

ASSA 2020 Annual Meeting

Gordon Tullock on Simple Majority Voting: the Making of Conviction

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An intellectual path towards a real conviction

1. Questioning the simple majority voting principle

Democratic Marginalism

Problems of Majority Voting (1959)

2. Developments in the theory

A Preliminary Investigation of the Theory of Constitutions

3. A real conviction that majority voting must be replaced

Problems of Majority Voting: Reply to a Traditionalist (1961)

An Economic Analysis of Public Choice / Un'Analisi Economica della Scelta Politica (1961)

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Democratic Marginalism (1/2)

- In a democracy, the traditional voting system is problematic:
 - *“Majority is binding the minority” (p. 1)*
 - Intensities of preferences are not taken into account
- A designated solution to improve the situation : the use of logrolling

Democratic Marginalism (2/2)

Three problems arise with the use of logrolling:

- An “oppressed minority” will have to bear “external costs”
 - External costs will appear
 - A minority will still be oppressed
- An equilibrium that is not stable will appear
 - 50% + 1 voters form the majority
 - A continuous process of trading support will appear
- An overinvestment can happen
 - Seriatim assumption
 - Someone who votes against one measure will attract hostility

Problems of Majority Voting (1959) (1/2)

- Logrolling is impossible when:
 - The election is a standard referendum
 - Secret ballots are used
- Logrolling is permitted when:
 - The electorate is small enough
 - Voters vote openly
- Logrolling can be:
 - implicit (construction of a mix of policies that will attract support)
 - explicit (direct vote trading)

Problems of Majority Voting (1959) (2/2)

- The use of logrolling is Pareto improving and takes account of the intensity of the preferences
- But a paradox arises: *“each individual behaves rationally, but the outcome is irrational”* (p. 575)
- Can we improve logrolling ?
 - Requiring more than a simple majority to reduce the bound minority would increase the difficulty of negotiating a bargain
 - Collecting taxes by some indirect method would worsen the situation since people could vote for every bill presented
- One certainty: *“The system of majority voting is not by any means an optimal method of allocating resources”* (p. 579)

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A Preliminary Investigation (1/2)

- Tullock tries to find a rule to replace majority voting
 - What if we change the required number of voters?
 - What about the method of voting?

- Questioning Downs's median voter rule
 - In the case of equal intensity of the preferences
 - Otherwise: median intensity rule ?

A Preliminary Investigation (2/2)

Several conclusions are extracted:

- Government activities should be made available for people willing to pay for them
 - But free riding appears
- We could facilitate the bargains by restraining the electorate
 - What is the size of the proper unit?
 - Is the same unit able to decide on various problems?
 - Will the unit be the right one over the years?
- Since we can't propose an efficient unique rule, we should provide a set of different rules applicable to different situations

Downs's answer no. 1: *Why the Government Budget is Too Small in a Democracy* (1960)

- Politicians aim at being reelected:
 - They try to satisfy the majority
 - They also try to satisfy minorities with intensive feelings
- Intensity of preferences is taken into account since policies and bills are not voted one by one
- Logrolling is already present

Downs's answer no. 2: *Problems of Majority Voting: In Defense of Majority Voting* (1961)

- Each voter should have the same weight in front of the ballot: that's only allowed by simple majority rule
- Majority voting is not the cause of the misallocation of the resources: seriatim assumption is
- The lack of information is the possible cause of irrationality

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The idea becomes a conviction

- *“Being against majority voting in the present climate of opinion is almost as bad as being against motherhood” (letter to the JOPE editor, oct. 1960)*
- Tullock admits: *“[I can] no longer simply say that I do not oppose majority voting since I have changed my mind on this point” (letter to the JOPE editor, nov. 1960)*

Reply to a Traditionalist (1961)

- Downs advocates the use of a unique rule – simple majority voting – but there must be different rules corresponding to different issues
- The defense of majority voting is problematic: following Arrow and Black, *“careful analysis has uncovered a series of serious mathematical difficulties which make the traditional view which Downs presents untenable”* (pp. 202-203)
- The conclusion about overinvestment is true concerning road maintenance but a generalized model wouldn't necessarily conduct to the same point

Un' analisi (1961)

- At no moment is simple majority voting mentioned
- *“Only by requiring unanimous agreement [...] could we make certain that the cost to the “decision-makers” and the real cost coincided, and hence eliminate over-investment” (p. 236)*
- The only problem is that *“in the real world, requiring unanimity would be impractical because of the problem of obtaining unanimous agreement” (ibid.)*

Conclusion

- First came the idea of questioning a sacrosanct system
- An idea slowly becoming a conviction
- A conviction that will become one of the main pillars of the *Calculus of Consent*

Thank you

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