Group Decision-making

Suggested exercise: Use the federal budget as a case study for group decision-making. How does a group reach consensus when making decisions?

Arrange 10 posterboards around the room and provide 100 sticky notes that will each represent 1% of budget allocation. Title each posterboard with one of the 10 budget categories presented below. (Tip: do this ahead of time.) Distribute to each participant a blank chart and a reference list, below.

These budget categories are the official categories used by the Congressional Budget Office. They are, as of 2021, the top 9 spending categories, and, for the purposes of this exercise, all other categories were lumped into a tenth category and called "Other." The reference list is a guide to explaining what types of federal funding fall within each budget category.

Invite each participant to read the reference list, and then fill out the first column of the blank chart with the percentage of the federal budget they believe should be allocated to each category. (Tip: participants may ask you if the goal is to be "accurate" or "ideal;" you can set up the exercise either way, or you can leave that decision up to each participant.) After each participant fills out the first column with their "personal percentage," instruct them to fill out the second column with their guess of where the group will land.

Then, open the floor for group discussion. The task is to move all 100 sticky notes onto the 10 posterboards. Each sticky note represents 1% of federal spending. (Tip: to move things along, you can instruct each guest to grab, say, 5 of the sticky notes and allocate them onto the posterboards. Repeat as necessary.) Eventually, all 100 sticky notes will be allocated onto the various posterboards, and participants will have a visual image of the budget and the relative weight of each category. Participants should discuss and argue and move sticky notes as necessary. Try to reach group consensus.

Ahead of time, ask a friend who is not participating to email you the actual spending percentages, which can be found using the first link below. Don't open that email until the exercise is concluded. When you're ready, reveal the results to the group, fill out the final column of the chart, and discuss.

Here are links to federal resources regarding spending:

Dept. of Treasury – DataLabs report of actual federal spending:
https://www.usaspending.gov/explorer/budget_function

Dept. of Treasury – DataLabs explanation of budget categories:
https://datalab.usaspending.gov/americas-finance-guide/spending/categories/

Congressional Budget Office – Extra explanation of categories:
https://www.cbo.gov/about/products/ce-faq

And here is a link for suggested reading, from the great Linda Holmes:

https://www.npr.org/2016/05/05/476739552/captain-america-aaron-burr-and-the-politics-of-killing-your-friends

Cate-gory	Your Personal %	Predict Our Group %	Our Group %	Actual federal %
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Cate-gory	Your Personal %	Predict Our Group %	Our Group %	Actual federal %
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Cate-gory	Your Personal %	Predict Our Group %	Our Group %	Actual federal %
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CODE	CATEGORY NAME	DESCRIPTION
C	Commerce and housing credit	Programs that promote and regulate U.S. commerce, including postal service, including loans/underwriting for Small Business Administration and Federal Housing Administration, FDIC (insures banks), and trade assistance to promote U.S. products to overseas markets
E	Education, training, employment, and social services	Dept. of Education, Dept. of Labor, spending to educate and train, elementary through higher ed and vocational
G	General government	Spending to carry out legislative and administrative responsibilities of federal government, including facilities and personnel management
H	Health	Health care services provided by federal government (*excluding* Medicare, but including Medicaid), including health research and health training
I	Income security	Welfare and other federal aid
M	Medicare	Health care services for seniors
NI	Net interest	Interest charged on debt/borrowing
ND	National defense	Military and national security
O	Other	veterans' benefits and services, transportation, administration of justice, agriculture, community and regional development, international affairs, natural resources and environment, general science space and technology, and energy
S	Social security	Basic income for seniors based on wage contributions