

The voter who wasn't there: Referenda, representation and abstention

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Abstract. We analyze single binary-choice voting rules and identify the presence of the No-Show paradox in this simple setting, as a consequence of specific turnout or quorum conditions that are included in actual rules. Since these conditions are meant to ensure a representative outcome, we formalize this concern and reach our main result: no voting rule can ensure representation if abstention is possible, unless restrictive assumptions are made on the preference domain of abstainers. We then focus on the main referendum systems and show that appropriate restrictions do make them compatible with representation.

The main purpose of our paper is, however, to provide a tool for referendum design: rather than imposing arbitrary restrictions on the preference domain of non-voters, we recommend instead that a conscious choice be made on how abstention is to be interpreted and that this choice be used to derive the corresponding referendum rule.

The idea for this paper started with some jocose but insightful notes written by José João Marques da Silva at the time of the first referendum held in Portugal (1998). When José João passed away in August 2000, ISEG lost a bright, interested and friendly scholar. May we dedicate this paper to his memory. This paper was presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Public Choice Society and Economic Science Association, San Diego, CA and a preliminary version was presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the European Public Choice Society, Paris. We would like to thank Mathew Braham, Moshé Machover, Eric Maskin, Vincent Merlin, Hannu Nurmi, Katri Sieberg, Frank Steffen, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments. The usual proviso applies.

1 Introduction

Direct democracy is increasingly popular in European countries¹. While countries like Switzerland [8], Italy and Ireland have been using direct democracy procedures for decades, and for a great variety of issues, in the last decade we have seen France, Austria, Sweden, Finland [3], Norway, and (repeatedly) Denmark [17] holding referenda on issues related to European Integration – such as the decision to join the Union, the ratification of Treaties and the adoption of the Euro –, as well as Portugal introducing the referendum institution to decide on abortion laws.

Although the use of referenda is widespread, it is far from homogeneous: differences include the right of initiative (group of citizens, Parliament, President or monarch), the object of the question (constitutional amendment, ordinary Act approved by the Parliament, bill proposal, local issue), the intended effects of the referendum (approval or veto), the domain of voters (all electors or electors of particular states) and the rules that ultimately decide the outcome [12]. For the purposes of our paper, we restrict the analysis to the typical referendum, that is held to decide on a unique change to the status quo – and the citizens are called to either ratify or veto that change. From here on, we will simply examine the case where a vote for ‘No’ is a vote for the status quo whereas a vote for ‘Yes’ supports the change – and we also study the consequences of this assumption and the extent to which it is costless.

The public and social choice literature has seldom focused on simple Yes-No voting for an equally simple reason: in the presence of just two alternatives – a change versus the status quo –, the Condorcet-Arrow problems of collective choice disequilibrium vanish and most decision-making rules lead to the same outcome. A simple majority rule (associated with some tie-breaking rule) should then be used, ensuring the choice of the Condorcet winner². Nurmi [14], in his analysis of referenda, concludes that every referendum should indeed be restricted to a unique binary decision in order to avoid agenda manipulation, and also that its result should be binding. In turn, the relevance of the simple majority rule in the simple binary decision setting was established by May’s [10] well-known characterization: it is the unique well-defined rule that is both anonymous and neutral (i.e., independent of the names of the voters, and of the names of the alternatives, respectively) and that responds positively to changes in the preferences of voters. We find further support for the use of the majority rule in the work of Felsenthal and Machover [6]: defining ternary voting games as a generalization of simple voting games where abstention³ is an additional option for

¹ Apart from India, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands and the United States (on a federal level), all major democracies have used national referenda.

² The Condorcet winner is the alternative that defeats all others in a pairwise comparison.

³ We also use the term ‘abstention’ defined as simple non-voting.