

**Can someone in the minority coherently believe that the majority will
ought to be enacted?**

In this essay I will present the view that a member of a minority *can* coherently believe that the majority will ought to be enacted. In order to demonstrate this I will begin with a brief exposition of the system under which we will attempt to answer the question of our title – namely the system of democracy. In Section 2 I will present reasons for believing that my conclusion may be problematic by introducing the ‘paradox of democracy’. My third and fourth sections are dedicated to an exposition and refutation of some initial proposal of how to resolve the paradox and thus derive my conclusion. In my final section I shall introduce a new analysis of voting that allows us to coherently show how a member of a minority can believe the majority will should be enacted.

1. Democracy

Most of the western world functions under some sort of democratic system. Democracy is a system of government in which the power is vested in the people. As democracy has evolved as a system from one capable of governing the Athenian city state to a practical system of government for a modern nation certain features of it have changed. In the United Kingdom we are largely governed by a number of representatives who are themselves democratically voted into this position of power by the country’s population. In this sense we are governed by a system of democracy by proxy. This system is necessitated by the practical problems of vesting power in a population of millions.

Regardless of the details of the particular democratic system in question, several important features of democracy are recurrent. The one which we will be analysing in detail in this essay is that of the majoritarian principle. This is the principle that “all disputes which require political settlement should be settled by a majority vote, or by elected persons in accordance with the

sentiments of the majority.”¹ It is this principle which is at the heart of any democracy and it is also that which leads to the so-called ‘paradox of democracy’.

2. The Paradox of Democracy

The democratic system must involve some system of expressing assent or dissent for a particular policy. This is normally conceived of as a system of voting. Thus, during a democratic election a man may vote for a party whose policy is A. In casting this vote for this party it seems sensible to suggest that he may believe that policy A ought to be enacted. However, as it happens another party receives the majority of the votes. This party does not support A, but rather has policy B – one that is incompatible with A. Given our subject’s adherence to the majoritarian principle it seems that he must now be committed to the judgement that B ought to be enacted. This commitment to opposing policies gives rise to the paradox of democracy.

This simple but problematic issue has been the focus of much philosophical attention. An overwhelming desire to rescue democracy from the clutches of paradox has given rise to a great many attempted resolutions of this problem – some more successful than others. Many of these proposed solutions focus on the act of voting and what is expressed in this action.

3. An Initial Solution

Barry suggests that we analyse the ‘primary’ and ‘corrected’ wishes of the voter. The primary wish may be of any nature but the secondary wish is one for an outcome in accord with the desire of the majority. For example, one may have the primary wish that gambling be made illegal. This primary desire would lead one to vote against legal gambling in a referendum. However, in

¹ Barry, *Political Argument*

accord with the majoritarian principle, the democrat must also desire that gambling be legal if the vote shows that the majority desires this. This latter desire is the 'corrected' wish and Barry claims that this is not inconsistent "provided that the first is taken as a qualified assertion."² By this he means that it must be taken as expressing the manner in which the person will exert his voting influence on the outcome rather than as a wish for that to be the result. This is deemed analogous to the runner who desires that he win the race but also desires that the fastest runner wins whoever that may be.

A slightly different though equivalent approach to the problem is made by claiming that one votes in accord with some interim evaluation – the evaluation that A ought to be enacted provided enough people are of the same opinion.³ One then revises this interim opinion into a final opinion when voting has revealed the will of the majority. Thus, the paradox appears to be dispelled as one does not hold contradictory opinions at one time, but rather revises one's opinion and thus simply holds different opinions at different time. There only appears to be paradox because of the necessity of voting in accord with one's own convictions in order to ascertain the will of the majority.

I believe this attempted resolution of our problem to be flawed and, as such, rather ineffective. It seems inaccurate to claim that in voting one is not expressing a desire for one outcome over another. I am sure that many fervent Labour supporters genuinely desire that Labour win the election as they cast their votes. It therefore seems that we must concede the primary desire of the individual to be that the policy they vote for be enacted. This assertion means that we must amend Barry's solution if it is to retain any power. An obvious way to do this is to claim that a desire for policy A may be reconciled with the majoritarian principle by qualifying it as desire that A be enacted if this is the majority view. Given this qualification it seems that our subject will have no problem in endorsing B if the majority votes for it and as such the paradox is resolved.

² Barry, *ibid*

³ Wollheim, *A Paradox in the Theory of Democracy*

However, I propose that this solution fails. This failure is demonstrable through its clear descriptive inaccuracy of the voter's desire and the further problems it must lead to if it were accurate. Wollheim divides these problems into four.⁴ This description of the voter's thought process must lead us to declare anyone who knowingly votes for a lost cause to be acting irrationally. If one acts on a conditional judgement knowing the antecedent to be unfulfilled it is obvious that one's support is utterly pointless. I believe that this is rather too strong a claim against those who engage in such voting practices. Furthermore, this description of the voter commits him to believing that the moral value of a policy depends entirely upon what the majority of the electorate thinks. I do not believe that many democrats would defend this view. Rather, I propose that many voters believe that the policy they vote for ought to be enacted and that this is in some sense independent of how many people vote for the policy. Additionally, a defence of this view would lead to problems in formulating any primary desire. One would only ever rationally vote in accordance with one's perception of the majority view. This would lead to everyone looking to everyone else in order to assess how to vote.

If we take this view of the voter and the voting process it seems that no voter makes a declaration about how the world should be. Thus the purely conditional judgement that a vote is supposed to entail seems to negate any kind of authority that most of us would like to believe a democratic verdict to have. Perhaps the most alarming conclusion that one may draw from the proposed view is that any voter may as well have voted for any policy – for if one is committed to the majoritarian principle then one is committed to any conditional statement of the form 'A ought to be enacted if enough people vote for it.' Therefore this view of voting fails to take into account any personal preference on the part of the voter.

It seems that our initial proposal for a solution to the paradox of democracy fails. It relies upon a view of voting that is factually inaccurate in its description

⁴ Wollheim, *ibid*

of the process and normatively redundant due to the further problems it leads to.

4. Further Attempts to Resolve the Paradox

Wollheim's own suggestion fares more favourably in the face of criticism but I believe that ultimately it fails too. It is proposed that the two assertions "A ought to be enacted" and "B ought to be enacted", where A is the individual's choice of policy and B is the incompatible choice of the majority, are compatible. Wollheim suggests that this is so on the basis of a distinction between 'oblique' and 'direct' moral principles. Direct moral principles refer to specific events and actions, for example 'Murder is wrong' or 'Gambling is permissible'. Oblique moral principles "refer to the morality of actions, policies, motives etc" – for example 'What is willed by the people is right'.

In light of this distinction it is proposed that 'A ought to be the case' and 'B ought to be the case' are asserted as judgements under different types of principles. 'A ought to be the case' may be asserted as direct principle. By contrast, 'B ought to be the case' may be asserted as a derivation of an oblique moral principle. This serves as a way out of the paradox so long as the direct and oblique principles are not themselves incompatible. Indeed, this usually seems to be the case when the oblique principle is the majoritarian principle – as it is in the case of the democrat.

It seems that Wollheim himself is rather aware that his thesis is somewhat lacking in substance. He refers to explanation as carried out "rather sketchily" and "far from satisfactory", even referring to his reasons for proffering this particular solution as "rather disappointing". When he has done such a thorough job of removing confidence in his own theory it seems little more need be done. Hopefully it will suffice to say, in accordance with Honderich, that we should hope to resolve our problem "without having recourse to

arcane doctrines about the language of morality.”⁵ While this in itself may not be a sufficiently devastating criticism to lead to outright rejection of Wollheim’s theory I propose that it *is* sufficient to give us cause to look elsewhere for more concrete and assured proposals than we find in his work.

5. A Fresh Analysis of Voting

Honderich proposes that the paradox of democracy may be resolved through a fresh analysis of voting and the judgements normally involved when a man votes for policy A over policy B. These judgements are threefold:

- 1) Policy A being enacted with majority support is preferable to policy B being enacted with majority support.
- 2) If policy A has majority support it ought to be enacted.
- 3) If policy B has majority support it ought to be enacted.⁶

The first judgment is that which gives the voter cause to vote for one policy rather than another. However, the heavy emphasis on majority support in all three judgements also captures the democratic spirit of adherence to the majoritarian principle. No true democrat can believe that a policy should be enacted ‘no matter what’ – it must always have majority support. Thus casting a vote for A is not making a statement that A should be enacted no matter what the circumstances – it is simply expressing a preference for A within a democratic system. This view avoids the difficulty of tying personal preference to majority opinion. We do not find any claims that the voter would believe B to be preferable to A if the majority thinks this is the case – rather there is a claim that adherence to the higher principle of the majoritarian is preferable to A being enacted without majority support. Indeed, if the majority does vote for B, our subject can rationally support B without causing any conflict with 1) – judgement that initially caused him to vote for A.

⁵ Honderich, *A Difficulty with Democracy*

⁶ Honderich, *ibid*

It seems that this analysis of voting avoids all of the problems that besieged those analyses entailed in our earlier attempts to resolve the paradox. One cannot say that a vote cast for A in the knowledge that the majority will vote for B is pointless or irrational here. This is because under our present view of voting we are not committed to a vote consisting only in a conditional judgement whose antecedent is known to be false. Furthermore, this view of the voting procedure retains the authority we intuitively prescribe to the decisions made under democratic systems. This authority is derived from each voter making a judgement of the type described in 1).

One may object that no voter actually carries out such a thought process and as such we may level the same charge of descriptive inaccuracy against this thesis as we did against those discussed earlier. However, I deny this claim. Whilst the voter may not consciously think the thoughts presented above each time he votes this is not sufficient to refute Honderich's description. If one were to ask the voter some relevant questions – such as whether they think that A should be enacted even if the vast majority were opposed to it – the true democrat would surely answer that I should not. I believe that further questioning would reveal some thought pattern reflective of Honderich's description. There may well be policies that some people feel so strongly about that they would support their enactment despite only minority support. However, in this case the lack of adherence to the majoritarian principle fails to qualify them as a democrat and they therefore fall outside the scope of this discussion.

I therefore propose that under this analysis of the act of voting in a democratic system a member of minority *can* coherently believe that the majority will be enacted. Furthermore, this coherence can be achieved under the scope of an analysis that is true to our current understandings of democracy and thus the possibility is a practical and, indeed, rather everyday one.