

Abstract

Democratic governance relies upon the assumption that group deliberation achieves more than individuals deciding alone, taking the form of governing boards, committees, panels, and task forces. Even in online communities, recent movements have shifted power from the lone content moderator to a deliberating collective. However, a special form of deliberating group stands out: juries. There, 6–12 average individuals can determine the difference between one’s life and death.

Jury decisions are only legitimate if they are also consistent: that is, in a parallel universe, would the same jury have come to the same conclusion? If juries are inconsistent in this manner, it suggests that the adjudication is influenced by arbitrary social factors within the discussion, rather than being grounded in the facts as presented.

Yet it is unclear whether groups outperform individuals on this metric. On the one hand, social influence has been found to increase the accuracy of beliefs; on the other, groups are vulnerable to information signals and reputation pressures, amplifying errors and inconsistency. Thus, group decisions may be far less consistent than an individual deciding alone.

However, consistency in groups has never been directly measured, since the same group cannot convene again without reactivating prior social context. Further, even if the same group reconvenes, its prior experience on a case would likely influence its subsequent decisions, thereby creating a learning effect.

This thesis directly compares the consistency of group and individual decision-makers. To do this, we draw upon the affordances of a pseudonymous online deliberation platform. Using one-way pseudonym masking, we manipulate the perceived identities of one’s past collaborators, enabling each repeated group deliberation to begin anew. Reconvened groups adjudicate paired cases that are known to have aligned outcomes. We then use this system to compare the decision consistency of juries to that of individual decision-makers.

Ultimately, we find that groups and individuals are equally consistent; participating in a group also does not affect an individual’s own decision consistency. We also find that minority voices are more influential in deliberation than previously expected. These results are especially interesting in light of the fact that participants greatly underestimated the consistency of the teams they participated in. Jury decisions are consistent despite a widespread perception to the contrary.