

# DEMOCRACY DOES NOT BELONG TO HUMANS ALONE

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In light of the constant election talk, an oft-repeated phrase is that what sets humans apart from animals is democracy. Well, this isn't entirely true. Animals might not have elected leaders, but they sure do vote! In several species, voting has been observed for routine decision-making such as the direction to move in or the place to camp at.

## Honeybees

Sometimes when bee colonies become too big, the Queen leaves the colony with half the workers while a new daughter takes over the existing group. The old queen and her bees move a certain distance away, rest on trees, and send out scouts in all directions to look for a new place to call home. When the scouts return, they communicate their information through a unique dance.

Over the course of days, other bees start voting for locations by endorsing

a favourite scout's location. Several scouts abandon their dance and join in as well. The final decision is taken not by the queen but by the majority consensus. Whichever scout has the most number of dancers leads the group to his location.

## Wild Dogs

These hyena-like animals move in packs and vote to decide when to hunt. When one of the dogs thinks it's time to hunt, he sneezes. A supporter would also sneeze to indicate his favour for hunting. As more dogs join in sneezing, the pack needs to decide whether to hunt or not. If there's a majority, they hunt.

Older, stronger male dogs need to sneeze only once or twice, while weak, smaller dogs need to sneeze repeatedly to signal their hunger. Many a time, the weaklings are vetoed with silence overruling tiny sneezes.

## Macaques

These avid fruit-eating monkeys often vote on which direction their group should move in to obtain more fruits through the jungles of south Asia. Whenever they rest, an individual who wants to go in a certain direction will move that way and wait for others to follow her. Not all do; some

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monkeys offer alternative directions to take and walk their way. The rest of the group casts their vote by going and standing with one of the candidates. The decision is taken once again through majority consensus. As soon as a group starts growing big, smaller groups abandon their choice and side with the bigger ones.

Voting and candidacy isn't restricted to adults or females; all monkeys of all sizes, age, and sexes vote. A similar process is followed by baboons as well. They might have a social hierarchy amongst themselves, but everyone votes.

## Buffaloes

The larger cousins of our water-loving herbivores in Africa vote which direction their herd should move in through a complicated physical exercise. The females in the herd offer their choice of direction during rest by standing up and lying back down with their heads facing the direction in which they want to go. Different animals in the group offer different options and the exercise goes on for an

hour or two, generally appearing like the beasts are lazing around or resting. A consensus emerges when a large number of buffaloes are turned in the same direction. The herd moves in the direction of maximum buffalo heads.

## Meerkats

These desert mongooses are often easy prey to large predators like eagles and snakes. Meerkats always move in groups (called clans) for protection; a lone meerkat is a dead meerkat. Sometimes, certain individuals of a clan sense risk or feel panic and start emitting vocalisations. If these sounds are not one of the six urgent alarm calls for predators: a low, medium, and high urgency setting for predators on land and sky, but are just persuasion, the clan decides whether to pay heed and move faster or stick to their speed. If more meerkats join in on the noise and there is a majority vote, the clan speeds up.

## Ants

Rock ants perhaps have the simplest and most cumbersome voting procedure for deciding on a new nest. They travel to each individual site location, inspect it thoroughly, and if satisfied, just stay there. If their numbers don't build, they go around to see who's getting votes and move into the place that has the largest number of stationary ants.

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*The views expressed are personal*