HI-08 Unanimity at scale: the liberum veto and the Dutch States General

The fundamental dilemma of collective governance is the structural trade-off between the legitimacy of a consensus decision and the transactional friction required to reach it. In their foundational work *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (1962), James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock formalized this dynamic by dissecting the costs of collective action into two diametrically opposed categories: external costs and decision-making costs[1]. External costs are those imposed on an individual or minority when a majority forces a collective decision upon them against their will. Decision-making costs represent the time, physical resources, and opportunity costs expended in the bargaining process required to reach an agreement[3]. Mathematical models of governance demonstrate that as a system approaches a unanimity rule, external costs drop to theoretical zero, because no individual can be formally coerced into accepting an undesired policy[2]. Simultaneously, however, decision-making costs skyrocket toward infinity.

Under a strict unanimity rule, every single participant becomes a veto player, possessing the unilateral power to preserve the status quo. George Tsebelis (1995, 2002) illustrated this mechanism through spatial modeling: as the number of veto players increases, and as the ideological distance between them widens, the "winset of the status quo"—the mathematical set of alternative policies that can successfully defeat the current state of affairs—shrinks drastically, eventually reaching zero[5]. When the winset reaches zero, policy stability becomes absolute policy paralysis.

At smaller scales, such as a household or a nomadic band, the high decision-making costs of unanimity are mitigated by frequent interpersonal interaction, shared existential risks, and cultural homogeneity. At the scale of millions, however, unanimity fundamentally alters the nature of the state. When a polity expands beyond the Dunbar limit and localized trust networks, unanimity ceases to be a mechanism for consensus and instead transforms into an asymmetric vector for institutional capture. It grants outsized leverage to external hegemons, rent-seeking oligarchs, and actors exhibiting dark-triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy), who can paralyze a nation by capturing merely one node in the decision-making matrix. This report examines the historical record of unanimity rules at scale, isolating the mechanisms of their failure, the methods of their capture, and the systemic lessons they provide for post-collapse governance architecture.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Liberum Veto (1652–1791)

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth represents history's most extreme and protracted experiment in unanimity at the scale of a major nation-state. By the 16th century, the Commonwealth had developed a unique constitutional system known as "Golden Liberty" (*Złota Wolność*), characterized by an elective monarchy and a bicameral parliament (the *Sejm*) ultimately controlled by the nobility (*szlachta*)[8]. The foundation of this system was a

deep-seated suspicion of central authority; the nobility constantly suspected the ruler of machinations to extend his powers, tracing back to the Privilege of Koszyce in 1374, which virtually exempted the *szlachta* from taxation[9].

The absolute apex of this anti-authoritarian architecture was the *liberum veto* (Latin for "I freely forbid"). Derived from the theoretical principle of absolute equality among all members of the *szlachta*, the rule stipulated that any single envoy to the Sejm could nullify all legislation passed during that session and immediately dissolve the assembly[8]. This was not merely a line-item veto; uttering the phrase "I do not allow" (*nie pozwalam*) "tore" (*zerwany*) the entire Sejm, discarding all work accomplished during the weeks or months of the session[10].

The Mechanics of Paralysis and Quantification of Failure

The *liberum veto* was first formally and successfully deployed to dissolve a Sejm in 1652 by Władysław Siciński, a deputy from Upita acting on the direct instructions of the powerful, dissident magnate Janusz Radziwiłł[10]. This normalization of the veto triggered a catastrophic institutional collapse over the following century. The quantification of this institutional failure is starkly documented in the historiography, most notably by Władysław Konopczyński in his seminal 1918 work *Liberum Veto* and his 1936 *Dzieje Polski nowożytnej*[8].

Konopczyński's statistical analysis reveals the terminal velocity of unanimous governance. Of the approximately 150 Sejms convened between 1573 and 1763, roughly 73 were broken or failed to pass legislation entirely[9]. The density of failure escalated exponentially as the culture of the veto entrenched itself. Between 1652 and 1764, out of 55 Sejms convened, 48 were broken, effectively paralyzing the Commonwealth's ability to raise taxes, expand its army, or conduct coherent foreign policy for over a century[9]. By the reign of King Jan Casimir Vasa, Konopczyński noted an actual disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian state into separate magnate fiefdoms, as the central legislature ceased to function[14].

By the 18th century, the *liberum veto* had transitioned from a domestic constitutional mechanism into a primary instrument of foreign imperial control. Neighboring autocracies—specifically the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia—recognized the strategic advantage of a permanently paralyzed neighbor and actively funded the breaking of Sejms. Treaties between Russia and Prussia explicitly guaranteed the preservation of the *liberum veto* and the elective monarchy as mechanisms to prevent Polish military and fiscal reform[15]. When reformers attempted to enlarge the standing army or commute labor services to cash rents, foreign powers weaponized the veto. During the reign of King Stanisław August Poniatowski, Russian Empress Catherine II instructed her ambassador, Nikolai Repnin, to bribe, intimidate, or arrest deputies to ensure the veto was deployed against any modernizing legislation[17].

The Targowica Confederation and State Death

The terminal crisis of the Commonwealth illustrates the ultimate danger of unanimity at scale. In a desperate bid for survival, the Great Sejm (1788–1792) managed to temporarily bypass the veto by forming a "Confederated Sejm" (*sejm skonfederowany*), an emergency legislative session where the *liberum veto* was suspended and majority rule applied[17]. This allowed them to pass the Constitution of May 3, 1791, which formally abolished the *liberum veto*, established

a hereditary monarchy, and expanded political rights to towns[16].
In response, a faction of conservative magnates—most notably Stanisław Szczęsny Potocki, Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, and Seweryn Rzewuski—formed the Targowica Confederation in April 1792 in Saint Petersburg[20]. Acting as a classic dark-triad faction driven by narcissism (protection of personal elite status) and Machiavellianism (collusion with a hostile foreign power to secure domestic dominance), they appealed directly to Catherine II to invade their own country to restore their "Golden Liberty"[16].
This betrayal resulted in the Polish-Russian War of 1792. The Commonwealth, unable to field a massive modern army due to decades of veto-induced fiscal starvation, marshaled only around 16,000 effective troops (later swelling marginally but lacking equipment) against an Imperial Russian Army of 98,000, backed by a total reserve of 300,000[23]. Recognizing the military futility, the King capitulated and joined the Targowica Confederation[16]. The state was subsequently subjected to the Second Partition in 1793 and the Third Partition in 1795, physically erasing the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the map for 123 years[16]. The leaders of the Targowica Confederation were later sentenced to death for treason during the Kościuszko Uprising, with many hanged in effigy by the populace[21].

Perception vs. Reality in the Commonwealth

What they said: The *szlachta* aggressively defended the *liberum veto* as the palladium of true liberty. They claimed it prevented royal absolutism, guaranteed perfect equality among the nobility, and forced the state to operate purely on harmonious consensus[9].
What the record shows: The veto created a decentralized, predatory oligarchy. Because the state could not pass laws or levy taxes, effective power devolved entirely to regional magnates who operated as quasi-sovereign warlords[14]. Furthermore, avoiding the "naturalistic fallacy" requires acknowledging that this "liberty" was exclusively for the nobility (roughly 10% of the population); the remaining 90% were enserfed peasants and disenfranchised burghers who suffered under intense exploitation by the very magnates protecting their "freedom"[16].
What modern scholarship infers: The strongest historical case against the system was articulated by contemporary reformer Stanisław Konarski in his four-volume treatise *O skutecznym rad sposobie* (On the Means of Effective Counsels, 1760–1763). Konarski proved exhaustively that the veto was not a foundational legal right but a fatal, creeping custom that guaranteed state suicide, famously noting that while households and towns fall through misrule, Poland was the only state attempting to survive on anarchy[25]. Modern spatial modeling (Tsebelis) confirms Konarski's thesis: by effectively setting the number of veto players to the total number of parliamentary deputies, the Commonwealth permanently reduced the winset of the status quo to zero, making adaptation to external economic or military shocks mathematically impossible[6].

Scale Ledger: Liberum Veto

Scale Rung	Status	Explanation

Household (4–10)	Untried	Feudal patriarchies ruled households hierarchically; peer unanimity was not applied.
Hamlet/Band (30–50)	Operated & Worked	*Sejmiks* (local assemblies) functioned reasonably well when homogeneous, but fractured when magnate rivalries emerged[8].
Village (150–500)	Failed	Serfs had no governance rights; village unanimity was an alien concept.
Parish/District (1,500–5,000)	Failed	Regional assemblies broke down rapidly as the veto custom spread downward to all levels of noble administration.
Town/Watershed (15k–50k)	Failed	Urban centers were largely excluded from the *szlachta* system until the abortive 1791 reforms[8].
Region/Bioregion (0.5–5m)	Failed	The veto allowed individual magnates to practically secede, reducing regions to warring factional fiefdoms[11].
Nation (50–500m)	Catastrophic Failure	Resulted in the complete institutional paralysis, foreign subjugation, and physical partition of the state[18].
Planet (8b)	Never Tried	Not applicable to this historical epoch.

Capture Test: Liberum Veto

The capture vector for the *liberum veto* is glaringly direct. A dark-triad actor (either an

ambitious domestic magnate or a foreign monarch) identifies the most impoverished, indebted, or easily manipulated member of the assembly. By bribing or intimidating this single node, the actor halts state function entirely. Historical cases abound, beginning with the 1652 veto by Siciński acting as a proxy for Radziwiłł[12], and culminating in the Targowica Confederation of Potocki, Rzewuski, and Branicki acting as direct proxies for Catherine II in 1792[21]. The only feature within the system capable of resisting this capture was the aforementioned "Confederated Sejm" (*sejm skonfederowany*), an emergency workaround that suspended the veto in favor of majority rule[17]. However, invoking a confederacy was an extraordinary extra-legal measure that frequently sparked civil war, proving that the system could only survive by temporarily abandoning its core principle.

The Dutch Republic and the States General (1579–1795)

While the Polish experiment ended in partition, the Dutch Republic (the United Provinces) utilized a unanimity-bound confederation to become the preeminent mercantile and naval power of the 17th century. Born from a revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs, the foundational treaty of the Republic, the Union of Utrecht (1579), created a deliberately weak central government designed to preserve the autonomy of the provinces[28].

The primary governing body, the States General (*Staten-Generaal*), convened in The Hague and operated under strict federative rules. According to Article 9 of the Union of Utrecht, critical decisions regarding new taxes, declarations of war, and peace treaties required the unanimous consent of all seven sovereign provinces[28]. Furthermore, provincial delegates were not independent actors; they were strictly bound by *rugge-spraak* (mandatory consultation). This meant they had to vote exactly as instructed by their provincial states, who in turn received their instructions from the local city councils (*vroedschappen*)[32].

Hegemonic Stabilization of Unanimity

If mathematical models dictate that unanimity leads to paralysis, how did the Dutch Republic achieve its Golden Age under these exact constraints? The answer lies in massive demographic and financial asymmetry. The province of Holland was an economic leviathan compared to its peers. It contained nearly 50% of the Republic's population and contributed roughly 58% to the general budget of the States General[32].

In a system of pure theoretical unanimity, Holland could be vetoed by the smallest, poorest landward province. In practice, Holland operated as a benevolent (and frequently coercive) hegemon. It utilized its vast wealth to buy off smaller provinces, subsidize their localized defenses against foreign incursions, or, conversely, threaten to withhold military funding if they did not conform to Holland's mercantile foreign policy[32]. Unanimity in the Dutch Republic functioned solely because the immense decision-making costs identified by Buchanan and Tullock were absorbed by a single, overwhelmingly wealthy node that subsidized the consensus.

When consensus could not be bought, the system ground to a halt or resulted in extra-legal maneuvering. The "First Stadtholderless Period" (1650–1672), championed by Grand Pensionary

Johan de Witt and theorized by Pieter de la Court in his influential 1662 work *Interest van Holland*, saw Holland assert provincial supremacy to the point of outright refusing to fund the federal army, defying the other provinces[33]. De la Court's writings heavily influenced the period, arguing that true republican liberty required the abolition of the standing army in favor of militias to prevent the Princes of Orange from establishing a monarchy[37].

Furthermore, the naturalistic fallacy—that decentralization inherently equates to liberty and fairness—is decisively challenged by the Dutch treatment of the *Generaliteitslanden* (Generality Lands). Roughly 20% of the Republic's territory (including parts of modern North Brabant, Zeelandic Flanders, and Limburg) was denied provincial status and governed directly by the States General as internal colonies. They were heavily taxed to fund the Republic's wars but had no representation, no vote, and thus no veto, demonstrating that the "equality" of unanimity among the core seven provinces required the subjugation of a massive out-group to function financially[32].

Perception vs. Reality in the Dutch Republic

What they said: Republican theorists like Pieter de la Court explicitly praised the superiority of the decentralized state. He argued that provincial vetoes prevented monarchical tyranny, aligned the state with rational mercantile interests, and achieved a perfect "political balance" (*politike weegschaal*) where the common good was generated by intersecting self-interests[36].

What the record shows: The system was chronically, painfully slow. Foreign ambassadors routinely complained that negotiating with the Dutch required endless delays as delegates constantly returned to their cities for *rugge-spraak*[32]. It functioned as a major power only because Holland effectively dominated the other six provinces through overwhelming economic leverage, effectively overriding the veto through financial coercion[32].

What modern scholarship infers: The Dutch States General is a classic example of an asymmetric confederation. It proves that unanimity at the nation-state scale can survive *if and only if* one constituent member possesses such overwhelming resources that it can unilaterally absorb the transaction costs of consensus-building[34]. When Holland's economic hegemony waned in the 18th century relative to Britain and France, the Republic succumbed to the institutional gridlock predicted by Tsebelis's veto player theory. Unable to adapt, it eventually fell to French revolutionary forces and was forcefully restructured into a unitary state in 1798[29].

Scale Ledger: Dutch States General

Scale Rung	Status	Explanation
Household (4–10)	Operated & Worked	Merchant families operated as tight, cohesive economic units under patriarchal consensus.
Hamlet/Band (30–50)	Operated & Worked	Local agricultural and

		infrastructural matters were handled organically.
Village (150–500)	Operated & Worked	*Vroedschap* (city councils) reached consensus efficiently among a closed patrician elite[32].
Parish/District (1,500–5,000)	Operated & Worked	Strong local autonomy integrated successfully into the urban networks.
Town/Watershed (15k–50k)	Operated & Worked	Amsterdam and regional towns wielded immense power, effectively dictating provincial policy via strict voting instructions[32].
Region/Bioregion (0.5–5m)	Operated & Worked	The Provincial States functioned reasonably well via a blend of majority and consensus rules heavily influenced by urban capital.
Nation (50–500m)	Failed (Long-term)	Operated successfully for ~150 years only due to Holland's financial hegemony; failed into gridlock once that hegemony declined[32].
Planet (8b)	Never Tried	Not applicable.

Capture Test: Dutch States General

The capture vector for the Dutch system involved leveraging the slower *rugge-spraak* process during wartime to outmaneuver the mercantile elite, or blockading the shipping routes of a single dissenting province to force a veto on national defense spending. Historical cases of attempted capture frequently involved the perpetual friction between the Princes of Orange (Stadtholders) and the States of Holland. In 1650, Holland disbanded troops unilaterally to assert supremacy and avoid military taxation, leading the Stadtholder to attempt a military coup against Amsterdam, a civil war aborted only by his sudden death from smallpox[35]. The

primary resisting feature was Holland's sheer wealth. Because one node held 58% of the capital, foreign bribery of a minor landward province (like Overijssel) could be countered by Holland threatening to cut off provincial stipends and military protection[32].

The United States Articles of Confederation (1781–1789)

The American founders, heavily influenced by the history of the Dutch Republic and fearing the centralization of the British Crown, adopted a strict unanimity framework in their first constitution, the Articles of Confederation (effective 1781). Article II guaranteed the absolute sovereignty, freedom, and independence of each state. To protect this sovereignty, Article VIII and Article XIII dictated that any amendment to the Articles required the unanimous consent of all thirteen state legislatures[28].

The fatal structural flaw of the Articles was the lack of an independent federal taxation mechanism. Congress was entirely dependent on the states for revenue requisitions, which the states routinely ignored[43]. As Alexander Hamilton observed in 1780, the fundamental defect was a want of power in Congress, rendering the government impotent and chronically unable to pay its wartime debts to European creditors or its own soldiers[43].

To rectify this, Congress proposed the Impost of 1781, a 5% federal tariff on imported goods[43]. Because it fundamentally altered the revenue structure, it required unanimous ratification as an amendment. Twelve states rapidly approved the measure. Rhode Island, a state representing less than 2% of the national population, vetoed it[43]. Led by Congressman David Howell, Rhode Island argued that federal tax collectors would become engines of corruption and tyranny, and that the state relied on its own import duties[43].

Desperate for revenue, Congress attempted a modified, heavily compromised version, the Impost of 1783, which allowed states to appoint the tax collectors. Again, twelve states agreed. This time, New York, led by the powerful anti-federalist Governor George Clinton, vetoed the measure[41]. Clinton refused to surrender the lucrative harbor duties collected at the Port of New York, which provided half of his state's annual revenue and allowed him to keep state property taxes artificially low[41].

Perception vs. Reality in the American Confederacy

What they said: Anti-federalists (like Clinton and Howell) claimed that the unanimity rule protected local liberties, maintained the sovereignty of the individual states, and prevented the rise of a distant, tyrannical central authority analogous to the British Parliament[44].

What the record shows: The national government was functionally paralyzed. It was unable to pay its domestic or foreign debts, fund a standing army, or protect American shipping from predation. The veto of a single state rendered the other twelve completely helpless, creating a systemic crisis where the nation tottered on "the precipice" of dissolution[41].

What modern scholarship infers: Unanimity under the Articles created a textbook collective action problem. Without coercive power, states inevitably free-rode on the defense contributions of others. As Alexander Hamilton correctly assessed in his 1787 speech to the New York Assembly, the system was inherently defective because "the idea of an uncontrolable

sovereignty in each" member destroyed the whole[41]. Modern scholars like Calvin Johnson note that the failure of the Imposts proved that unanimity at the continental scale is unworkable without an external coercive force. This gridlock was the direct catalyst for the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where the unanimity rule was abandoned in favor of a majoritarian and super-majoritarian federal republic[41].

Scale Ledger: Articles of Confederation

Scale Rung	Status	Explanation
Household to Town	N/A	Existed under individual state constitutions, largely functional.
Region/Bioregion (0.5–5m)	Operated & Worked	Individual states functioned successfully as sovereign entities, raising taxes and regulating local commerce.
Nation (50–500m)	Failed	Failed entirely within 8 years due to the inability to bypass state vetoes on taxation and constitutional amendments[41].
Planet (8b)	Never Tried	Not applicable.

Capture Test: Articles of Confederation

The vector of capture under the Articles involved a self-interested state leader leveraging the absolute veto to hold the entire national credit system hostage in exchange for localized economic rents. The clearest historical case is Governor George Clinton of New York intentionally vetoing the 1783 Impost. Operating with Machiavellian political acumen, Clinton allowed New York to continue taxing neighboring states' goods flowing through its harbor, enriching his own political machine and constituents at the direct cost of national bankruptcy[41]. There were no resisting features within the system to override this. The only resolution was the extra-legal abandonment of the Articles themselves in favor of drafting the 1787 Constitution.

The European Union and the Joint-Decision Trap (1957–Present)

The most prominent modern iteration of unanimity at scale exists within the European Union, specifically concerning the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), taxation, and treaty revisions. Under the Treaties (e.g., Article 31 TEU), the EU Council requires unanimity among all

member states for major foreign policy directives[48].

Fritz W. Scharpf (1988, revised 2006) formulated the "Joint-Decision Trap" (*Politikverflechtungsfalle*) to explain the pathology of this specific institutional setup. Drawing on Buchanan and Tullock, Scharpf demonstrated that in a compulsory negotiation system where the status quo can only be altered by unanimous consent, member governments will base decisions on their localized, institutional self-interest rather than optimal problem-solving for the union[51]. Because every member has a veto, the negotiator's dilemma ensures that bona fide cooperators are exploited by free riders maximizing their distributive gains. Consequently, policies inevitably regress to the lowest common denominator, resulting in suboptimal outcomes. Furthermore, once an inefficient policy is adopted, it cannot be reformed because the beneficiaries of the dysfunction will veto any change[51].

George Tsebelis expands on this by classifying the EU as a system with an unusually high number of institutional veto players. According to Tsebelis's spatial modeling, as the ideological distance between EU member states expands (e.g., through enlargement to 27 diverse nations), the winset of the status quo effectively closes. Policy stability hardens into total policy stagnation[5].

To mitigate this paralysis without formally abolishing the veto and violating national sovereignty, the EU developed the mechanism of "constructive abstention" (Article 31(2) TEU), allowing a state to formally abstain from a vote without blocking the unanimous decision of the others[48]. However, when vital financial or strategic interests are at stake, constructive abstention fails, and the veto is deployed. For example, during the drafting of the 8th sanctions package against Russia in October 2022, Belgium initially utilized the threat of a veto to protect its domestic steel industry, highlighting how unanimity exposes the entire continent to the localized economic anxieties of a single member[55].

Perception vs. Reality in the EU

What they said: Proponents argue that unanimity protects national sovereignty, ensures that the EU remains an intergovernmental organization rather than an overreaching supranational superstate, and forces a culture of deep consensus-building[49].

What the record shows: Single states routinely hold continental foreign policy hostage to extract unrelated concessions (e.g., threatening to veto sanctions or aid packages unless domestic EU funds are released). The system incentivizes blackmail by rogue actors within the union.

What modern scholarship infers: The Joint-Decision Trap proves that systems requiring unanimity among distinct sovereignties generate pathological policy outcomes. Scharpf notes that integration continues largely through "stealth" mechanisms—such as the European Court of Justice legislating through judicial review in a supranational-hierarchical mode—which bypass the veto players entirely but severely degrade the democratic legitimacy of the institution[53].

Scale Ledger: European Union Unanimity

Scale Rung	Status	Explanation
Household to Region	N/A	Subsumed within individual national structures.
Nation (50–500m)	Operated & Worked	Individual member states function primarily using majoritarian parliamentary rules.
Continent (450m+)	Failed/Pathological	Unanimity in the Council leads to the Joint-Decision Trap, requiring extra-legal circumvention (ECJ) or resulting in lowest-common-denomina tor policy[49].
Planet (8b)	Never Tried	Not applicable.

Capture Test: European Union

The vector of capture in the EU occurs when an autocratic external hegemon funnels targeted infrastructure investment or cheap energy to a single member state. That state's leader, acting in a Machiavellian capacity, then uses their veto to block continental defense initiatives or sanctions policies against the hegemon, effectively allowing an outside power to dictate European foreign policy by buying a single proxy vote. Resisting features include constructive abstention (allowing states to step aside without blocking)[48], intense peer pressure and diplomatic isolation, or bypassing the Council entirely via the European Commission's supranational regulatory powers and the ECJ[53].

Conclusions: Unanimity as a Capture Vector

The historical, empirical, and mathematical record is unequivocal: unanimity is a viable governance protocol only at the lowest scales of human organization. At the household or village level, the external costs of coercion are high, and the decision-making costs of consensus are manageable due to proximity and shared risk.

As a polity ascends the scale ledger to the nation or continent, the mathematics of the *Calculus of Consent* violently invert. At the scale of millions, unanimity becomes an explicit, structural vector for institutional capture. It allows a dark-triad actor—whether a domestic oligarch like George Clinton or Szczęsny Potocki, or a foreign hegemon like Catherine II—to completely halt the machinery of the state by compromising a single, isolated node. The Polish *liberum veto* resulted in the physical erasure of a nation[23]; the Dutch States General functioned only because

it was secretly a financial hegemony[34]; the Articles of Confederation resulted in near-bankruptcy[44]; and the EU struggles continuously in a Joint-Decision Trap[51]. Unanimity at scale is not the ultimate expression of liberty; it is the ultimate expression of systemic vulnerability.

Summary of Robust Findings

Unanimity mathematically minimizes external costs but drives decision-making transaction costs to unmanageable extremes as populations scale. In large assemblies, the "winset of the status quo" approaches zero, ensuring total policy paralysis and the inability to adapt to external shocks. Unanimity rules inevitably lead to state failure unless they are covertly subsidized by a massive, wealthy hegemon, as seen with Holland in the Dutch Republic. The *liberum veto* in Poland-Lithuania devolved from a symbol of noble equality into a weaponized tool used by foreign powers to maintain the Commonwealth's weakness. The United States Articles of Confederation failed rapidly precisely because single states, like Rhode Island and New York, utilized their vetoes to starve the national government of revenue. The European Union suffers from a Joint-Decision Trap, yielding lowest-common-denominator policies that can only be overcome by bypassing democratic accountability. Unanimity acts as a magnet for dark-triad capture, as seizing control of an entire state requires bribing or coercing only one susceptible actor. Claims that unanimity protects pure liberty often mask the subjugation of out-groups, such as the enserfed peasants in Poland or the disenfranchised Generality Lands in the Dutch Republic. Systems locked in unanimity cannot legally reform themselves; they are altered only through collapse, secession, or extra-legal circumvention. Ultimately, at the scale of millions, unanimity is a structural vector for institutional suicide.

Contested or Open Questions

- Can modern cryptographic digital technology drastically lower the decision-making costs of unanimity, allowing it to scale beyond the village level without falling into the Joint-Decision Trap?
- Is "constructive abstention" a viable long-term patch for unanimity rules, or does it inevitably lead to a fragmented, two-tiered system of governance where core states advance while veto-wielding states are left behind?
- How do you transition a society accustomed to the veto (where any loss of the veto is perceived as an existential loss of liberty) into a functional majoritarian system without sparking civil war or necessitating collapse?

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Implementability after the Fall

Household (4 to 10 people): Unanimity is the optimal default. It requires only a shared physical reality and common meals to enforce. The minimum viable version relies on daily verbal consensus regarding labor allocation. The first failure will occur if an abusive patriarch or matriarch uses the expectation of consensus to covertly enforce tyranny, weaponizing the veto to block any deviation from their personal desires.

Village (300 people): Unanimity is viable strictly for external relations (e.g., forming a mutual defense pact or going to war with a neighboring village), but internal administration must revert to a supermajority to avoid gridlock. **Minimum viable version:** A council of household heads meeting monthly. **Needs:** A central meeting place, a shared calendar to guarantee attendance, and oral or rudimentary written records to bind agreements. **First failure:** A wealthy household leverages its veto over vital communal resources (e.g., access to a functioning well or seed stock) to extract rents from poorer households, leading to immediate gridlock and subsequent violence.

District (3,000 people): Unanimity will structurally fail here. A confederation of 10 villages operating on unanimity will immediately fall into a Joint-Decision Trap. **Minimum viable version:** A district council requiring unanimity *only* for the admission of new villages or mutual defense, with all other trade, infrastructure, and legal disputes settled by a 2/3 majority. **Needs:** Literacy, written legal codes, recognized scribes to record precedents, and a secure communication relay between villages. **First failure:** The richest village will act exactly like Holland or Rhode Island, using the veto to refuse infrastructure contributions while demanding unequal protection, fracturing the district and forcing the poorer villages to either submit to hegemony or secede.

Principles

Principle	Testable Sentence
The Veto Player Axiom	As the number of veto players in a system increases, the winset of the status quo shrinks, increasing policy stability but eliminating the institution's ability to adapt to external shocks.
The Cost Trade-off	Unanimity rules mathematically minimize the external costs of political coercion but maximize the decision-making transaction costs of building consensus.
The Hegemonic Subsidization Law	In a confederation bound by strict unanimity, operational stability can only be

	maintained over time if one constituent node is overwhelmingly wealthy enough to unilaterally subsidize the costs of consensus.
The Capture Vulnerability	At the scale of the nation-state, unanimity structurally empowers the poorest, most corrupt, or most narcissistic actor, turning them into a high-leverage capture point for external hostile powers.
The Reform Paradox	Systems structurally paralyzed by unanimity rules cannot legally reform themselves; they are altered only through systemic collapse, military secession, or extra-legal circumvention.

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