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WORKING PAPER

The New "Supercommittee":

An "Optimistic" View

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Note: The word "Optimistic" in my subtitle is there in tribute to Ken Koford's 1982 study "An Optimistic View of the Possibility of Rational Legislative Decision-Making."

An October *New York Times* story remarked that "with just five weeks until its deadline, a secretive Congressional committee seeking ways to cut the federal deficit is far from a consensus, and party leaders may need to step in if they want to ensure agreement, say people involved in the panel's work." We have this "supercommittee" of twelve members of Congress, ostensibly for the purpose of cutting a minimum $1.2 trillion from our deficit, chosen by four appointers, none agreeing with any other on exactly what ought to be done, representing mostly diametrically opposing wings of two parties with irreconcilable differences.

Furthermore, if there's no recommendation before Thanksgiving Day, there's to be a 5-percent across-the-board cut in non-entitlement government expenditures (which includes defense cuts estimated at $600 billion). On the surface this supercommittee would seem to be highly unlikely to produce anything useful, a statement so self-evident that the introduction of theory would appear superfluous—unless theory suggests there may somehow be hope of a successful outcome. Is it possible that the supercommittee will make recommendations—which will then be passed into law—and achieve the desired result? Let us see. We might mention here in passing that past study, going back at least fifty years to *Parkinson's Law*, tells us twelve is too many for a working committee and that committees with an even number of members and no casting vote are a dubious proposition at best (Charles I tried it, by the way, with his cabinet and got his head cut off).

Committees and Commissions

The advocates of this new supercommittee have been correct in saying that it is in fact a committee rather than a commission—that is, the members have a power beyond simply the power to make recommendations. Nevertheless, because this is such a restricted special committee, research on how commissions work is relevant. In the Theory of Committees, a legislative committee differs from a commission in that the members of a committee can vote on the recommendations they make. Here, though the members of this supercommittee can vote in the House or Senate, in fact the committee's statutory requirement is to make recommendations – not to get them passed. Therefore, like any "recommending" committee, the supercommittee is

subject to some of the limitations of a commission—and "successful" recommending commissions have worked through longer-term education of the public.

What, then, is the purpose of a commission? In the early days of *The Public Interest*, Daniel Bell wrote a short "Comment" in which he set out a typology of government commissions – advisory, evaluative, fact-finding, public- relations, and policy recommendation commissions (Bell 1966, p. 6). These commissions, he suggested, represented something new in the executive branch: they provided for the direct representation of "functional constituencies" in the advisory process; they permitted the government to explore the limits of action by taking soundings; they served as a direct public relations device to call attention to certain issues; and they fostered "élite participation" in government policy.

That would seem to be what the Simpson-Bowles Commission was supposed to do, and it would look pretty much like what this supercommittee is doing—with the functional constituencies funneled through four obvious political entities: House Republicans, House Democrats, Senate Republicans, and Senate Democrats. But there is a considerable *caveat* to be entered here. The commission and the supercommittee weren't designed for the same purpose. Bell's fundamental point about commissions is that they are agents of education – as Bertrand de Jouvenel said, "to make the future a matter for public opinion" (Bell 1966, pp. 7, 9). That is far from what is going on with the new supercommittee – though it may have been the case with the Simpson-Bowles Commission. Still, parts of the theory of commissions are relevant to this discussion.

What about the Theory of Committees? Is There a Solution to Condorcet's Paradox?

The problem that gives rise to the literature on committees may be set out in a three-person three-alternative example. Suppose person no. 1 prefers alternative A to alternative B to alternative C (1: ApBpC). Suppose person no. 2 prefers alternative B to alternative C to alternative A (2: BpCpA). Suppose person no. 3 prefers alternative C to alternative A to alternative B (3: CpApB). Now if all we have are these ordinal rankings, without any cardinal values attached, a committee consisting of these three persons (1, 2, and 3) and faced with these alternatives (A, B, and C) will vote 2-1 for A over B (ApB: 2-1), 2-1 for B over C (BpC: 2-1), but 2-1 for C over A (CpA: 2-1). That is, the 2-1 preference for A over B and B over C will not produce (transitively) a preference for A over C. Indeed, as noted, C will be preferred over A, 2-

1 (Arrow 1951). This paradox—noted by the Marquis de Condorcet more than two centuries ago—is very much a simplified case, but it presents the difficulty in no uncertain terms.

The difficulty is not always insuperable, though. Back in the 1940s, Duncan Black set out to develop a pure theory of politics as a ramified theory of committees (Grofman 1981, p. 12). Our concern here is with the part of this theory that can be adapted to the peculiar, limited form of a committee constituting a commission, or the almost-as-limited form represented by the supercommittee. Under some conditions, even for these, there could be a stable equilibrium solution, and it should be the most preferred alternative for the median voter (Black 1948, pp. 23-34, Black 1958).

Historically, various criteria for determining "majority will" have been proposed. Condorcet himself, for instance, said that it is "any alternative which is preferred by a majority to each and every other alternative." Jean-Charles de Borda "assigns to each alternative for each committee member one point for each alternative to which it is preferred by that committee member" – with the alternative that gains the highest point total being selected, like a member of the French Academy or the MVP in Major League Baseball. Finally, C. L. Dodgson wrote to "choose the element that would become maximal with the fewest changes to existing preference orderings." The first two of these cannot solve the "intransitivity" problem presented above, nor is there any evident median voter, which is why the "median optimum" solution almost certainly cannot hold. The solution will necessarily be a Dodgson solution, involving legislative bargaining, giving up lesser preferences to gain greater. Even now, there is a chance.

Solutions in Wonderland

This single-purpose supercommittee—and almost all commissions in general—are considerably more restricted than most legislative committees in what they can do to get their recommendations accepted, and indeed in how they can develop recommendations to begin with. To see why, let us consider the possibility of reaching a Dodgson solution within a legislative committee suffering from a problem of intransitive preferences. What we need to do is make the fewest possible changes in preference orderings. The question is how—and the usual answer is along the lines of "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." This is known, in the literature, as log-rolling (Mueller 1979, pp. 49-98). Charles Lutwidge Dodgson of *A Method of Taking*

Votes in Committees is the Lewis Carroll of *Alice in Wonderland.* Both the supercommittee members and the characters in *Alice* operate consistently within their own logic.

Suppose the members of the committee have preferences of different intensities on different issues, either in this committee or (as noted earlier) coming up before different committees with overlapping memberships. Suppose in our A/B/C case above that person no. 1 would "give anything" to defeat alternative C, while person no. 3 would give anything to defeat alternative B: person no 2, on the other hand, prefers B to C to A, but does not really care very much. A minor change in no. 2's preferences can be assured by no. 1 or no. 3 or both, at low cost, provided there is another issue available for trade (an issue in which no. 2 is perhaps more involved). In fact, log-rolling of this type might produce de Borda, Condorcet, or median optimum solutions from the revised preference schedule (Mueller 1979, p. 50). It might very well, of course, not produce social welfare, but that is not entirely our point here.

Duncan Black discovered that if committee members have preferences that rise steadily to a single peak and then fall steadily away from it, then there is a single unique outcome capable of receiving a majority in pair-wise competition against other alternatives, and *this unique outcome will always be the median voter's most preferred alternative* (Grofman 1981, pp. 19-20). This rule has since been systematically proven, and it can be generalized to multi-dimensional issue spaces. That is, the "property of the median optimum"—the fact that the outcome will be what the median voter most wants—will hold even if more than one issue is at stake, but only if there are single-peaked preferences on every issue.

We can look briefly here at several findings on commissions for guidance. It has been found that commissions appointed from the corporate/governmental élite are significantly more likely than either public-interest ("interest-group") or mixed commissions to come up with recommended regulations. (Tutchings 1979, p. 108, and see also Zegart 2004). A special limited joint House/Senate Committee *lacking intransigent interest-group representation* would be in many ways similar to a corporate/governmental élite commission – more likely to recommend regulations and moderately more likely to have the recommendations accepted than are public interest commissions. With intransigent interest-group representation, on the other hand, it is subject to the limitations of an interest-group commission – unless, as we will see, there are interest-groups with overlapping memberships.

Interest Groups, Blue Ribbons, and Outcomes

From his studies of ninety-five governmental regulations and their 5,053 recommendations, Tutchings drew conclusions, which in turn led him to classify commission recommendations according to a "manipulability" factor. The *least* manipulable, by commission report, of all actors that presidential commissions might want to manipulate is the U. S. Congress (Tutchings 1979, p. 69). This is a good reason for creating instead a special joint committee of the Congress, if it is an élite or blue-ribbon committee rather than a committee representing interest-groups with intransigent differences. Tutchings divided his commissions by their membership into three types: (1) corporate/governmental, (2) public interest, and (3) mixed (Tutchings 1979, pp. 97, 99-100). These correspond roughly to a "blue ribbon" (Hamiltonian, Progressive, and centripetal) "interest group" (Populist and centrifugal) and "political" division of commissions (or, here, our limited special committee).

The public-interest commission is least likely to have a single, preferred Condorcet solution. It is least likely to have real de Borda rankings—preferences arranged at uniform intervals on a preference schedule. It is perhaps least likely – and certainly not very likely – to have the possibility of a Dodgson solution because existing preference orderings are unlikely to have significant overlapping. It is certainly least likely to possess a median optimum. It should be noted here that there may be "blue-ribbon" members of a mixed commission or committee, and they may in fact constitute an interest-group within that commission or committee.

Members of corporate élites and members of governmental élites (and some commission members are both simultaneously) are both likely to have at least some carrots to dangle for future exchange. But if the members are not interested in each other's carrots—and are therefore intransigently opposed—all bets may be out the window. Still, it should be asked whether commission members should be examined for preferences of different intensities, for common single-peaked preference schedules, for an actual median member – in short, whether all this is merely abstraction or whether it's useful in determining the way particular commission or special super-committee members might behave. We'll be carrying out a brief examination.

One question here: Can the members of the supercommittee be thought of simply as agents of the respective leaderships in the House and the Senate? The preferences of those leaders might be shaped by what could be passed (assuming they want a bill passed), even apart from their own preferences about what *should* be passed. We might be dealing with questions of perfect or imperfect agency, reflecting polarized factions in both chambers and perhaps in the

general public. Principals may be more important than agents. On the surface, it may not be easy to see what outcome was desired by any one appointer by looking at the appointees. But before questions of agency, there is the question whether or not theory is useful in telling us how individual commission members will behave. We can begin by appealing to an early study by Herbert Simon on interaction in small groups (Simon 1952).

The Bounds of Committee Rationality

Simon proved formally that, given a particular group structure and set of interactions, in groups containing subgroups or cliques, the equilibrium value of whole-group activity will decline as the clique activity increases – external goals being held constant. In addition, there may be no equilibrium activity point for the group as a whole (Simon 1952, p. 210). That is, there is no guarantee the group will fulfill any portion of its assigned tasks: "When the goals of an organization cannot be connected operationally with actions … then decisions will be judged against subordinate goals that can be so connected" (Simon 1982, p. 481).

In this lies the kernel of Simon's theory of bounded *procedural* rationality. This theory says that the capacity of the human mind for formulating and solving complex problems is very small compared with the size of the problems whose solution is required for "objectively rational" behavior in the real world, or even for a reasonable approximation of such behavior.

The consequence is that the "intended rationality of an actor" requires him to construct a simplified model of the "real situation" in order to deal with it (Simon 1957, pp. 241-43, 256). This principle of bounded rationality lies at the very core of organization theory, and also (as Simon specifically points out) at the core of a theory of action (he believes, *any* theory of action) that purports to treat human behavior in complex situations (Simon 1957, p. 256) – including the complex situations involved in commission behavior. The principle of bounded rationality tells us that many or most of the premises of rational choice will be determined by the social and psychological environment of the subject making the choice. The "role hypothesis" asserts that many of these premises will be obtained from the socially-defined role in which the actor—or, in our case, the supercommittee member—is placed. That social definition includes, of course, what we might call a cultural component, and in that cultural component are the roots of many of the actor's thought processes – his or her cognitive map.

Decision Premises

Hence, if we take the decision-premise as the unit for role description, we can accept both the idea that behavior is rational and the idea that it is, to a considerable extent, role-determined. We must take into account the simplifications made by (in Simon's term) the "choosing organism" so as to bring his or her model of the situation within the range of the organism's computing capacity. The environment in which decisions are made thus lies in part within the skin of the organism: constraints that must be taken as "givens" in the equation for choice may be the organism's physiological and psychological limitations. Most important among them are likely to be limitations on computational choice (Simon 1957, p. 256). These limitations require simplifying decision processes by adopting – in accordance with one's role (one might say, *as* one's role) – certain subsets of decision premises that are thereafter left unexamined, and that must be left unexamined if work is to be done. But to the degree that the same subsets are adopted by more than one member of a group, there will tend to be factions within that group. This will lead to unstable activity and questionable output.

Different decision premises will lead to different outcomes. If, in our original A/B/C model, we were to have three three-person cliques rather than three single persons, the model would still hold. Indeed, inasmuch as there would be activity within cliques, lowering the level of the group activity as a whole, the preferences of the cliques might be even more intractable than individual preferences would be. To the degree that log-rolling would be a between-clique rather than a within-clique activity, there would be less time for log-rolling in a commission with cliques than in one without.

Moreover, in addition to producing unstable and diminished overall activity levels, and making log-rolling less likely, cliques in any voting group will reduce the applicability of de Borda solutions, reduce the probability of a median optimum, and likewise reduce the probability of a Condorcet solution. Activity within cliques will, as Simon's model indicates, lead to better interrelationships within cliques, strengthening member identification with clique desires. It will thus (1) tend to set preferences at irregular intervals along preference schedules (with the clique's preferred alternative way ahead of others), and (2) tend to establish clique allegiance to increasingly different sets of preferences. In the latter case, it will both reduce the chances that there will be a true median optimum and (somewhat more obviously) reduce the chances that any

single alternative action, however minor, will be preferred to all other alternatives (Simon 1982b, p. 41).

Public Pressure, Agenda, and "Actors or Agency" – What about the Outcome?

Public Pressure: Suppose there is considerable public pressure for solving the problem (as there is here).   We would expect single-peaked preferences in such a case – to the extent that public concern for an issue generates well-defined preference schedules, which it will, and to the extent that these will be single-peaked, which is not likely. We would expect, on much the same grounds, that de Borda and Condorcet solutions would both be unlikely. We might expect that public pressure could generate log-rolling in order to bring about a Dodgson solution in the real world, but our understanding of the bounds to rationality suggests severe limitations. We should also emphasize that the bounds apply to procedural rationality: it will almost certainly be the case that the differing subsets of "role" decision premises will generate differing preferences as to final recommendations, and the fact that these subsets exist may limit the ability of one commission or committee member to follow another's logic. Early experiments with computer chess (thus with severely limited-memory computers) suggested just how important this problem is – differing algorithms leading to widely differing strengths and weaknesses in patterns of play (Simon 1982b, pp. 412-18).

Agenda: We have not yet considered one highly important point in the public choice literature, the "agenda" question – nor, of course, have we returned to the question of agency. It has been widely agreed for a third of a century that he who sets the agenda (in this imperfect world) determines the outcome (Koford 1982, pp. 5-6, from which I have taken the word "optimistic" in my title, Kramer 1977, McKelvey 1976, and subsequent work developed from these: see Zegart 2004). What is not agreed is whether there exists any reasonable way around this. Controlled laboratory experiments have shown that groups of decision-makers do *not*, in fact, *necessarily* act in such a way as to produce a lack of stable equilibrium in their decision-making. But they still seem to show that equilibrium, whether real or apparent, is a function of agenda-setting (Fiorina and Plott 1978, pp. 575-598, though since that time most studies of agenda-setting have concentrated on the media). Our committee's agenda right now is unknown, though considered unlikely to promote a stable equilibrium solution. And even if some kind of

restrictive agenda-setting here could assure equilibrium – that is, an agreed-upon decision – it would be unlikely to produce any kind of optimality (Koford 1982, p. 6).

But Koford did give us some hope. His seminal article showed that, though recent formal models of legislatures had made equilibrium outcomes highly unlikely without either (1) extreme restrictions upon preferences or (2) severe constraints upon the agenda, nevertheless legislatures (and other political processes) showed sufficient regularities that equilibrium models were appropriate. If legislators may freely make binding contracts and if there are the right institutional restrictions on legislative agendas (such as constitutional rules, agreements to share "pork barrel" projects evenly, limitation of committees to specific policy arenas, and the election of leaders who then determine the voting agenda), we may have something close to an equilibrium model. In other words, we might get an outcome other than kicking the can.

We should look at another question related to agenda-setting that really needs to be considered here: the reversion point (the automatic cuts) is endogenous, that is, within the system, and thus a matter of choice, though the automatic cuts will not take place for a year after a supercommittee failure. Is it likely that they will ever happen, since Congress could simply overrule itself? In fact, it might be argued, this whole elaborate drama is being staged fundamentally because Congress has failed to live up to its responsibilities over the years, and is fixing to duck out on them now. Indeed, it may be argued (*via* Simon) that our supercommittee will perforce seek "satisficing" solutions if they accept any at all. The "satisficing" solution could well be no recommendations and the ensuing across-the-board cut in Federal expenditures – of course, with the disclaimer "but it wasn't our fault – we tried!"

What is also important on agenda-setting, however, is the question of *who sets the internal order of the agenda*. Here we can set out a general principle. To the degree that the same person (or body) appoints the members and sets the agenda, the members ought to be such that the agenda is suited to them *and to the goal of the commission or committee*, unless the person making the appointments has failed to match them because of computational or information bounds (Simon 1982b, pp. 344-350). An exception would occur under conditions of insincere appointment or agenda-setting with concealed goals (Grofman 1981, pp. 30-36) – that is, goals different from the stated goals of the commission (or committee) or of those who appointed it. But if the stated goals (or the expected sub-goals) of the four appointers to this committee are

contradictory (as they seem to be), then there is hope of a favorable outcome if – and perhaps only if – there is insincere appointment with concealed goals.

Actors or Agency: Unanimity of role – that is, agreed-upon decision premises (at least so far as the "role" subset is concerned) – is no guarantee of a "best" solution, only that a solution will be agreed upon. In his *The Hoover Commissions Revisited*, Ronald C. Moe noted that of "detailed case studies of major individual commissions, there are none" (Moe 1982, and see Zegart 2004). That was a while ago; he was referring to presidential commissions; and his book was an attempt to remedy the situation for the two Hoover Commissions. But things haven't changed much since. Case studies of presidential commissions by Thomas Wolanin (Wolanin 1975, and see Zegart 2004 for follow-up) are very brief. But we know that the size of a commission (or special committee) is important. For example, out of 116 such commissions, the only fully successful state tax revision commission in the century from 1880 to 1980 – the Wisconsin commission of 1897-8 (under the late George Frost Kennan's father – see Kennan 1899) – had only three members, by far the smallest of these ever. It is even possible that with the Kennan Commission, we had a case of the median optimum solution, which, as we know, is much more likely in small bodies than in large.

Thus, following Herbert Simon, no human organism has more than limited computing capacity, and we necessarily apply our own limits to any task that faces us. We limit our examination of both decision-premises and our search space. But if we can switch our available resources from maintaining a relatively wide search space to examining the relevance of our decision-premises—that is, to looking beyond our role-determined premises—we will be less bound by our roles. The narrower the search space implied by a commission's mandate, the less role-bound the commissioners should be (the less they should be "agents" and the more they should be "actors"). The one successful state tax revision commission in a century achieved a good beginning in the education of the public toward courses of action that were originally politically inexpedient—if not impossible—but were apparently necessary to achieve the desired equitable outcome. The "unsuccessful" commissions were those which were more attuned to the passage of specific laws or regulations. In short, they were short-sighted, more concerned with the trees – or even a particular tree – than with the forest.

The same may be true of the supercommittee. But our model proposes a connection between breadth of accepted mandate and rigidity of role decision-premises: the broader the

mandate, the broader therefore the search space to be covered, and the more rigidly the role decision-premises will come into play in commission procedure. All other things being equal, a narrower mandate will lead to greater examination of decision-premises and thus less role-bound decision-making. But, of course, if roles are otherwise reinforced, this proviso does not hold. And although this supercommittee has a mandate focused on one issue, the issue itself is very broad, leading quite probably to proliferating sub-goals and more role-bound decisions.

There are significant implications for the fact that commission decision-making is necessarily flawed, given that a commission is the purest form of a committee, having neither exterior log-rolling nor "cross-committee" bargaining. The supercommittee may be considered similarly flawed – but not all of these implications are unfavorable. One of the most immediately important findings of previous study is that blue-ribbon commissions (and blue-ribbon members of mixed commissions or committees) may be just as role-bound as interest-group commissions (or interest-group members), but we may still have rational decision-making and Dodgson solutions. That was the burden of Simon's original study and his follow-ups over fifty years. That has been the burden of the studies on decision-making by his students.

Hope? I: Committee Members

What is necessary – and what may obtain here – is that there be sufficient similarity among members in their role decision-premises (if they generally believe they are part of the blue-ribbon élite, the governors, the Hamiltonian "able") – if what Professor Robert Axelrod would call the cognitive maps of the élite members (the ways they think, the backgrounds they think from, the mental roads they take) are sufficiently similar (Axelrod 1976) – if such members see their role as the "mature responsible adults" who make things work (a "blue-ribbon" role). Also – another important finding of past studies – interest-group members representing more than one interest-group may, if forced to choose between them, choose the one not relevant to their immediate task. This will permit log-rolling in this special case of a Congressional supercommittee. For example, if the Congressional Black Caucus wants something quite apart from the shape of this committee's work, a Republican House member of the committee could promise his vote for that to get Representative Clyburn's vote on, say, defense.

It could be argued, as earlier work on commission voting suggests, that our potential compromise votes are possible "blue-ribbon" members such as Senators Kerry, Baucus, and Portman, and Representatives Upton and Camp, and at least one member representing a dual constituency whose separate goals may in some cases differ – Democrats and Hispanics (Becerra) or Democrats and African-Americans (Clyburn), on some issue important to our supercommittee. We note that all of the supercommittee members who were members of Simpson-Bowles voted against the Simpson-Bowles Report (Hensarling, Camp, Baucus, Becerra), so this is clearly not a case of appointing a successor committee or commission to carry out the policy implicit in the educational goals of the original commission.

Hope? II: Committee Goals and Preferences

Within this supercommittee, the members have no single-peaked preferences in common, and thus there is no evident median-optimum solution. Part of the committee is concerned with tax reduction or stability—as well as reduction of regulation—and part of the committee is concerned with government expenditures for safety nets and getting us out of the recession by government action. We have strong sub-goal and interest-group commitment to reduced taxes and expenditures among Republicans, and to increased expenditures and tax revenues among Democrats. The tax-and-expenditure constituency represented by the Republicans may be defined as "No new taxes – lower existing taxes – in any case a recession is the worst time to raise taxes – government lives within its budget, and if government needs some billions of dollars (or even hundreds of millions) for sudden FEMA expenditures, FEMA won't get it unless Congress can find somewhere else to cut a very similar amount." The tax-and-expenditure constituency represented by Democrats here may be defined as "We're in a national emergency, we can't afford inaction, but if we have to balance necessary new expenditures with revenues, there's not enough fat in the budget to be cut quickly, and we're going to need 'revenue enhancement.'"

To be sure, if we are at a place where lowered tax rates bring increased tax revenues, we could lower taxes (tax rates) and get higher tax revenues – but there is no evidence we are. In any case, Herbert Simon taught us long ago that the solution to the bounded rationality of sub-goal identification lies specifically in putting ourselves in our opponent's place and seeing how we would react, and his doing the same thing for us. Will Jeb Hensarling put himself in Chris

Van Hollen's place, and *vice versa*. It is doubtful. And yet, there is some ambiguity in the appointments. We don't know the true goals of the appointers – are they, like Pontius Pilate, washing their hands of the matter? Will their agents do the same? In any case, at least there is ambiguity, and in that, some hope

We should reiterate that the stated goal of this supercommittee is to find an acceptable way of reducing the budget deficit by at least $1.2 trillion. The solution is generally formulated in the public mind as a mix of increased revenues and reduced expenditures, but subject to the pledge by House Republicans not to raise any taxes or set up any new taxes. There is also the additional goal of preventing the across-the-board budget cuts (including defense) threatened if no acceptable compromise is reached by November 23rd. Many observers believe that, without entitlement changes that further broaden the mandate, it is hard to see how there can be any solution beyond that date, even if the supercomittee can manage to kick the can past the 23rd.

These are not views that suggest real possibilities of compromise and certainly not of a median-optimum (or any Condorcet) solution. It is possible that an agenda could be established by which various plans for cutting the deficit by $1.2 trillion could be given De Borda ratings, and the highest rated plan be voted on by the supercommittee, subject possibly to external log-rolling to reduce net give-ups required for a Dodgson solution, knowing that if the plan failed (at any stage), the automatic cuts would take place, including programs affecting members' special constituencies – Defense, Minorities, Republicans, Democrats.

It may turn out that the distinction between a commission and a committee, though understated in this case, still holds promise. But the arithmetic seems to work out that for Senator Kyl, for example, to preserve Defense spending, he may have to agree to revenue enhancement equal to the amount Defense spending is not cut—as it would be if the committee can't agree. The procedure would in any case be futile if the supercommittee's recommendations were not passed into law. And, of course, Congress could always go back on the across-the-board cuts (which wouldn't take place till after 2012), rendering the whole procedure nugatory.

The weather outlook is for dense fog and storms, and no sun on November 23rd. Yet, it is possible, despite the auguries—despite what seems the unlikelihood of real choice by the supercommittee members—that the members could have a concealed agenda (possibly even given them by the leaders) to get something done. The outlook isn't good, but it may not be as bleak as we would think. All other things are not necessarily equal. As Mr. Dodgson/Carroll is

said to have invented the story of *Alice in Wonderland* to hold Alice Liddell still while he took her picture, perhaps someone of equal genius will come up with a Dodgson solution to hold Congress still while it saves money – and us! – and perhaps even itself! That would be Wonderland indeed! And it could happen.

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