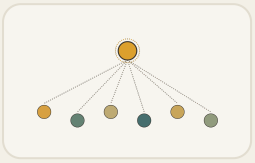
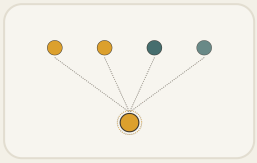
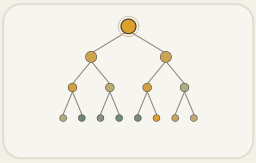
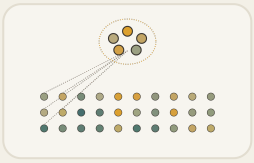
25 ways to decide together

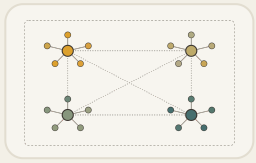
1 · DECIDING BY AUTHORITY


One person decides (autocratic)

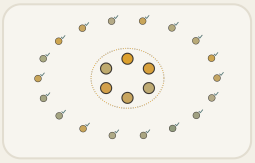

One person decides after asking (consultative)

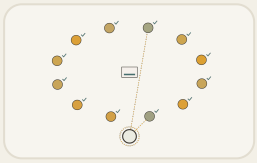

Chain of command

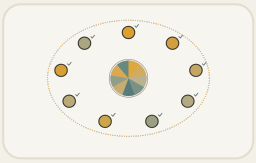

A few decide (committee)

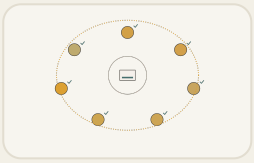

Polycentric governance

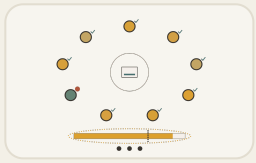
2 · DECIDING BY CONSENSUS


Indaba (as adapted at climate talks)

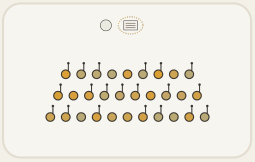

Rough or lazy consensus

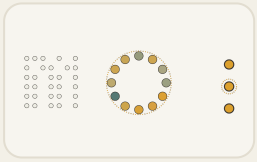

Unanimous consensus with discussion

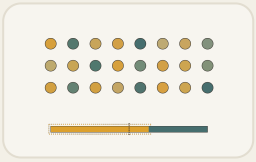

Sociocratic consent and holacracy

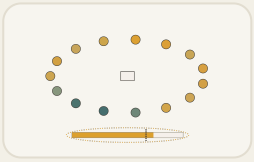

Consensus with a fallback

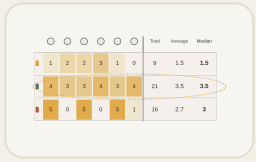
3 · DECIDING BY VOTING

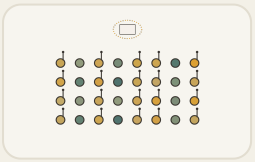

Open assembly (Gram Sabha)

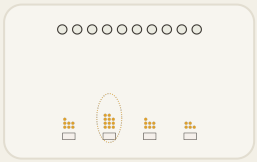

Citizens' assembly

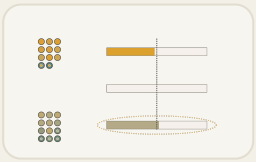

Majority rule

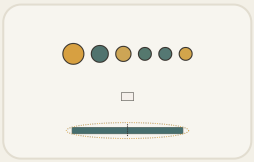

Supermajority

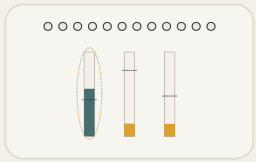

Score voting (average or median)


Show of hands vote

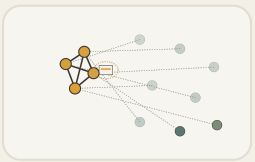

Dot voting (cumulative voting)


Ranked ballots

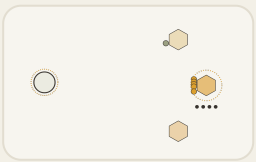

Weighted voting

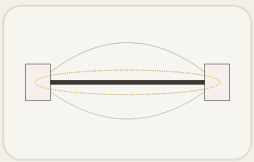

Conviction voting

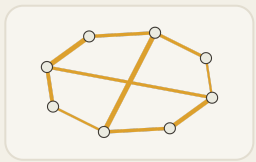
4 · NO ONE IN CHARGE


No structure


Herd movement


Honeybee quorum sensing

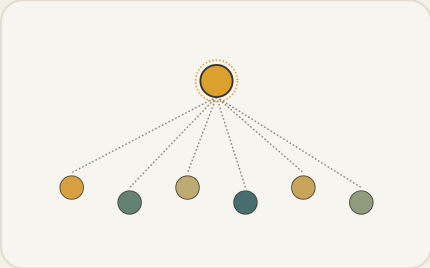

Stigmergy (ant trails)


Slime mould networks

1 Deciding by authority

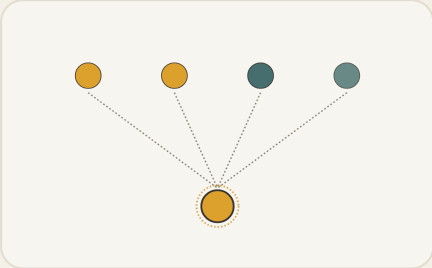
One person or a few decide for everyone

The simplest structure is one person making the call, like a principal for a whole-school decision or a teacher for how to introduce a particular topic. The decider may ask for advice first, or orders may pass down through layers of managers, as in the military. Authority can also be split across many local centres, each deciding its own part under rules set from above. Or the decision can sit with a small group of leaders, chosen for expertise or seniority, who may talk it through in the open while everyone else listens, as in an indaba. These structures are fast, and they work well when the deciders already know what they need to know.



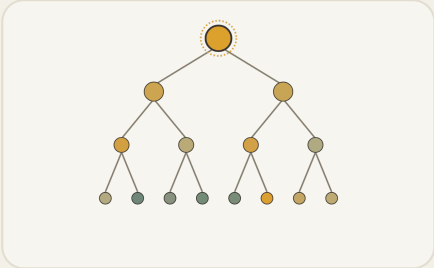
One person decides (autocratic)

One person makes the call for everyone. It is the simplest structure, and the base the others build on.



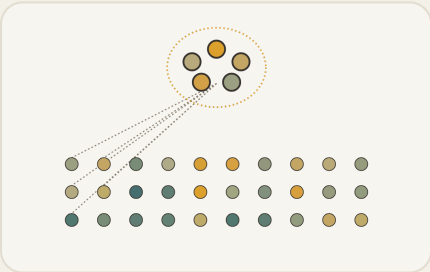
One person decides after asking (consultative)

One person still decides, but asks others for advice first.



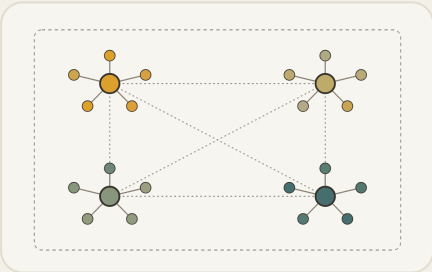
Chain of command

One person decides at each level, and orders pass down a hierarchy, as in the military.



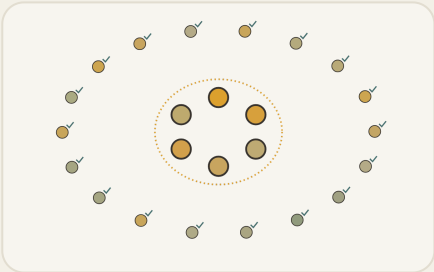
A few decide (committee)

A small group decides for everyone, chosen for expertise, seniority or age, like a council of elders.



Polycentric governance

Many local centres each decide their own part, under rules set by a higher authority.



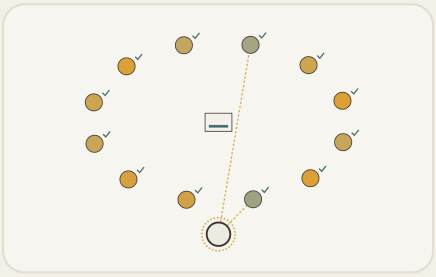
Indaba (as adapted at climate talks)

Leaders talk at the centre while everyone else listens, and each no must come with a solution.

2 Deciding by consensus

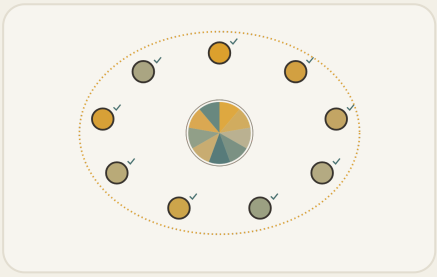
The group works toward a decision everyone can support, or at least live with

Consent asks “can you live with it?” where a vote asks “which do you prefer?”. A proposal goes ahead unless someone raises a reasoned objection, and the group uses the objection to improve the proposal. Consensus goes further and keeps talking until everyone can support the decision. Both take more time than a vote, and both usually come with a date to review the decision. At the informal end, a small group of friends may simply agree with no rules at all, which works until the group grows. A group drawn by lot can also work toward agreement on behalf of everyone else, as in a citizens’ assembly. Many set a fallback vote in case agreement never comes. A whole community can also reach agreement in an open meeting, where raised hands show support without anyone counting them.



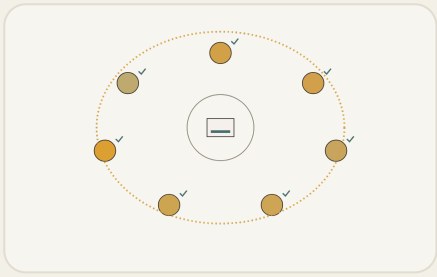
Rough or lazy consensus

Agreement without everyone's active yes: a chair judges every concern is answered, or silence by a deadline counts.



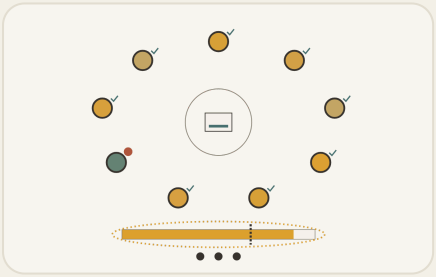
Unanimous consensus with discussion

The group keeps talking until everyone can support one decision, not just accept it.



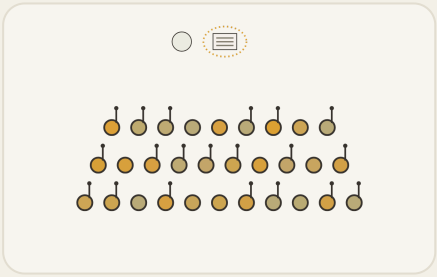
Sociocratic consent and holacracy

A proposal passes when no one has a reasoned objection. Holacracy adds a fixed script for working through objections.



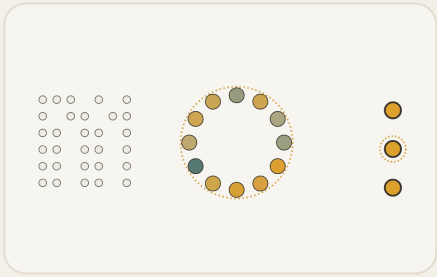
Consensus with a fallback

The group seeks consensus, but switches to a supermajority vote if it cannot agree by a set point.



Open assembly (Gram Sabha)

Everyone affected meets in the open to review past work, discuss needs and agree plans together.



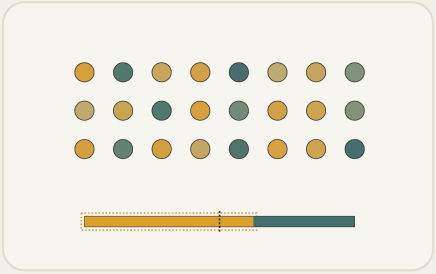
Citizens’ assembly

A group drawn by lottery learns about an issue, hears every side, and recommends what to do.

3 Deciding by voting

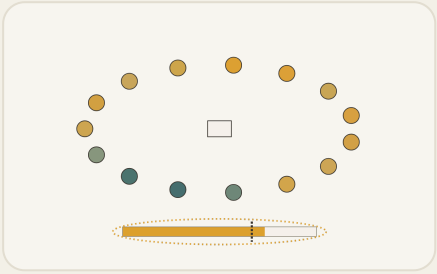
Each person votes, and a rule turns the votes into a decision

In a vote, each person picks an option and a rule turns the count into a decision. Small choices in the rule matter a lot: whether you need more than half or two-thirds, how you count when there are more than two options, and whether people vote in the open or in private. Some rules also change what a vote is worth, by weighting it by stake, letting people spend more votes on what they care about most, or letting support build up over time.



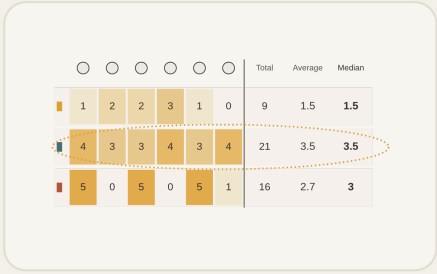
Majority rule

Everyone votes and more than half wins. It is the simplest way to count, and the base for the others.



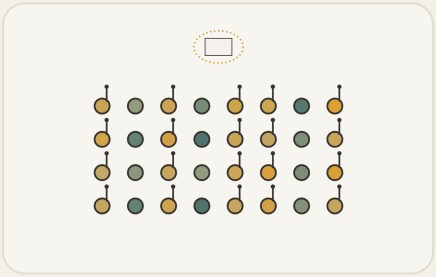
Supermajority

Majority rule with a higher bar, often two-thirds, so a decision needs wide support.



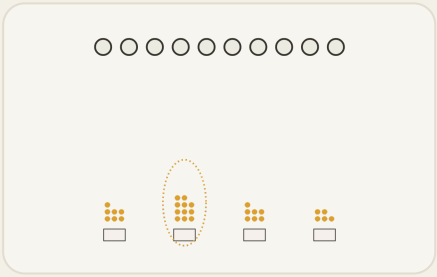
Score voting (average or median)

Everyone rates every option, for example 0 to 5. The best average, or the best middle rating, wins.



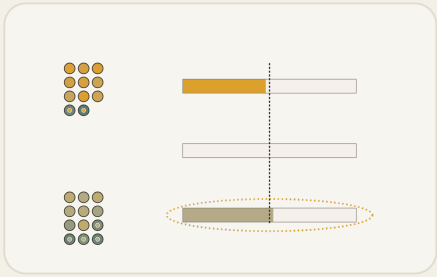
Show of hands vote

Everyone gathers in one place and votes on the spot by show of hands.



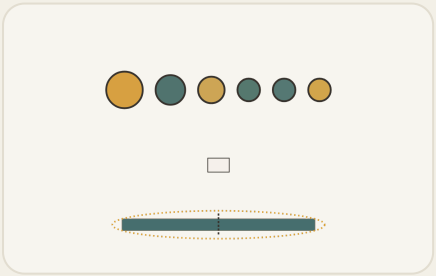
Dot voting (cumulative voting)

Everyone gets the same number of dots and can stack them on one option to show how strongly they feel.



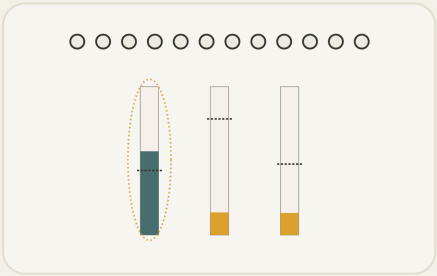
Ranked ballots

Voters rank the options. If none has more than half, the last drops out and its ballots move on.



Weighted voting

Votes count for more or less depending on what each voter holds or represents, so power can be very unequal.



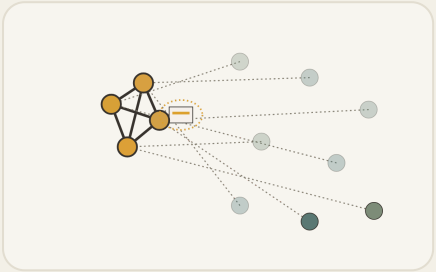
Conviction voting

Support builds the longer people keep backing a proposal, so lasting support counts for more.

4 No one in charge

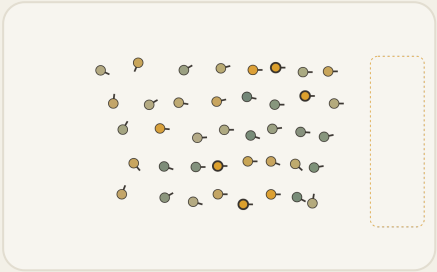
Groups with no leader and no vote

Some groups have no one in charge. Without agreed rules, the best-connected people end up deciding, often unnoticed. Nature shows another way: bee swarms, herds, ant trails and slime moulds decide well with no leader, because each individual follows a few simple shared rules. These are not structures a school would adopt whole, but each suggests a practical design for how people can search, copy and settle on a choice.



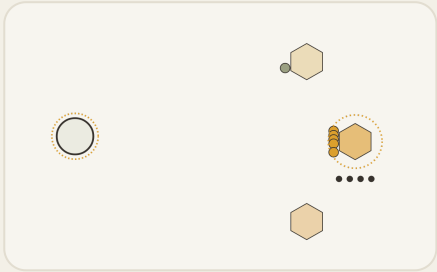
No structure

There are no agreed rules, so whoever is most connected ends up deciding, often without anyone noticing.



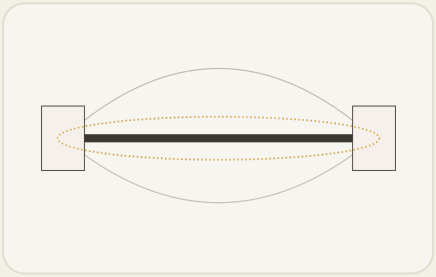
Herd movement

Each animal faces the way it wants to go, then the herd moves together.



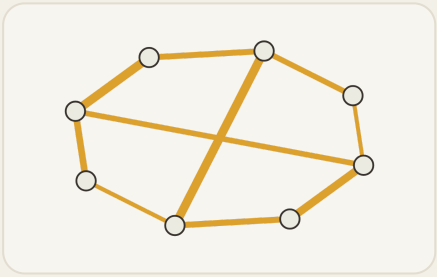
Honeybee quorum sensing

Scouts visit possible homes. Once enough gather at one site, the swarm moves.



Stigmergy (ant trails)

Ants leave scent trails. The shortest path gathers the most scent, so more ants use it.



Slime mould networks

The mould grows everywhere, keeps the useful links and drops the rest.

Open any of these online

Each structure in the guide has an example where it works and one where it backfires, and the social forces to watch for. If you have a decision in front of you now, describe it in Guide me and get a step-by-step way to decide.

welearnwegrow.github.io/deciding-together