

Democracy

Brian Barry – Sociologists, Economists, and Democracy

Take away point: economic approaches to the study of democracy often have to fall back on “sociological” explanations for preferences that in turn violate assumptions basic economic assumption about incentives to act.

Chapter 1 – “Introduction”

Political theory is not/should not be static. Concepts in political theory should be subject to empirical testing as a means of generating new insights.

Sources of Innovation in Political Theory:

- developments in other disciplines which suggest parallels to politics
- changes in the actual phenomena of politics (ex. nuclear weapons)
- improvement of empirical tools **most important source of innovation**

Two broad types of contemporary political theory: economic and sociological:

Economic

- “the logic of choice” , “a theory of rational behavior”
- rational maximizers with set goals
- use of models as simplifications of reality
- Equilibrium Focus: How will certain conditions work themselves out?
- Philosophical Origins: Bentham, J.S. Mill
- History of Ideas Pattern: Congruence of ideas with social and political context

Sociological

- focus on the development and change in motives
- not a deductive theory
- System Focus: How does a system maintain itself in spite of on-going change?
- Philosophical origins: French Revolution and notions of men as irrational and relatively fixed national cultures that shape politics
- History of Ideas Pattern: methods/concepts in successful in one area get applied in other areas

Chapter 2 – “Political Participation as Rational Action”

Downsian and Rikerian models of voting behavior (people decide whether to vote based on whether their vote will make a difference and how much they stand to gain if their preferred party is elected) cannot explain the motivation for voting without resorting to explanations that link behavior with outcomes. Instead they resort to sociological explanations (a sense of civic duty) to explain why people vote. A brief empirical analysis of voting data finds that the Downsian explanations are stronger precisely when civic duty is not strong. Ultimately the costs and benefits of voting are so small at the individual level that an economic approach is simply not all that useful.

Olsonian public goods analysis contradict abundant examples of contribution to public goods where the benefit received is less than the contribution (like labor unions). Sociological factors (like sense of duty) encourage participation in the production of public goods. Certain institutional factors may influence collective action schemes by being more or less amenable to the formation of groups. Additional much collective action occurs in the absence of selective

incentives/returns on material contributions to collective efforts (charitable contributions alleviate poverty by the upper middle class or fighting in a war on behalf of one's country). In short, collective action cannot be explained as the aggregation of individual selfish preferences.

Gutmann and Thompson – Democracy and Disagreement

Chapter 1 – “The Persistence of Moral Agreement”

Deliberative democracy – the promotion of extensive moral argument about the merits of public policies in public forums, with the aim of reaching provisional moral agreement and maintaining mutual respect among citizens.¹ The concept consists of three principles – reciprocity, publicity, and accountability – that regulate the process of politics, and three others – basic liberty, basic opportunity, and fair opportunity – that govern the content of policies.

- Moral arguments apply to everyone who is similarly situated in the morally relevant aspects. Their claims, if fully developed, would impute rights and wrongs, or ascribe virtue and vice, to anyone who is similar in the respects that the argument assumes to morally significant. (more than just generality is needed for a substantive moral argument in politics)
- Reciprocity fosters viewing others as moral agents even if conclusions are different.
- Publicity in that articulation of positions in moral disagreements are appeals made to all other citizens
- Accountability by all those who act as agents (presidents, CEOs, union bosses) and are accountable to others in their political actions.

This is a practical theory of how to come to some reconciliation of deep disagreements. The actual results of the deliberation are not always just, they will be more just the more completely the three components of deliberative democracy.

Sources of Moral Disagreement: scarcity of social resources, lack of generosity in human nature, incompatible values, and incomplete understanding.

Existing Views of Democracy

Procedural: establishment of fair and legitimate processes for making decisions about moral issues. Majority rule is the preferred mechanism. Extensive protections for individual rights

Constitutional: rights should be assigned to obtain just outcomes

Democracy is the best form of government for coping with moral disagreement because it accords equal respect for the moral claims of all citizens. In a deliberative democratic framework neither form (procedural democracy) nor content (constitutional democracy) of the discussion takes precedence over the other, only where they are recognized to be dynamically interacting are basic liberty and opportunity best preserved. Constitutional and procedural approaches both converge towards deliberative democracy. Given that morality of process or outcomes is critical to these approaches, morality should be integrated into the discourse itself.

Manin – Principles of Representative Government

Chapter 1 – “Direct democracy and representation: selection of officials in Athens”

¹ This is different from discourse theory (eg Habermas) in that liberty and opportunity are not subordinated to the discourse rather they are “rules of the game”.

In Athens many public tasks were assigned by lottery. Candidates had to nominate themselves and thus there was self-selection into the pool – only those who deemed themselves worthy in spite of extensive scrutiny would nominate themselves. There were extensive mechanisms for monitoring and sanctioning those who were deemed to have performed their job poorly. In contrast to modern system, the initiative right was held by the Assembly.

Athenian democracy was direct only in the sense that lawmakers were selected by lot. Aristotle preferred combinations of oligarchic and democratic principles. Rotation in office reinforces liberty by making an individual understand what it is to be ruled and how to rule. To avoid the risk that there would be a conflict between democratic principles and the rotation principles there were limits to re-election of the same individual. Lottery also was consistent with the Athenian's distrust of political professionalism. Finally, lots were valued as an egalitarian procedure – equality in the sense that there was an equal probability of obtaining something.