

# Letters

## Public Choice in Political Science

The article in *PS* (XXIII, 4, Dec. 1990) by Jay Dow and Michael Munger, "Public Choice in Political Science: We Don't Teach It, But We Publish It," makes the point that, despite the considerable influence of public choice ideas in the discipline (e.g., the work of Downs, Riker, and Olson), only a handful of institutions teach public choice. *As of Fall 1991, the number of institutions where public choice is taught will grow by one.* The University of California, Irvine, has just inaugurated a unique interdisciplinary Ph.D. concentration in Public Choice whose core courses will be jointly taught by political scientists and economists. Students in the program will apply to either the Department of Politics or the Department of Economics. In addition to courses in public choice, they satisfy the regular degree requirements in one of these disciplines under the guidance of the interdisciplinary committee that supervises the public choice concentration.

The new program is genuinely interdisciplinary, within the framework of a School of Social Sciences that has a long commitment to interdisciplinary research going back to its first Dean, James March. Philosophers interested in decision theory and the application of rational choice ideas in moral philosophy (Gregory Kavka, David Estlund, and Bryan Skyrms) will also be members of the core faculty. Students in the program will be encouraged to take advantage of courses taught by faculty associated with UCI's Research Unit in Mathematical Behavioral Sciences, headed by the noted mathematical psychologist, Duncan Luce, who co-authored (with Howard Raiffa) the classic game theory text, *Games and Decisions*. Students with the necessary mathematical background who meet the requirements of that research unit can receive a Masters in Mathematical Behavioral Science on their way toward a Ph.D.

The program has a strong emphasis on testable models. Students in it will train in econometrics and applied microeconomics, a major area of strength of UCI's Economics Department, whose members include Jack Johnston (a noted econometrician and author of the classic textbook, *Econometric Methods*, now in its third edition), David Lilien (author of the Micro-TSP package), and Charles Lave (co-author with James March of the 1975 textbook, *Introduction to Analysis*, that has long provided the best cross-disciplinary introduction to research methods in the social sciences), as well as a number of other distinguished econometricians.

The program is committed to fostering work in applied public choice that builds on the existing corpus of political science (and social science) knowledge, rather than insisting on reinventing the wheel or holding the view that there is only one path to knowledge. In particular, the program eschews the view that rational choice approaches to politics require a commitment to a particular ideological perspective, and it also eschews the view that any one disciplinary perspective explains everything. To borrow Gabriel Almond's apt phrase, we are committed to avoiding "separate tables."

The program emphasizes applying public choice ideas outside the American context as well as within it. No other public choice program has this feature. The greatest strength of the Politics Department at UCI is in comparative politics (e.g., Russell Dalton, comparative parties, public opinion, and German politics; James Danziger, public policy and British politics, David Easton, systems theory; Harry Eckstein, cultural theory; Sung-Chull Lee, quantitative international relations and Korean politics; William Schonfeld, political socialization and French politics; Etel Solingen, technology policy and Latin American politics; Dorothy Solinger, political economy and Chinese politics; Rein Taagepera,

comparative elections systems, quantitative international relations, and Baltic politics; and Brian Woodall, political economy and Japanese politics), interests shared by the members of the Public Choice Steering Committee (Bernard Grofman, representation, comparative election systems; Carole Uhlaner, political participation; Marty Wattenberg, party systems).

Faculty associated with the concentration in public choice are committed to a "hands-on" training of graduate students that involves them in ongoing research projects that will result in co-authored publications. Students in the public choice concentration will be encouraged to develop substantive applications of public choice ideas in the domain of comparative politics. In addition, students will have the possibility of spending time abroad in conjunction with projects involving European scholars associated with UCI (Ian Budge, Essex; Georgio Freddi, University of Bologna; Michel Crozier, CNRS, Paris; Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Free University of Berlin).

We on the steering committee hope that UCI's new program in public choice will help remedy the problem addressed by Dow and Munger that public choice is being read, but not being taught. We welcome student applications to our new program.

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Amihai Glazer, Economics  
Bernard Grofman, Politics  
Carole Uhlaner, Politics  
Martin Wattenberg, Politics  
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## "The Fairest of Them All"

I have followed, with some interest, the chronicling in *PS* of attempts to judge who is "the fairest of them all" amongst political science departments in the land. The Awards presentations at the San Francisco meetings seem to settle the argument. Harvard, by a mile.

My assumption is that those who give the awards are the true arbiters of quality in our profession. Given this, the awards event should have been called "The Harvard Awards in Political Science."

The evidence? Harvard placed 24 people on the 18 selection committees, most of which consist of three people. It was a poor committee, indeed, that did not have a Harvard faculty member or Harvard Ph.D. on it. All but three did, and one of those (Schuck award) had a Harvard recipient. That committee must have had a Harvard deprivation attack. Five committees had two Harvard folk, two were all Harvard affairs. The James Madison committee produced a critical mass, there were three Harvard awarders and a former Harvard professor awardee . . . the hat trick.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting for a minute that there was anything but honest decisions being made by each of these committees. That is not my point. My point is that a power elite controls the giving of the awards; it is not relevant who receives them. Though there could be raised a bit of "Caesar's wifeism" in the Leo Strauss award where a Harvard chair and recent Harvard faculty member made up a majority of the committee that gave the dissertation award to . . . ta da . . . a Harvard man.

A recent Klingemann, et al. *PS* article (June, 1989) suggests citation dominance of Harvard graduates, along with Yale and Chicago graduates, in recent decades. The cycle of citations from patron to client and back again emanates from an elite few institutions. The awards reinforce this data. Nearly 40% of the committees were Harvard connected, 65% if you add Yale and Chicago.

Icing on the cake? The chair of the awards ceremonies was a Harvard Ph.D. and the speaker (incoming president of the APSA) is at Harvard.

Who's the fairest of them all? Who controls the giving of kudos in our profession? They are the quality arbiters of the profession.

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## On the Critique of Rational Choice

In the December 1990 issue of *PS*, Paul Edward Johnson attempts to answer the concerns of Jurg Steiner regarding the moral propriety of teaching rational choice to political science classes. Steiner cautions the teaching of rational choice might diminish civic responsibility. Rational choice might be used to justify rugged individualism and the pursuit of selfish interests at the expense of morality. Johnson counters that rational choice does have a valuable moral component.

Johnson's defense fails to address the central concern of the critics of rational choice. There is a deeply held suspicion among large segments of the community of investigators that these methods impoverish science, justify selfishness, and apologize for capitalism. The "critique of rational choice" has roots in Hegel's critique of understanding and contract theory, Marx's critique of the Robinsonaides and political economy, Heidegger's critique of mathematization, the Frankfurt critique of positivism and instrumental reason. Anti-behavioralists' criticisms of positivism were very similar to criticisms of rational choice.

To its critics, rational choice is a modern-day Robinsonaide. Like Marx, the critics of rational choice contend that methodological individualist methods conflate self-interest with greed. These "Robinsonaides" not only hypostatize Bentham, they portray capitalism as a Benthamite idyll. Marx noted:

This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour power goes on is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom because both buyer and sellers are constrained only by their free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equal because they exchange equivalents. Property because each disposes only of their own, Bentham because each looks only to himself. What brings them together and puts them in relations with each other is the selfishness of gain and the private interest of

each. Each looks only to himself and no one troubles with the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the preestablished harmony of things, or under the auspices of all powerful providence, work together for their mutual advantage, for the common weal and interest of all. (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 172)

Rational choice hypostatizes Bentham, justifies self-interest, defends capitalism.

While I believe that the critics of rational choice tar all rational choice theorists with the same brush, I do not believe that rational choice has properly answered its critics. The "critique of rational choice" is not false consciousness. There *is* evidence for the contention that much rational choice is ideological.

These are salient criticisms of rational choice and their prime facie evidence.

1. *Criticism: Rational Choice justifies selfishness.* Evidence: The exemplars of rational choice seem to counsel selfishness. The public goods and collective action problems portray provision as irrational, in "the state of nature" anarchic cooperation is irrational, it is irrational to cooperate in the Prisoners' Dilemma. For Olson unionization, class formation, and revolution are irrational. It is irrational to vote or participate in politics.
2. *Criticism: Public Choice is concerned with liberal issues.* Evidence: Most rational choice theory is concerned with crime, elections, voting, committees, market failure, defense, deterrence, etc. Though enormously unimportant, many other issues are given little attention.
3. *Criticism: The rational choice agenda is driven by liberal politics.* Evidence: Most rational choice is neo-Hobbesian. Human beings are selfish. Once numbers are large and wealth substantial, anarchic cooperation is impossible. The state is a benevolent actor which allows self-interested actors to escape from the Pareto irrational state of nature. The state protects property from invasion, insures contracts, defends the polity, and limits market failure. The state and the market provide for a Pareto rational societal end state.

4. *Criticism: Olson's "logic" is anti-labor, reborn substantive due process.* Evidence: Olson contends that unionization is irrational. Olson argues the essence of unionization is violence and coercion. Unions are inimical to the economic liberty of their members. Labor legislation reduces economic freedom.
5. *Criticism: Rational choice "political theory" is myopically liberal.* Evidence: Those rational choice theorists mixing political theory and rational choice focus the bulk of their attention of liberal political theory, especially Anglo-American political theory. The names of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, the utilitarians, Rawls, and Nozick appear again and again. The Greeks, the Christians, Marx, Nietzsche, anarchists, socialists, are virtually ignored.
6. *Criticism: Rational Choice leads to the logic of accommodation.* Evidence: It is hard to gainsay the ideological implications of a "logic" portraying unionization and revolution as irrational. Rational choice Marxists are largely reformists. Roemer, Elster, and Przeworski argue revolution is irrational. For Przeworski hegemony is consent to exploitation, capitalist democracy a class compromise.

I do not mean to suggest these criticisms are correct or decisive, merely cogent.

The critique of rational choice should not be treated as a mirage based on emotionalism or dogma. The critics of rational choice can marshal a substantial body of evidence to confirm their "hypothesis" that rational choice is ideological. The *fact* is that much, if not most, rational choice has been used to justify selfishness, has conflated self-interest and selfishness, counsels accommodation, defends the efficiency of the benevolent state-market combination, is thoroughly liberal in philosophy and agenda. Rational choice has generally hypostatized Bentham and portrayed capitalism as a Benthamite utopia. For all its professed hardheadedness most rational choice is thoroughly Panglossian, "all works out for the best in this

best of all possible societal end states."

Having said all this, I would argue the critics of rational choice are ultimately wrong. Even if we agree rational choice has been ideological, the relationship is contingent, not necessary. The ideological albatross need not hang around the neck of rational choice. Rational choice has remained ideological because its critics are content with flippant external criticism and its defenders treat any criticism as if they were the products of false consciousness. The Steiner-Johnson debate does not go beyond these polarities.

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### We Need More Politicians Like Havel, and We Should Tell Our Students So

To the moral questions about rational choice theories which I raised in the March 1990 issue of *PS*, Gordon Tullock (*PS*, June 1990) and Paul Edward Johnson (*PS*, December 1990) have responded in interesting and constructive ways. Their replies clarify where I differ with the rational choice approach, and where I don't. I write once more in order to put my position towards rational choice in a more systematic context. To do this, I use a two-dimensional space depicted in Figure 1.

The two dimensions refer to the most basic ways that we think about politics. By what motives do we think political actors are driven and how do we think they make their decisions? Motives can be ranked on a continuum from selfish to altruistic. Styles of decision making can be characterized from calculating to spontaneous. The latter term needs some discussion. According to Webster's Dictionary, the key characteristics of spontaneous are to act "from natural feeling," "without premeditation," "by impulse." This definition gives exactly the right connotation for the opposite of calculating.

Rational choice theorists see the political world inhabited by calculating actors who try to maximize their utilities. They thus occupy the left-hand side of the figure. What the

utilities are differs among rational choice theorists. As far as I can determine, there are many more rational choice studies working with the assumption that political actors maximize their self-interest. These rational choice theorists, located in the upper left corner of the figure, are diametrically opposed to the assumption that politicians are driven by altruistic motives and make decisions in a spontaneous way. I do not encourage at all that we make this general assumption about political actors, which indeed would be rather naive. But what I *do* encourage is that we leave open the possibility that there are some politicians who at least some of the time act as spontaneous altruists. Their behavior needs explanation, too.

My general point is that motives of political behavior and styles of political decision making should not be treated in an axiomatic way but as variables. Looking at my figure, I would argue that the entire space may be filled. Some politicians may act as impulsive egoists (upper right corner), others as calculating altruists (lower left corner). Still other politicians may be at the very center of the figure, combining selfish and altruistic motives, calculating and spontaneous styles of decision making.

The logical conclusion of this line of argument is that we need first an empirical theory explaining the distribution of politicians in the two-dimensional space of my figure. I do not deny that there are political situations, perhaps many, where all actors pursue in a calculating way their self-interest. But there are numerous other potential locations in my two-dimensional space.

With this approach we also get a better handle on normative questions, in that we can ask how the location of politicians in the two-dimensional space influences the quality of their decisions. In my earlier piece, I tried to argue that the public good, especially for future generations, may be better served if we had more altruists in politics. But I am also willing to acknowledge that an argument can be made that the public good is better served if calculating politicians pursue their self-interest. This is what Gordon Tullock

argues when he states: “The politician who takes action which is most likely to return him to office is carrying out the will of the people as expressed in their votes in a better way than any other possible arrangement.” Tullock feels that people do not need “guardians.” I respect this position although I prefer that politicians try to be moral guardians for their voters and rather risk losing an election than to betray their moral convictions. But these are positions on which one may differ in good faith.

What disturbs me about rational choice is something else. The responses from Tullock and Johnson may help me to put in sharper focus what I object to. I object when rational choice theorists give implicitly or explicitly the impression to their students that human beings *by their very nature* are calculating selfish utility maximizers. As I argued in my earlier piece, this may easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy, in the sense that students take explanation for justification. Human nature is certainly more malleable. At least I hope so, and in this sense I may be called by cynics an idealist.

Writing from labor camp more than ten years ago, Václav Havel claimed that ultimately the greatest idealists will be the greatest realists. For his own life this turned out to be true. He did not become a dissident calculating that going to labor camp will be a good long-term investment increasing his chances to one day become president of the country. As Havel so eloquently wrote in the letters to his wife Olga, he acted to keep his personal integrity intact. In my view, we need more politicians like Havel and we should tell our students so.

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**FIGURE 1.**  
**Assumptions About Motives and Decision Styles of Political Actors**

