

Choosing a Decision-Making Method: Majority Voting

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What is Majority Voting?

Majority voting is one of the most common decision-making methods used in teams because it is simple, fast, and produces a clear outcome. However, ease of use does not mean it is always appropriate. In team science, majority voting should be treated as a deliberate choice rather than a default.

Majority voting is a positional decision method in which individuals select among options and the option receiving more than half of the votes wins. In this way, majority voting is closely related to compromise as both approaches divide groups into winners and losers rather than integrating perspectives into a shared solution. Because of this structure, majority voting can be the most divisive decision method available to a team.

The central question teams should ask before using majority voting is: Can this group afford to be divided on this decision? Put differently, can the team live with a situation where a portion of the group will remain dissatisfied? If the answer is no, majority voting is likely to generate tension and weaken commitment to the final decision. Research on group dynamics shows that decisions that leave unresolved disagreement can undermine collaboration long after the vote itself is over (Janis, 1982; NASEM, 2015).

The Importance of Group Size

Group size plays an important role in determining whether majority voting is appropriate. In small teams, roughly ten people or fewer, consensus or modified consensus is often feasible because members can hear one another's reasoning, ask questions, and work toward shared understanding without taking up too much time. In contrast, in very large teams, roughly 20 or more, consensus can become impractical due to time constraints and coordination challenges. In these settings, majority voting may be useful for making clear, bounded decisions that allow the group to move forward (NASEM, 2015).

Modifying Majority Voting for Large Teams

Often in larger teams, there are sub-groups or smaller working groups that are pulled together to work on tasks decided by the larger group. These sorts of arrangements help to more effectively use team time, by grouping members by their skillset and interests to complete goals. In these smaller working groups, majority voting can be used so long as the following criteria are met:

- The smaller working groups' decisions only affect their work,
- The smaller working groups are not making decisions for the larger group,
- None of the decisions affect the tasks of other smaller working groups, and the golden question,
- The smaller working group can afford to be divided on the decision

Using Majority Voting

The primary benefit of majority voting is efficiency. It allows teams to reach a decision quickly and unambiguously, which can be valuable when time is limited or when decisions are procedural or low stakes (e.g., trivial to the work at hand). However, this speed is also a key limitation. Voting can cut off discussion, reduce opportunities for learning, and result in lower-quality decisions if individuals rely on personal biases rather than engaging with others' perspectives (Kahneman, 2011). Public voting methods, such as a show of hands, can further amplify conformity pressure and discourage dissent, particularly from individuals with less power or status within the group (Janis, 1982). [See our other explainers to learn more about problems related to group think and power issues].

For these reasons, majority voting is best reserved for situations where 1) division is acceptable, 2) the consequences of disagreement are limited or trivial, and 3) the team has already had sufficient opportunity to discuss the issue. When decisions involve values, identity, authorship, resource distribution, norms, behaviors, or long-term strategy, majority voting is more likely to create lasting problems.

In effective teams, the method of decision making is itself a strategic choice. Selecting majority voting should signal not only a desire for efficiency, but also a shared understanding that the group can withstand disagreement.

Majority Voting Decision Tree

If you and your team are trying to decide if majority voting is right for you, consider the following questions:

1. Is a decision required now?
 - If no, continue discussion or gather more information.
 - If yes, proceed to the next question.
2. Can the group afford to be divided on this decision?
 - If no, avoid majority voting and use delegated decisions, multi-voting, or consensus.
 - If yes, continue.

3. Is the decision low-stakes, procedural, or easily revisited?
 - If no, majority voting carries high risk. The team should consider alternative methods.
 - If yes, continue.

4. Is the group large enough that consensus is impractical?
 - If no (small group), consensus is likely feasible and preferable.
 - If yes (large group), majority voting may be appropriate.

If voting is used:

Ensure prior discussion has occurred and explicitly acknowledge minority viewpoints after the decision. To improve the discussion, consider anonymous voting to reduce conformity pressure.

References

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