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Abstract

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Author Biography

Timothy J. Shaffer is an associate editor for the *Journal of Public Deliberation* and an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Kansas State University, assistant director of the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, and Principal Research Specialist at the National Institute for Civil Discourse. His research centers on the advancement of democratic practices through deliberative politics and civic engagement in higher education and other institutional and community settings. He received his Ph.D. from Cornell University.

Keywords

decision making, majority, consensus, counsel, sortition

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As scholars and practitioners committed to democracy and its principles, it is important to acknowledge the rich complexity to the history of our field (if we might call ourselves such a thing). In sometimes rather simplistic ways, we create dynamics that position traditional voting schemes up and against more engaging, collaborative, deliberative, and/or participatory processes. In short, we have confronting us a dilemma about how to think about collective decision making when horizontalism is an aspiration yet not often a reality. Rarely is a movement or institution truly organized as such when it comes to representation or leadership.

In many ways, there is a desire to think about such non-hierarchical models as being relatively new (the rise of the New Left in the 1960s is a natural starting point for many). Yet, there are significant reasons to challenge the narrative that we have moved progressively from “old” vertical models of decision making to more horizontal ones today. With this as a starting point, Andy Blunden notes in the preface that the focus of the book is the *principle* governing collective decision making. As he writes,

I must emphasize from the outset...that the procedure for making collective decisions is an *ethical* problem, and until the ethical dilemmas which arise amongst a group of people trying to decide upon what they do together can be resolved, there is no chance of resolving the pragmatic problems which arise when participants try to extend their decision-making processes beyond those together in the here and now (p. ix).

It is this focus on the ethical question that guides Blunden, especially as historical examples can provide the reader with the ability to empathize with “the efforts of oppressed people to create just and effective forms or organisation based on ethical means of making collective decisions” (p. ix). His approach and selection of examples is not agnostic. It is important to note that the examples throughout the book are biased to entities that Blunden identifies as the “Left.” As a self-identified Marxist philosopher who employs a “realist historical investigation” (p. 11) in this book, he has used his own experience in activist settings to think about “a variety of models of collective decision making” (p. 12). This inherently brackets what is included and what is not. Significantly, as the author notes, the examples come almost exclusively from Britain and the United States (p. 16). Thus, guilds, the Methodist Church, and General Workers Unions are found alongside New England town meetings, Quakers, and Highlander. The book was not designed to be exhaustive, but the selection does point to the central interest in thinking about collective group discussion making more than the process of public deliberation. As Blunden states in the Introduction:

I have set out to write a history, but the entities whose history I have written are the products of my investigation, not objects or events given at the outset. Consequently, the broad structure of the book is that of my investigation, going back from the present into the past to find origins, and then working forwards again, and on a number of occasions, stepping back again to follow up leads which would later prove to be byways. And I do this twice, once for each of the types of collective decision making which were known to me at the outset.

The style of writing is more personal than scholarly, in part because each chapter is based largely on one or two primary sources. You will be challenged to find citations within the text. For that reason, this book reads more like a popular-audience book rather than a traditional academic text. For the reader most interested in *beginning* to think about the ways that people within institutional or community settings have made decisions, this is a helpful resource to highlight for that inquiry. For others, the book is a useful resource for thinking about contexts beyond the typical or familiar historical examples such as town meetings often referred to as examples of ways people have made decisions collectively. Yet, if you are looking for copious footnotes to follow toward new sources, you may be sadly disappointed.

With this approach in mind, the book is structured in three parts. Part 1 traces some of the origins of majority decision making and looks back to the medieval roots of Anglo-Saxon England and through more contemporary examples. Part 2 starts again with examples from the present time and trace back to the origins of consensus decision making in the aftermath of the English Revolution of the 1640s and follow its evolution forwards up to the 1970s. Finally, Part 3 presents a brief explanation of the political landscape in the decades following World War II and how this changed over a period of 50 years. Finally, as Blunden states, “In conclusion, I sum up the results of this investigation as far as the advent of the new millennium, setting the scene for how the problem of collective decision making confronts social change activism today.” It is this final statement about activism and the work of “Left” (p. 245) and of “Radical” (p. 246) that limits the potential audience for this book. But even if those aren’t description of your own views, you should not dismiss the book out of hand.

Nevertheless, the most significant contribution this book makes to the scholarship on collective decision making and, thus at least implicitly, democracy, is a filling in of the gaps between the earliest chapters or our grand history rooted in settings such as Athenian democracy that often jump to participatory movements of the mid-20th century and deliberative democracy at the turn of the 21st century. As someone personally interested in the retrieval and reconsideration of earlier

expressions of dialogue and deliberation (see Shaffer, 2016, 2017a, 2017b), I believe this book serves as a useful introduction to chapters often overlooked, even if it is brief in certain sections. It also helps to remind readers of four paradigms of collective decision making—majority, consensus, counsel, and sortition—that have relevance to wide audiences. Additionally, the exploration of three paradigms of collaboration—negotiation, solidarity, and command—are useful as students of dialogue and deliberation explore historical roots and examples to make sense of efforts and approaches today. It is a helpful reminder that we have not only recently discovered deliberative and participatory approaches to decision making. Interestingly, Blunden notes that that “chief concerns of our historical investigation are Majority, Consensus, and to a lesser extent, Counsel. Sortition is of only marginal interest” (p. 7). What’s striking about this statement is, in fact, the contemporary interest in various forms of sortition gaining attention internationally. The absence of that model of decision making is an unfortunate omission for this otherwise interesting survey across centuries.

This brings me to the final point I wish to make about the book. Blunden makes a bold claim at the beginning of the book that “*there has never been an historical investigation of collective decision making*, far less an historical investigation of how the internal decision making processes of a project prefigure the decision making processes of a larger community” (p. 2). Immediately, I went to my shelves to determine if this claim is true. I considered the scholarship in the realm of group communication, a natural home for such a history. I also went to books that focus on various forms of adult education, another field in which collective and collaborative decision making are foundational elements. What I found on my own shelves and more widely through searches of academic libraries were examples of collective decision making in specific settings (see Keith, 2007). I recoil at decisive and definitive claims, but I believe that Blunden has amassed a worthy collection of examples that can help individuals think about the ways that communities and associations have dealt with significant social challenges. While his focus and interest comes from a place on the political spectrum that is to the left of some, the breadth and commitment to exploring how groups of people made decisions is laudable. He notes that he takes “*a group of people in the same room, deciding what to do together* as the ‘germ cell’ of collective decision making” (p. 2). This reminded me of a similar statement about “Conversation at large [being] the DNA or germ plasm of social life” (Schudson, 1997, p. 305). Attending to the human scale of interaction and communication, speaking specifically to the structures that allow for such democratic and participatory discussion to take place, is something we would do well to learn from—even if those examples come from decades or centuries before our own time. In fact, they might offer a perspective worthy of reclaiming or fashioning anew in our contemporary times.

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