The Rationality of the Default Status of Majority Rule

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Introduction

In "Arguing for Majority Rule," Mathias Risse holds that "unless majoritarians present a more complete defense, it is irrational to grant majority rule (MR) the default status that it occupies."[1] I defend the following argument in *disagreement* with Risse's claim:

> **P1.** If it is irrational to grant MR the default status that it occupies, then majoritarians need to present a more complete defense.
> **P2.** Majoritarians do not need to present a more complete defense.
> **C.** It is rational to grant MR the default status that it occupies.

I defend this argument by first motivating **P1**. Then, I explain Risse's claim in Section II, critically evaluating it alongside the **P2** defense in Section III.

Section I

To motivate **P1**, I explain how the need for a complete defense of a position follows from the irrationality of its default status. **P1** follows from Risse's framing which implies continuing to grant MR its default status is irrational so, the irrationality claim entails a demand for further argument.

An aggregation rule (AR) occupies a default status when it is the automatic method used in determining a collective decision. 'Default' can be interpreted as what is *prima facie* implemented – the AR in place unless someone intentionally chooses another.[2] Defaults are not panaceas. Justification of *prima facie* use ought to be sufficient enough for a rational actor to deem it a rational initial choice. 'Irrationality' by definition, requires that the default that is considered 'irrational' does not meet the justificatory burden required to affirm its *prima facie* use. More complete defenses restore its warrant for rational use.

For MR to require a more complete defense means it does not meet the minimum threshold for rational adoption. If MR satisfies key desiderata or generally performs well comparatively or under common conditions, then it meets a baseline requirement for *prima facie* rational use. Therefore, overturning the irrationality of a default status requires a more sufficient defense of the rule in question as to affirm its ability to meet baseline criteria for *prima facie* rational use.

Section II

This section explains and briefly motivates Risse's claim which serves as an objection against **P2**.

Risse holds that the current justification of MR is deficient motivation for its default status because they assume that collective decisions are made by ranking, or rely on arguments that affirm other decision rules.[3] The

[1] Risse, M. "Arguing for Majority Rule." (2004). p.42.
[2] Jachimowicz, J. et al. "When and why defaults influence decisions: a meta-analysis of default effects." (2019). p. 159.
[3] Risse, M. "Arguing for Majority Rule." (2004). p. 41.

excessively narrow arguments neglect MRs that use more than ordinal information and those that are not aggregative. For example, he argues that May's theorem, a majoritarian proceduralist argument, is "too narrow" as it supports majoritarian rule under only restrictive conditions – e.g., facilitating a choice-decision over *two* alternatives by *ranking*.[4] The majoritarian arguments which are "too broad" allow for the acceptance of rules like the Borda count and, possibly, minority rule (e.g., arguments from 'respect' and 'fairness').[5] Amorphous notions like 'fairness,' Risse argues, cannot ground fine-grained justifications for specific ARs.[6] By labeling current defenses as "too narrow/broad," he deems them not comprehensively nor uniquely motivating MR as the rational default AR.

Moreover, Risse holds that other ARs may match or outperform MR in cases where he believes MR results in unfair outcomes. He lists four objections as descriptors of these cases:[7]

- ➢ Argumentative Content: The quality of the arguments from the minority may outweigh those of the majority.
- ➢ Preference Intensity: Some voters – potentially, the minority – may care more than others about the outcome.
- ➢ Omission of Relevant Information: Majority voting outcome is independent of (the qualifications contributing to) the truth-value of the alternative voted on.
- ➢ Proportionate Consideration: No proportionate consideration is given to the truth-value of the alternative in question with MR, regardless of how big the minority is.

Risse suggests that because the defenses currently are not unique to MR in its comprehensive, yet distinct form and MR seems defenseless against the four objections he raises (while other ARs could satisfy them), it is not rational to give MR its default status. Finally, Risse closes by positing that the *needed* complete defense of MR would satisfy three conditions. That is, the strongest arguments for MR use merely ordinal information regarding rankings, restrict voting to option pairs, and use a unique AR.[8]

Section III

Here, I defend **P2** by critically engaging with Risse. I do this by attempting to disarm his concerns enough to affirm that current majoritarian defense sufficiently justifies *prima facie* use of MR as a rational default.

Four Objections. These *essentially* object to the AR's presupposition of mere ordinal information use.[9] The problem of 'counting heads,' interpersonal utility comparisons, and truth-value independence are broad

[4] Ibid. p.51-53.
[5] Ibid. p.47.
[6] Ibid. p. 54.
[7] Ibid. p.49-50.
[8] Ibid. p.57
[9] Ibid. p.54.

objections, striking down other plausible ordinally-reliant ARs – e.g., Borda count. Risse may hold that other nonordinally-reliant ARs supply avenues to bypass these objections. But, ordinal information is practical for voting; there is ease of obtaining and interpreting it which adds to the necessarily broad appeal of ARs with ordinal presuppositions. Ordinal rankings can be seen not as a detraction, but rather as an attractive component of aggregation facilitation and interpretation, adding to the justification of an ordinally-reliant default. Ordinal information is a rational feature of *a* default AR.

While other ARs may address these objections, MR likely would perform just as well as those rules in providing the same, or a 'truth-tracking,' outcome. The Majority Dominance Theorem posits that whenever any voting system works well, so does MR.[10] More clearly, in cases where other ARs work, MR performs just as well or better. Within the political arena, voters tend to rank ideologically (in accordance with specific conceptions of the good/right distinctively discerned from those unaligned), and rank with value restrictions (are particularly attracted to or repelled by certain alternatives). These common voting behaviors ensure Transitivity.[11] MR dominates when ordinal rankings are "ideologically driven" and "value restricted" (exhibit polarization).[12] This entails that MR works well when compared to other aggregations when MR satisfies its relational challenge: Transitivity. MR violations of Transitivity are called Condorcet Paradoxes which force an indeterminate outcome from cyclical preference.[13] While MR still fails to work *sometimes* – in Condorcet Paradoxes – it fails less often than other ARs provided the known context of voting behaviors enabling logical relations between rankings.

On Desiderata. Risse cites May's Theorem as "too narrow" as its assumptions (Universal Domain, Anonymity, Neutrality, and Positive Responsiveness) only endorse a restricted majority rule.[14] Consider a wider, less 'stand-alone' conception of desiderata that any good AR should probably satisfy. Take four desiderata: Weak Pareto, Anonymity, Neutrality, and Transitivity.

- Weak Pareto: When all individuals prefer one alternative to another, so does society.
- Anonymity: No voters are treated differently from others.
- Neutrality: No alternative is treated differently from others.
- Transitivity: Roughly, alternatives need to satisfy this logical relation: If $x \succcurlyeq y$ and $y \succcurlyeq z$, then $x \succcurlyeq z$.

MR always satisfies Weak Pareto, Anonymity, Neutrality and sometimes Transitivity; Borda count satisfies Weak Pareto, Anonymity, and Transitivity, but not Neutrality. So, MR satisfies these desiderata when background conditions ensure transitive preference relations (e.g., aforementioned voter behavior or ranking over strictly 2

[10] Dasgupta, P. and Maskin, E. "The Fairest Vote of All." (2004). p.95.
[11] Ibid. p.96.
[12] May, K. "A Set of Independent Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Majority Decision." (2002). p.684.
[13] Risse, M. "Arrow's Theorem, Indeterminacy, and Multiplicity Reconsidered." (2001). p.707.
[14] Risse, M. "Arguing for Majority Rule." (2004). p.51-53.

alternatives) and still may not violate Transitivity in cases where there are ≥ 3 alternatives. Borda fails to satisfy Neutrality because it requires ranking of all alternatives against eachother due to its logistical framework.

Though not a comprehensive 'theory,' per se, in their conjunction, these desiderata capture an important dimension of preference/logical relations observed in two popular, often politically competing, ARs. While reasonable desiderata imposed on decision procedures force fairness trade-offs, Majority Dominance Theorem and political voter behavior demonstrate that MR *can* satisfy *these* desiderata; and, when MR does, it performs dominantly against other ARs. So, while it may not uniquely satisfy *May's* theorem in non-restricted cases, MR can satisfy the relation critics take issue with its potential dissatisfaction: Transitivity.

Further, other principle/relation-based theories (e.g., Arrow's Impossibility Theorem) demonstrate that when other plausible 'fairness' desiderata or logical principles are considered – Universal Domain, Collective Rationality, Weak Pareto, Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives, and Non-Dictatorship – there is no AR that satisfies all; any AR must sometimes violate at least one principle.[15] In his 2001 paper, Risse defends the Condorcet proposal MR which selects the ranking with maximal support through pairwise votes against intransitivity and the Impossibility Theorem, holding that MR's desiderata trade-offs are not as problematic as they seem.[16] That is, Arrow's conditions are not always consistent with plausible interpretations of majoritarianism/ARs generally given the Impossibility result; and Risse claims this "by no means entails [MR's] incoherence."[17] Risse argues that there is no indeterminacy problem threatening purely majoritarian decision-making, demonstrating a solution to transitivity concerns. It seems that the justification of coherency in MR's forced trade-offs affirm its baseline level of rational justification for its *prima facie* use in voting procedures.

Practical Motivation. The practicality of MR adds to its rational justification as a default method. MR is computationally simple, transparent for interpreting results, and widely understood. First, the informational basis for MR is quite weak, so it is incredibly easy to implement. The interpretation is just as simple: whichever alternative has the most votes is the outcome awarded.

Another rational practical appeal to there being *a* default, regardless of the power of its justification, is that there is an enormous logical space of possible ARs. It is not possible to consult every possibility, and having a default that satisfies a kind of dominance against others (Majority Dominance Theorem), helps avoid paralysis in preliminary logistical stages of a general decision procedure. Default statuses, again, are *prima facie* considered for use, meaning that if there is a compelling reason to override the default and to choose otherwise, then the agent can always deviate. For an agent to choose to override the default, they must know that they wish to make a different trade-off in favor of using another AR that prioritizes considerations they want for their contexted collective decision (e.g., using Borda count for choosing a state's capital city which prioritizes forced individual

[15] List, C. "Social Choice Theory: Section 3." (2022).
[16] Risse, M. "Arrow's Theorem, Indeterminacy, and Multiplicity Reconsidered." (2001). p.722.
[17] Ibid. p.723.

dispositions toward all possible capitals, which supplies useful knowledge). Regardless, merely having *a* default streamlines decision procedures for groups who are not informed in social choice theory, and provides a basis for reasoning about other trade-offs to those who are informed.

MR is widely understood, which is important for achieving a baseline of informed voters (those who know how to cast their votes). The basis of understanding, voter-side, for MR is lower than that of – say – Borda count. To accurately rank one's preferences over a set of alternatives in voting via Borda count is to know one's opinions about an array of alternatives, and some may be irrelevant.[18] In mid-1900s U.S. elections where Borda count was used, the percentage of 'spoiled' ballots was about 20%; whereas, in MR early-2000s U.S. elections, that percentage was 1%.[19] This supports the notion that ARs which require voters to rank all alternatives puts a greater burden of understanding on the voters that a notable portion do not achieve. With MR, voters need not concern themselves with alternatives they deem to be – or may be, in fact – irrelevant. High information cost is not a feature of MR. A rational default AR should be widely understood by voters.

As for Risse's tripartite prescription for a needed defense of MR, what exists as support to each of those tenants though perhaps not comprehensively nor uniquely addressing MR in their individual iterations, jointly support its default status. While MR faces a compelling challenge from Risse, every AR faces trade-offs in their defenses. As rational actors are looking for *sufficient* justification for a default AR, **P2** stands.

Conclusion

There is no universally superior alternative to MR; and, MR is not universally superior to other ARs.[20] However, a default status need not be a method that is universally superior; simply, a default method needs to be a rule that is practical, procedurally understood and typically just as (if not more) successful as other voting rules. MR's current defenses are sufficient – as they achieve the above calls – to affirm its rational status as a default and such, should be *prima facie* used as an AR.

[18] Atkeson, L. et al. "The Impact of Voter Confusion in Ranked Choice Voting." (2024). p.1030.
[19] Mott, R. "Invalid Ballots Under the Hare System of Proportional Representation." (1926). p.875.
[20] Dasgupta, P. and Maskin, E. "The Fairest Vote of All." (2004). p.94.

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