Consensus Is Not Unanimity:
Making Decisions Cooperatively
by Randy Schutt

What is consensus? Is it a cooperative, loving, nonviolent process in which people share their best ideas and come up with superior decisions? Or is it a coercive, manipulative, time-wasting process in which those who are most treacherous, are most verbal, or have the most time can get their way? Or is it an idealistic fantasy where every problem always has a good, simple solution that incorporates everyone’s ideas (no matter how ridiculous) and satisfies everyone completely? These are the questions often raised by progressive activists.

As a nonviolent activist since 1977, I have, of course, heard all these views expressed. I’ve been at some wonderful meetings that used consensus and some horrendous meetings that (ostensibly) used consensus. There seems to be quite a bit of confusion and ignorance about what the consensus process is, how it should work, and when we should use it. In this paper, I will outline what I’ve learned in studying and practicing consensus over the years and try to dispel some myths.

Consensus is Not Unanimity
Many people think of consensus as simply an extended voting method in which everyone must cast their votes the same way. Since unanimity of this kind rarely occurs in groups with more than one member, groups that try to use this kind of process usually end up being either extremely frustrated or coercive. Decisions are never made (leading to the demise of the group), they are made covertly, or some group or individual dominates the rest. Sometimes a majority dominates, sometimes a minority, sometimes an individual who employs “the Block.” But no matter how it is done, this coercive process is not consensus.

Consensus is a process for deciding what is best for a group. The final decision is often not the first preference of any individual in the group, and many may not even like the final result. But it is a decision to which they all consent because they know it is the best one for the group.

Consensus is a Cooperative Process
Consensus is a process for people who want to work together honestly in good faith to find good solutions for the group. It cannot be used by people who do not, can not, or will not cooperate. Consensus should not be attempted in a group with people who want to dominate or control others or who want to maintain their privileges at the expense of others. In these situations, nonviolent struggle would be a more appropriate process.

Consensus is a Valuable Step Toward Democracy
Consensus is a process that allows everyone in a group to participate and work together nonviolently to make decisions — the ultimate realization of a true democracy and very attractive to anyone who has ever been dominated or oppressed. It gives people the power to make decisions and also demands that they take responsibility for those decisions. Rather than abdicating power to a leader or representative, it demands that we take complete responsibility. To me, establishing and modeling democratic and responsible governance is important, as valuable as ending war or establishing justice.

Consensus is Better than Other Processes
If not consensus, then what? Usually, people offer voting as a reasonably democratic alternative. But voting is not a meeting process, it is only a procedure for tallying preferences. Kenneth Arrow received a Nobel prize for proving it is impossible to come up with a decision in a logical, fair, and equitable way by combining the (existing) preferences of a group of people except under very simple circumstances — for example, situations when there are only two possible options. Even in these few situations, voting fails to consider the intensity of preference each individual feels — it does not take into account that one person may feel very strongly opposed while many are mildly in favor. It fails to consider the uneven distribution of consequences a decision may impose — it fails to protect the rights of people not to be hurt or killed if they are in the minority. It also does a poor job of protecting the rights of future generations, the environment, or any other party not voting. Whenever there is a disagreement, voting necessarily means that the minority will not get what they want, and if the majority severely tramples them, they may leave the group or retaliate.

Voting can therefore only produce satisfying decisions if there is unanimity of opinion, if everyone is extremely tolerant, or if one person can persuade everyone else of the validity of her perspective and her solution. But if people are enamored with different proposals or there is competition for power in the group, the process will often bog down, factionalize, or slide into coercive manipulation.

Good consensus process avoids these problems by allowing the members of the group to explore in depth the complete range of options and concerns in a non-adversarial, cooperative atmosphere. Discussions in small groups allow everyone, even those who are not verbally adept, to express their ideas, concerns, and opinions. Members of the group get a chance to learn from each other’s experience and thinking, empathize with other’s experiences and backgrounds, and gracefully change their minds as they hear new ideas and arguments. They can challenge dumb, obsolete, or immoral assumptions and solutions, and they can explore unusual solutions (radical transformations, compromises, bargains, etc.) that are often overlooked when the discussion gets polarized or restrained by formal proposals. Individuals can offer to give of their time or wealth or to suffer a loss for the good of the group. And people can be persuaded, inspired, loved, or counseled out of their prejudices, biases, and other rigidities or, if this fails, nonviolently prevented from acting immorally.

Of course, a good process that ends with a vote can also have all these cooperative aspects. In fact, a good voting process may be indistinguishable from a good consensus process until the final step. But non-consensual processes usually rely on formal proposals, debates, and other parliamentary procedures that interfere with cooperation. Knowing there will be an up-down vote at the end often polarizes the discussion. People may argue

for an extreme position so they can compromise to their true goal.

**Consensus is Not Conflict-Free or Painless**

Good consensus process relies heavily on problem-solving, questioning, empathy, self-sacrifice, and nonviolent direct action. In a good process, conflict is not ignored or covered up, but encouraged. Issues and proposed solutions are thoroughly thrashed out until a good solution is found. Like any good nonviolent action, ideas are severely challenged, but the people involved are listened to, loved, and supported. When there are no easy solutions, then individuals must be willing to sacrifice their preferences for the good of the group or the group must divide or disband. When one person or a group (a majority or minority) refuses to or is unable to work cooperatively, everyone else must boldly, yet tenderly, resist and challenge them, or if necessary, push them out of the group (ideally, offering support and guidance to their next endeavor).

**Consensus Can Be Efficient**

Many groups feel that they must allow every person in the group to fully discuss every possible perspective on every issue. When there is little trust in a group of people, this may be justified. But consensus does not require this. In a cooperative, trusting group it is possible to allow individuals or committees to make decisions with little or no discussion in the larger group. When the group is pressed for time, quick — though less ideal — decisions, can also be tolerated.

**Consensus Requires Skill and a Desire to Cooperate**

In a world made up of people who were all knowledgeable, skilled, rational, loving, and cooperative, a group of people could easily practice consensus well. But in our social change organizations we find instead regular people who have been reared in our violent society. Most are, therefore, ignorant of many important aspects of consensus process and have little experience using it. Moreover, they are often overworked, irrational, and fragile, having been squashed and battered throughout their lives.

To overcome these limitations, consensus is best practiced by a group of people who are all committed and accountable to the group and willing to spend time and energy to help it thrive. No one should ever be given the power to block a group unless he or she is willing to spend time and energy to help it thrive. No one should ever be given the power to block a group unless he or she is willing to spend time and energy to help it thrive. No one should ever be given the power to block a group unless he or she is willing to spend time and energy to help it thrive.

**Groups That Should Not Use Consensus**

Groups with poor decision-making processes usually have not met these conditions. These groups often allow anyone to join the group and its decision-making process without any instruc-

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Prepared by Randy Schutt, P.O. Box 608867, Cleveland, OH 44108 <http://www.veralproject.org>. OK to copy for non-commercial purposes.

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