motivational orientation and the nature of consensual decision processes: a triangulated approach Fritz Gaenslen

Area specialists have observed that one way elite decision processes can vary is in the proportion of the decision-making group seen as necessary to support group action: decision-makers can aim for consensus, or they can aim for less inclusive support. Is this distinction of theoretical significance? I argue that it is through an examination of three sources: (1) rational-choice analyses of unanimity and majority rules; (2) social psychological studies of the effects of these rules in the laboratory; and (3) descriptions of dispute resolution processes as these appear in Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and American fiction. These sources indicate that consensual decision processes tend either to inhibit collective action, induce cognitive effort and commitment, or promote particular definitions of issues depending on the motivational orientation of decision-makers—on whether they are interest-maximizers, information-processors, or social beings. This conclusion, I argue, has broad implications for the study of elite decision making.

The Brezhnev politburo, widely characterized as an oligarchy or cartel (Gelman 1984: 51–52; Roeder 1984: 176–78), has often been described as having made decisions consensually (Jones 1984; Valenta 1991: 186–87). Indeed, Brezhnev himself asserted in 1973—albeit for the benefit of Western journalists—that politburo decisions were reached by consensus “99.99 percent of the time” (Hough and Fainsod 1979: 472). Moreover decision-makers in this period may have seen consensual processes as not only politically expedient, but as normatively desirable: the period was marked, after all, by efforts to shore up and strengthen those Party rules intended to make the top leadership of the Soviet Union more truly “collective” (Gill 1985: 222–23).

Consensual decision processes have similarly been seen as a notable feature of elite politics in China for the decade of the 1980s, at least in the sphere of economic policy. Analysts have portrayed such processes as a response, in part, to a fragmentation of authority at the top and to the complexity of the issues associated with economic reform (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal 1992: 9; Lampton 1992: 35, 51). Susan Shirk (1993: 116–28), in particular, has argued that Party leaders pursued economic reform via the method of “delegation by consensus.” By this method, as Shirk describes it, State Council leaders, astride the government bureaucracy, delegated to lower-level officials the authority to make decisions if these officials could reach consensus; if officials at one level were unable to achieve this aim, they were to pass the matter upward to the next level for another round of discussion, with deliberations proceeding until a consensus could be produced. Consensual decision processes in the 1980s may also have been assigned a certain moral significance. This is suggested by statements from Chinese officials equating consultation and “balancism” in the policy process with “fairness” (Lampton 1992: 39; Hamrin 1992: 112; Shirk 1993: 125).

Perhaps no country’s political elites have been so closely identified with consensual decision making as Japan’s. One common explanation for this emphasis posits a disjuncture between authority and power such that various governmental actors possess the authority to intervene and participate in a wide variety of issue areas but lack the power either to direct the action or to control the outcomes. The result has been described as “consensual governance” (Haley 1992: 32–34; also Samuels 1987: 260; Rohlen 1989: 31–40; McKean 1993: 88–104). Nor are structural features of the Japanese polity the only explanation offered for pursuing consensual decisions. Elite decision-makers have been said to view consensual decision processes as culturally appropriate (Calder 1988a: 28, 41; Okimoto 1989: 32), an assertion bolstered by survey evidence suggesting the appeal of such processes among both Japanese government bureaucrats (Aberbach et al. 1990: 473) and the Japanese citizenry at large (Massey 1976: 57–64; Richardson and Flanagan 1984: 192).
Implicit in the foregoing descriptions of elite decision making in the Soviet Union, China, and Japan is a recognition by area specialists that one of the ways that collective decision processes can vary is in the proportion of the decision-making group seen as necessary to support group action: decision-makers can aim for unanimity, as the preceding accounts suggest, or they can aim for less inclusive support, as the preceding accounts imply. Is this distinction of theoretical significance? Area specialists have had little to say on the matter. My purpose in this article is to demonstrate that the distinction is indeed of theoretical note, but also to suggest that its precise significance in any actual case is likely to be difficult to identify and to depend, at least in part, on the motivational orientation of the participants. This conclusion, I shall argue, has broad implications for the study of elite decision making.

Why have area specialists had little to say about the implications of consensual decision processes? The principal difficulty has been a lack of access to these processes at the level of who says what to whom with what intention and with what effect. Thus Jerry Hough complained in 1979 that to say that the Brezhnev politburo made decisions consensually was to say not very much at all:

*Does the politburo usually defer to the member most expert on a policy question? Is the presumed balance of opinion within the Central Committee as a whole a crucial factor? Does everybody simply defer to the General Secretary when he has a firm opinion? Does the General Secretary often have a firm opinion or is he an instinctive compromiser? (Hough and Fainsod 1979: 473)*

These were the sorts of questions to ask, Hough maintained, about the structure of power within the politburo. A consensus, he rightly concluded, can be produced in a variety of ways.

Nor is the sort of information we require likely to follow automatically from improved access to archival materials—memoranda, reports, and minutes of meetings. First, much of the discussion and persuasion that goes into making high-level government decisions occurs away from the sorts of formal settings that generate minutes and notes. Second, although archival materials are usually produced for institutional reasons and not for public consumption, they may nevertheless be tainted by image-management concerns. Their authors may plausibly be seen as presenting a favorable image of themselves to immediate superiors, other elites with access to the documents, and perhaps future historians. Finally, even what gets written down at formal meetings will invariably reflect the inclinations and limitations of the writer.

So, as Lenin might have put it: what is to be done? The approach adopted here is to seek insight from three different sources, each at some remove from the elite decision-makers of our concern: (1) “rational-choice” analyses of unanimity and majority decision rules; (2) studies by social psychologists exploring the effects of these rules in the laboratory; and (3) descriptions of dispute resolution processes as these appear in Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and American fiction. Taken together, these sources suggest that decision processes aimed at consensus are likely to differ in significant ways from decision processes aimed at less inclusive support and that the nature of these differences will depend on whether decision-makers are interest-maximizers, information-processors, or social beings.

1 For a more extended discussion of these points and a comparison of the minutes of ExComm Meeting No. 7 on October 27, 1962, with the secret White House tape recording of the same meeting, see Gaenslen (1992: 172–76).

decision makers as interest-maximizers

Let us consider first the insights of rational-choice theorists. Rational-choice theorists who have explored the properties of
unanimity and majority rules have largely done so with the object of designing or evaluating public institutions. The underlying assumption in much of this work is that institutions ought to be designed for, or evaluated within, a context in which (1) each decision-maker independently develops his or her own preferences prior to group deliberation; (2) these preferences are non-identical among decision-makers; (3) formal voting power is distributed equally among decision-makers; and (4) each decision-maker is motivated to maximize his or her own material self-interest. In this context, the key difference between a unanimity rule and, majority rule, assuming a constant number of participants, is the greater difficulty of reaching agreement under unanimity. From this greater difficulty, a number of consequences have been said to follow (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Rae 1975; Mueller 1989: 43–52; Herzberg 1992).

First, the process of seeking unanimity is likely to be more lengthy through the need to accommodate more interests. Second, it is likely to involve a fuller discussion of the issues. Third, the desire for unanimity is likely to induce a greater effort to find logrolling solutions—to assess differences in the intensity of preferences among participants in order to facilitate mutually beneficial exchanges. As a result, a unanimity process is more likely to produce pareto-efficient outcomes. And, of course, the requirement of unanimity is more likely to result in failure to reach a decision in the first place.

This greater inability of decision-makers to take collective action under a unanimity rule has suggested to rational-choice theorists several additional consequences. In a positive light, because it tends to inhibit action, unanimity is more likely than majority rule to promote stability. More negatively, unanimity is more likely to support the status quo (and existing inequities). Furthermore, the incentive is greater under unanimity for individual participants to falsify their preferences either as a means of preventing a decision or as a means of extortion. Similarly, the incentive is greater to engage in surreptitious behavior, to buy public support with private side-payments. Finally, for those who desire collective action, the incentive is greater under unanimity to attempt to reduce the size of the decision making group.

In summary, rational-choice accounts have assumed that decision-makers are motivated to behave as interest-maximizers and that their interests are likely to conflict. Insofar as these accounts give emphasis to a single conclusion, then, it is that the adoption of consensual processes is likely to promote a policy stasis born of an inability to act, a stasis that lends itself to being characterized as “inertia,” “stagnation” or “decay” (We may note in passing that these words have frequently been applied to the Brezhnev era.) However, studies by social psychologists conjure up a different image of consensual decision processes; but then the decision makers in these studies have a different motivational orientation.

decision-makers as information-processors

Social psychologists who have compared the effects of unanimity and majority rules have done so largely through the study of laboratory groups. This work tends to display two noteworthy characteristics. First, the groups tend to be composed of individuals who do not know one another and who will not see one another again once their group’s task is completed. Second, the tasks themselves tend to be cooperative in nature and to be extraordinarily well-defined. The activity of decision making, then, appears as a largely cognitive endeavor, with decision-makers less motivated to maximize their material self-interest than to hold valid opinions about the world. These studies ask: do decision-makers seeking unanimity notice different things about a shared task and reason differently about it than decision-makers seeking less inclusive support? The key difference between a unanimity rule and majority rule, they suggest, is the greater thoughtfulness—the more concentrated cognitive effort—that a unanimity rule is likely to induce.

Several findings support this conclusion directly. First, unanimity-seekers have been found to uncover more relevant facts than
majority-seekers, even with the duration of deliberations held constant (Hastie et al. 1983: 84–85). Second, unanimity-seekers, more than majority-seekers, have been found to devote attention to minority viewpoints within the group (Foss 1981: 1061; Hastie et al. 1983: 108–12, 78). Attention to minority viewpoints, in turn, has been found to encourage “divergent thought” and to reduce the likelihood of “tunnel vision” (Nemeth 1986). Third, factions and proposals for action have been found to emerge later in unanimity-seeking groups than in majority-seeking ones (Hastie et al. 1983: 95). Thus, unanimity-seekers would seem to have less opportunity to take “cognitive shortcuts” and to shift their attention away from what is being said to who is doing the talking (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989). In sum, these findings portray unanimity deliberations as more data-driven than solution-driven, with unanimity-seekers more likely to ask “what has happened and why?” and majority-seekers more likely to ask “what should we do?” (Hastie et al. 1983: 163).

These different styles of deliberation, in turn, suggest differences in the decisions themselves. First, unanimity-seekers would seem more likely than majority-seekers to recommend doing nothing. For majority-seekers, the stronger inclination to ask “what should we do?” implies a greater readiness to do something. Second, unanimity-seekers would seem more likely than majority-seekers to take the time to design new solutions for problems rather than adopting ready-made solutions or engaging in “satisficing.” For majority-seekers, the greater emphasis on taking action suggests a reduced focus on the probability of success. Third, because of a better fit between problem and solution, unanimity-seekers would seem more likely than majority-seekers to produce high quality decisions. Numerous laboratory results are consistent with these conclusions (Bower 1965; Hall and Watson 1971; Nemeroff and King 1975; Hollomon and Hendrick 1972; Thompson et al. 1988).

A final set of laboratory findings suggests that unanimity-seekers are more likely than majority-seekers to internalize their group’s decision and to feel committed to it. Laboratory decision-makers asked to achieve unanimity have been found more likely than those operating under less stringent requirements to be satisfied with the decision (Kerr et al. 1976: 290; Hare 1980: 138; Tjosvold and Field 1983: 504; Schweiger et al. 1986: 66; Kaplan and Miller 1987: 310; Miller 1989); to regard the decision process itself as fair (Kerr et al. 1976: 290; Nemeth 1977: 47; Hastie et al. 1983: 76; Kaplan and Miller 1987: 310); to agree privately with the decision (Nemeth 1977: 47; Hastie et al. 1983: 7; Miller 1989); to be willing to work with their fellow decision-makers in the future (Schweiger et al. 1986: 65); to be impressed with the quality of their fellows’ performance (Hastie et al. 1983: 76); and to be impressed with the extent of their own influence (Hastie et al. 1983: 77, 80). This greater internalization of the decision under unanimity suggests two further consequences. First, unanimity decisions are more likely than majority ones to be implemented; and second they are more likely to be resistant to change.

In summary, laboratory studies of the effects of unanimity and majority rules have tended to focus on decision-makers who are motivated to behave as information-processors rather than interest-maximizers. Insofar as these studies emphasize a single conclusion, it is that a consensus requirement is likely to promote decisions of high quality painstakingly arrived at and reluctantly abandoned. Of special note, then, is the perspective that these studies offer on the connection between a consensus requirement and policy stasis. Where the rational-choice accounts see policy stasis as resulting from deadlock, from the inability of decision-makers to act (i.e., ‘stagnation’), laboratory studies attribute this same stasis to an unwillingness to act, to the commitment by decision-makers to their own past decisions and to the hard work and cognitive effort that went into producing them. (Here we may note in passing that this latter description resonates well with descriptions, not of the Brezhnev era, but of policymaking in Japan in the heyday of the Liberal Democratic Party). Still, our discussion of the impact of motivational orientation on the nature of consensual decision processes is not yet complete. We need to consider decision-makers who are motivated to behave as social beings.

For evidence that the more cognitive effort expended acquiring an opinion, the more the opinion will be internalized, resistant to counterpersuasion, and predictive of subsequent behavior; see Petty and Cacioppo (1986: 175–82). For evidence relating differences in
decision makers as social beings

Most studies of elite decision making do not attempt to show how particular decisions fit into the ongoing lives of the elites who make them. Indeed, analysts frequently assume, at least implicitly, that elite decision-makers set aside their everyday concerns—put their lives “on hold,” as it were—as they come to grapple with events defined by the analyst as having “world-historical” significance. The rational-choice and laboratory literatures discussed above rest, in effect, on a similar assumption. The decision-makers who appear in these accounts are largely asocial. In neither account are a decision-maker’s colleagues anything more than obstacles or aides in the decision-maker’s own pursuit of aims (self-interest or truth) external to the decision-making group. Human behavior within the group appears unconstrained by concerns about hierarchical status, friendship, past history, expected interaction, or more generally, the approval or disapproval of one’s colleagues. In short, in neither account are the decision-makers social beings.

political elites as social beings

Do concerns about relations with one’s colleagues sometimes affect the decision processes of political elites? One reason to think so is suggested by the nature of the decision-making tasks that political elites commonly confront. The need to reconcile multiple competing values and interests, uncertainty about the relation between alternatives and outcomes, and ambiguity even about collective purposes—all of these standard features of public problems would seem to provide elites with both the incentive and opportunity to reconstrue their situations in such a way as to ease the stress of choice (George 1980: 26–28; Steinbruner 1974: 121–22; Gaenslen 1986: 82–85). One way for elites to ease this stress is to import into the decision-making arena their concerns about their relations with their colleagues; the approval of one’s colleagues can enhance self-esteem, friendships, career prospects, and bureaucratic resources. These concerns may provide elite decision-makers with a more straightforward basis for choice than their analyses of the public problem at hand.

Nor should we see the desire for confident choices as the sole reason for elite attention to social relationships. To the extent that elite status is itself both desirable and made problematic by the underdevelopment of impersonal “rules of the game,” we should expect the creation, maintenance, and alteration of social relationships to be central to the ordinary conduct of political life. A well-known maxim of elite politics in the United States has it that in order to get along, you have to go along, at least some of the time. This maxim would seem to have near-universal applicability. Let us consider briefly political elites in the Soviet Union, China, and Japan.

In Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, no set rules specified a clear career ladder to the top, the limits to power associated with top positions, or the length of tenure to which high-level officeholders were entitled. How, then, did one get to the top, what could one do there, and how long could one stay? The answers were a function, in part, of one’s relations with one’s colleagues, and these relations’ were the object of ongoing cultivation. This state of affairs was made manifest in efforts by top leaders to consolidate and expand patron-client networks—offering career opportunities in exchange for loyalty and support (Gill 1980; Miller 1989; Klugtnan 1989; Willerton 1992)—and in the unwillingness or inability of top leaders to establish clear jurisdictional boundaries for easing the resolution of policy disputes (Fairbanks 1988). In broad brush, if not in precise detail, a similar portrait could be painted of the organization of elite politics in China for the decade of the 1980s (Shirk 1993: 55–91; Manion 1993: 45–76; Li and Pye 1992; Shambaugh 1993; Dittmer and Wu 1993).

The Japanese case, of course, is somewhat different. Indeed, by world standards, impersonal “rules of the game” are well-developed in Japan. Nevertheless, the important elite activities of faction-building, money-raising, and selecting a prime minister...
continue to be dominated by informal processes shaped, in part, by social relationships. Furthermore, as in the Soviet Union and China, the relatively weak development at the top of the system of mechanisms for the resolution of policy disputes can be seen as providing some scope for concerns about social relationships to intrude directly into the policy-making process (Campbell 1984: 320; Calder 1988b: 528–29; Hayao 1993).

In summary, we have grounds for believing that political elites are sometimes motivated to behave as social beings.

fiction as a source of data

How might decision-makers’ concerns about their social relations with one another affect the nature of consensual decision processes? Descriptions in fiction of how people resolve interpersonal disputes offer a way of addressing this question that has several advantages over more traditional methods. First, fiction can offer more complete descriptions of both social relationships and influence processes than are commonly available in archival materials. Second, fiction provides a way to circumvent the problems of faulty memory and self-serving responses that we might encounter if we interview decision-makers. Third, fiction permits access to a multiplicity of contexts without the problem of investigator contamination associated with the direct observation of decision processes. Finally, in contrast to the laboratory, the settings of fiction tend to be “natural” settings: characters have “real” relationships with one another and the issues they confront have “real” meaning.

This last point merits elaboration. Although laboratory experimenters can, with effort, recruit subjects who have social relationships with one another, or even, to some degree, create these relationships in the laboratory, they are poorly situated to construct a context that will not strike their subjects as artificial in the light of these relationships. Laboratory tasks tend to be singularly well-defined by the experimenter and to be without consequence outside the experiment itself. A realistic assessment of the effects of social relationships on the nature of consensual decision processes requires that decision-makers face issues that are both meaningful to them and ill-structured enough so as to permit them some leeway in defining that meaning. Fiction tends to describe characters in just such circumstances.

Of course, the use of fiction as a source of data presents its own difficulties. These will be considered at the close of our discussion of “methods.”

methods

At their most extensive, the data consist of 1,000 interpersonal disagreements. An interpersonal disagreement was said to exist whenever two characters expressed to one another that they had opposing interests or contradictory evaluations of some state of affairs. Examples of disagreements include a student arguing with a professor over a course grade, a rickshaw puller and his customer haggling over the fare, two peasants arguing about which is the best spot in the market for selling their cooperative’s vegetables, and a geisha and her patron arguing about the nature of their relationship.

The disagreements were drawn, in order of their appearance, from short stories and novels selected at random from six different lists: (1) Soviet Russian fiction, government-controlled and published in Moscow between 1946 and 1970; (2) samizdat fiction, written in the Soviet Union but smuggled to the West without undergoing Soviet censorship; (3) government-controlled Chinese fiction published between 1951 and 1976 in Beijing; (4) Chinese fiction not subject to government control published in China between 1918 and 1949; (5) Japanese fiction published between 1900 and 1970; and (6) American fiction published between 1900 and 1970. Although these lists do not define the universe of published fiction for each society they are adequate for present purposes: we require a substantial number of disagreements and a sufficient number of authors so as not to be overly dependent on the particular worldviews of particular authors. Of the 514 works by 272 different authors that were read, 337 contained...
disagreements; 1,000 of these were examined.

American disagreements were included in the analysis to aid in assessing the generalizability of the results. Because Americans frequently have been described as more individualist and less collectivist—as less sensitive to social relations—than Russians, Chinese, or Japanese (Triandis 1990; Gaenslen 1986), we have reason to wonder whether the effects of social relations on consensual decision processes will differ from one society to another.

Our analysis requires that we pay attention to three sets of variables. First, in examining interpersonal disagreements in fiction, we need to distinguish between consensual and nonconsensual outcomes. A consensual outcome was one in which each disputant was “very happy,” “satisfied,” or “neither happy nor unhappy” with the result of the dispute. A nonconsensual outcome was one in which at least one disputant was “dissatisfied” or “very unhappy” with the result of the dispute.

Second, we need a measure of the social relationship between disputants immediately prior to the dispute. Here I shall focus on whether the disputants perceive each other as peers or as status unequals. Of course, the distribution of status between disputants does not exhaust the meaning of “social relationship.” I focus on this aspect for two reasons. First, cross-cultural evidence strongly indicates that among the ways that people categorize their relations with one another, status similarities and differences are widely granted considerable weight (Wish et al. 1976; Hofstede 1980; Triandis 1989; Fiske 1992; Haslam 1994). Second, we can expect the status dimension of social relationships to feature prominently in the world of elite politics. As noted above, vertically arranged factions of patrons and clients are thought to permeate politics in the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. Similarly, U.S. presidents can be seen as situated in vertical relation to their advisers.

Finally, we need a measure of the decision-making process, of what disputants say to one in the course of deliberation. Here I shall distinguish between coercive, expert, normative, and referent arguments. These were defined as follows:

When two people disagree and seek to resolve their disagreement, each may try to persuade or influence the other as to the merits of his or her particular position. A coercive argument consists of one disputant telling the other “Do it this way or I will punish you,” or “Do it this way and I will reward you.”

An expert argument consists of one disputant telling the other “Do it this way and the environment will cause such and such a consequence,” or “Do it this way because it will work best.”

A normative argument consists of one disputant telling the other “Do it this way because it is right.” A normative argument is an appeal to morality, ethics, ideology, or legitimacy.

When one person is responsive to another out of personal regard for that other, referent argument is operating. Essentially, a referent argument consists of one person saying, “Do it this way because it’s me who is asking you,” and the other replying, “Okay, I’ll do it for you.”

To illustrate the use of these arguments in the fiction, consider a confrontation between a mother (“Mrs. Li”) and her married daughter shortly after the unification of China by the Nationalists in 1927. The mother, the principal of a girls’ middle school, has noticed that all of her pupils have had their hair bobbed to show their revolutionary spirit. This seems reasonable to her: the men had cut off their Manchu-imposed pigtails following the collapse of the dynasty in 1911; it is only natural that women should cut their hair now. Although she is very vain about her hair she feels that her duty as a school principal requires that she too adopt the revolutionary style. When she raises the subject with her daughter, however, the daughter objects. People will laugh, the daughter tells her (expert and referent argument). The style is inappropriate for a woman her mother’s age (normative argument). The mother disagrees. In these revolutionary days all women should have their hair cut (normative argument). Why, if the style is all right for her daughter is it not all right for her (normative argument)? Her duty as a school principal requires it (normative argument).
Each type of argument was rated as “prominent,” “present,” or “absent” for each disagreement. In addition, a judgment was made as to the type of argument that was most decisive for determining the final “resolution” of the dispute.

Can fiction be read reliably? Each disagreement was identified and coded by two persons working independently of each other. Coders were college seniors or graduate students with backgrounds in literature. For some thirty variables (including the variables described above), the range of intercoder agreement extended from a high of 99.9 percent to a low of 82.4 percent. In short, what was found in the fiction was intersubjectively “there” to be found.  

Of course, the key question concerns validity. What can disagreements in fiction tell us about consensual decision processes in life? The best we can hope for, I suggest, is that authors, in choosing their fictional outcomes, tend to be constrained by reality in depicting the processes that produce these outcomes. This is to say that although frequency distributions on a single variable may not reflect reality, relationships between variables might. Does the fiction examined here meet this test? To find out, 36 findings (with a universal ring to them) were culled from the social psychology literature on conflict resolution and from the anthropological literature on dispute settlement. Two examples of such findings are:

- The more equal the disputants in status, the more likely the dispute will end in a compromise.
- The more prominent the use of coercive argument, the more likely the subsequent relationship between disputants will be harmed.

The 36 social science generalizations were explored in each of the six sets of fiction. In the four sets of uncensored fiction, the results were consistent with the social science generalizations approximately 87 percent of the time. Moreover, the supported generalizations were overwhelmingly the same ones in each set. Furthermore, in no set of uncensored fiction were the correlations systematically high or low in comparison with the correlations in the other sets. In the censored fiction, however the social science generalizations were less frequently supported. For this reason, the analyses reported below will rest only on the uncensored fiction. For the uncensored fiction, we have reason to believe that authors tended to describe human action in realistically probable terms—that this fiction can offer insight about consensual decision processes in life.

Social beings and consensual decision processes

In the rational-choice accounts of the effects of unanimity and majority decision rules, the issues decision-makers face are assumed to be a product of individual preferences (utility functions) set in stone prior to group deliberation. Similarly, in the laboratory accounts, the issues decision-makers face come already neatly packaged by the experimenter. In the fiction, however what a decision is about is not somehow “given,” but rather is constituted by, and is contingent on, what particular, socially-situated individuals say to one another. The story of the school principal’s hair, recounted above, illustrates the point nicely. What could have been a tale of competing notions of propriety, or of the prospects for continuing employment in a period of revolutionary change, instead boiled down to the question of a mother’s emotional hold on her daughter. In such a context, the key difference between a unanimity rule and majority rule is not the greater difficulty of reaching agreement under unanimity, nor is it the greater cognitive effort that a unanimity rule may be thought to induce. Instead, the key difference between the two
rules lie the in sorts of arguments they are likely to elicit as decision-makers try to define issues one way rather than another.

Our question is this: are some sorts of arguments—and issue definitions—more likely to produce consensual outcomes than others, and are these likely to vary according to whether parties to a disagreement are peers or status unequals?

Consider first, normative arguments. In general, we should expect normative arguments to be less conducive to consensual outcomes than to nonconsensual ones—that disagreements framed in normative terms should not easily lend themselves to mutually satisfying results. Moreover, we should expect this effect to be stronger for unequals than for peers. When uttered between unequals, normative arguments not only assert claims about morality, ethics, ideology or legitimacy, but, in addition, they tend to publicize the fact of hierarchy. This is so because higher status disputants often regard their own use of normative arguments as a prerogative and see the use of such arguments by “underlings” as infringing on this prerogative. Among status unequals who desire consensus, then, we should expect an inclination to conceal the fact of hierarchy by avoiding the use of normative arguments altogether. Put more broadly, we should expect the desire for consensus to inhibit consideration of the moral dimensions of issues, especially when the decision-makers are unequals.

Second, consider expert arguments. We should expect expert arguments, other things being equal, to be conducive to consensual outcomes, and we should expect them to be more positively associated with consensus for unequals than peers. When expert arguments are uttered between unequals, not only do they constitute a relatively unobtrusive and benign way of expressing disagreement, but, in addition, they tend to minimize the fact of hierarchy by pointing to what the otherwise dissimilar disputants have in common: the empirical world that they share. Put more broadly, other things being equal, we should expect the desire for consensus, especially among unequals, to encourage decision-makers to define the issues they face as technical ones, as matters for expertise.

Finally, let us consider referent arguments—requests for agreement as a personal favor. We should expect referent arguments, too, to be conducive to consensual outcomes; and, again, we should expect this association to be stronger for unequals than for peers. When referent arguments are uttered between unequals, not only do they assert the existence of a valued personal relationship, but, in addition, they tend to domesticate the fact of hierarchy by reducing the anxiety of lower status participants. Put more broadly, the desire for consensus should, in some circumstances, encourage decision-makers to define issues, not as technical matters, but as tests of personal loyalty. These hypotheses are explored in Table 1.

Table 1 presents, for both peers and unequals, the percentage of consensual and nonconsensual outcomes in the uncensored fiction produced by coercive, expert, normative, and referent arguments, respectively. The table shows, for example, that among Chinese peers, 8.3 percent of the consensually resolved disputes were settled by coercive arguments as compared to 32.0 percent of the nonconsensually resolved disputes. Thus, as the initial column labeled “difference” indicates, coercive arguments among peers were 23.7 percent less likely to produce consensual outcomes than nonconsensual ones. Given the restriction that we must regard frequency distributions in fiction as potentially unreflective of reality, the two columns labeled “difference” are the most important ones in the table because they provide the most valid information. These columns offer an answer to the question: do consensual outcomes look different from nonconsensual ones? How do our hypotheses fare?

Consistent with our hypothesis about normative arguments, Table 1 shows that, in each society, normative arguments appeared largely und conducive to consensual outcomes—and more inimical to such outcomes among unequals than among peers. Table 1 also offers some support for our hypotheses concerning expert and referent arguments. In general, both sorts of arguments appeared to encourage consensual outcomes. However the results varied from one society’s fiction to another, with expert arguments more
efficacious in some settings and referent arguments more efficacious in others. Are these different patterns in the fiction to be interpreted as cultural differences in relationship rules in the different societies? In the absence of hypotheses derived from prior work (either theoretical or empirical), and in the absence of the sorts of controlled conditions to be found in the laboratory, such a conclusion would be premature. Still, the results are suggestive enough to merit a closer look.

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In the Chinese disagreements, more than in those of the other societies, expert arguments were positively associated with consensus, and they were more positively associated for unequals than for peers. On the other hand, for both unequals and peers, referent arguments were at least as likely to produce nonconsensual outcomes as consensual ones. In the Chinese disagreements, more than the others, referent arguments had the capacity to induce compliance without at the same time providing satisfaction. In China, the fiction suggests, decision-makers who desire consensus will do best to define the issues they confront as technical ones.

In the Japanese disagreements, both expert and referent arguments were positively associated with consensual outcomes, and both were more positively associated with consensus for unequals than for peers. Still, the fiction suggests that when it comes to producing a consensus in Japan, as in China, referent arguments may be a poor second choice to expert ones—that defining issues as matters of expertise may be preferred to defining them as tests of personal loyalty. These results are consistent with the observation that favors can be seen as especially burdensome in China and Japan because of strong rules of reciprocity (Smith...
The American disagreements offer a somewhat different picture. For disputes involving peers, the surest route to consensus was via expert arguments. On the other hand, for disputes involving unequals, the road to consensus was largely paved with referent arguments. In short, the American fiction suggests that when consensus is desired, issues may come to be defined differently depending on whether the participants are peers or status unequals—that what peers construe as technical questions may evoke questions of loyalty in the minds of unequal decision-makers.

Finally, in the Russian disagreements, although expert arguments were more conducive to consensus for unequals than for peers, they were not nearly so conducive as referent arguments. Indeed, referent arguments were more strongly associated with consensus for both peers and unequals in the Russian disagreements than in the disagreements of any of the other societies. In Russia, more than elsewhere, the fiction suggests, compliance may be regarded by both peers and unequals as a small price to pay for the affirmation of a valued personal relationship.

Of course, we are on firmer ground if we focus, not on the different patterns of behavior to be found in the several sets of fiction, but on the common patterns. To summarize, all four sets of fiction portray decision-makers as sometimes motivated to behave as social beings. In particular, decision-makers are revealed through their actions as implicitly recognizing (1) that normative arguments tend to inhibit consensual outcomes; (2) that expert and/or referent arguments tend to facilitate consensual outcomes; and (3) that these tendencies are likely to operate more strongly among unequals than among peers. The results seem quite robust. They are no less evident in the American disagreements, where we might have expected an individualist insensitivity to social relationships, than in the Chinese, Japanese, and Russian disagreements. Insofar as the fiction emphasizes a single conclusion, then, it is that the adoption of a consensus requirement is likely (especially among unequals) to discourage attention to the moral dimensions of issues and to encourage a definition of issues as either technical matters or tests of personal loyalty. This conclusion calls into question the connection between a consensus requirement and policy stasis, proposed in both the rational-choice and laboratory accounts. As noted above, in the rational-choice accounts, a consensus requirement is seen as risking political deadlock and policy stagnation. In the laboratory accounts, this same requirement is seen as leading to cognitive commitment and policy continuity. The fiction, however, suggests the possibility of policy change. Where decision-makers desire consensus and are motivated to behave as social beings, we can anticipate changes that proceed incrementally, as issues are defined in narrow technical terms, or in more fitful fashion, as technical definitions compete with demonstrations of loyalty (Here we may note in passing—and in concluding—the stop-and-go progress of economic reform in China in the latter half of the 1980s.)


4 The coding instruction was as follows: “Think of the two disputing characters as disputant A and disputant B. How satisfied is A with the outcome of the dispute? 1. Very happy with the outcome. 2. Satisfied with the outcome. 3. Neither happy nor unhappy with the outcome. 4. Dissatisfied with the outcome. 5. Very unhappy with the outcome. How satisfied is B with the outcome of the dispute?” (Repeat 1–5 above.)

5 The coding instruction was as follows: “Would you say the disputing characters generally perceive each other to be peers (status equals) or
do they perceive each other as unequal in status? 1. The disputing characters are peers. 2. One disputing character is of higher status than the other. 3. One disputing character is of much higher status than the other. In the analysis reported below, categories 2 and 3 are combined.

6 The coding instruction for the summary judgment was as follows: “Which type of argument best explains the outcome of the dispute? That is, which type of argument appears most decisive for the way the conflict is finally settled? 1. Coercive argument. 2. Expert argument. 3. Normative argument. 4. Referent argument.”

7 All of the coders were American citizens. Two coders had backgrounds in Japanese literature, one in Russian literature, one in French literature, and three in American literature. Copies of the codebook are available upon request from the author.

8 The 36 social science generalizations, the sources from which they are drawn, and the correlations exploring each generalization in each of the six sets of fiction are reported in Gaenslen (1982).

conclusion

Our analysis began with a recognition, shared by students of Soviet, Chinese, and Japanese politics, that one way elite decision processes can vary is in the proportion of the decision-making group seen as necessary to support group action. Decision-makers can aim for consensus, we observed, or they can aim for something less. In this article, I have argued that the distinction between consensual and nonconsensual processes is theoretically significant. I presented this argument through an examination of three sources: rational-choice analyses of unanimity and majority decision rules, social psychological studies of the effects of these rules in the laboratory, and descriptions of dispute resolution processes in fiction. These sources suggest that consensual decision processes tend either to inhibit collective action, induce cognitive effort and commitment, or promote particular definitions of issues depending on the motivational orientation of decision-makers—on whether they are interest-maximizers, information-processors, or social beings. This conclusion has broad implications for the study of elite decision making.

The principal lesson is that any account of what decision-makers do that fails to refer to their intentions, purposes, and particular circumstances is liable to prove unhelpful. As we have seen, it is not enough to know if political elites make decisions consensually. Among other things, we need to know what motivates them.

Another lesson follows. If we need to understand elite motives, then we need to develop a theory of elite attention, of the conditions that tend to arouse one motivational orientation rather than another. In principle, elites are at once, and at least, interest-maximizers, information-processors, and social beings. In practice, however, their concerns tend to vary with their circumstances. The trick is to identify these circumstances as they vary over time and from one place to another.

What methods should we use? If, in the preceding pages, fiction has claimed “pride of space,” I have not meant to grant it pride of place. Ideally, we want to know of elite decision-makers who says what to whom with what intention and with what effect. Against this standard, all methods appear unsatisfactory and none deserving of our outright condemnation. Combining archival materials and interviews seems to me a reasonable way to go about identifying the salient “structures”of elite politics. The implications of structure for process, however, might better be pursued in the laboratory via experiment and simulation. And what about fiction? That our girls’ school principal is an imaginary character and not, say, a member of the Chinese Politburo is certainly a fact. But, in the circumstances, it is not much of a criticism.

references


