



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 9  
Issue 2 June

Article 5

June 1982

# Consensus as a Form of Decision Making

Martha E. Gentry  
*University of Kentucky*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Gentry, Martha E. (1982) "Consensus as a Form of Decision Making," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol9/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



CONSENSUS AS A FORM OF DECISION MAKING\*

Martha E. Gentry, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
College of Social Work  
University of Kentucky

ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the consensus process as used in decision-making. Drawing from the Quaker experience and from social psychological research, statements of conditions for its effective use are enunciated. Descriptions of the use of consensus are provided and areas for further exploration are identified.

A popular, if not faddish, word of the 1980's is the term consensus. "Can we reach consensus on this? The consensus of the group was. . ." are familiar examples. Upon close examination, consensus is used to mean either a statement of agreement or a particular process used in decision making.<sup>1</sup> Often an inference is made that a particular process as used to reach a statement of agreement when such was not true.

This paper is about consensus as a form of decision-making--a process of reaching a decision which has a long tradition as an alternative to majority rule and the use of formalized rules and parliamentary procedures. This process was developed and has been refined by the Society of Friends or Quakers over three hundred years. It is referred to in business administration texts, used in the international political arena and in constitution writing by independent nation-building countries (Hare, 1980). Consensus as a process which permeates all hierarchical levels in major Japanese corporations is attracting the interest of corporations and others interested in increasing productivity in the United States (Ouchi, 1981). Women's groups and economic cooperatives have used consensus as their major decision-making form.

\*The author expresses appreciation to students in her Advanced Practice Theory Course, Fall 1980, for reactions to a draft of this paper.

Revision of a paper presented at the 1980 Symposium on Social Work with Groups.

<sup>1</sup>A further elaboration of differing meanings of the term "consensus" is provided in the doctoral dissertation by Drake as cited in References. He analyzed both macro and micro level uses of the term (pp. 18-25). Since the dissertation was accepted in 1973, confusion in usage evidently precedes the 1980's. In the political arena, an assumption of a national consensus was important to the development of Great Society Programs of the 1960's.

This diversity of use and popularity of the term with ambiguous meaning suggest the timeliness of a review and analysis of what is known about consensus. As used here, consensus is defined as a decision participated in by all members of a group and representing the maximum area of common acceptance (English & English, 1958). Small group properties and conditions are used to analyze the literature. These include group purpose, conflict and its resolution, leadership, power or influence, size and the use of time.

### Literature Review and Analysis

#### The Quaker Contribution

Within the Quaker experience, occasions for worship are not separated from occasions for the transaction of business. Central to this is the belief that each person possesses the Light of Christ which should serve to guide each person's life experiences as well as be available to guide a group. The process of reaching a consensus, therefore, is to seek the Spirit of God--not to seek a community of minds. This difference in purpose is essential to understand the consensus process as used by Quakers. It suggests that shared ideology in some form may be a necessary condition for successful use. Hare analyzed the Quaker experience from a Parsonian systems perspective which is based upon an assumption of shared values.

If the Inner Light is within each person but consensus is a group process, then a natural tension should be expected. The presence of natural tension or conflict is explained by suggesting that the Spirit has not as yet been sufficiently found in all members of the group. Quakers have built in several techniques to manage conflict. Uniquely, Quakers use a period of silence in which members consider their own and others' views. During this period, self interests which may impede seeking the Inner Light are to be set aside. A committee may be appointed to obtain more facts and this committee may or may not report back to the larger group. The conflict-producing item may be withdrawn from consideration and, perhaps, introduced at a later meeting.

Within this framework, is it possible for a person to disagree with a developing group consensus? It is, but only after serious examination to determine that the different stand is based upon an objective view of facts informed by individual conscience. Pride, insensitivity and personal ambition are to be set aside. The ability for self-reflection, self-awareness and sensitivity to others appears to be required to some degree to all members.

Leadership of the Society in Meeting is institutionalized in a Clerk. The Clerk (1) senses the need for silence, (2) introduces the subject to be considered (though it may also be introduced by any Friend present), (3) sees that each person has the opportunity to speak, (4) delays consideration of the subject by referring it to a committee, (5) verbalizes the "sense of the meeting,"

and (6) records and reads the record of the sense of the meeting. This record of the sense of the meeting is called a "Minute."

Members give assent to the Minute by verbalizing "I agree" or by nodding the head. Assent does not necessarily imply uniformity of judgment but a recognition that the Minute records what the members think is right at this time--that it reflects the sense of the meeting. The extent of unity may differ according to the relative importance of the issue at hand and whether or not a decision can be postponed.

In Meeting each member is expected to speak, is listened to and is permitted sufficient time for full expression of viewpoints. Do some members possess more power or influence over others in the deliberations? The process of weighting individual contributions is fundamental to the Quaker method. Some Friends are held in positions of high status on the basis of reputation gained through experience and spiritual insight. Little weight is given to those who speak out of apparent self interest. The position of high/low status in the structural hierarchy appears to be an achieved or earned position in contrast to ascribed status. Factors which influence this internal "weighting" probably are somewhat unique to Quakers and not necessarily limited to the goal achievement behaviors noted in small group research (Strodtbeck, et al, 1957). The extent to which external group factors, however, influence internal ranking is not known.

Meeting for business in a structure which includes periods of silence and encouragement for participation by all members assumes an availability of time. Critics of the process suggest that a majority-vote decision-making process is more efficient; however, once a decision is reached by the consensus method, support for the action is assured. Compliant behavior or sabotage by the minority are well known tactics in the majority-rule process which obstruct acting upon a decision. This may suggest that the consensus process is particularly useful when the decision outcome requires common action and support.

Limited research is available about the Quaker process. Drake (1973) was concerned that the informal socialization process traditionally used to teach Friends was not sufficient since children are now excluded from Meeting and the adult population is highly mobile. Among other questions, he sought to identify the common elements or principles in the process which could be included in educational programs designed for Quakers. He analyzed the literature to identify principles of the process and subsequently used the Delphi technique with recognized experts in the consensus process to locate those principles most commonly accepted. Considerable agreement was obtained from these two methods.

This analysis of the Quaker decision-making process suggests that the following conditions promote successful use of consensus: (1) members are bound together by shared ideology; (2) conflict management techniques are built into the structural arrangements of the group; (3) leadership is sensitive and responsive; (4) members understand and value the process; (5) criteria for internal ranking of members are consistent with the goals of the group and its values.

### Reaching Human Agreement

Although small group literature historically suggested that (1) groups are more effective when all members participate, (2) minority views should be voiced, (3) the group product or decision should be developed cooperatively, and (4) the group atmosphere should be supportive; these principles have usually found expression only in the majority-rule form of decision-making. There is a growing body of research, however, which focuses on consensus. This literature, primarily from the field of social psychology, identifies conditions for the consensus process to work, considers the use of power or influence, notes the relationship of conflict to the decision process, and identifies the characteristics of the consensus process as different from the majority-vote process and the effects of personal characteristic variables on outcomes.

Dodd and Christopher (1969) tried to discover some correlates of the consensus process in the variables "intent-to-agree," "discussion," and "practice." Their findings suggested three rules to use to make the consensus process work:

1. Strengthen members intent-to-agree.
2. Provide ample time for thorough discussion among members.
3. Let members practice making decisions together.

Improvement of decision-making through training was studied by comparing thirty untrained and thirty trained groups (Hall and Williams, 1970). Training consisted of an instrumented T-group intervention. Their findings related to the flow of the influence process are of particular interest to an analysis of the consensus process.

Before the group sessions, when 50% or more of the group members subscribed to a judgment which was later incorporated in the group solution, Hall and Williams inferred that there was a majority flow of influence or a majority power bloc. When fewer than 50% subscribed to a judgment prior to the discussion, but that solution appeared later in the decision, a minority bloc technique was attributed to the group. If no individuals subscribed to the ultimate group decision prior to the discussion, the solution was viewed as an emergent solution where a free flow of influence prevailed. Those groups which received training and whose decisions were emergent also utilized the resources of their most adequate members. Untrained groups generally did not utilize the resources of their members.

Whether or not conflict was correlated with the outcome of emergent solutions was also studied. The presence of conflict was determined by measuring the extent of agreement or disagreement among members prior to group discussion. With this before-group information available, the use of emergent solutions as a response to the presence of conflict could be examined. For the groups which received training, the presence of conflict was not correlated with the use of emergent solutions. In contrast, untrained groups appeared to use emergent

judgements as a response to conflict. Hall and Williams speculate that the use of the training intervention permitted a flexible and more participative power distribution in the groups.

The presence of conflict in decision-making is an essential phase, however, in the work of Fisher (1970, 1974). He identifies four phases in characteristic patterns of interaction, primarily associated with the socio-emotional dimension. These are Orientation, Conflict, Emergence and Reinforcement. Decisions which emerged in the third phase were preceded by an intense period of debate and dispute over decision proposals.

Nemiroff and King (1975) compared groups instructed in the consensus process with groups not instructed in this form of decision-making. Uninstructed groups used the familiar majority-rule process. Findings suggested that the two groups differed in important ways. Consistent with prediction, the instructed groups using consensus produced qualitatively better decisions, more fully utilized the average and best resources of their group members and obtained more ideas and information from members than uninstructed groups. Groups using majority rule reached quick compromise decision; they also used 50% less time than groups using the consensus process.

Effects of self-orientation, a personal characteristic variable, have been examined in relationship to the consensus process. This variable, measured by the Bass Orientation Inventory, focuses on the extent a person describes him or herself as expecting direct rewards regardless of performance on the task or effects upon others. The researchers speculated that any of the groups, instructed or not, composed of members who measured high on self-orientation would perform less effectively than groups composed of members low on the measure. The data did not support this prediction.

An explanation was suggested by the researchers that the consensus instructions acted as a leveler on persons high on self-orientation since no significant differences in any groups using the consensus process were noted on any performance criteria, observer reactions or self-reports. This is in contrast to the uninstructed groups which used the majority rule form. In these groups, significant differences on performance criteria were noted in groups composed of persons high on the self-orientation scale as compared with those low on the scale.

A straightforward examination of the manner in which groups make decisions was conducted by Hall and Watson (1970). Subjects were persons registered for management seminars. From this pool, sixteen control and sixteen experimental groups were randomly composed. The experimental groups received written instructions and guidelines on the method of group consensus in reaching a decision. Outcome variables were adequacy of decision task, utilization of member resources and resolution of conflicts.

It was predicted that instructed groups would perform more effectively on a decision-making task than groups which had received no instructions.

Instructed groups were found to produce qualitatively better decisions, to be more creative and to achieve the synergy bonus more frequently and by greater margin than uninstructed groups. (The synergy bonus was credited to a group when the group's decisions were qualitatively superior to any of those of its individual members.)

The researchers, drawing upon knowledge about small groups, suggested explanations for the effects of the intervention which altered the usual procedures for reaching a decision. In particular, they identified the phenomenon known as the strain toward convergence. This strain toward convergence is often valued by group members because it is equated with group movement, efficiency and harmony. In operation, this strain has the effect of increasing pressure upon members for closure, which serves to frustrate members who hold differing opinions. Additionally, members who already have converged are less tolerant of opinion differences. Furthermore, members of uninstructed groups were observed to react to conflict and opinion differences as personal rejection.

The guidelines presented to the instructed group probably modified task and social-emotional obstacles inherent in the convergence strain and conflict resolution attempts to the extent that different results were obtained for the instructed groups. The instructions used by Hall and Watson were developed by Hall and Williams (1970) and are the most complete and available statements of the consensus process used to reach human agreement. In shortened form, the guidelines are:

1. Avoid arguing for your own position.
2. Avoid win-lose stalemates in discussions.
3. Avoid changing your mind only in order to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony.
4. Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averaging, bargaining, coin flipping and the like.
5. View differences of opinion as both natural and helpful rather than as a hindrance in decision-making.
6. View initial agreement as suspect. (p. 304)

Laboratory conducted experiments obviously are not simulations of the totality of reality known in decision-making. For initial isolation and study of particular variables, however, the method is advantageous. In the studies reported, consensus as a decision process comes off rather well. Findings suggest that there is flexibility in the use of power, members' resources become available, resulting decisions are qualitatively good and self-oriented behaviors are checked by the process. In order for consensus to work, members must be committed to the process, they must have experience using it and they must have time available for the extent of discussion necessary. The studies are less clear, however, about how conflict is expressed and managed. In addition, the tasks presented to the groups may be reasonable analogues, but are not representative of tasks which require decisions in natural settings. However, the foundation for extending knowledge to natural settings is present and available for use in education and practice.

### Examples of Use of the Consensus Process

An interesting example of the use of the consensus process is found in the League of Women Voters of the United States. The process is used to develop responses to issues selected for study. The issue itself is chosen by delegates from over 1300 local Leagues and 50 state Leagues in biennial national conventions. Following choice of the issue, materials are provided to local Leagues as background for study. Questions are developed that members will need to answer to reach national consensus. The questions are as free of bias as possible and phrased to elicit members' opinions. The national study committee then assures itself that every measure of consensus reflects agreement in all sections of the country, in big cities and small towns and in large and small Leagues.

In the case of the 1978 study of the federal government's urban policy options, local Leagues received the questions and study materials eight months before responses were required. This provided ample time to become informed through study of the materials and additional research. In a recent speech, Ruth Hinerfeld, President of the League of Women Voters of the United States provided a description of the process.

"Such member meetings, conducted by a discussion leader who is usually assisted by a resource person and a recorder, are the central core of the League's consensus process. The interaction--questioning, debating and, most important, listening -that goes on at the meetings is what gives a League consensus its meaning: the sense of the group. Not a collection of individual options solicited through a survey. Not a totaling of views recorded by vote. Rather, a sense of what the group, as a group, believes, a convergence of opinion which emerges in the process of discussion and debate."

(Hinerfeld, 1979)

The League's use of the consensus process is based upon the conviction that it is one means to achieve the doctrine of the consent of the governed as outlined in the United States Constitution. This is their commitment and rationale for use of the consensus process. This commitment and rationale is of particular interest in the political climate of the current decade, filled with narrowly conceived special interest/issue groups.

A second example is the use of the process by a Conference of the United Nations. In 1973, the Chairman of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of the Sea-bed and the Ocean Floor beyond the Limits of National Jurisdiction, recommended that the successor body, known as the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, adopt procedures which would provide for the use of consensus. Adlai Stevenson, former United Nations Ambassador, had earlier supported the establishment of the Conference and the inclusion of



this form of decision-making in its rules of procedure. The Conference, at its 19th meeting on June 27, 1974, adopted the recommendation in its rules. The rationale and the rule itself are of special interest.

"Bearing in mind that the problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be considered as a whole and the desirability of adopting a Convention on the Law of the Sea which will secure the widest possible acceptance,

The Conference should make every effort to reach agreement on substantive matters by way of consensus and there should be no voting on such matters until all efforts at consensus have been exhausted."

(Appendix, Rules of Procedure, p. 17)

This Convention provides for the establishment of the International Seabed Authority. The Authority establishes an Assembly to develop general policies. The Assembly would elect 36 of its members to a Council which is to be the executive organ of the Authority. Article 161 of the Convention relates to voting procedures of the Council. Decisions on questions of procedure are to be taken by a majority of members present and voting.

A three-tiered categorization of issues of substance was developed to be decided by a two-thirds majority vote, a three-fourths majority vote or by consensus. (Draft Convention, 1980) This division of issues reflects relative importance and the need for common action and support.

The informal text of the Draft Convention on the Law of the Sea was completed in the Resumed Ninth Session held in Geneva, Summer 1980. Completion of the Convention was expected and opened for signature in 1981; however, the Reagan administration postponed action, wishing to re-examine the issues. Administration concerns appear to be related to perceived threats to the free enterprise system in seabed mining and the placement of the United States in an egalitarian relationship with other countries, especially those of the Third World. Unilateral action would be prohibited as a result of substantive issues reached by consensus.

Additional examples of the use of the consensus process are not as accessible in the literature. Members of womens' groups who use the process report some difficulties. It may be speculated that this can be attributed in part to their lack of common understanding of the essential features of a consensus process. They do encourage participation by all, listen to each other, allow ample time and, generally, share a common ideology. The process is valued because of its philosophical appeal -- a de-emphasis of use of personal and arbitrary power, respect for each member's views and freedom from structural constraints. Critics of its use identify over-emphasis on process

as compared to outcome, incompatibility of task-oriented persons and interpersonally-oriented group members and periods of meetings of unbearable length. Persons associated with a variety of collectives and communal groups report similar dissatisfactions. Recent information is available about the use of the consensus process in Japanese business and industrial corporations, based upon agreement on philosophy, values and beliefs. (Ouchi, 1981)

Of the examples described, it appears that the essential feature for selection of the consensus process as contrasted to majority-rule is the necessity to develop a decision which will have the widest possible common acceptance. The nature of the decision issues, in both the example of the League of Women Voters and the Conferences on the Law of the Sea, necessitate implementation of the decision by everyone or the fact of the decision would have no meaning. Analysis of the issue to be decided may provide guidelines in practice for the choice of one decision-making process over another.

#### Implications for Education and Practice

The diversity of these examples and findings from research suggest that consensus as a form of decision-making is available for teaching and use. To summarize, characteristics of the process and conditions for it to work are listed. This is followed by identification of areas and issues yet to be explored.

From the review and analysis of consensus, at least the following statements can be made.

1. The consensus process is time consuming.
2. The decision reached is likely to be supported and implemented.
3. The process works best if members have been taught how to do it.
4. Repeated use of the process improves performance.
5. The process works best when members approach a decision task with an intent to agree.
6. Communication skills of verbal facility and listening are important personal characteristics for members to possess.
7. Shared ideology appears necessary for the process to work.
8. Particular skills are needed for the person in the role position of leader.
9. Members must be open to different views and information, seek all sides of an issue.
10. Members must be willing to give up personal power.
11. Members must be committed to participation by all.

12. Members should view conflict, expressed as differences of opinion, as natural and helpful rather than a hindrance.
13. Members should not seek early and quick agreement and should guard against premature strain for convergence.
14. Structural arrangements, for example, use of committees for further study and deferral procedures to a later meeting, should be provided when it becomes apparent that the group is not yet ready to reach consensus.

Knowledge development is needed in several areas. The literature is rather clear that the consensus form of decision-making is preferred when the decision requires the widest possible extent of common acceptance. An area for further investigation is the identification of characteristics of tasks about which a decision is needed. This should include attention to the relative importance of the task to the group and the anticipated effects of the decision outcome. Results of this process might suggest guidelines for choosing between majority-rule or consensus. Furthermore, consideration should be given to the internal status ranking of the group to explore the extent to which a group is hindered or facilitated in reaching a consensus when high status persons are absent. It can be speculated that implementation of a decision, made without influential persons would be difficult, unless they are also supportive.

The literature does not seem to be consistent about conflict and its resolution (cf. Hall & Watson, 1970 and Fisher, 1974). Part of this can be attributed to the different ways conflict is understood -- natural and helpful or, as a threat to the system. There are some who suggest that the consensus process is used in the field of business to promote harmony and group cohesion among employees, under the rubric of participatory management. This use is a conflict management tool; the tasks assigned are insignificant to both management and employees which degrades the consensus process and participatory management in its intended form. In teaching about consensus, care should be taken to explore fully the issue of conflict and the political implications of its use since it may promote harmony/agreement when diversity/disagreement is needed.

No information was available in the research examples reviewed which addressed the issue of group size. There are reports of attempts of its use with groups of ninety persons. Size as related to time available, member characteristics, familiarity with the process, among other variables, should be examined systematically.

In general, then, consensus as a decision-making process has been used widely. Its proponents argue that its values outweigh problems in use. Some research supports the conclusion that decisions reached by this process are qualitatively better than those achieved by other processes. This paper has suggested selected areas for further research and examination.

References

- Bacon, M.H. The quiet rebels. The story of quakers in America. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969
- Brinton, H.H. Divine-human society. Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publishers, 1938.
- Comfort, W.W. Just among friends. The quaker way of life. (5th ed.) Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1968.
- Dodd, S.C., & Christopher, S.C. How to produce a consensus: a progress report from project consensus, Journal of Human Relations, 1969, 17(4): 618-629.
- Draft Convention on the Law of the Sea (Informal Text), Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, Resumed Ninth Session, Geneva, July 28, 1980 - August 29, 1980. Reproduced by Office of Law of the Sea Negotiations, Department of State, Washington, D.C., September 2, 1980.
- Drake, M.C. Quaker consensus: helping learners understand and participate in the quaker way of reaching group decision. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1973.
- English, H.B. & English, A.C. A comprehensive dictionary of psychological and psychoanalytical terms. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958.
- Fisher, B.A. Decision emergence: Phases in group decision-making, Speech Monographs, 1970, 37: 53-66.
- Fisher, B.A. Small group decision-making: Communication and the group process. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974.
- Hall, J. & Watson, W.H. The effects of a normative intervention on group decision-making performance. Human Relations, 1970, 23(4): 299-317.
- Hall, J. & Williams, M.S. Group dynamics training and improved decision-making, Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 1970, 6(1): 39-68.
- Hare, A.P. Group decision by consensus: reaching unity in the society of friends, Sociological Inquiry, 1973, 43(1): 75-84.
- Hare, A.P. Consensus versus majority vote, Small Group Behavior, 1980, 11(2): 131-143.
- Hinnerfeld, R.J. Consensus in American politics: a little help is needed, Address, National Conference on Government, Detroit, November 12, 1979, (Published by the League of Women Voters of the U.S.)

Jones, R.M. The faith and practice of the quakers. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press (no date).

Nemiroff, P.M. & King, D.C. Group decision-making performance as influenced by consensus and self-orientation, Human Relations, 1975, 28(1): 1-21.

Ouchi, W. Theory Z. Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1981.

Rules of Procedure, Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, adopted June 27, 1974, United Nations, New York.

Selleck, G.A. Principles of the quaker business meeting. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press (no date).

Strodtbeck, F.L., R. M. James and C. Hawkins, Social status in jury deliberations, American Sociological Review, 1957, 22: 468-473.

The meeting as a fellowship, In Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends, Excerpts from the London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press.

U.S. Delegation Briefing Materials, Law of the Sea Conference Organizational Session, December 3-14, 1973, United Nations Headquarters, New York.