

Modes of Government in Intentional Communities

Modes of Government

The first element of the FIC data that I want to discuss is governmental style. The questionnaires allowed communities to describe their decision-making system using any of seven options. They could, however, select multiple options, and many of them did so. The five main choices were: “Leader” for autocracies; “Consensus” for a consensus democracies (sometimes self-identified as anarchies); “Majority” for a majoritarian democracies; “Elders” for oligarchies (usually the founders), and “Other.” In some versions of the questionnaire, two other options existed: “Democratic Leader” and “Planner-Manager.”

To some degree, we can typify these governmental elements in an empirical fashion. At correlations of 0.2 or better, communities with leaders are associated with using a “weighting system,” wherein not all members have the same level of standing, and having a core group of advisors. They are also associated with high labor demands; with a shared spiritual path (especially Eastern religions or the Emissaries of Divine Light, and *not* an eclectic spirituality); with being celibate or prohibiting homosexuality, or having some other mandatory sexual policy. They are strongly negatively associated with feminism.

Consensus groups are statistically associated with feminism; with having relatively few communal meals; and with permitting the use of alcohol. They are negatively associated with Eastern religions; with weighting systems; and with core groups. Consensus is numerically the most prominent governmental mode among the FIC communities. It was the dominant political method in the FIC itself, derived from the FIC's Quaker and Mennonite precursors. In the 1960s and 1970s, formal consensus began to supplant majoritarianism as the default model for communities that professed some version of radical democratic politics. (The student cooperative movement seems to have been majoritarian). I have outlined this genealogy in more detail in a previous article.

Majoritarian groups are statistically associated with high labor demands and the absence of sexual policies. “Elder” groups are associated with prohibiting alcohol, and with having a “core group:” presumably in this case the core group and the elders are usually one and the same. “Other” groups are, of course, impossible to typify. They are statistically associated with prohibitions on alcohol use, and with land that is own by a single individual.

“Democratic leader” systems are ostensibly autocracies mitigated by some form of election or plebiscite, although as we will see below, there is some reason to doubt that this always the case. “Planner-Manager” systems are in principle based on a bicameral elected legislature, modeled on the one described in B.F. Skinner's book, *Walden II*. They existed only in the 1970s, and seem to have disappeared in the general shift away from leftist fascination with behavioral psychology.

Mixed Modes

Where communities have indicated multiple forms of government, it is often unclear exactly what they meant. For instance, a “Leader / Majority” system might refer to rule by a leader who is periodically elected by a majority vote. It might refer to a leader having complete control over some facets of the community, while other aspects are controlled by a majoritarian assembly. It might simply refer to a leader who periodically uses a plebiscite to validate their decisions.

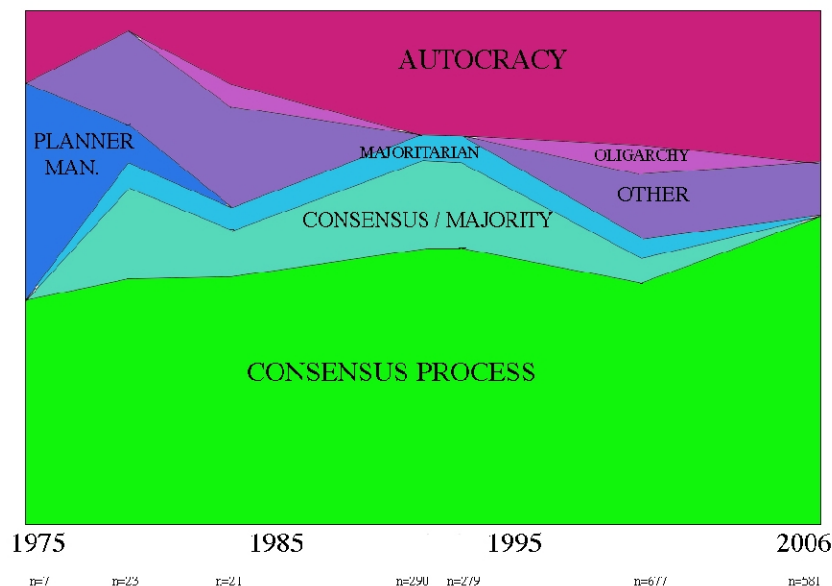
One of the popular criticisms of communes, especially after the Manson Family arrests in 1969, was that they were run by dictatorial cults of personality. It seems likely that many essentially

autocratic communities wish to present themselves in a democratic light. This is perhaps especially true in communities where a single founder owns the land and assets of the community—and therefore exercise considerable *de facto* political authority—but has some type of democratic vision. In all events, there are many variations on the theme of communities with leaders that *also* use some other political model, including the designation “democratic Leader.” I will refer to these as “leader-plus” communities. Again, there is good reason to think that this was frequently little more than a public relations effort.

Nevertheless, the term “consensus” is often applied to less formal procedures, and sometimes is used to reflect a political *style* rather than a process. It seems likely some communities reporting consensus in tandem with other methods of government probably did not use a formal consensus model. However, as mentioned in the article above, a common modification of consensus process in secular organizations is to allow a reversion to some type of supermajority rule in the event that consensus is not reached. This became a fairly common (and very stable) pattern among intentional communities, and is probably reflected by the “Consensus / majority” designation in many cases.

Frequency of and conversion between modes

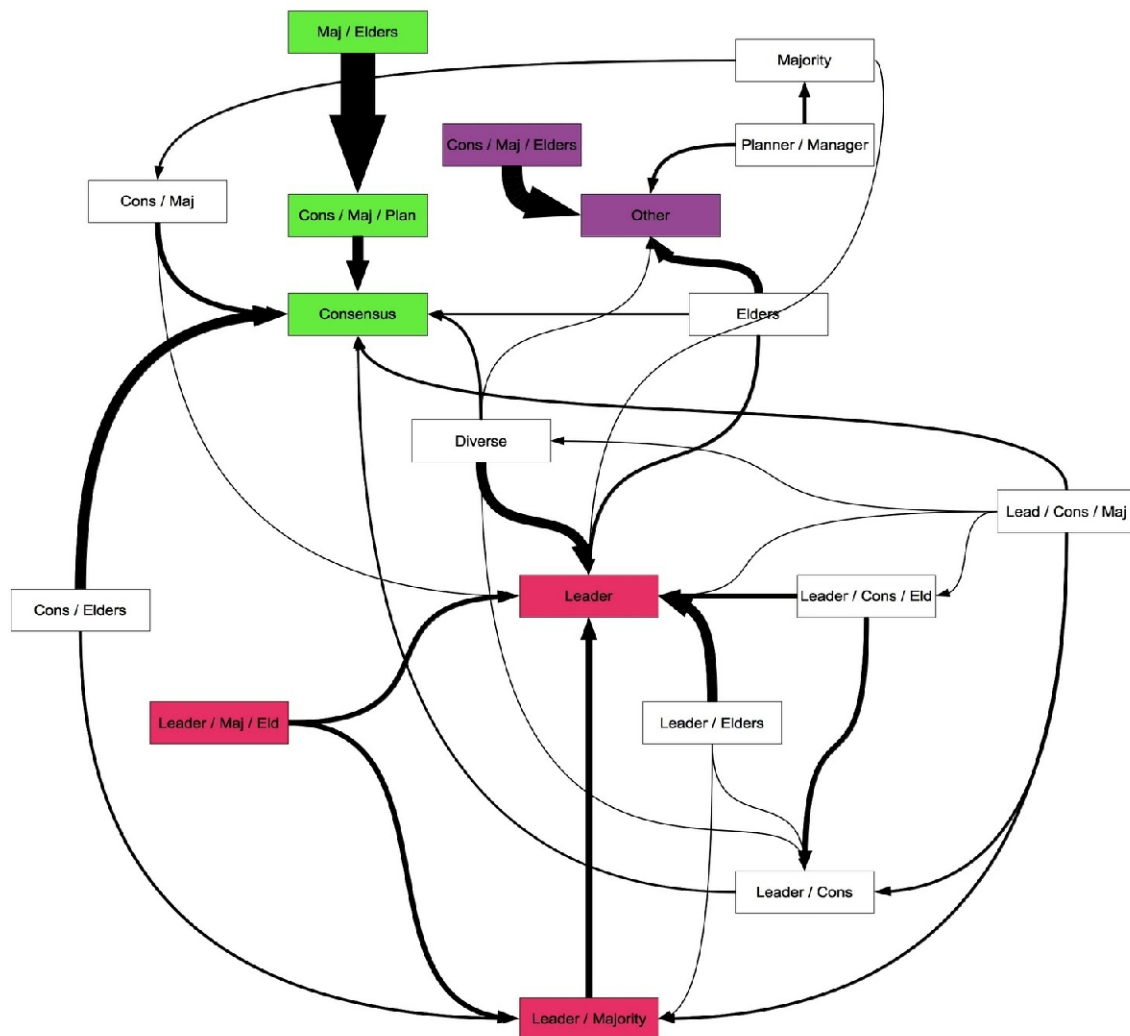
The secular pattern over the last three decades has been for consensus process and autocracy to squeeze out nearly all other modes of community government. This could plausibly be seen as a kind of polarization between democratic and authoritarian models. The diagram below shows the number communities professing a given mode of government in the seven surveys for which there was sufficient data. The total *N* is 1878. (For clarity, this data is collapsed somewhat further than the collapse system described for the analysis below; most importantly, the leader-plus communities are combined with autocracy.)



There are 682 instances in which we can make a longitudinal comparison between the same community at two points in time, *and* in which we have information about the governmental model for those points. These encompass 487 communities.

I have collapsed the data as follows. “Other” has been maintained, but combinations with “other” have been truncated to their basic form. (E.g. “Leader / majority / other” is collapsed to “Leader / majority”.) “Democratic leaders” have been collapsed to “Leader / Majority.” (There were no communities in this sample that indicated Democratic Leader by itself.) Finally, a range of communities that checked four or more different modes of government, usually in unique patterns, are all collapsed into “Diverse.” It is noteworthy that nearly every group in this category includes “Leader” as one of their categories.

After these collapses, there are 161 instances of governmental modes changing, and 521 cases of the modes remaining the same. I've created the chart below to visualize these conversions. The width of the arrows represents the likelihood of a given conversion. For the sake of clarity, probabilities lower than 2% annually are not shown. This means that there are in fact some “pathways” between governmental styles that are not shown here, though they are exceedingly unusual.



There is considerable variation in the stability of the governmental modes. “Other” and “Consensus” are both retained 98% of the time annually. “Leader / Consensus” is retained 96% of the time, “Leader” and “Majority” 94% of the time. Of the other major modes, “Planner-Manager” is 91%, and “Elders” at 81%, and “Diverse” at 79%. At the bottom of the spectrum, “Majority / Elders” is retained only 57% of the time, making it the least stable governmental mode in this sample (Though it is also a fairly unusual one).

As both diagrams indicate, there is a tendency for governmental modes to convert towards three attractors: Consensus, Leader, and Other. The coloring shows the conversion-sheds for these three attractors, although these are not absolute: this graph does not show conversions at very low levels of probability. On the basis of this graph, most community government modes (shown in white) are capable of ultimately converting to either consensus or leader systems; a few may also convert to “other.”

There is a mechanical logic to these transformations in one sense. Consensus systems and autocracies both have a sort of constitutional inertia. In principle, these are the two modes of government that can persist even when *all but one person* is opposed to them. On the other hand, a majoritarian assembly (including planner-manager systems) can convert to some other mode of government even over the wishes of a substantial minority.

Oligarchies (“elders”) present a more nuanced question. In principle, an oligarchy could behave like an autocracy, only converting to another mode of government when the members voluntarily relinquish power. In fact, oligarchies appear to be among the least stable model here, with attrition of 19% per year, mostly to “other.”

Finally, the pattern of conversion shown here bears out my suspicion that autocratic communities may paint themselves as democratic. Among the conversions from “leader-plus” communities, 55% go to simple autocracies, and another 32% go to some other version of “leader-plus.”

Towards Autocracy or Consensus? Predictive Factors.

The diagram above shows that there is very considerable overlap between the conversion sheds of consensus and leader systems. A number of factors, however, seem to predispose a group to convert to one format or the other. The list on the following page shows factors that (individually) have a correlation at $|r| > 0.1$ for both to autocracy *and* (with the opposite sign) for consensus, with all correlations significant at 0.01 or better. The combined variance for each pairing is shown on the right.

Most of this is relatively unsurprising. Existing political structures that are non-egalitarian predict conversion to autocracy, and the absence of those predicts conversion to consensus. Being socially conservative in matters of feminist values, sex, or alcohol use all predict conversion to autocracy; being socially liberal in those matters predicts conversion to consensus. Communities with a shared spiritual path, especially an Eastern religion, tend towards autocracy, others tend towards consensus.

A more interesting pattern exists with respect to the communities' economics. Larger communities are more likely to become autocratic. Communities that subsequently convert to consensus average an adult population of 19; those that subsequently convert to autocracy average a 79. However, we can qualify this observation in several ways. First, the *number of buildings* is more predictive measure of size than the number of the people: plausibly this corresponds to the

communities' economic assets. And the source and tenure of those assets seems to matter as well: communities with joining fees, or with a land trust, are more likely to convert to consensus process. This would seem to suggest that economic stakeholding is an important factor in the evolution of governmental modes.

I had hypothesized that there would be correlations with change in population or gender balance, but I cannot find any.

Although it is not apparent in the numbers above, the tiny minority of conversions *away from* autocracy and consensus typically involve “elder” formulas of some type. Oligarchy is also the most indeterminate system, tending to convert to consensus or autocracy with about equal frequency.

CONVERSION TO AUTOCRACY	CONVERSION TO CONSENSUS	COMBINED VARIANCE
Leader	No leader	61%
No Consensus	Consensus	56%
Not Feminist	Feminist	43%
Weight System	No Weight System	37%
Core Group	No Core Group	32%
Queer Friendly	Not Queer Friendly	19%
Eastern Religion	No Eastern Religion	18%
More labor required	Less labor required	17%
Spiritual Path	No Spiritual Path	16%
More group meals	Fewer group meals	12%
More buildings	Fewer buildings	12%
Sexual Policy	No Sexual Policy	12%
More people	Fewer people	9%
No alcohol	Alcohol	6%
No Joining Fee	Joining Fee	5%
No Land Trust	Land Trust	5%
“Other” politics	No “other” politics	5%