

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-07003-5 - Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited
Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I

BASICS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07003-5 - Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited

Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The Analysis of Politics

That argument . . . maintained by many who assume to be authorities, was . . . that the opinions of some men are to be regarded, and of other men not to be regarded. Now you, Crito, are a disinterested person who are not going to die tomorrow. . . . Tell me, then, whether I am right in saying that some opinions, and the opinions of some men only, are to be valued, and other opinions, and the opinions of other men, are not to be valued. I ask you whether I was right in maintaining this? (Socrates, in Plato’s *Crito*)

CHOOSING IN GROUPS: POLITICS AS CONSTITUTED
 COOPERATIVE ACTION

Ambrose Bierce claimed, in *The Devil’s Dictionary*, that politics is the “strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles . . . the conduct of public affairs for private advantage.” At its crudest, politics may seem like nothing more than the use of power and authority to direct social relations. Franz de Waal, in *Chimpanzee Politics*, defined politics as “social manipulation to secure and maintain influential positions,” and then pointed out that “politics involves every one of us . . . in our family, at school, at work, and in meetings” (p. 208). But there must be something more to politics, more merit to the idea that groups can choose well, *as* a group and *for* the group. Not as a state, or government, necessarily, but as a socially constituted group, because “politics” is really just choosing and acting in groups. It is a mistake to think that choosing in groups is zero sum, so that for every winner there is a loser. Long ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (Book III, part 9) claimed that we should understand politics not (only) as a means of choosing, but as a path to social connectedness. Politics is the set of social relations by which societies *become* good and people achieve fulfillment.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07003-5 - Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited

Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aristotle's teacher, Plato, had a clear idea of politics as a kind of mutually beneficial exchange. In *The Republic*, Plato describes it this way:

A State, I said, arises, as I conceive, out of the needs of mankind; no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants. Can any other origin of a State be imagined?

There can be no other.

Then, as we have many wants, and many persons are needed to supply them, one takes a helper for one purpose and another for another; and when these partners and helpers are gathered together in one habitation the body of inhabitants is termed a State... And they exchange with one another, and one gives, and another receives, under the idea that the exchange will be for their good. (*Republic*, Book II)

This "exchange," however, is something more than an atomistic economic division of labor. The groupness of the arrangement, or the rules for fostering cooperation, are essential parts of what politics means, and how groups connect. The Greeks did not see man's political sense as a base or animal instinct. Our capacities for cooperation and the daily practice of *intentional* – not just instinctual – social interaction are what set us apart from the animals. Politics makes us human, even though groups sometimes act like animals.¹

In modern societies, the link between a monolithic "state" and "groups" is much weaker, though the need to connect in groups and the division of labor collective action can provide is stronger than ever.² People choose in groups all the time, sometimes all sitting in the same room and sometimes facing a computer screen or smart phone and choosing as part of a group that exists only on some social media platform. However, the way that groups are formed, choose rules, and decide things is a very general problem, and an important one. Thus, "politics" will be taken to mean people choosing in groups according to rules they have agreed on in advance, with the understanding that everyone accepts the result if the rules are followed. Moreover, the reason that people form groups – as scholars from Emile Durkheim to James Buchanan have recognized – is to share the advantages from increasing returns that cooperation and specialization create.

This tension between selfishness and teamwork, between calculation and community, is what makes analytical political theory so much fun. When we work out an explanation for what we see, we often also conceive of what should be. Our focus in both realms, the commonly seen and the ideal, is a product of people choosing in groups for their mutual benefit. The claims we focus on for most of the book are those that we can write down in models. Nevertheless, the choices and groups that these models help us understand are very real.

A GROUP, CHOOSING

On November 24, 1805, Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery was in a rough spot. Forty-five men had traveled up the Missouri River, crossed the continental

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07003-5 - Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited

Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Analysis of Politics*

5

divide, and canoed down the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, they had picked up Sacagawea – a Shoshone woman whom they had used as a translator and guide – along with her French trapper husband and their infant son, bringing the band to forty-eight souls.

Their arrival at the Pacific had completed their outbound mission (spelling in this and following nineteenth-century entries is as in original, from the journal entries³):

The river Missouri, & the Indians inhabiting it, are not as well known as is rendered desirable by their connection . . . with us. . . . An intelligent officer with ten or twelve chosen men . . . might explore the whole . . . to the Western Ocean. (Confidential letter from Thomas Jefferson to the U.S. Congress, January 18, 1803)

To explore the Missouri River and such principal stream of it as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river that may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purpose of commerce. (Official Letter of Commission from President Thomas Jefferson, June 20, 1803)

Now the Corps had to get home. First, they somehow had to survive the winter. They were nearly out of supplies and trade goods, and terrible storms battered them relentlessly.

Nine days earlier, William Clark had written in his journal:

. . . from [November] 5th in the mornng. untill the 16th is eleven days rain, and the most disagreeable time I have experienced confined in a tempest coast wet, where I can neither git out to hunt, return to a better situation, or proceed on: in this situation we have been for Six days past.

Later, on November 22, Clark wrote:

a little before Day light the wind which was from the S S. E. blew with Such violence that we were almost overwhelmed with water blown from the river, this Storm did not Sease at day but blew with nearly equal violence throughout the whole day accompaned with rain. O! how horriable is the day waves brakeing with great violence against the Shore throwing the Water into our Camp &c. all wet and Confind to our Shelters, . . .

Socrates called Crito “a disinterested person who is not going to die tomorrow.” In Plato’s story, Socrates himself had to decide whether to leave in the night or stay and commit suicide by drinking hemlock. So Socrates saw himself as “interested,” in the sense that he had a stake in the choice. Socrates appealed to Crito as “disinterested” because his views were more objective, and therefore less likely to be colored by having a stake in the outcome.

The Corps was in the position of Socrates, not Crito. Everyone shivering in that rude shelter was “interested.” They were exhausted, held a weak defensive position, lacked supplies, and found themselves uncomfortably close to hostile native tribes.⁴ A wrong choice would bring catastrophe.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07003-5 - Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited

Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

According to the records from the expedition, on November 24 they considered three options.⁵ Here is a summary of each of those options:⁶

Option A. Remain at the hastily constructed Station Camp on the north side of the Columbia, in what is now Washington, near the confluence of Seal Creek (now the Washougal River) and the Columbia. Station Camp was near the coast, so the Corps might make contact with a ship if one anchored. Further, there were plenty of fish, and lots of salt to cure them.

Option B. Explore the south side of the Columbia, in what is now Oregon, and build winter quarters there. There were reports (though no one knew for sure) that far more elk could be found on the south side, and there were deer to be taken one day's travel east. The Indian tribes (Clatsops) on the south side were reportedly friendly and might offer better rates for the Corps' few remaining trade goods. The Chinooks of the northern side were sharp and aggressive traders.⁷

Option C. Go back upriver as far as possible, to the Celilo falls of the Columbia, to reduce the length of the return trip. Although the weather would be colder inland, they could escape the savage storms and constant rains of the coast. The Corps also hoped that there would be fewer Indians and more game on the land further east, as everyone was most heartily sick of fish.⁸

Someone in the shelter might have described the scene this way: A group of more than forty people must choose between three very different alternatives.⁹ Everyone knew the stakes were high, since crossing the continent would count for little if they could not survive the winter. Jefferson had concluded his official letter by requiring that Lewis should "repair yourself with your papers to the seat of government." Jefferson expected samples, records, and maps. To succeed, the Corps had to return.

The structure of command in the Corps, until that point, had been military and hierarchical. The two captains, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, had given orders. The men had carried out those orders or suffered martial discipline. Dissent or neglect of duty was punished harshly: At least six members of the Corps had been whipped, receiving twenty-five or more lashes each. One of these (Alexander Willard) received 100 lashes on his bare back – for sleeping on duty – in four sets of twenty-five lashes to spare his life.¹⁰

But there was something different about the choice of where to spend the winter. They all agreed on the goal of the decision: to survive the winter and return home. There was no question of shirking, or deceit, because a wrong choice meant failure and death for everyone. In addition, there was no interconnected set of military strategies, no implementation of a complex plan. The problem was simple: choose from among three clearly defined locations the one that made survival most likely.

It is impossible to tell, looking back only at the notes in the journals, what the reasoning behind taking a vote may have been.¹¹ Nevertheless, there are

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07003-5 - Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited

Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Analysis of Politics

7

two important reasons people choosing in groups often use some kind of voting mechanism: *information* and *legitimacy*.

INFORMATION: THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

The remarkable thing is that Lewis and Clark seem to have perceived that the unified command/military discipline model of decision-making was an obstacle to making the best choice in this situation. We cannot know exactly why, because they didn't say, but they may have called for a vote to get better information.

The leaders, Lewis and Clark, had the right to make a choice and see it carried out, but instead they tried to combine each individual judgment into the best collective wisdom they could uncover. Rather than focus on "the opinions of some men, and some men only," as Socrates had counseled, the captains took account of the opinion of each member of the company. Facing death, they wanted every scrap of information and every considered judgment available to them.

Collecting information by aggregating judgments can make the group smarter than any of its members. This recognition, that voting processes may be useful for collecting information, is ancient. As Aristotle put it: "It is possible that the many, no one of whom taken singly is a sound man, may yet, taken all together, be better than the few, not individually but collectively..." (*Politics*, Book I, Chapter 11).

In a famous example, statistician Francis Galton (1907) wrote of a fair in England where the statistical power of many independent guesses created an accurate estimation of an unknown quantity. What Galton saw was a contest to guess the weight of a large ox. The mean of the 800 guesses registered for the ox's weight was within one-half of one percentage point of the true weight. Perhaps more interestingly, the mean of the 800 guesses was closer than *any* of the individual guesses. Therefore, though "no one taken singly is a sound man," the combined wisdom of the group may be profound. Galton (1907: 51; emphasis added) recognized the (possible) implication for voting: "This result is, I think, more creditable to the trust-worthiness of a *democratic judgment* than might have been expected."

A more contemporary example of what Surowiecki (2004) called "wisdom of crowds" is the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Of the three lifelines (eliminate two alternatives, call a friend, ask the crowd) the best was "ask the crowd."¹² But the live audience had waited in line for hours to watch in person, from a distance, a show that each of them could have seen more easily on television. Very few of them are likely "sound" as Aristotle might define that term. Nevertheless, as a group, the average of their response is nearly always correct.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07003-5 - *Choosing in Groups: Analytical Politics Revisited*

Michael C. Munger and Kevin M. Munger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LEGITIMACY: OWNERSHIP AND MORALE

The two captains wanted everyone in the company to feel ownership in the choice the group made. The way to accomplish this is to give everyone a voice, both in making arguments and in registering their views publicly. Significant participation in the process of choice ensured that each member of the Corps kept a stake in what the group chose. The Corps was already a cohesive unit, but the decision to take a vote cemented the reciprocal trust between the leaders and the rank-and-file members.

The vote on November 24 allowed the members of the Corps to go on record in support of the alternative they preferred. It would have been easy, had the captains just imposed the choice, to have grumbling later: “I never wanted to stay here; I knew this wasn’t going to work!” Having a vote, with compulsory “turnout,” meant that human nature created a set of advocates for the choice. People who publicly support a choice have a stake in defending it. Even if things go badly, the group chose it, and now everyone is in this together.

THE CHOICE

In taking the vote, the captains were not shirking. They were obliged – as military leaders – to make the final decision, and to take responsibility for it. Earlier, when there had been a disagreement over which tributary fork was the “real” Missouri, the two captains had imposed their view on the men, who “disagreed to a man.”¹³ But this time, in Oregon, Lewis and Clark asked for data. They sought a systematic representation of the opinions of all thirty people present that night.¹⁴

At least two people, Captain William Clark and Sergeant Patrick Gass, recorded the event in journals. Clark gave a full listing of each of the thirty opinions, or “votes.” However, the record is confused. It appears that the Shoshone woman, Sakagawea, said only that she hoped the selection location had “plenty of wappato.”¹⁵ York, Clark’s male slave, was asked his view, and voted for C, going back up the Columbia as far as possible before choosing a winter encampment. It is worth noting that the views of an Indian woman and a slave were recorded in the journal as data for the captains to ponder.

Clark recorded the vote totals in one way, but then lists in his journal the individual votes in a way that yields a different total, as shown in Table 1.1.¹⁶

The second account appears in the journal of Sergeant Gass¹⁷, who wrote:

We took a vote of the men as to the location for our winter quarters. Some are for investigating the other side of the Columbia for a suitable site – while others prefer a camp upriver near the falls, or at least up the river where it is less rainy. Sacagawea is in favor of a place where there are plenty of wappato. The vote resulted: 5 for the falls, 12 for the Seal [Washougal] River, and 12 for across the Columbia. Therefore Capt. Lewis

TABLE 1.1. *Three Versions of the Vote Totals on November 24, 1805*

	Clark’s Account	Clark’s Journal	Gass’s Account
Option A: Station Camp	10	9	12
Option B: Fort Clatsop	12	13	12
Option C: Upriver	6	6	5

and another man will cross to the other side to see if good hunting is there, for we cannot depend on the natives for food. We prefer to be near the harbor in the event a ship will come this winter. The advantage of procuring goods from a vessel would off-set living on poor deer and elk higher up the river.

Putting this report into our format for alternatives in the third column of Table 1.1, we see that Gass has a slightly different result for the vote totals. Gass also recorded one more vote than Clark did, but it is quite possible that someone expressed a clearer preference than Clark perceived during the raucous meeting.

In any event, alternative “B” – favored by no more than 43 percent of the voters in all accounts, well short of a majority – was selected. Fort Clatsop was built on the south bank of the Columbia, near what is now Astoria, Oregon. Elk were plentiful, the storms really were less fierce, and in the spring of 1806, the Corps began the trip home. They arrived back in St. Louis on September 23, 1806.

A SHORT CONJECTURAL HISTORY

Since they survived, and returned, they appear to have made a good choice. Nevertheless, one wonders. The votes were recorded, and the issue decided, in a way that political scientists call “first past the post” (or plurality rule). That is, everyone announces exactly one vote for their first preference, and then the votes are tallied. The alternative that receives the most votes is selected.

For the sake of example, suppose we had more information about the views of the people in that room. This information is entirely conjectural, but it is plausible enough, since we are certain about the first preferences. If a person could not get his or her first choice, then that person would certainly have a preference about the next-best thing to do.

Consider Table 1.2, which follows Clark’s account. There are three groups: the ten people who preferred Station Camp (alternative A), the twelve who preferred Fort Clatsop (B), and the six who preferred to go back Up River (C). Thus, the groups’ first preferences (“Best”) and relative sizes are historically accurate, using the report that gives the most decisive advantage to the selection

TABLE 1.2. *A Conjecture about Secondary Preferences*

	Station Campers (10)	Fort C-ers (12)	Up River (6)
Best	A	B	C
<i>Middle</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>Worst</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>

of Fort Clatsop, choice B. Everything above the dark line is “true,” or as true as can be deduced from the historical record.

The conjectural information appears in italics, to differentiate it from what is above the dark line. With this additional information about preferences, we can try a different decision procedure. Consider a comparison between just two alternatives, A and B. Obviously, those who thought A was the best alternative would vote for A, so that is ten votes. But what if those who wanted to go back up river also preferred A to B, in terms of the next-best alternative? If that were true, then that would be six more votes for A. In other words, in a pairwise vote, A would receive sixteen votes and B would receive only twelve. Choosing B actually ignores the judgment of the majority, if preferences looked like this.

What about B versus C? Again, those who liked C best would vote for it, yielding six votes. But what if those who preferred Station Camp also would have preferred going up river to Fort Clatsop (preferred C to B, in our formulation)? Then again, the result would be sixteen opposed to B, now favoring C. B receives only the twelve votes from its proponents, and again a majority opposes B.

Finally, what of the other comparison, A versus C? In our example, if those who preferred Fort Clatsop had not had this option, their second preference would have been going back up river. But that would mean that eighteen people favored C, and only ten favored A. If we combine these results, we find something disturbing. First, if our conjectures were correct, then B was arguably the *least preferred* choice. A majority thought A was better than B, and a (different) majority thought C was better than B.

Second, a strong argument can be made for Up River, alternative C. C beats both A and B in pairwise simple majority votes. This may seem strange, because only six people had C as their first choice. The problem with plurality or first past the post votes is that these rules ignore the ranking of secondary alternatives. Both those who preferred Station Camp (A) and those who preferred going back Up River (C) considered B (in our example) to be the worst choice.

Further, those who preferred Station Camp and those who preferred Fort Clatsop both considered Up River (C) the second best choice. So, though they disagreed about the best choice, they agreed on the second choice. Since the third group considered C to be the best alternative, a group might reasonably choose C. After all, unlike A and especially unlike B, no one thought C was the worst choice.