

## **MAJORITY RULE**

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### **What is Majority Rule?**

Majority Rule = a political principle providing that a majority usually constituted by fifty percent plus one of an organized group will have the power to make decisions binding upon the whole.

Majority rule processes do not require consensus for group action. Instead, decisions are made by voting with a majority determining the position of the entire group. In modern democracies, many decisions such as electing representatives are made by majority rule. This rule gives the same, or equal, weight to the opinion of each equal citizen. When people vote on an issue, the group with the most votes wins - the losers have to accept the will of the winners on that issue.

### **Why do we need Majority Rule?**

*"On no question can a perfect unanimity be hoped." --Thomas Jefferson (1808)*

The nature of modern government and democracy make it impractical to endeavour to reach a 100% consensus of the people in resolving major public decisions. Firstly, the citizenry is far too expansive to collect everyone's opinion on every issue. Secondly, 100% of the people rarely agree on anything. What, then, is the next-best formula?

If we require only 75% to reach a consensus, a consensus may still prove difficult to reach, resulting in inefficiency in decision-making. Further, only 26% of the voting population would be necessary to block the will of the majority, meaning that the majority would not be able to express or enforce its will, even though that is in fact the will of the majority of the people.

*"Majority Rule Produces the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number." – Fredrick Copleston (1974)*

Thus, we come to the "majority rule" formula - when more than half is sufficient to decide. The votes of only 51% of the people – the majority – are required in order to make decisions for the whole of society. This approach has the advantage of being able to produce a prompt and clear decision. A 2-fold requirement is met: (1) the will of the majority is reigns, and (2) a 51% majority is much easier to accomplish than an absolute or near-absolute consensus, making the operation of democracy smoother.

### **Is Majority Rule synonymous with a Democratic Society? Is it the Antithesis of a Totalitarian, Authoritarian, or Communist society?**

*"Majority Rule is the Basis of Democratic Government" – J. Bryce (1921)*

One's first reaction might be that majority rule equals democracy, and is not present in other governmental systems where a few people make decisions on behalf of and without consulting the majority.

***“The tyranny of the multitude is a multiplied tyranny.” – Edmund Burke***  
***“Fifty-one percent of a nation can establish a totalitarian regime, suppress minorities and still remain democratic.” – Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn***

However, a closer look reveals some interesting characteristics of majority rule. We generally see a democracy as a society where people can express their will, enjoy specific freedoms, and be treated equally. However, this is not always the case with majority rule – the will of the people means the will of the majority or more active of the people, who in turn may desire to oppress minorities. On a less severe scale, it is difficult for minorities to get laws passed or programs developed or receive government funding that is beneficial to them if that is not the desire of the majority.

***“The monarch is not in the least the creature of his people, set up to satisfy their wants. He is rather a parasitic and dominating growth which has detached itself from the dominating group of parasitic conquerors. But the need to establish his authority, to maintain it and keep it supplied, binds him to a course of conduct which profits the vast majority of his subjects. To suppose that majority rule functions only in democracy is a fantastic illusion. The king, who is but one solitary individual, stands far more in need of the general support of society than any other form of government.” - Bertrand de Jouvenel (1945)***

Contrastingly, a totalitarian, authoritarian, or other oppressive régime may, in fact, require the (perhaps not overt) consent of the minority to remain in power. There are, of course, several other dynamics involved.

### **Necessities for Workable Majority Rule**

***“It is the besetting vice of democracies to substitute public opinion for law. This is the usual form in which the masses of men exhibit their tyranny.” – James Fenimore Cooper***

***“All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression.” - Thomas Jefferson (1801)***

Majority rule alone can be tyrannical and so a democratic society requires that something be done to protect the rights of the minorities. Fundamental values in a society are shared, though important values may be different. Fundamental values (such as rights and freedoms) are those values that people in a society share in common and covet for themselves as necessary to democratic existence. These could be said to be values based on social contracts, and guaranteed through law and the constitution. The

constitution, for instance, would require much more than a simple majority to change, and therefore strongly protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of the minority by infringement from the majority. Thus, as suggested in the quotations above, a democracy based on majority rule, to be fair and equal, must also be supplemented by law.

### **What are the weaknesses / limitations of Majority Rule?**

- (1) **tyranny of the majority** – as discussed above, majority rule may result in the suppression of minorities because the will of the majority is forced on the minority and the minority lacks a strong voice in decision making. Also, minority rights are not protected.
- (2) **the majority may not always be right** – decisions reached through majority rule do not necessarily represent proper values or truths. Consider the election of Hitler and subsequent persecution of the Jews. Consider also slavery.
- (3) **does not favour negotiation or compromise** - majority rule processes provide only limited incentives for the parties to compromise or to find a way for dealing with issues that serve the interests of all participants. Instead, the incentive is to compromise only enough to build a majority coalition. Once a winning coalition has been achieved, the parties are largely free to ignore the interests of other participants.
- (4) **will of the majority not always represented** – “Condorcet cycle”, “Arrow Impossibility Theorem”, “more than 2 alternatives”.

### **Is there a better way than Majority Rule?**

- (1) **super-majority** – super-majority means that 60%,  $\frac{2}{3}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$  or some other proportion of the vote higher than 51% is needed. The strength of super-majority is that it is closer to absolute consensus. However, weaknesses include the fact that super-majority rules unfairly aid whatever policy happens to be the status quo. Further, super-majority rules give policy-setting power to minority groups who can block the will of the majority.
- (2) **Rank order voting** – People rank various options in order of preference. ROV fails to satisfy the principle that “irrelevant” candidates (options) should not determine the outcome of votes.
- (3) **The best system appears to be Majority Rule supplemented by laws protecting basic rights, freedoms and values that the society holds in common.**