Consensus Problem

• Every process contributes a value
• Each process *decides* a value
  – Decision once made can’t be changed
• **Goal is to have all processes decide same value**
• If everyone votes V, decision is V

• Consensus *impossible* to solve in asynchronous systems (FLP result)
• But important since it maps to many important distributed computing problems
• Um, can’t we just solve consensus?
Yes we can!

• Paxos algorithm
  – Most popular “consensus-solving” algorithm
  – Does not solve consensus problem (which would be impossible, because we already proved that)
  – But provides safety and eventual liveness
  – A lot of systems use it
    • Zookeeper (Yahoo!), Google Chubby, and many other companies

• Paxos invented by? (take a guess)
Yes we can!

- Paxos invented by Leslie Lamport

- Paxos provides **safety** and **eventual liveness**
  - **Safety**: Consensus is not violated
  - **Eventual Liveness**: If things go well sometime in the future (messages, failures, etc.), there is a good chance consensus will be reached. But there is no guarantee.
Political Science 101, i.e., Paxos Groked

- Paxos has rounds; each round has a unique ballot id
- Rounds are asynchronous
  - Time synchronization not required
  - If you’re in round $j$ and hear a message from round $j+1$, abort everything and move over to round $j+1$
  - Use timeouts; may be pessimistic
- Each round itself broken into phases (which are also asynchronous)
  - Phase 1: A leader is elected (Election)
  - Phase 2: Leader proposes a value, processes ack (Bill)
  - Phase 3: Leader multicasts final value (Law)

Slide ideas borrow from Jeff Chase’s material (Duke U.)
Phase 1 – Election

- Potential leader chooses a unique ballot id, higher than seen anything so far
- Sends to all processes
- Processes wait, respond once to highest ballot id
  - If potential leader sees a higher ballot id, it can’t be a leader
  - Paxos tolerant to multiple leaders, but we’ll only discuss 1 leader case
  - Processes also log received ballot ID on disk
- If a process has in a previous round decided on a value v’, it includes value v’ in its response
- If majority (i.e., quorum) respond OK then you are the leader
  - If no one has majority, start new round
- (If things go right) A round cannot have two leaders (why?)
Phase 2 – Proposal (Bill)

- Leader sends proposed value $v$ to all
  - use $v=v'$ if some process already decided in a previous round and sent you its decided value $v'$
- Recipient logs on disk; responds OK

Please elect me!

Value $v$ ok?

OK!
Phase 3 – Decision (Law)

• If leader hears a majority of OKs, it lets everyone know of the decision
• Recipients receive decision, log it on disk
Which is the point of no-return?

- That is, when is consensus reached in the system
Which is the point of no-return?

• If/when a majority of processes hear proposed value and accept it (i.e., are about to/have respond(ed) with an OK!)

• Processes may not know it yet, but a decision has been made for the group
  – Even leader does not know it yet

• What if leader fails after that?
  – Keep having rounds until some round completes
Safety

• If some round has a majority (i.e., quorum) hearing proposed value $v'$ and accepting it, then subsequently at each round either: 1) the round chooses $v'$ as decision or 2) the round fails.

• Proof:
  – Potential leader waits for majority of OKs in Phase 1
  – At least one will contain $v'$ (because two majorities or quorums always intersect)
  – It will choose to send out $v'$ in Phase 2

• Success requires a majority, and any two majority sets intersect.
What could go wrong?

• Process fails
  – Majority does not include it
  – When process restarts, it uses log to retrieve a past decision (if any) and past-seen ballot ids. Tries to know of past decisions.

• Leader fails
  – Start another round

• Messages dropped
  – If too flaky, just start another round

• Note that anyone can start a round any time

• Protocol may never end – tough luck, buddy!
  – Impossibility result not violated
  – If things go well sometime in the future, consensus reached

Please elect me!

OK!

Value v ok?

OK!

v!
What could go wrong?

- A lot more!

- This is a highly simplified view of Paxos.

Reminder

• **Today**: Last day to sign up for a project discussion meeting
  – Mandatory
  – We will use project discussion groups to assign VMs and Azure accounts