



## INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH SEMINAR



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### Social Choice and Democracy

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#### Abstract

Participation of all in the decision-making process is an important element of democracy. However, social choice theory demonstrates that aggregating individual preferences into a collective choice often proves to be difficult. In particular, intransitive collective preference orders pose a fundamental problem in democratic theory because they can lead to the occurrence of cyclic majorities where alternative A beats alternative B, while B beats C and C again beats A. In such a situation, a clear collective choice cannot be determined. Moreover, groups with constant individual preferences may arrive at different results, and policy outcomes can vary significantly over time despite unchanged preferences. Determining a clear voting result is then not possible.

In the literature, there are highly diverse positions on the theoretical and empirical significance of intransitive collective preference orders. William Riker in particular argues that cyclic majorities hinder the determination of a clear collective will. Since the direct observation of individual preferences is impossible, there is no certainty in any decision about whether the preferences of the involved actors establish an equilibrium or lead to an intransitive collective preference order. In addition, collective choices are prone to be manipulated by strategic voting and agenda control. Hence, Riker argues that all democratic decisions are arbitrary and meaningless.

I argue that the pessimistic conclusions of social choice theory with respect to the meaning of democratic decisions can be avoided if we add more structure to individual preferences. If we admit all preferences to collective decisions and thus refrain from making restrictive assumptions about individual motivations in our theoretical models, majority rule might result in arbitrary and meaningless collective decisions. Hence interpretable democratic decisions do not arise from nothing, but presuppose the addition of 'something normative' to the preferences of the individuals. I will present a series of experimental studies that suggests that prosocial motivations can be part of these normative elements. Individuals care about others and take the well-being of other individuals into account. Thus, the viability of democracy rests on the existence of a common social bond between the members of a society.