

Defining Democratic Decision Making

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1. Introduction

In his *Populist Democracy: A Defence* (1993), Torbjörn Tännsjö suggests, roughly, the following necessary and sufficient conditions for a democratic collective choice: If the majority of a given group of voters prefer A to B, then the collective choice is A rather than B; and if the majority of voters had preferred B to A, then the collective choice would have been B rather than A. Moreover, the preference of a voter is equated with the one she is showing by the act of voting (e.g., by putting a ballot in a box).

Tännsjö's definition has the advantage of being simple, naturalistic, and quite clear. As such, I think it is a useful starting point for a discussion of how to define democratic decision making. As I hope to show below, such a discussion can be quite illuminating and generate interesting and fruitful questions regarding how to understand democracy.

Tännsjö claims that his definition is in line with common language use, i.e., that it is a lexical definition. Pace Tännsjö, I shall show that it departs from common language use since it has a number of counterintuitive implications in regards to which decisions and methods that are classified as democratic or undemocratic. I shall suggest a number of amendments to avoid these drawbacks and incorporate these in a definition of a democratic decision and decision method which is superior to Tännsjö's, or so I shall argue. However, although I'm quite satisfied with the characterisation of a democratic decision method, I will acknowledge that the definition of a democratic decision still has some shortcomings that future efforts need to rectify, or that it might not be possible to give a simple and naturalistic definition of a democratic decision that is sufficiently in line with common language use. En route, we shall discuss some interesting divergences between the popular will and democratic decisions.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, let me add that I don't think there is one correct way of defining a democratic decision and decision method (although there might be a common kernel) and I certainly don't suggest that the definition proposed here is the only way of explicating the ordinary language use of the term "democracy". Actually, as will transpire below, it is

more correct to say that what we are trying to define is a majoritarian democratic decision and decision method.

Moreover, it is important to remember that what we aim to define here is a democratic decision and method, not a democratic state, firm, etc. However, the former might be useful for defining the latter, since, arguably, one part of those latter definitions will be that some decisions of these collectives are taken democratically.

2. Tännsjö's Definition

Tännsjö aims at a lexical and naturalistic definition:

The definition of democracy should be true to a standard or classical sense of the word which means that systematic collective decision-making in accordance with the majoritarian principle ... should be countenanced as 'democratic'. (p. 3)¹

The concept of democracy could and should be stated in naturalistic terms, however. Otherwise we shall have difficulties in evaluating the various different ideals of democracy, stated in terms of the concept of democracy. If these ideals are stated in value-laden [non-naturalistic] terms we shall not know for certain what more exactly they amount to... (p. 7)²

Tännsjö makes a distinction between questions regarding the definition of democracy which is part of "narrow democratic theory", and questions regarding normative democratic ideals which is part of "broad democratic theory". In other words, in narrow democratic theory he tries to describe what makes a decision or a method democratic, not what makes a decision or a method desirable. For example, it might be desirable that people vote on what they consider is the common good, or vote altruistically, or are perfectly informed about what is at stake, but that is hardly necessary for a decision to be democratic. Tännsjö's general strategy is to define democracy in a quite thin manner and leave a lot of important considerations regarding democratic decision making to broad democratic theory.

¹ All references in the text are to Tännsjö (1993) if not otherwise stated.

² Tännsjö doesn't explain why we cannot know what ideals stated in non-naturalistic terms "amount to" and I don't believe that this is generally true. Definitions of utilitarianism and other normative theories involve axiological or normative terms and we can, arguably, understand what these theories involve. Tännsjö's example --- "It is not very informative to say ... that certain national decisions should be taken in accordance with the demands of justice" (p. 7) --- might indicate that what he has in mind is that if a normative ideal is stated in ambiguous terms, then we will have a hard time knowing what it involves. However, the same can be said for an ambiguous naturalistic definition. Perhaps Tännsjö just means that we need to know the extension of a concept for it to be useful. If that is what he has in mind, then I certainly agree, but, on the other hand, we can know the extension of a concept even if it is stated in normative terms.

Of what can democracy be a property? Clearly, a lot of things can be democratic: states, nations, organizations, clubs, people, characters, methods, decisions, and so forth. Tännsjö consider it to be a property of decisions or methods of decision making:

... these concepts of democracy ... are conceived of as properties of decisions (or methods of decision-making) taken (utilized) by collectivities". (p. 1)

... a classical definition of democracy should state what it means for a *decision* to be taken democratically by a certain collectivity rather than, say, what it means for a *state* to be a democracy. (pp. 1-2, italics in original)

I think Tännsjö's is partly right and partly wrong about this. All too often one sees a putative definition of democracy that is rather a definition of a democratic state.³ Clearly, such definitions are not in line with common language use since "democracy" is not only applicable to states but to a wide array of social unions. Arguably, any social union of two or more individuals, from the world community to the family, is part of the domain of democracy, i.e., are candidates for being democratically organised.⁴

Again, however, we should recognise that the term "democracy" is not only applied to decisions and decision methods but to a lot of things. So we shouldn't claim that the only things that can be democratic are decisions and decision methods but only make the weaker but true claim that two of the entities that can be democratic are decisions and decision methods.

More importantly, if we have a definition of a democratic decision or decision method, then we can use it to define a democratic state (organization, club etc). Again, some kind of democratic decision making, for example when passing bills in the parliament or in the election of members of parliament, plays a role in most definitions of a democratic state. So what many definitions (but not all, methinks) of democracy have in common is that democratic decisions or decisions methods play some part in the definiens.

Now, here is how Tännsjö presents his definition:

Consider a political issue I, where two solutions are possible, A and B. Assume that the will of the people deciding the issue is that A be adopted ... To be sure, in order to be solved democratically, the outcome of I must be A. This is not enough, however, in order for I to be solved democratically, A must have been chosen *because* A was the will of the people. ... [T]he will of the people ... must have been causally sufficient to produce A as the outcome. Even this is not enough, however. ... [W]e must also include a counterfactual element in our definition as well. It must also be the case that if,

³ See e.g. Lundström (2001).

⁴ See Cunningham (1987), p. 51, and Arrhenius (2005) for the same view.

contrary to fact, the will of the people had instead been that B be adopted, then, because of this, B would have been adopted. (pp. 16-17)

In his definition, Tännsjö doesn't state what the popular will consists in. Later on, however, he writes that:

One natural way of conceiving of the will of a group of people is to take it to be identical with the will of the majority among the people. (p. 17)

... [T]he things that matter to (narrow) democratic theory are only explicitly – publicly – stated preferences. (p. 29)

I take this to mean that the popular will is equated with the majority will, and that the majority will is understood in terms of the preferences of the individuals in the majority, and that the preference of an individual is equated with the one she is showing by some act of voting (more on this below). Taking this and the above observations into account, we can explicate Tännsjö's definition as follows:

Tännsjö's Definition Explicated

1. A decision method is democratic iff it satisfies the following two conditions:
 - a. If the majority vote for A in the choice between two alternatives A and B, then the collective choice is A; and if the majority had voted for B, then the collective choice would have been B (*the counterfactual requirement*).
 - b. If the majority vote for a certain alternative, then that is causally sufficient for making that alternative the collective choice (*the causal requirement*).
2. A decision is democratic iff it is taken with a democratic decision method.

Notice that we have first defined a democratic decision method and then defined a democratic decision in terms of the decision method. We have also skipped any reference to the popular will since it seems superfluous given that Tännsjö defines the popular will in terms of the votes (expressed preferences) of the majority.

This definition has some nice features. It is quite clear and naturalistic. It is lexical insofar that democratic decisions and decision methods should respect the expressed majority will. Nevertheless, as I shall show below, it doesn't capture the right relation between the popular will and democratic decision making and it is too permissive, that is, it classifies a number of non-democratic methods and decisions as democratic.

A terminological note: When I henceforth speak about the “actual majority will”, I mean the actual preference of the majority (at some point in time). When I speak of the “expressed majority will” or “expressed majority preference”, I have in mind the preference that the majority has showed by some act of voting. When the context makes the meaning clear or when it doesn’t matter which one of these two senses we use, I shall sometimes just speak about the “majority will” or the “popular will” (used as synonymous).

3. The Majority Will and Democratic Decisions

One might wonder why there is both a causal and a counterfactual requirement in Tännsjö’s definition and which role they play in the definition. The idea, I take it, behind these requirements is that there should be the right kind of dependency relation between the popular will and collective decisions for a decision method or a decision to be democratic. On this I think Tännsjö is right, not just any decision in accordance with the popular will is democratic.

For example, we would like to rule out that decisions taken by a “lucky dictator”, who just happens by coincidence to make decisions in accordance with the popular will, are classified as democratic. Tännsjö’s causal requirement rules this out since the collective decision is not caused by the popular will in such cases. Likewise, his counterfactual requirement rules this out since if the dictator also follows the popular will in all counterfactual situations in which the popular will has changed, then one can hardly claim that she just happens to make decisions in accordance with the popular will.⁵

However, although Tännsjö’s causal and counterfactual requirements at first sight look quite intuitive and seem to capture the right dependency relation between the popular will and a decision, this is not so, and it is actually quite tricky to spell out the right relation.

For instance, consider a “benevolent dictator”.⁶ Since this dictator is benevolent, she always decides in accordance with the popular will. Hence, if the popular will is A, then the benevolent dictator picks A because the popular will is A and if, contrary to fact, the popular will would have been B, then the benevolent dictator would have picked B because the popular will would have been B. Clearly, the benevolent dictator satisfies both the causal and counterfactual requirement. However, I think we would neither like to classify a decision method involving a benevolent dictator as democratic, nor

⁵ The dependency can go both ways: Either the dictator always follows the popular will or the popular will always follows the dictator’s will, that is, the dictator wants something because the people wants it or vice versa. In both cases, if this regularity also holds counterfactually, it seems moot to claim that the connection is coincidental. At any rate, as we shall discuss below, there is another problem with the first case from a democratic perspective.

⁶ I’m grateful to Ragnar Francén for a useful discussion of a case similar to the benevolent dictator.

the decision that she takes, since it is completely up to the benevolent dictator whether the popular will is followed or not. The benevolent dictator could have changed her mind at any point and decided against the will of the people and she has thus complete power over which alternatives are chosen. Hence, Tännsjö's causal and counterfactual requirements don't capture the dependency relation we want between the popular will and the collective decision from a democratic perspective.

I think a more promising approach is to state the dependency relation in terms of the collective choice being a function of the expressed majority will such that in any situation in which there is such a majority will, the collective choice is just a function of it and respects it. To put it differently, we will use a kind of counterfactual requirement but we will quantify over all possible voting situations. More exactly, a decision method is democratic only if for any possible binary voting situations S and any two alternatives X and Y in S , if the expressed majority will is X in S , then the method yields that the collective choice is X in S .

For any decision method that satisfy this *functional requirement*, as I shall call it, the will of the benevolent dictator is irrelevant (or it only counts as a part of the popular will if she is a member of the electorate) since even if she changes her mind and prefers an alternative contrary to the popular will, the latter will always prevail and the collective choice will be in accordance with it. Hence, the benevolent dictator as a decision method doesn't satisfy the functional requirement. Likewise, the functional requirement rules out the lucky dictator as a democratic decision method.

The functional requirement also seems to be able to handle another problem case (which is a problem for Tännsjö's counterfactual requirement but perhaps not for his causal requirement). Consider a method where a "mind-controlling dictator" (or a demon or a machine or something else) are in charge and when she wants A , she both causes A to be adopted and causes the popular will to be that A is adopted (but there is no casual connection between A being the popular will and A being adopted). Since the functional requirement quantifies over all possible voting situations, the mind-controlling dictator will be ruled out since in a situation where the popular will is B (perhaps because the dictator failed in her mind-control activity), the dictator will still cause A to be the collective choice, and thus violate the requirement.⁷

There is, however, a second mind-controller case which the functional requirement cannot handle. In this case, the mind-controlling dictator causes

⁷ One might think that Tännsjö's counterfactual requirement can handle this case since it is counterfactually possible that the people want B although the mind-controller wants A . However, depending on our analysis of counterfactuals, it might be that the closest possible world in which the people want B is also a world where the demon caused the people to want B . If causality is analyzed in terms of counterfactuals, then the causal requirement is likely to run into similar problems.

the popular will to be A which in turn causes the collective decision to be A. One might consider this case no less problematic for a definition of a democratic decision or decision method than the first case in which the mind-controller directly causes both the popular will and the collective decision to be A.

I think there are three possible routes here. One is to bite the bullet and claim that a decision or method can be democratic although people's preferences are under external control. What matters for classifying a decision or method as democratic is that it cannot yield a result that contradicts the expressed will of the majority. How much autonomy one should demand from the voters is then a further question relegated to the topic of how desirable forms of democratic decision making should look like, or, alternatively, criteria for what makes some decisions more democratic than others. Moreover, since autonomy comes in degrees, an autonomy requirement might be more suitable for being included in a criterion for ranking democratic decisions in terms of how democratic or how desirable they are.

Another possible route is to claim that the above problems show that we have to reject Tännsjö's definition and include an autonomy requirement in the definition. This has the advantage, I think, of yielding a definition that is closer to most people's intuitive idea of a democratic decision. In addition, it is quite likely that an autonomy requirement that can handle the second demon case will also take care of the first one.

A third route, which I find attractive, is to claim that we don't need an autonomy requirement for a democratic decision method since that is just about the right way of aggregating individual preferences into a collective decision. However, for a decision to be democratic it isn't sufficient for it to be taken with a democratic decision method but the preferences of the voters must also to some degree be formed autonomously.

It is not going to be easy, however, to formulate an autonomy requirement that doesn't rule out too much. All preferences are to some extent caused by factors external to an agent, such as genetic endowment, childhood environment, peers, mass media influence etc. It might not be possible to state in simple and exact terms an autonomy requirement that only rules out influence on people's preferences that we find unacceptable from a democratic perspective. However, if we want a definition that is sufficiently lexical, this is a prize we will have to pay.

4. Six Voting Problems for Tännsjö's Definition

The First Problem: More than Two Alternatives

Replacing the causal and counterfactual requirement with the functional one is a step forward but there are more problems with Tännsjö's definition that

have to do with how it handles certain voting results. The first problem is quite trivial: We often face more than two alternatives. As it stands, Tänn-sjö's definition is compatible with a method that uses the majority principle when we are faced with a binary choice and otherwise a dictator. We can easily avoid this undesirable result by using the following revised version of the functional requirement:

The Functional Requirement II: A decision method is democratic only if for all possible voting situations S and any alternative X in S , if the expressed majority will in the choice among all the alternatives in S is X , then the method yields that the collective choice is X in S .

The Second Problem: Ties

The second problem concerns ties. Assume that 50% of the voters prefer A to B and 50% prefer B to A. Which decision is then democratic? Here's Tänn-sjö's answer:

... [I]t does mean that no unique will of the people exists. --- This leaves room for democratic solutions of the issue, however. Perhaps they have a chairman, who is allowed to decide it for them, who has, in situation where ties arise, *qua* chairman, a casting vote. This is consistent with majoritarian democracy as defined here. (p. 21)

From the point of view of majoritarian democracy, it is not necessary that a decision is favoured by a majority (this would rule out democratic decision-making in the presence of simple ties)... (p. 23).

This is too permissive, I think, since that the whitest, fairest, richest, or the king decides simply in virtue of being the whitest, fairest, etc., is also consistent with Tänn-sjö's definition, i.e., such a method is democratic and yields a democratic decision. Rather, in such a situation, we should require of a democratic method that it doesn't put any voter in a favoured position --- a so-called anonymous method --- to pick the winner. Examples of such methods are a democratically elected chairman or a random device. The latter method was actually used in Sweden during the hung parliament 1973-76, the so-called "lottery parliament".⁸

⁸ In 1971, after a long public debate, the two chamber parliament was replaced with a one chamber parliament with 350 seats. In the 1973 election, the two parties on the left, Socialdemokraterna and Vänsterpartiet kommunisterna won 175 seats, the same number of seats won by the three parties on the right, Moderaterna, Centerpartiet and Folkpartiet. Consequently, the parliament was hung. The Social Democratic government lead by Olof Palme retained power and several votes were decided by drawing lots. Since 1976, the number of seats in the parliament is 349. It says quite a lot about the imaginative power of Swedish politicians and political scientists that they didn't foresee this problem when designing the new chamber system.

To be more exact, let's say that a method is permutation invariant iff the collective choice is invariant under any permutation of people's votes (e.g. it doesn't matter whether it were Erik or Torbjörn who voted for alternative A, only that one of them did). An anonymous method is either permutation invariant in itself or breaks ties with a method that is chosen with a permutation invariant method.

Third Problem: No Majority

Here's a third problem. Assume that 50% of the people vote for A, and that all the other alternatives each receive around 10% of the votes apart from alternative G that receives 0%. Which decision is then democratic?

Since there is no majority for any alternative, it is again consistent with Tännsjö's definition that the whitest, fairest, richest, or the king chooses G, i.e., such a method is democratic and yields a democratic decision. Again, we should require of a democratic method that it doesn't put any person in a favoured position to pick the winner.

Notice that A could be a Condorcet winner and that G could be a (strict) Condorcet loser. Assume that people's preference orderings are as follows:

50%: A, B, C, D, E, F, G
 10%: F, A, B, C, D, E, G
 10%: E, A, B, C, D, F, G
 10%: D, A, B, C, E, F, G
 10%: C, A, B, D, E, F, G
 10%: B, A, C, D, E, F, G

Assuming that people will express their preferences in a pairwise vote, alternative A beats all other alternatives with at least 90% of the votes and is thus a clear Condorcet winner. Alternative G, on the other hand, is beaten by all other alternatives with 100% of the votes against it – you cannot get a clearer Condorcet loser than that (it is a strict Condorcet loser). Given no other information than provided above, one might consider it odd to classify the choice of G in such a situation as a democratic choice.

So what further requirement should we put on a democratic decision method to avoid this result? Should we require of a satisfactory method that it picks the Condorcet winner? It seems congenial to the aim of defining what a *majoritarian* democratic decision method is since a Condorcet method (a method that always pick a Condorcet winner when there is one) guarantees that if there is an alternative favoured by the majority, then that alternative will be the collective choice.

One might argue that this is too strong a demand, however, since it would rule out methods that pick the alternative with the most votes in a choice between three or more alternatives, that is, the plurality rule (or relative majority rule as it is called in the UK). This is roughly the method used in elect-

ing the US president and in electing members of parliament in United Kingdom, and I think we should countenance these methods as democratic. The plurality principle also seems a natural extension of the majority rule in cases where no alternative gets a majority of the votes.

Should we then require that the method picks the alternative with the most votes? That would be too strong too, I think, since there are other desiderata that conflict with the plurality rule. For example, as is well-known, the plurality rule might pick a Condorcet loser.⁹

What the above examples show, I think, is that there are many ways of extending the majority principle to cases where there is no majority winner, and even innocent looking requirements might exclude methods that intuitively seems to pass the test for being democratic. It doesn't mean that anything goes, as is implied by Tännsjö's definition. The possible extensions discussed above, a Condorcet or plurality principle, doesn't privilege any voter, and there are other such methods.

Moreover, there are quite weak requirements that exclude the choice of G in the example above. Call an alternative that is not a plurality winner for a plurality loser. If we require that a method shouldn't pick an alternative which is both a Condorcet and plurality loser, then the choice of G is excluded in the case above (we could also do with the weaker requirement that a method shouldn't pick an alternative which is both a strict Condorcet and strict plurality loser, where the latter is the alternative that receives the least number of votes in a plurality vote).

Fourth Problem: Cyclical Majorities

A fourth problem for Tännsjö's definition is the existence of cyclical majorities. Assume that Erik, Torbjörn, and I are going out to eat at a restaurant. Here are our preference orderings:

Gustaf: Le Troquet, Le Temps des Cerises, Bofinger
 Torbjörn: Le Temps des Cerises, Bofinger, Le Troquet
 Erik: Bofinger, Le Troquet, Le Temps des Cerises

As good democrats, we decide to arrange a pairwise vote among all the alternatives and since we voted according to our preferences, it turned out as follows:

Le Troquet or Le Temps des Cerises? 2 - 1 (Gustaf and Erik voted for Le Troquet)

⁹ Consider, for example, an election in which 30% of the voters have the preference ordering A, B, C (and thus would vote for A in a vote among all candidates), 30% C, A, B, and 40% B, A, C. Candidate B wins a plurality vote with 40% of the vote even though A is a Condorcet winner, beating B 60% to 40%, and C 70% to 30%.

Le Temps des Cerises or Bofinger? 2 - 1 (Gustaf and Torbjörn voted for Le Temps des Cerises)
 Bofinger or Le Troquet? 2 - 1 (Erik and Torbjörn voted for Bofinger)

Thus, there is a majority against each alternative. How should we handle such situations? Here's Tännsjö's opinion:

From the point of majoritarian democracy, it is not ... necessary, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, that the decision is not opposed by a majority (this would rule out democratic decision-making in the presence of cycles). It is consistent with majoritarian democracy ... that any one among the alternatives in a cycle is selected... (p. 23)

I agree with Tännsjö that, surprising as it may be, a democratic decision method can choose alternatives that are opposed by a majority. As with ties, however, I would require the method not to privilege any voter. Again, this could be achieved by using a random device or, perhaps better, a democratically chosen method to solve the cycle, such as a democratically elected chairman.

Moreover, there is a further problem with Tännsjö's solution. Assume that there is a fourth alternative which is ranked last by everybody, that is, a Condorcet and plurality loser. A method that picks the Condorcet and plurality loser when there is a top-cycle is consistent with Tännsjö's definition, i.e., such a method is democratic and yields a democratic decision. Again, we should require that a democratic decision method doesn't pick an alternative that is both a Condorcet and plurality loser.

Fifth Problem: "Blank" Votes and Abstention

Assume that 55% of those who expressed a preference for A or B with their vote preferred A, but that 10% of the electorate voted blank, or cast illegitimate votes, or abstained. If we take all the votes into account, or all the voters in the case of abstention, then there is no majority winner, and a method which picks B is consistent with Tännsjö's definition of democracy. For example, if the electorate consists of 200 persons, then it follows that 99 persons voted for A which is less than 50% of the electorate.

Here we have an easy solution: A democratic decision method should pick the alternative that received a majority among the votes that expressed a preference for A or B, or alternatively, and in line with the discussion of the "no majority" problem above, the method should count all the votes or voters but not privilege any voter and avoid a Condorcet and plurality loser.

One might object to these proposed solutions with examples like the following. Assume that a referendum is arranged in China on a certain issue and among the one billion eligible voters, only one person actually voted, and voted for A. According to our revised definition (and Tännsjö's), the

choice of A will be classified as democratic. One might find this counterintuitive.¹⁰

I think the main reason that we find examples like this counterintuitive is that we fill in the story above with a lot of other assumptions indicating that there has been foul play since it seems incredible that such a situation would otherwise arise in real life. Assume instead that this situation did arise because only one person cared about the issue at stake and all the other voters were completely indifferent. In that case, it doesn't sound counterintuitive to classify the decision as democratic although only one person voted.

Another reason for considering cases like this counterintuitive is that it seems false to claim that the popular will is A. Rather, since the overwhelming majority is indifferent, the popular will is indifference. However, what I suggest here, and in some other cases that we shall discuss below, is that popular will and the result of a democratic decision method can sometimes diverge. As we shall see, this can even happen when there is a clear majority will among those who actually voted.

Sixth Problem: Proportional representation

It is unclear whether elections to parliaments with proportional representation of parties will be classified as democratic on Tännsjö's definition since it is unclear what issue is at stake in such elections. Such elections doesn't give the electorate an opportunity to express a preference for having, say, John Doe in seat 55, nor for, say, the Socialist having 40 seats. It does, arguably, give the electorate an opportunity to express a preference for which party that should run the country for the next few years but it is doubtful that the whole electorate conceive of the election in such a manner. Hence, the proportional methods used to elect parliaments in many countries that we normally classify as democratic have an unclear democratic status according to Tännsjö's view.¹¹

Tännsjö might reply here that this is true but that the important matter is that the parliament is using a democratic decision method when voting on which laws or policies to implement. He could claim that the point of having a parliament is that it approximates the views of the population as a whole, and as such what the majority of the population would have chosen, had they voted on a certain policy. Moreover, he could claim that this feature, perhaps together with some further conditions, is sufficient to classify a *state* as democratic, although the method used to elect parliamentarians might not be democratic. He might also draw some support from the fact that in the early

¹⁰ I'm grateful to Thomas Petersen for pressing this point.

¹¹ The system with multiple electoral districts and plurality voting which is used to elect members of the parliament in United Kingdom and some of its former colonies is, on the other hand, classified as democratic by Tännsjö's definition.

days of proportional representations, it was conceived as an alternative to democracy.

Nevertheless, since proportional representation is such a widely used system and generally considered to be a democratic way of electing a parliament, I think we should countenance it as such. But I also think that we should recognize that the proportional representation method is very different from majoritarian democracy and that it is rather a way of approximating the majoritarian decision that would have been the case if all the voters had been able to gather, deliberate, and vote directly on the different issues. Hence, our revised definition should not be stated as a necessary condition for a decision to be democratic but rather only as a sufficient condition or, alternatively, only as a necessary and sufficient condition for a majoritarian democratic decision. We shall take the latter route.

5. Two Problems with Expressed Preferences

As I mentioned above, Tännsjö takes expressed preferences as the relevant input for a democratic decision:

What, then, are we to mean by the word ‘want’, or by words such as ‘preference’ and ‘will’, which in the present context I have used as rough synonyms? In (narrow) democratic theory these terms should be understood in a straightforwardly, actualistic sense, without any attempts being made at idealization (where the will of a person is identified with what she would prefer if she were different in certain respects, better informed, perfectly rational, and so forth). --- Moreover, the things that matter to (narrow) democratic theory are only explicitly – publicly – stated preferences. If everyone misrepresents his true preferences, what matters to (narrow) democratic theory are his publicly presented – misrepresented – preferences, not his – hidden – true preferences. (p. 29.)

A problem with expressed preferences is that people can make mistakes. They might press the wrong button, or tick the wrong box, and the like. Hence an alternative A might be chosen although the majority actually prefer B. Tännsjö seems ready to accept this:

... [W]hen casting his vote, some member of the demos may accidentally press the wrong button; my concept of democracy allows that this might change the decision. (p. 124, fn. 3)

Assume that the majority actually prefer A to B but because of mistakes, B is the collective choice. Likewise, voters can be mistaken about the alternatives. The majority actually prefer A to B but believe that A is B and B is A so they vote for B. It indeed seems odd to say in these cases that it is the will of the people that B is adopted but perhaps we could accept it as a democ-

ratic decision. We can make the case worse, however. Assume that the reason why people make mistakes is that it is very complicated to vote for A but easy to vote for B. For example, A is the default choice if you don't tick any box or press a certain button, or that you are told to press the red button to vote for candidate A and the blue button to vote for candidate B although the reverse is actually true. The most clear cut case is malfunctioning or rigged voting machines. There is nothing in Tännsjö's definition that excludes such methods from being countenanced as democratic.

We could solve this problem by replacing a voter's expressed preference with the preference for a certain alternative that the voter intended to express by the act of voting. This makes it possible to disqualify a method that picks alternative B in a situation where the majority actually prefer A and intended by their voting act to express this preference but where the expressed preference of the majority is B over A because of mistakes, or malfunctioning or rigged voting machines. Likewise for cases where my intention with my voting act was to vote for candidate A but where I was misinformed about what button to press.

Moreover, one of the main arguments Tännsjö gives for using expressed preferences as input is that they allow for compromises and strategic voting:

This ... has the advantage that it prepares for the possibility of democratic compromise. Suppose I prefer a certain proposal, A, ... to another proposal, B, and suppose I am in the majority. I realize that the minority ... would be very much hurt by a defeat. ... I may *express* a preference for B when our votes are cast in the hope that ... the members of the minority will requite this favour some time when I would be very much hurt by a defeat... If we all do, then this means that B receives a unanimous public support. This (public) support is what matters to (narrow) democratic theory. (p. 30.)

Switching to the preference the voter intends to express by her act of voting still allows for compromises and strategic voting. In those cases, the voter intends to express her preference for the compromise or strategic alternative.

However, switching to the preference the voter intends to express doesn't help in cases where it is the voters own fault that she didn't succeed in voting for her preferred alternative. For instance, let's say that 60% of the members of parliament intended to vote for A but a number of them freely decided to go to a party before the vote. As it happened, they got too drunk and by pressing the wrong button, they failed in expressing their actual preference in the vote. As a consequence, the vote turned out in favour of alternative B. A more realistic case, perhaps, is when the will of the majority fails to materialise in the voting process because some voters have confused the time of the vote.¹² Although it is reasonable to claim that the will of the ma-

¹² Recently, the will of the majority in the Swedish Parliament failed to materialise because one parliamentarian had gone to the bathroom at the time of the vote.

majority is A in such cases, it might seem strange to say that the choice of B was an undemocratic decision.¹³

Examples like the above points to, I surmise, that it is sufficient from a democratic perspective with a reasonable possibility for the voter to express their actual preference correctly but it isn't necessary that they always succeed. A requirement to this effect would, arguably, rule out rigged voting machines, or very complicated voting machines, or misinformation about how to vote for a certain candidate, but accept that the outcome of a democratic method sometimes depends on mistakes or on voters who by their own fault fail in expressing their actual preference correctly.

It is interesting to note here that if we accept this argument, then there are cases where the popular will and a democratic decision comes apart even when there is a clear majority will. In the above cases, it is clear that the popular will is A but the democratic decision method will yield B as the democratic decision.

I think that Tännsjö should welcome this suggested requirement since in a footnote he writes that "I do require that it be possible at least for a careful voter truly to express his or her preference" (p. 124, fn. 3). Although I'm not sure what kind of possibility and carefulness Tännsjö's has in mind, I think he should accept that rigged voting machines or very distorted information about how to vote for a certain candidate and the like makes it impossible in the relevant sense for a careful voter to "truly express" her preference.

Second Problem with Expressed Preferences: Bribery and Threats

Assume that the majority actually prefer A to B. However, there is a market for selling and buying votes. Rich people pay handsomely for a vote and the profit from selling votes is an important part of poor people's income. Since many poor people sell their vote, the majority end up voting for B. According to Tännsjö's definition, this is a democratic decision.

Many people would find this an unsatisfactory state of affairs from the point of view of democracy, I surmise, and trade in votes is outlawed in many countries. Nevertheless, I'm not sure that this is a clear enough case to motivate a change in the definition of a democratic decision and that the "Tännsjö move" might be the right response here: It is a democratic decision but the method used is not a desirable one.

There is a worse but structurally similar case, however. Assume again that the majority actually prefer A to B but if they were to express their prefer-

¹³ I'm grateful to Jonas Olson and Ragnar Francén for pressing me on this issue. Another problem for the "intended expressed preference" approach, pointed out to me by Francén, are voters that didn't intend to express any preference for A or B because they are indifferent and therefore just picked one alternative (or flipped a coin). Accordingly, these votes shouldn't be counted which might strike one as counterintuitive from a democratic perspective. This points to another approach according to which we should care about the alternative for which the voter intended to vote. I shall not pursue this possibility further here.

ence, they would be severely punished, since there is a soldier in each polling station who is going to shoot anyone who doesn't vote for alternative B. Thus, the majority of people vote for B. Such an arrangement is consistent with Tännsjö's definition which seems quite unsatisfactory. However, perhaps Tännsjö would agree since, again, he says that "I do require that it be possible at least for a careful voter truly to express his or her preference" (p. 124, fn. 3). As before, this depends on how we should understand the possibility that Tännsjö is talking about but it seems reasonable to say that it isn't possible for you to "truly express" your preference in the relevant sense if you're going to be shot in the head if you do.

A natural solution to this problem is to require that the choice of what alternative to vote for should be an uncoerced choice, i.e., not brought about by coercion or force. As we hinted at above, such a requirement can be seen as part of the requirement that there should be a sufficient possibility for the voter to express their actual preferences regarding the alternatives on the agenda. Of course, it will not be an easy task to exactly spell out such a condition in a naturalistic fashion but that isn't a sufficient reason for not including such a requirement in our definition of democracy, at least if we want it to be "true to a standard or classical sense of the word" (p.3).

6. The Improved Definition

Drawing all of this together, here's the improved definition of a majoritarian democratic decision and decision method that I would like to tentatively suggest:

The Improved Definition

1. A decision method is majoritarian democratic iff it satisfies the following three conditions:
 - a. For all possible voting situations S and any alternative X in S, if the expressed majority will in the choice among all the alternatives in S is X, then the method yields that the collective choice is X in S.
 - b. Anonymity.
 - c. If an alternative is both a Condorcet and plurality loser, then it is not the collective choice.
2. A decision is majoritarian democratic iff it satisfies the following three conditions:
 - a. It was taken with a majoritarian democratic decision method.
 - b. The voters' preferences were formed in a sufficiently autonomous manner.

- c. The voters had a sufficient possibility to express their actual preference.

I think this definition is superior to Tännsjö's for the reasons that we have discussed above. However, although I'm quite satisfied with the characterisation of a democratic decision method, the definition of a democratic decision still has some obvious shortcomings. We haven't given a clear and naturalistic account of what it means for a preference to be formed in a "sufficiently autonomous manner" and when a voter has "sufficient possibility" to express her actual preference (including the tricky notion of an "uncoerced choice"). Nevertheless, I think it is a promising definition that opens up for future research that might rectify these shortcomings.¹⁴

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