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)
1. Questioning the simple majority voting principle

   *Democratic Marginalism*

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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?
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

• 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.
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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