PHD THESIS SUMMARY:
Democracy-as-fairness: justice, equal chances and lotteries.

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My dissertation lies primarily in the area of normative political philosophy, yet draws from sources as diverse as economics (the desiderata of social choice), moral philosophy (fairness in choosing between groups of people), and ancient history (use of lotteries in Athenian democracy) to challenge the widespread acceptance of majority rule.

I argue that democracy is legitimate as a solution to co-ordination problems, but that it is only acceptable to all if it gives each at least a chance of getting at least some of what they want (chapter 1). Adopting a contractualist approach to the justification of decision procedures, I reject two popular arguments for majority rule. Firstly, it need not produce good outcomes, since for example it does not take account of intensities (chapter 2). Secondly, it is not necessarily fair to all parties: unless all have some chance of ending up in the winning coalition, those excluded have no reason to accept the process as fair (chapter 3).

These arguments do not show that majority rule is always illegitimate, but they do suggest that there are some circumstances—such as when there is a permanent minority—where it is inappropriate. Here, we need some procedure that respects minorities. Chapters 4 and 5 develop one such proposal, termed 'lottery voting', in which a single vote is randomly selected to determine the outcome. Consequently, each individual is equally likely to be decisive (with a probability of $1/n$) while the chance of each option winning is proportional to its level of support amongst voters. I consider various possibilities for the implementation of such a procedure in small group decision-making, including how it may be combined with judicial review or time limits on decisions, and rebut objections based on the possibility of extreme minorities winning (suggesting that this could be avoided by institutional checks, but may be unlikely given that voting behaviour is endogenous to the system and a system where any vote could win encourages responsible voting).

The final two chapters (chapters 6 and 7) evaluate lottery voting against certain normative requirements commonly employed as axioms in the literature on social choice. Firstly, I evaluate it against the necessary and sufficient conditions of simple majority rule identified by May: decisiveness, anonymity, neutrality, and positive responsiveness. This comparison is complicated, since May assumes a deterministic rather than probabilistic procedure, but I argue that lottery voting meets analogues of his conditions that share the same intuitive appeal: it always produces a decision, it treats all voters and options equally, and voting for an option always favours it (which, I note, removes any incentives for strategic voting). I then proceed to compare lottery voting to Arrow's axiomatic conditions: collective rationality, universal domain, Pareto, independence of irrelevant alternatives, and non-dictatorship. Again, there are some difficulties because democracy is here understood as a pure procedure for settling conflicts of individual interests, rather than as a system for computing a single collective will or interests. Nonetheless, I observe that lottery voting will always respect unanimous preferences; while a random dictatorship is normatively unproblematic (there is no individual who always gets his or her way, regardless of others' preferences).

Chapter 7 is devoted to rationality, and argues that no decision procedure is inherently rational or irrational: what matters is the rationality of individual agents adopting it, which is a condition of my contractualist approach. Just as it may be rational for two individuals to settle a disagreement by tossing a coin, so it may be rational for a larger group to settle disagreements by agreeing to accept a randomly-drawn vote.

If democracy is understood as citizen sovereignty and political equality, then the possibility of lottery voting shows that it does not logically require majority rule. Whether the members of society should prefer lottery voting to majority rule or vice versa seems to rest on the conditions that they face (e.g., whether there are permanent minorities), but the mere possibility of an alternative discredits some arguments for majority rule and shows that we need to justify that procedure separately from democracy. Moreover, lottery voting has a number of benefits, aside from giving minorities some chance of victory, because it removes incentives for strategic voting and makes it easy to use weighted voting (if desired).

Ben Saunders obtained his DPhil from the University of Oxford in June 2008. He was supervised by David Miller (University of Oxford), and examined by David Estlund (Brown University) and Adam Swift (University of Oxford). He is currently departmental lecturer in philosophy at the University of Oxford, and working on a book based on the thesis.

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