Mandel, D. R. (2004). Unanimity may be improbable; dictatorship is worse: Comment on *The Dangers of Unanimity* by R. B. Zajonc. *Dialogue*, **19**(2), 28-29.

Unanimity may be Improbable, but Dictatorship is Worse: Comment on "The Dangers of Unanimity" by R. B. Zajonc

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In the last issue of *Dialogue*, R. B. Zajonc made an interesting claim—namely, that the requirement of unanimity in political decision making can be dangerous because the probability of having many decision makers each arrive at the correct decision is exceedingly small. Certainly, world history provides no shortage of examples that illustrate the dangers of uniformity pressures, about which social psychologists from LeBon (1896) onwards have commented. However, Zajonc's argument is quite different and deserves closer examination.

In his example, ten decision makers including the President, Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Advisor, and five other White House decision makers have to choose between a preemptive war in Iraq or continued weapons inspections, and the reader is asked to assume "that one of these outcomes is by far the wiser" (p. 14). Further, the reader is asked to assume that each decision maker has an even chance of picking the wiser alternative. According to Zajonc:

> If unanimity is required, then this group of ten decision makers has less than one in a thousand chances ($.5^{10}$ = .000976) of reaching the wiser decision. Even dictatorship, is much better. A dictator, acting alone under the above constraints, would have 1 in 2 chances of selecting the wiser course of action. (p. 14)

Does dictatorship really give us a better statistical chance of arriving at the wiser decision than forced consensus? Probably not. If the probability of any given decision maker choosing the wise decision (W) over the silly decision (S) is .5, then Zajonc is right that the binomial probability of ten out of ten decision makers choosing W is less than one in a thousand. However, given that the probability of choosing W is equal to the probability of choosing S, the probability of ten out of ten decision makers choosing S is exactly the same.

Now here's the problem: Without the requirement of unanimity, the probability of a unanimous outcome is additive: $2(.5^{10})$ = .001952. That is, spontaneous unanimity of decisions from ten unconstrained decision makers is an improbable type of outcome. Roughly 998 times in 1,000 we would expect that the outcome would not be unanimous.

However, if unanimity is *required*, as Zajonc stated in his example, then there are only two possible outcomes. Either everyone chooses S or else everyone chooses W. In this case, the probability of the group of ten decision makers reaching the wise decision must be reconditionalized on the new possibility space, which has been pruned from eleven possible outcomes to a mere two (i.e., assuming the substitutability of decision makers).

With an even chance of choosing S or W, the probability that the team of consensus-bound decision makers would reach the wiser decision is .5—not $.5^{10}$.

From a probability standpoint alone, the chances of reaching the wiser decision is the same for ten consensus-bound decision makers as it is for a single dictator. However, this analysis ignores the causal bases that give rise to the equal chance of choosing W over S. A scenario that ascribes a random chance of picking the wiser of two plans to expert decision makers is maximally pessimistic—the decision might as well be made by flipping a coin. Why would expert decision makers have such poor chances? Surely, they would have a considerable amount of information at their disposal, but with such poor chances of choosing wisely it is likely that at least some of the information that they were acting on would be misleading. Moreover, different decision makers would probably vary in what they knew. Each might be misinformed in one way or another, but they would be misinformed about different things. Thus, a team of consensus-bound decision makers would have an opportunity of doing better than chance provided that they were required to express the evidentiary bases for their decisions and other members were encouraged to challenge the evidence with appropriate counter-evidence.

By contrast, a lone dictator would not have this advantage. Of course, if the consensus reached by a team of decision makers was imposed by a leader in a manner that implied "you are either with me or against me," then the most would not be made of the consensus-reaching process. After all, leaders can hardly expect to reap the benefits of consensus if they impose the requirement in a dictatorial manner.

Zajonc proposed that "of the various decision schemes one can imagine, unanimity is absolutely the worst" (p. 14). I disagree. Reaching a unanimous decision without unanimity being imposed as a constraint may be improbable, but dictatorship as a mode of political decision making is certainly worse. If you doubt this claim, just look at the statistics (e.g., Rummel, 1994). On average, dictators still offer much more favorable odds for bringing about outcomes like genocide, democide, and war than even the most narrow-minded democratically-elected leaders. Dictators also tend to stick around for much longer given that they cannot be voted out of office.

Notwithstanding the importance of critically examining the policies of the current U.S. administration and, for that matter, other administrations, social scientists and ordinary citizens alike should be careful how they rank the alternatives.

References

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