ?' question – ('remain-or-leave ?' it's the same thing) – on the UK's membership of the EU. We could just as easily have had a 'yes-or-no ?' vote on our membership of the European Economic Area, or a Customs' Union, the World Trade Organization, or whatever. Doubtless, these ballots would also all have been 'no'.

In a nutshell, in a multi-option debate, a binary vote on only one of the options can be very negative, and therein lie the dangers of populism. A 'no' to everything will leave us with nothing. To have a collection of binary votes on different options –an indicative vote – does make sense either. The House of Commons held two such ballots in March-April 2019 and, as predicted, both 'indicated' nothing. Every option failed to get a majority.

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Binary votes have had even more serious consequences elsewhere. In 1991, Croatia's President Tudjman held a top-down referendum on the question – (to paraphrase) – "Are you Serb or Croat ?" If you were a Yugoslav, a partner in or child of a mixed relationship, or if you wanted peace and some sort of compromise, in all of these scenarios, you were disenfranchised. As in war, so too in binary politics, voters take sides. Needless to say, lots of Croatian Catholics voted 'yes' and most of the Orthodox abstained. But one week earlier in the 'krajina' – the Croatian Serb enclaves – their leaders had their own referendum with their top-down question, and sure enough, their people voted 'yes' and the Catholics abstained. History repeats itself. In Northern Ireland's 1972 border poll, the Protestants voted 'yes' and the Catholics stayed at home. It was to be more of the same in Bosnia and *Republika Srpska*, Georgia and Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Alghagori, and Ukraine and Crimea. In all of these instances, with Stalinist majorities of over 90 per cent, the votes provoked violence and war. Binary voting on non-binary problems is not only foolish, it is dangerous. Yet the 1948 UN resolution 47 on Kashmir recommends a referendum. Heaven forbid! Others advocate the same divisive politics in Catalonia, Hong Kong, Scotland, Tibet, and Xīnjiāng. Will we never learn ?

Alternatives are out there

Now admittedly, you could have a binary vote if the problem was indeed binary. In a modern pluralist democracy, however, debates on contentious problems, as in peace negotiations, should allow for a bottom-up process. For every relevant option should be 'on the table' and, therefore, a (short) list of everything on the ballot paper. I can think of only one political problem which was definitely binary : the question, "Which side of the road shall we drive on ?" Yet in their 1955 referendum on this topic, Sweden had three options, 'left', 'right' and 'blank'. Those committed democrats who on this particular question were indifferent could still participate. 40 000 voters did exactly that. (As it happened, the people voted 'left' whereupon, after a short pause, the government imposed 'right' – all very top-down if not upside-down.)

But the lesson is clear : even on the simplest of problems, there may be more than two ways of voting. Accordingly, as was said at a seminar on consensus voting in the first Irish Green Party Convention in 1982, we must give up this habit of voting 'yes-or-no' on top-down or even bottom-up amendments and motions, be it in parliaments, in referendums, in party gatherings, wherever. Instead, a multi-option preference vote should be used, as first advocated over 800 years ago by one Ramón Llull. Let everyone (or their representatives) participate in forming the list of options, and then let all concerned cast their preferences, so to find, at best, that option which has the highest average preference. Llull, poor chap, a Spaniard/Catalan, is now a'rolling in his grave, not least because of the illegal binary referendum in Barcelona which others in *Republika Srpska* want to mimic, just like some of the Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine 'justified' their deeds by quoting events in Scotland. No one is an island.

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The methodology Llull outlined is now called a modified Borda count (MBC) – and the app on https://debordavote.org is free. After all, computers make preference voting easy and bottom-up politics possible. This was demonstrated in Belfast in 1991 at a New Ireland Group's People's Convention of 100 participants, Republicans and Unionists *et al*, and this still three years before the ceasefire. They chose 10 options – some 'British', some 'Irish', a few 'both' or 'neither' – and those present then cast their preferences, admittedly on paper ballots. Next, while now-President of the Republic of Ireland Michael D. Higgins addressed them all, the data were fed into a computer and the results were displayed on a computer screen. Not bad for 1991.

In the years that followed, a demonstration of this MBC electronic preference voting was given to Dublin's All-Party *Oireachtas* Committee. Before Ireland's 2002 abortion referendum, arguments were made for multi-option voting, not least on the subject of abortion – a multi-option subject if ever there was one. Alas, the referendum was binary, and it lost by less than 1 per cent. But preference voting under the Borda rules was used in Ireland's recent Citizens' Assembly. The citizens chose the options and then cast their preferences. As is well known, the abortion question was thus resolved, albeit by subjecting the citizens' consensus option to a national but binary referendum. Among their several recommendations on many topics, the citizens also suggested future referendums should be multi-optional.

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The one thing they forgot was to advocate multi-option preference voting in the Dáil, the Irish Parliament. Now the

MBC is non-majoritarian – as noted, it can identify the option with the highest average preference, and an average, of course, involves not just a majority but every voter. If, therefore, majority voting in the Dáil were to be replaced by the MBC, binary majority rule could be replaced by a more pluralist form, an all-party coalition. This type of inclusive governance is necessary for Northern Ireland, as well as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Kenya, Ukraine, and other divided countries. It is practised in Switzerland and one day soon, when parliaments use electronic voting, it could be everywhere. With the likes of Messrs Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Johnson, Modi, Putin, Trump and co., consensus is rapidly becoming a pre-requisite for human survival.

Such a bottom-up structure of governance could include proportional and preferential voting in elections to parliament (a single transferable vote proportional system or, even better, the Quota Borda System). A similar methodology, a QBS matrix vote, could also allow parliaments to elect gender-balanced, all-party, power-sharing executives. Citizens' assemblies, created at the behest of either Parliament or citizens' initiatives, should be part of a future bottom-up politics. Finally, be it in parliaments, cabinets, or citizens' assemblies, non-urgent decisions should be based on consensus, achieved through either verbal agreement or preferential MBC voting.

No majority has the right to dominate and no minority the right to veto. Instead, we all have a responsibility to share this planet with our neighbours, and if there is no cross-party consensus for a particular (non-urgent) policy – oil exploration in the Arctic, for example – the rules of democracy should stipulate that no decision should be taken.
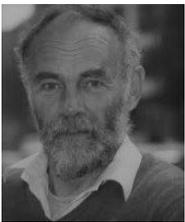
Like Jean-Charles de Borda, "capitaine et savant" to quote the statue in L'École Navale in Brest, Peter Emerson was initially a sailor, but only a lieutenant ; next, a volunteer maths/physics teacher in Nairobi ; then a founder of the NI GP in Belfast; and now the director of the de Borda Institute. A linguist, he has worked in other conflict zones, not least the Balkans and the Caucasus. In 2017, he gave a lecture entitled So, What is Democracy Anyway? at TedXVienna, and his latest work is *Majority Voting as a Catalyst of Populism*, (Springer, 2019). He is also the founder member of the Irish and NI Green Parties ; director of the de Borda Institute and author of Majority Voting as a Catalyst of Populism (Springer, Heidelberg).