

## **Voice or Exit: The Quest of Central Option in Organizational Models**

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According to Hirschman lapses do occur in the functional behavior of firms/organizations, but there are “forces” in the society that must be able to marshal to “revert” them back on sound track. Presenting a triadic model of Exit, Voice and Loyalty, he suggests that exit option on the part of customers/members would work powerfully to put the faltering firms/organizations back on track. This option is perceived to work good in neo-classical economic model that has a sufficient degree of quality elasticity of demand along with decent scale of slack mechanism. Hirschman applies his model to social and political organization and finds it fairly workable. The thesis he builds is quite impressive and powerful. However, it seems unable to explain the complexities of behavior in closed systems whether political or economic. His optimistic approach does not take into consideration the negative or passive exits and voices. He does not take into account the transcendence of voice across the boundaries by the agency of technology. This paper critiques Hirschman’s thesis and proposes an alternative one.

**Keywords:** voice and exit model, loyalty, neo-classical economic organizational model, customer/voter behavior.

This paper builds a critical response to Albert Hirschman. In his book “Exit, Voice and Loyalty”, Hirschman gives the following thesis: “The presence of exit alternative can therefore tend to atrophy the development of the art of voice. This is a central point of this book...” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 43). Elaborating the process of how exit mechanism works in neo-classic economics and competitive business cycles he shows the superiority of ‘exit’ alternative to the ‘voice’ alternative. First he tests the voice alternative as “residue of exit” and then the possibilities of “voice as an alternative to exit” are measured, but are found to be inadequate. Hence the exit is considered to be significant and central phenomenon as compared to voice. In support of his argument he presents various reasons and examples.

The researchers need to observe at the outset that Hirschman’s famous treatise was published many years ago. Even though it is still one of the major contributions in the field of public policy, many new facts have surfaced, technological advancements have taken place, and theory has enriched that some of his basic assumptions do not seem viable anymore. Our concern is only to show the centrality of the status and position of *voice* as tool or ‘option’ in changing the behavior of economic, political and social organizations. We would also suggest that economic and political organizations have grown highly complex that the binary paradigm resting on voice-exit options is unable to explain the full range of behavior patterns of members/customers.

### **Hirschman’s Voice-Exit Model**

Before we begin to build our argument by taking issue with some specific arguments of Hirschman, it would be an imperative in setting the stage for this paper to draw an outline of his basic arguments. Hirschman begins with an inquisitive question: how organization can recuperate after falling behind? Answering this question he contends that ‘lapses’ do occur in the ‘functional behavior’ of individuals, business firms and

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organizations living under any economic, social or political systems. In response “every society learns to live with a certain amount of dysfunctions or misbehavior but warns about the tendency of misbehavior feeding on itself and lead to a general decay.” Therefore, he stresses on the need that society “must be able to marshal from within itself forces which will make as many of the faltering actors as possible revert to the behavior required for its proper functioning” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 1). However, he shows the unconcern of competitive economic system towards a “laggard” firm or organization on the assumptions of “undeviating rational behavior” and “reallocation” of resources. But this approach becomes questionable in monopolies and oligopolies where it can leave “permanent pockets.”

Thus he makes a point that an “alternative mechanism”, i.e., exit and voice, comes to play a crucial role to complement the competitive system or to replace it. When a firm or an organization faces deterioration of its outputs it becomes evident in either the “desertion” or “direct expression of dissatisfaction” by customers or/and members of that firm or organization. At this juncture he makes a comparison between the “taut economy” or what he has earlier referred to as “competitive economy” and “slack economy.” He finds that slack is a “blessing in disguise” that “permits firms to ride out adverse market or other developments.” Unlike the taut economy which leaves no room for the firm to recuperate the slack economy assumes that only small number of customers or members have exited or voiced and therefore there is quick need to recuperate. He argues that slack has been “rationalized” in political system that provides for “reserves of political resources which can be thrown into battle in crisis situations” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 14).

Hirschman argues that exit belongs to economic realm and voice belongs to political realm. In this connection the economists have high bias voice thus considering it “cumbrous” whilst political scientists have regarded exit as “desertion, defection, and treason.” Both have not yet understood the “exceptional opportunity” of market mechanism and political mechanism working “side by side in harmony and mutual support.” Hirschman takes this big task of “demonstrat [ing] to political scientists the usefulness of economic concepts and to economists the usefulness of political concepts” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 19). However, he argues that when both exit and voice are available to customers/members then they will choose the exit though in monopoly systems voice will have more value. Two examples are given to support his arguments. First, he shows that the deteriorating school system in the US is consequence of exit of children of wealthy families when they find that the education standard is falling. Second, when some members of minority groups prosper they are accepted into higher classes thus leaving behind their community members. In both the cases the exit leads to decline in strength and power of voice of schools and minority groups.

Hirschman introduces the third concept at this point i.e. loyalty. Loyalty represents a feeling of attachment to an organization of which one is a member. The existence of loyalty effectively increases the cost of exit. As a result, it enables the customers or members to stay with the faltering organization for a while, hence reducing excess exit. Loyalty is different from faith. Instead, loyalty is a calculated and somewhat rational behavior. Being loyal to an organization means one believes that, “over a period of time, the right turns will more than balance the wrong ones”. With exit being held at bay, customers or members are more likely to invoke their voice options. The faltering organization could not afford ignoring dissenting voices for long. The reason is that although loyalty can delay exit for a while, it can’t do so indefinitely. As stated above, loyalty is a calculated behavior. Once the loyalists are convinced that the organization they are associated with is truly doomed and its deterioration is irreversible, they would exit for sure though the exit costs are huge. Hirschman calls this as the loyalists’ threat of exit. It is this threat that catches organization’s attention to the wrongdoings.

#### **Voice as a Residual of Exit or Central Option?**

Hirschman considers voice as a residual of exit option in the organizations where exit is not available. This is the case, he says, with the systems like “family, church, state,” as well as “monopolies” and “oligopolies.” On the other hand, in competitive market systems where demand is highly elastic and exit option is easily available he contends that the exit remains as dominant option as compared to voice option. Thus exit is referred to as dominant option of recuperation of organizations as well as the option that ends up in atrophy of voice option. I would take an issue with Hirschman from this point and my arguments will proceed parallel but contrapuntal to his.

We want to pose a preliminary question that whether the voice is the *only* way in which customers or members react when exit is not available? This leads us to more basic and precise question: Whether the binary model of exit-voice the *only* model by which customers/members react? In fact, Hirschman binary model that draws on economic competitive market system seems insufficient in its scope and applicability to social and political organizations. It seems even unable to explain the complex process of economic organizations. The social and political organizations have grown highly complex in their structure and functions that it would be oversimplification to inscribe them in binary model and understand them through Manichaeism approach. Let us take a couple of examples from the same social and political organizations that Hirschman talks about. Family, the basic unit of social organization of any society, is connected and stabilized by trust, understanding, respect and cooperation. It is a natural and organic institution made of blood ties, and therefore the Hirschman's argument that there is no exit option in it. Now if the family members are not happy with elderly leadership how do they convey their message? Here voice is only one of the various behavioral tools used by family members. At some times even the articulation of voice would need artistry and care because it may end up as disrespect to elders. Other behavioral signals for showing unhappiness can be, for instance, not showing up for family gatherings, lunch, dinner etc; showing attitudes or putting up off mood and remaining silent; taking possession of vital assets of family and threatening; asking a third party to intervene; or going to extremes like suicide or suicide threats and killing or threatening to kill the leadership ( See Hawes & Nybakken, 2001; Morris & Winter, 1978; Sadoff, 1978).

Let us see the example of religious institutions, which appear to be more difficult to be dealt with the binary model of exit and voice. In the case of a church if exit is not available as Hirschman argues then voice is also not available because it is taken as blasphemy, sacrilege and heresy that in turn leads to apostasy and forceful "exit" from the church. Like for example, Salman Rushdie by writing "The Satanic Verses" (1988) desecrated the religion, and therefore he was declared apostate. In this case a compulsory "exit" was forced by the church/mosque to punish and/or suppress the voice. Thus how can we explain this anomalous relationship between exit and voice by the binary model? Does this example not evince a greater strength of or danger from voice than from exit? The socio-religious organization of church/mosque that keeps a strong conviction of self-righteousness and infallibility about its teachings will never be ready to change its attitude even if someone exits or raises voice. It would rather force its authority on people and requires them to change their behavior. In such a situation, if membership wants a change in church then there can be an internal coup or external revolution. It may be peaceful overtaking or gruesome and horrible event (See Creech, 2006; Lupinin, 1984; Pettegree, 1992).

The example of the state as a political organization is far more complex. Modern state systems with numerous forms and innumerable institutions, forces and agents working in it constitute highly complex and dynamic organizations to be contained and explained through binary model of exit and voice. In fact there are a variety of exits and voices of different sorts taking place in a state but they are not meant to impinge on the recuperation of state system. Apart from exit and voice there are infinite techniques and strategies for correcting and changing the behavior of a State. However, it would be apt to mention here that though exits occur in States but in today's democratic states voice has assumed a central position in the sense that it makes and shakes the governments, guides the public policy, checks corruption and ensures welfare. While on the other hand, exit will neither do any good to state nor to exiting because they will keep exiting from tough situations.

The above discussion not only manifests the complexity of social and political phenomena but also points to another significant shortcoming of the binary model. The assumption that pervades through Hirschman model in relation to recuperation mechanism is that exit and voice work positively in alarming the management about deterioration of quality and thus the need for correction and improvement arise. Though he acknowledges that voice like exit reaching a high level halts the recuperation mechanism by becoming a hurdle. He writes, "...the effectiveness of voice will increase, up to a certain point, with its volume. But voice is like exit in that it *can be overdone*: the discontented customers or members could become so harassing that their protests would at *some point* hinder rather than help whatever efforts at recovery are undertaken" [Emphasis added] (Hirschman, 1970, p. 31). However, he has a blind spot to observing that sometimes voice and are not attempted from the *very beginning* to help recuperation but as problem creating, disturbance making, concession seeking or in final resort overwhelming the erstwhile system.

This phenomenon can be observed in political as well as economic systems. In this connection, let us see briefly the role played by interest groups and pressure groups, alienated groups and minorities, splintered groups and secessionist groups, lobbyists and propagandists and extremists and terrorists. In fact the role played by all these groups in political organization is more than often, from the very beginning, aimed to bring the voice raised, demonstration carried out, strikes rendered are not always to help recuperate rather put hurdles in the way of the same. The splinter groups and secessionist groups never raise a voice for recuperation rather their aims, from the very beginning, remain disintegration. The lobbyist, interest groups and pressure groups demand concessions rather than recuperation. The concessions are unilateral and unwarranted. Therefore they cast a negative impact on the whole system. It is interesting to note that even in the market system the clientele are set up, more than often, to demand concessions rather than to raise voice or exit for recuperation. Another aspect worth noticing is the jealous competition among firms may lead to negative practices like buying off the members/customers of other firms and asking them to put up a fuss or to exit. In such cases when the voice and exit are meant to damage the firms, the customers/members do not come to agreement with the management rather keep on increasing their concessions.

The role of opposition parties is interesting to note. It is aimed from the very beginning to censure the ruling party, discredit it and remove it from power. Therefore, the fuss that is put up by political opposition is not meant to recuperation of staggering ruling party rather to destabilize it further. We can here refer to some other voices in political and economic system of a State: Those that are emerge due to dissatisfaction with the existing order and therefore aim to replace it with new order. For instance, the socialist voices in a capitalist State are regarded as dangerous because they do not aim at recuperation rather at replacing the system. Similarly the capitalist and democratic voices in socialist, authoritarian and dictatorships are ruthlessly suppressed because they are regarded as anti-State from the very beginning.

Hirschman argues that “whoever does not exit is a candidate for voice” and in this way “in a first approximation, then, voice can be viewed as a residual” of exit (Hirschman, 1970, p. 34). In a simple example he shows that when quality deteriorates but the customers do not desert the firm then they are rendered “non-existing” customers. These customers become the source of voice. Now if we agree to this line of argument then we are left unanswered with a couple of significant questions that constitute the core of the logic of current market system. Does a firm/organization need voice only to correct a deteriorating situation of quality? Do they not want voice before the quality deteriorates in order to constantly upgrade their products and by doing so value the customers/members? These questions will prove decisive to determine whether voice is a “residual” of exit or it is itself a central concept. Our argument will end up with an opposite relationship: Exit as residual of voice. We want to elaborate my argument on the above questions by introducing two new market concepts. We would call them Active Market Approach (AMA) and Passive Market Approach (PMA).

In fact the difference between our argument and Hirschman’s argument is that our argument evolves in Active Market Approach and his argument develops in Passive Market Approach. By AMA We mean the propensity of market system --the firms and organizations in it—to approach the customers/members *before* the quality of goods/services deteriorates or behavior of the firm to its customers worsens in order to forecast and avert the possible damages. This is done with a purpose to harmonize the interests of customers/members with that of the firm and to infuse a sense of association and acknowledgement of their value. It is not seeks how to sustain the current membership by keeping them satisfied but also looking to extend the new membership and for that purpose the former may prove quite helpful. On the other hand, PMA has propensity to approach the customers/members *after* the quality of goods/services start deteriorating. The management comes to know about it when either exit or voice starts taking place. It would be better to put it in words of Hirschman himself:

“The deterioration in performance is reflected most typically and generally...in a absolute or comparative deterioration of the quality of the product or service provided. Management then finds out about its failings via two alternative routes: 1) Some customers stop buying the firm’s products or some members leave the organization: this is the exit option...2) the firm’s customers or the organization’s members express their dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through

general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen: this is the voice option” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 4).

A close look on these two approaches would show a different status and place for voice in the social, political and economic systems. In AMA voice is regarded as highly important and thus takes a central position. It guides, shapes and propels the forces of market, society and politics. The exit takes a back seat and usually signifies the danger zone to be avoided. It is the last bad thing to occur to the market, society or politics. It is assumed that when voice is not heard the customers/members resort to exit. On the other hand, in PMA voice gets a secondary place—a place after the exit. The exit is considered as first option and even those who do not exit, out of loyalty, are told to exit finally.

In order to see how voice plays a central role in modern market and political systems let us quickly take a glance of the modern tools and techniques of approaching to customers/members. Keeping the customers/members abreast of information regarding quality and variety as well as prices and availability of new products, the market firms/organizations publish brochures, handouts, magazines and a whole range of other material. This material is sent to customers/members regularly. Modern Information Technology has made this task easier. Now firms/organizations send the electronic copies of updating material through news-alerts or newsletters. They also carry out surveys, conduct interviews and distribute questionnaires in order to know the *voice* of their customers/members. For that purpose they even distribute gifts and souvenirs to motivate the customer/members participate and speak out their voice. They set up free stalls and give out free sample products for getting propagation as well as getting the feedback (See for instance Dobkin & Axelrod, 1998). Do these modern techniques not imply how important voice is for organizations/firms rather than just being a “residual” option?

Let us now return to closed systems or organizations in which exit is not available. Hirschman argued that in such closed systems “voice would increase” and “carry the entire burden of altering management to its failings”. He gives an example of “Soviet economy” in which “it was found necessary to give voice a more prominent role.” Then he takes up the example of less developed countries and argues that there “one simply cannot choose between as many commodities, nor between as many varieties of the same good.” There people resort to “loud, often politically colored protests against the poor quality of goods or services” (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 34–35). Hirschman endeavors to establish the residual status of voice in those closed systems in face of the unavailability of exit. I see the situation of closed systems from a different angle. I have two different arguments: First, in closed systems like communism, dictatorship or totalitarianism voice itself is strangled and suffocated and thus is unavailable like exit. Interestingly, it will be noted that exit from the closed organization or system is comparatively available but not the voice. Second, dissatisfaction keeps building in the system, though unexpressed due to lack of voice, to a point when it explodes into agitation or revolution. Here it should be noted that agitation or revolution is not for the “recuperation” or “altering management to its failings” but to replace the system altogether.

Let us take the same example of USSR. The communist state was ruled by one party—Communist party—that was notorious for ruthlessly suppressing all sorts of voices against communist economic and political system. However, those who felt penalized under the system and having no voice used to flee from the system. That shows that though they had exit option but had no voice option. The collapse of USSR is quite anomalous that shows the failure of the system rather than success of voice phenomenon (Hough, 1997; Lane, 1985). Another interesting example can be found in Iranian Revolution. People were dissatisfied under the dictatorship of Shah of Iran but had no voice. They used to flee from the country. The dissatisfaction kept on simmering ultimately exploding in a bloody revolution of 1979 (Milani, 1988). It is worth noting from above two examples that when voice was not available members resorted to fleeing or exiting. Thus in the closed systems the voice is regarded as more dangerous than exit. The rulers (management) would like to deliberately send the dissenters into exile (exit). Does it not imply that voice is more forceful than exit? Does it not manifest that voice is not residual of exit but rather exit is residual of voice?

Hirschman goes on a step further and maintains that with exit the voice is lost: "Once you have exited, you have lost the opportunity to use voice, but not vice versa; in some situations, exit will therefore be a reaction of last resort after voice has failed" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 37). We deem that it is not necessarily the case. Drawing on the previous examples and the line of argument, it appears that there is good possibility of retaining the voice even after the exit. In some cases the impact of voice increases further after exiting due to getting freedom of expression in new system wherefrom the voice can be raised. We can take a couple of examples to illustrate this argument. As we have talked above about the Iranian Revolution, it is interesting to note that the revolutionary leader had exited the country and raising his voice from France. In fact he was able to stir a revolution in Iran though he entered the country at a later stage of revolution. Another significant example can be of leader of Mutahida Qomi Movement MQM in Pakistan (Tariq, 1999). He sits in London but controls the movement-cum-political party in Pakistan. He makes telephonic speeches to big audience that gathers only to listen to him. Without stretching these examples any farther it is quite evident that voice can be raised within as well as without the organization/system and the impact of voice then depends on the prevailing circumstances.

Another significant dimension of Hirschman remark above is that exit is "reaction of last resort after the *voice failed*" [Emphasis added]. We want to discuss this point along with another argument found in the next pages. He writes that "voice can be a substitute for exit, as well as a complement to it" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 39) but that "voice is *costly* and conditioned on the influence and bargaining power customers and members can bring to bear within the firm...[Emphasis added]" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 40). We do not say that the above line of argument is entirely unacceptable. However, we want to make some observations based on the changes that have occurred in new economic and political systems: First, Hirschman assumes the possibility of function of voice to fail but he does not see the function of exit to fail. This means that exit is not only dominant option for him but a win-win situation. Here it should be stated that the time voice takes during the struggle it carries out against bad management, creates enough consciousness among the customers that if the "reaction of last resort" i.e. exit, is taken then it would result in big exit leaving the organization bankrupt. This means failure of voice, which builds over time, would be critical to failure of exit as well. Second, the cost of voice is in fact some times higher than that of exit. However, in democracies it is not so. The voice expressed is not only inexpensive but also convenient. This is not only done today during regular election but in a variety of polls for example, advance poll, exit poll, electronic poll and so forth. Even in the business firms and organizations the cost of voice has undergone tremendous change. We have discussed it above how the firms now want to approach the customers.

Third, a category of stronger voices has emerged in the global market system and political systems. The fast globalizing world has seen the emergence of economic and political international organizations and along with them the standardizing rules and regulations. This has introduced new check on the deterioration of quality. In the global market the products are rated and standardized. Their cost depends on the quality standards. Now before the qualities of products deteriorate and that should lead to either exit or voice, these standardizing institutions jump in to discredit those firms/organizations and stop their supplies.

Last, a significant change has occurred in the way of incurring cost by customers. In fact the burden of cost especially with regard to expensive and durable products has now shifted somewhat from customers to other market actors. The emergence and expansion of insurance companies has lowered the cost effects in case of bad quality. Almost all expensive and durable products are insured at the time sale point. Customers/members can insure any other products, items and services. Second important thing that has resulted with insurance companies is that they exert influence and pressure on the firms/organizations whose products they insure. For instance they will not insure the products of those firms/organizations they are deemed of poor quality. Thus the firms/organizations have to maintain good quality rating with insurance companies. This means that insurance companies serve as another check on the quality of products.

### Conclusion

The basic concern of Hirschman remained the question with which he begins his thesis: The “lapses” do occur in the “functional behavior” of firms/organizations but what “forces” society must be able to marshal to “revert” them back on track? Presenting a triadic model of Exit, Voice and Loyalty he suggests that exit option on the part of customers/members would work powerfully to put the faltering firms/organizations back on track. This option is perceived to work good in neo-classical economic model that has a sufficient degree of quality elasticity of demand along with decent scale of slack mechanism. Hirschman applies his model to social and political organization and finds it fairly workable. Thus the thesis he builds in his book is quite impressive and powerful. In fact he gave some new insights to social scientists, especially political scientist, to think out of box. Up till his time, political scientists had not explored the dynamics of exit as another viable option in politics (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 17–20). In nutshell Hirschman not only tested unique options to cope with the failing situations in social, economic and political systems but also introduced a cross disciplinary approach especially between political science and economics:

“In developing my play on that basis I hope to demonstrate to political scientist the usefulness of economic concepts *and to economists the usefulness of political concepts*. This reciprocity has been lacking in recent interdisciplinary work...”  
(Hirschman, 1970, p. 19)

Over several years since the publication of his book, tremendous changes have occurred in the economic and political organizational systems. Advanced technology has transformed the modes and methods of business and politics. Modern research has introduced new techniques, tools, and operating systems. New economic and political institutions have grown up providing better management and sophistication. The capitalist competition has placed a focus on member/customer satisfaction rather than blind run for profit. However, with modern technology and improved economic and political systems, the complexity of problems has also aggravated. The systems are in transition from mechanization to digitalization.

In this perspective Hirschman binary model of exit and voice proves inadequate to answer many questions. It seems unable to explain the complexities of behavior in closed systems whether political or economic. His optimistic approach does not take into consideration the negative or passive exits and voices. His time and space remained unfamiliar with transcendence of voice across the boundaries by the agency of technology. In fact, a sizeable number of limitations of neo-classical economic system and democratizing political systems have been resolved by modern technology and research. Hirschman’s basic contention that “the presence of exit alternative can therefore tend to atrophy the development of the art of voice” stands challenged in modern economy and welfare state. Today market and economic systems have adopted Active Mechanism Approach. The firms/organizations can not wait till deterioration of quality to take improvement measures. Rather in highly competitive system they must constantly improve in quality as well as introduce new quality products. For this purpose they constantly engage their customers/members and seek the voice and opinion of the latter. The underpinnings of this conscious effort of firms/organizations are to generate everlasting loyalty among customers/members. Finally, the Public policy’s growing concern with “people and/or places” approach has clearly warned against the *exit* dilemmas (See Spencer, 2004; Spencer & Ong, 2004). It has sought and acted upon the *voice* to improve localities, services and life standards of people so as to avoid frequent migrations.

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