Rough Consensus at RIPE

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# Change log

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# Introduction

The usual decision-making standard for most issues in the RIPE community is “Rough Consensus”. This article seeks to document what is meant by that term, how it is properly applied, as well as the implications of using such a decision-making standard and the reasons why it has been chosen.

This document does not intentionally alter the standard; it attempts to codify what is already broadly understood. The purpose of doing so is so that the standard may be better understood, to help newcomers understand how RIPE operates and to assist in the standard being applied consistently both between areas of RIPE (e.g. between different Working Group) and over time.

It should be noted that while “Rough Consensus” is the usual decision-making standard within the RIPE community, it is not used to the exclusion of all else. For example, Working Group Chairs are sometimes selected by popular election. This document does not seek to describe when Rough Consensus is or should be used, only what it means.

# Terminology

## Consensus vs Rough Consensus

The RIPE community has variously described its decision-making standard as “Consensus” or “Rough Consensus”.

There are valid arguments for (or rather, against), either label. If we say “Consensus”, we risk that being misunderstood as full agreement or unanimity. On the other hand, the term “Rough Consensus” is widely understood to have originated with the IETF; using it might give the improper suggestion that RIPE simply defers to the IETF to set its decision-making standard. Indeed, while the RIPE standard is very similar to that in the IETF, some difference in situation apply.

Within this document we use the term “Rough Consensus”, but the reader is reminded this is only a label, a defined term. Within this document, it means what is said here.

## Community

Within this document we also use the term “community” frequently. The scope of what is meant by “the community” varies according to the context. For example, when the decision being considered is a decision of a Working Group, “the community” in that context means those participating in the Working Group.

# Definition of Rough Consensus

## Formal definition

Rough Consensus means that the community is in agreement, having disregarded invalid objections.

This definition places critical weight on what is meant by “invalid objections”. This is discussed in detail below.

## What rough consensus is not

Before we come to that critical issue, though, it is instructive to consider what rough consensus is not: the alternative standards that the above definition has disregarded.

* Rough consensus is not unanimity

The above standard makes clear that “invalid objections” are to be disregarded. However such objections are to be identified and distinguished from valid objections, it is clear that the mere fact that one person disagrees with a proposal is not in itself sufficient to prevent rough consensus being declared.

* Rough consensus is not winning a vote.

The rough consensus standard is an assessment that there is agreement within the community.

* Rough consensus is not a majority opinion

Rough consensus requires that the community be in agreement (disregarding invalid objections). This clearly means that the majority opinion does not necessarily prevail: if there is not general agreement for a proposal, it cannot be decided upon even if a majority support it.

* Rough consensus is not a super-majority

Perhaps the most difficult and finely nuanced issue is that of super-majority. Because “rough consensus” requires that “most” people in the community support a decision, and does not require complete unanimity, it is easy to mistake this for a super-majority, albeit one where the threshold for that super-majority is unclear (and perhaps not fixed). This would be an error. What determines whether a small minority is sufficient to block the declaration of rough consensus is not their number per se, but the nature and quality of their objection. If there is a sizeable number of people objecting, that might tend to indicate that the objection is valid, and if only one person dissents, that might tend to indicate that their objection is not valid. But these are at most rebuttable presumptions. Numbers, alone, are not decisive.

## What kind of objections are invalid

There are several broad categories in which invalid objections may be found. Loosely, these might be considered “lack of good faith”, “out of scope”, “asked and answered”. [Other grounds?]

### Lack of good faith

* The RIPE community is open to all who wish to participate. It is therefore possible that it will attract people who are deliberately disruptive, who simply seek to prevent the conduct of business.

Such objections should be disregarded when considering whether there is rough consensus within the community.

* The RIPE community exists for valid purposes that it has agreed are its proper scope and purview. It deemed legitimate for the RIPE community to develop policy within this scope.

It may be that a person does not accept the legitimacy of the existence of the RIPE community or its authority as a venue for policy-making within its agreed scope. That person may object to any policy or decision by RIPE, because they are opposed to RIPE in principle. This is a subset of the previous objections: such dissenters also seek to prevent the conduct of RIPE business, albeit on a point of principle rather than merely wilfully.

Such an objection should be disregarded as invalid: it is to be viewed as a proxy for an opinion on another subject (“should RIPE exist?”) and not a valid intervention on the issue at hand. If the only disagreement within the community is from people who want to end or to sabotage the existence of RIPE, then rough consensus can be declared to exist.

* The RIPE community is a collective enterprise, that seeks to benefit the common good. Accordingly, positions that are based wholly on private interest, disregarding the common good, can be themselves be excluded from an assessment of rough consensus.

This ground for disregarding dissent must be employed carefully.

* + It does not justify ignoring dissent merely because one side claims the moral high ground. It is wholly legitimate to disagree about where the common good lies. Accusations that one side is self-interested and harming the common good are absolutely no reason to disregard dissent.
  + It should also be remembered that the community is made up of individuals and entities, all of whom have a legitimate personal interest. Each participant is a member of the community, and evidence of harm to members of the community is valid evidence in opposition to a proposal.
  + It is therefore perfectly legitimate for a dissenter to oppose a proposal because they believe it is a poor decision, and to use evidence of how it would harm them personally in support of their case.

However, once it is clearly established that a proposal is beneficial to the community as a whole, and the only dissent is based entirely on the expectation that the proposal would cause harm or cost or reduced benefit to the dissenters themselves, then that dissent may be disregarded as invalid when considering whether rough consensus exists.

Note that this depends on first arriving at the conclusion that the proposal is beneficial to the community as a whole. If the proposal is harmful or costly to a large sub-set of the community, or the harm or cost to a smaller subset is severe, then it may not be possible to reach this conclusion.

This ground for disregarding dissent therefore requires careful judgement, and inherently cannot be wholly objective. That makes it difficult to apply, and likely to be controversial when applied. Nonetheless, where opposition to a proposal is based on an entirely self-centred disregard for the common good, such dissent can properly be disregarded when assessing whether rough consensus exists.

### Out of scope

It is legitimate to disregard dissent where the reason for that dissent is not properly related to the matter at hand.

* If the dissenter’s objection is simply unrelated to the issue, the fact that they express their opinion as opposition to the proposal can properly be disregarded when assessing whether rough consensus exists.
* RIPE community decisions should be made on their merits. Accordingly, it is not open to participates to wilfully hold up decision-making on one issue so as to coercively silence dissent on another. If a dissenter is simply seeking to trade an offer to set aside their objection on one proposal if others in turn set aside their (validly held) concerns on another, this is an abuse of the process. Dissent from a person based on no better reason than an attempt to game the system in this manner can be properly disregarded when assessing whether rough consensus exists.
* However, if two proposals, X and Y are currently being considered separately, it is entirely proper to consider one as a dependency for the other if there is a legitimate interaction between them. i.e. that policy X is viable only if accompanied by policy Y. That opinion is a legitimate objection, and should not be disregarded.

### Asked and answered

If someone raises a potentially legitimate objection to a proposal, it is possible that a reasonably sufficient answer is given – either by way of information, or perhaps by modifying the proposal.

The objection should properly be understood as the reasoning underpinning the objection, and not the mere fact of opposition: the mere fact of opposition, absent an underlying reason would be merely wilful obstruction.

Nor should the objection properly understood to be the dissenter’s proposed solution.

In other words, if the dissenter is understood to say “I object to this proposal, because it will result in X; please change it by adding Y to cure this problem”, the core of the objection standing in the way of a find of rough consensus should be understood to be “it will result in X”, not “I object” nor “please change it by adding Y”.

A dissenter is entitled to stand on their opposition as long as a reasonable concern remains, but they are not entitled to have that concern addressed in precisely the manner they propose. Accordingly, if a dissenter continues their opposition after their stated concern has been fully addressed, that continuing opposition can properly be disregarded in the assessment of whether rough consensus exists. Such continuing dissent may be disregarded notwithstanding that the proposal has not been changed in the manner that the dissenter asks.

However, as long as the underlying concern remains a legitimate objection to the proposal as it stands (for example, as modified), then such objection should not be disregarded, and continues to stand in the way of a finding of rough consensus until the matter is resolved.

# Commentary on the reasons for and implications of using rough consensus as the standard

## The critical role of the Chair

[meaning WG Chair, when in WGs; Plenary Chair in plenary, etc]

[Discussion still to be added]

## One person can indeed change the world

The rough consensus standard, properly applied, can in principle enable one person’s objection to prevent the finding of consensus.

If it really is only one person that objects, it may be more difficult for them to hold their corner. Usually, if the entire community save one is of one opinion, and one person of the other, then that one person can usually be shown to fail one of the tests described above: perhaps they are being wilfully disruptive, or they are simply refusing to accept that their objection has been addressed, or they are trying to insist on something that is simply out of scope. Conversely, if a significant number of dissenters seek to block a proposal, it may be that much harder to show that they are acting unreasonably or in bad faith.

Nonetheless, numbers alone are not decisive. If a single person has a valid objection, then there is a legitimate controversy and the community is not in agreement. And if an organised bloc acts in opposition, their dissent can be properly disregarded if it is genuinely invalid, even if that bloc is large and well organised.

What should be done if rough consensus cannot be declared because of the opposition of a single person lies beyond the scope of this paper. Sometimes, approaching the same problem from a different angle might solve the problem. Other times (especially when dealing with difficult problems that need solving) it may be best to seek first community consensus about process and principles before engineering solutions; such an approach may allow agreement on principles to be reached, and then when engineering a solution objections founded on opposition to agreed principles can be ruled out of scope.

## Rough consensus is a conservative standard

Rough consensus is a conservative standard: reaching agreement across a broad community can be a difficult thing to do. It is highly demanding: in comparing rough consensus with other standards, it should be seen as “unanimity minus certain exceptions” rather than “(super-)majority plus certain extra safeguards”.

One implication of this is that on controversial matters it may be impossible to reach agreement. It would be an error to regard that as a failure of process. Instead, the process should be regarded as successfully having identified that there is disagreement within the community, and avoided imposing a decision that some oppose for valid and legitimate reasons.

This will, of course, sometimes disappoint those who want the community to act in certain ways, and find it is unwilling to do so. We should guard against softening the rough consensus standard in response to such pressure: all that does is mollify one interest group while riling up another, whose opinions are then overruled.

If the RIPE community wishes to change from a rough consensus standard in its decision-making, to a more lax standard that makes it easier to approve proposals before it, it may of course do so. The arguments for and against can then be debated (some of which are considered below). But as long as rough consensus is the established standard, it should be recognised that it is a demanding standard that is intrinsically resistant to casual change.

## The RIPE community is deliberately conservative

The RIPE community is a voluntary community of private actors. It does not have sovereign rights or democratic legitimacy. The legitimacy of the RIPE community to make policy at all depends on, and derives from, community support.

Accordingly, the RIPE community has settled upon rough consensus as a deliberately conservative decision-making standard. Using it, RIPE is able to say that its decisions are supported by the community, because they were achieved by agreement. They were not imposed by a majority on a minority; they represent a consensus view. When assessing whether consensus exists, the community has evolved the rough consensus standard to prevent abuse of process by individuals who wilfully or accidentally are failing to cooperate effectively in the common process of seeking agreement. However, having disregarded such exceptions, the agreed policy is agreed, not imposed.

RIPE’s conservative approach may make it difficult to satisfy certain stakeholders who want to be able to bring about change. However, the flip side is that it provides an especially powerful justification and support for its own legitimacy and the legitimacy of its process.

## Comparisons with IETF