

Choosing a Decision-Making Method: Multivoting

By Kayleigh Ward, ESIL | January 30, 2026

What is Multivoting?

Multivoting is a structured decision-making method designed to help teams sort, prioritize, and/or rank a long list of options. It is especially useful when teams are facing an issue of complexity rather than strict disagreement. Here the issue is that the team cannot move forward because there are too many reasonable alternatives to address all at once.

Unlike majority voting, which divides a group into winners and losers, multivoting tends to function as a more neutral decision space. For this reason, multivoting is a powerful and useful decision-making tool. It allows team members to express priorities independently, reducing pressure to align with others or defend a single position (e.g., groupthink or positional arguments). For this reason, multivoting is often experienced as less divisive and more participatory than other voting-based methods.

Navigating Multivoting

In a multivote, individuals are typically given a fixed number of votes (or points) to distribute across a list of items. You can use physical votes, like stickers, sticky notes, slips of paper and so on, but anonymous methods are often better. These votes are then aggregated to produce a ranked set of priorities. While multivoting is often conducted openly, it can also be implemented anonymously using polling tools such as Mentimeter or similar platforms. Anonymity further reduces conformity pressure and helps ensure that all voices carry equal weight, regardless of status or power within the group (Janis, 1982). It also helps team members who fear retaliation to safely add their “voice” to the decision.

One of the key strengths of multivoting is that it creates a form of functional consensus without requiring debate or negotiation. Participants may not get everything they want, but they are likely to see their most important priorities reflected in the final outcome. Because everyone participates and all votes count equally, team members are less likely to treat the outcome as an additional adversarial debate. Instead, they are more inclined to accept results as legitimate and to “live with” the decision in a constructive way.

Multivoting is particularly well suited for situations in which teams must narrow down options, identify top priorities, and/or determine where to focus limited resources. It is systematic and relatively fast, making it effective for large or diverse groups that need to make progress without extensive deliberation.

At the same time, multivoting has limitations. Because votes are distributed across multiple options, optimal or innovative solutions may fail to rise to the top if support is split, resulting in ties or diluted rankings. This is especially the case if some options are riskier than others, despite the potential rewards. In addition, when multivoting is conducted openly, individuals may still be influenced by visible patterns in how others vote, although this risk can be mitigated through anonymous or delayed-result polling tools (Kahneman, 2011).

Multivoting is most effective when used as a prioritization tool, not as a substitute for deeper discussion on values, norms, behaviors, trade-offs, or long-term strategy. In many teams, it works best as an intermediate step by helping groups identify what matters most before moving into more deliberative decision-making methods.

Multivoting Decision Tree

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

1. Does the team have a long list of options, issues, or priorities to sort or rank?
 - If no, consider other decision methods.
 - If yes, continue.
2. Is the challenge complexity rather than deep disagreement?
 - If no (strong positional conflict), multivoting alone may be insufficient.
 - If yes, continue.
3. Is it important that everyone participates equally without pressure to debate or conform?
 - If no, another method may be more appropriate.
 - If yes, continue.
4. Would narrowing priorities help the team move forward?
 - If no, return to problem definition or option brainstorming.
 - If yes, multivoting is appropriate.

If multivoting is used:

Consider anonymous or delayed-result voting, clarify how many votes each person has, and explain how the results will be used in subsequent decision-making. In cases where there are more than 10 items to rank, try and separate items by theme first, and rank them separately. Doing this sub-ranking before the full ranking can help items that are truly important rise more easily to the top. Similarly, in cases where there are many items, giving members 2 votes can be useful (although they should not vote for the same option twice).

References



Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences
University of Colorado **Boulder**

Janis, I. L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes* (2nd ed.).
Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.