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Summary

The Best Way to Take Straw Polls before Group Decisions

“All in favor, say ‘Aye.’ All opposed, say ‘Nay.’”

Chances are you have participated in a preliminary vote before making a big decision. It makes sense, because taking a straw poll before launching into discussion can be a good tactic to see where people stand. In fact, one study found that two-thirds of all juries take unofficial votes within the first 30 minutes of deliberations.

Curious to find out if such unofficial votes help groups make good decisions, AOM scholars conducted experiments using three types of preliminary, unofficial voting to learn the effects of decision-making:

- **Plurality voting**, in which voters can choose only one option (how U.S. citizens elect presidents, how Olympic host cities are chosen, how juries typically start deliberations)
- **Ranked-choice voting**, in which voters indicate their preferences from best to worst (how members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences determine Oscar winners)
- **Multivoting**, in which voters get multiple votes they can allocate across options (how American Idol winners are selected)

It turns out that multivoting, the least common of the three types, is most likely to help groups make the best decisions, said [Michael D. Johnson](#) of the University of Washington.

In contrast, plurality voting, the most common way of doing straw polls (asking for a show of hands or for everyone to say “Aye” or “Nay”), proved to be the least-effective pre-vote ritual in terms of reaching the best conclusions, he said.

“We studied all of the different ways that voting affects outcomes, and it made us realize that people have a default, and it’s plurality voting, and it’s terrible in so many ways,” said Johnson, who cowrote the [Academy of Management Discoveries](#) article, [“Verdicts, Elections, and Counterterrorism: When Groups Take Unofficial Votes,”](#) with [Eli Awtrey](#) of the University of Cincinnati and [Wei Jee Ong](#) of the National University of Singapore.

Simulating counterterrorism teams to identify the biggest threat

After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security was formed to coordinate the efforts of various intelligence agencies. In 2010, the National Counterterrorism Center announced that it was



putting together “pursuit teams” to connect the dots of intelligence across agencies and pursue potential threats.

To test how different unofficial voting methods affect group decision-making, the researchers asked 93 groups of undergraduate students to simulate the counterterrorism support teams and identify which of three suspects represented the greatest threat. The groups were given information about three terrorists—Jackal, Badger, Eagle—but no group member had all the information about any one suspect, forcing the groups to share intelligence to identify the biggest threat.

Split into three groups of 31 each, the groups next took a preliminary vote using one of the three voting methods, to see where people stood on the suspects. After taking the unofficial vote, they considered the results and debated the suspects. If students shared information well, the assumption was that they would be able to identify one terrorist who was clearly the biggest threat. They then took their final votes, with the multivoting bloc earning the highest percentage of groups correctly selecting the most threatening suspect.

Simulation results

- **Plurality voting.** Just 31% of the teams using plurality voting correctly chose the most threatening suspect in the final vote, about the same as if it were left to chance. In their unofficial vote, 6% of those using the plurality method picked the correct suspect.
- **Ranked-choice voting.** In the final vote, 32% of teams chose the correct suspect. In the preliminary vote, only 7% of the ranked-choice teams correctly picked the most threatening suspect.
- **Multivoting.** Those in the multivoting team had the highest percentage, 30%, selecting the most threatening suspect in the unofficial vote. In the final vote, 45% correctly selected the most threatening suspect.

Surprisingly, Johnson said, was that the true benefit of multivoting happened before the discussion stage when the students, who had 10 votes to distribute across three suspects, had to think about the intelligence more critically from the beginning.

“The real strength of multivoting is in the unofficial straw vote, because it requires deeper thinking prior to the discussion,” Johnson said. “People in the multivoting groups had to process more before they started discussions. Some went 6 to 4 or voted 4, 4, and 2 across the suspects, or 8, 1, and 1, which led to more ambivalence, but also led to more votes for the correct suspect, which then improved the discussions, and ultimately the outcomes, because the discussions started further along.”

Johnson also said multivoting is a good way to counter “group think,” which is linked to plurality voting because people who are voting one way or another might be reluctant to speak up, particularly when the vote is transparent. “Multivoting, on the other hand, encourages the group to leave the decision open a little more, as people are more clearly expressing ambivalence.”

Recommendations for managers

When groups in organizations need to make group decisions, Johnson recommended using the multivoting method when there are not an unwieldy number of choices.

“It’s the best way we found to arrive at the best decision,” he said. “The first thing we would want to see is leaders to not default to plurality voting. Rather, if you’re making a hiring decision and have to choose among three candidates, give everyone who has a say a set number of votes to distribute across the three candidates. Take the preliminary vote and look at the distribution of votes and start your discussion from there.”

He conceded that multivoting is not recommended for all group decision-making scenarios. “If you have 10 candidates for CEO and 100 votes to allocate, that is an incredibly cognitively demanding task given the number of alternatives to consider.”

But multivoting, if used in the right circumstances, will likely lead to better group decisions because it reduces social pressures that lead to group-think and forces more thoughtful internal deliberations before group discussions.