Tree's (Quick & Dirty) Guide to the Biodiversity of Consensus Decision-Making Processes

Secular Community

This is the tradition i have learned from others in the world of community living, most influentially Quaker elder Caroline Estes. (It has significant overlap with common practices among political groups of the radical left, which many activists learned from Movement for a New Society in the 1980s.) The book *Building United Judgment* serves as something of a manual for this approach.

My experience is that using consensus successfully in groups of people who live together requires working skillfully with emotional expression and including people's feelings as a factor in the decision even more than in other groups. Groups that have a clear vision and values can use these as touchstones when facing controversial proposals; in the absence of that, a generalized commitment to the well-being of the group serves that role adequately but less satisfactorily. The use of colored cards as a tool to help facilitators prioritize the sequence of those wishing to speak has been popular in the cohousing sector of the intentional communities movement.

Formal Consensus

As written up by CT Butler & Amy Rothstein (manual available free online). Provides a clear set of steps for those new to the method. The Formal Consensus approach was designed to be robust enough to serve groups suffering covert government disruption of their meetings. States clearly that blocks can only be upheld if the rest of the group agrees the block is based in the foundational principles of the organization. Issues are expected to come in the form of a proposal. Once a proposal is presented, discussion at a general or philosophical level comes first, then more detailed concerns are listed and responded to.

Quaker

Best documented historical use of consensus over the past 350 years. Looking for more than just a solution to satisfy the members, Quakers seek to discern God's will: their business meetings are formally called "Meetings for Worship for Business." Quaker consensus practice includes periods of reflective silence and pauses between speakers. They are probably better at emphasizing the unity of the group than most other consensus users. The facilitator (called the Clerk) has a strong role if needed, including the ability to overrule blocks they judge inappropriate. Individual participants are expected to be self-disciplined, and to avoid repetition or unduly pressing one's point.

Sociocratic

I can't speak as much to this version because i haven't experienced it. It's a direct spin-off from Quaker process, refined by use in Dutch businesses. There is heavy use of go-rounds, but groups are trained to do them quickly, with each individual usually speaking only briefly. The facilitator role seems stronger than in other consensus forms, more like a chairperson: they may get involved in content, and are empowered to make important judgment calls, such as deciding when sufficient consent has been arrived at. There is an emphasis on having a rational basis for concerns that can be clearly articulated to others' satisfaction; thus, the presumption is that all proposals pass unless someone presents a "reasoned and paramount objection."

Agreement-Seeking/Consensus with Fallback Voting

Agreement-seeking is kind of a hybrid form on the spectrum between consensus and majority voting. It's used by the Pacific Green Party (Oregon), among others. Basically, one uses a bunch of consensus techniques to refine a proposal. Then, if consensus is not reached after a few tries, the group goes to a vote. This is further along the spectrum toward voting than cohousing communities, which typically have voting fallbacks written into their bylaws that are rarely, if ever, invoked. The book *Roberta's Rules of Order* by Alice Collier Cochran is on agreement-seeking, though it doesn't use that term. There is not common terminology in widespread use to refer to agreement-seeking.

Meditative Guidance

In the Winter 2000 issue of *Communities* magazine (#109), Betty Didcoct tells the story of a small spiritual community she was a member of that used the receipt of individual guidance during meditation as a significant component of its decision-making process. Their goal was to open to intuition and the "wisdom of the universe" in making community decisions. They recognized that such input might arrive in the form of imagery as well as words. Over time they became adept at distinguishing when guidance was truly being received vs. when their own beliefs or judgments were clouding the transmission.

Other

There are lots more local customs and variations within each method, and there are undoubtedly more varieties of consensus practice than what i have listed here. There are many boards of directors (both for-profit and not-for-profit) who technically vote using Roberts Rules, but in actual practice wait to take votes until unanimity has been reached. There are references to consensus being used among spiritual groups ranging from early Buddhists to contemporary Jesuits, and among secular groups ranging from the Polish parliament hundreds of years ago to the WTO protestors in Seattle in 1999. Go forth and explore, and please let me know what you come up with!