Democracy Defended

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Democracy and the intellectuals

Democracy is on the march in the world today. By democracy I mean something like free and equal people associating and communicating in public spheres, informed by liberal presuppositions, and governed politically by representative institutions based on wide suffrage and contested elections. I do not say that democracy is victorious in the world today, because its reign is fragile in the developing world, is flawed in the developed world (especially in the United States), and is barely emergent on the international scene. Evaluation should be a comparative enterprise, however, and most people aware of the alternatives believe that they are better off under democracy, and democracy is more widely spread now than it has ever been before.

There were a handful of developing democracies a hundred years ago (Dahl 1989, 240). Democratic aspirations flared in continental Europe and areas under its influence as World War I came to an end, but Communism and then Fascism smothered the democratic flame. Fascism was discredited as World War II came to an end, and also political imperialism went into decline, only to be replaced by the *realpolitik* of the Cold War. The Communists were glad to extend their tyranny to broad new territories, and the democracies found it expedient to justify tyrannies among their subordinate allies. Meanwhile, Fascism was dismantled in Mediterranean Europe in the late 1970s, and the democratization of Spain and Portugal strengthened democratic forces in Latin America in the 1980s. The fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, and then in the Soviet Union, confirmed a trend to democratization on a global scale. Most civil wars in Latin America came to an end. Apartheid was dismantled in South Africa. Authoritarian Marcos fell in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia. The theocracy in Iran came under democratic pressure. There are no dramatic democratic breakthroughs in the Arab world, however, or with respect to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In middle Africa one-party and military regimes are less common,

but corruption, poverty, massacre, and war are as grievous as ever. The democratic student movement in China was crushed by the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

I do not know why, but from the beginning academics have tended to be more disdainful of democracy than are, say, the *demos* (the people). Plato's hatred for democracy is no secret. In our times, "Almost as soon as representative democracy on a large scale appeared in Europe . . . there were misgivings about it, especially among intellectuals on both the Left and the Right" (Plamenatz 1973, ix). Victorian England pioneered mass democracy in Europe, and pioneered in its denunciation: where Plato opposed democracy on the ground that it produced spiritual anarchy in individuals, Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, and Lecky opposed democracy on the ground that it led to social anarchy, according to Lippincott (1938, 5). The followers of Marx and Lenin damned democracy as a bourgeois sham, and predicted scientific administration and the withering away of politics in the communist future (see Schwartz 1995). Plamenatz refers to the "academic attack on democracy" by liberals Mosca, Michels, and Pareto, whose debunking of democracy provided intellectual suckling to fascism. The US had more of a democratic tradition, personified by Dewey. Dewey's most influential rival was Lippmann, who argued that the citizenry is ignorant and that experts must rule in spite of the "democratic fallacy" (Wiebe 1995). In Europe during the interwar period Lindsay (1935) and Barker (1951) were virtually alone as academic defenders of democracy. In the period after World War II, an exhausted conformism in American culture was accompanied by an empirical democratic theory that apotheosized the "beneficial apathy" of the citizenry, and by positivistic animosity to normative theory; Dahl (e.g., 1956) was nevertheless a milestone in democratic theory. In this period, although little good was said about democracy, not much bad was said about it either. The revival of liberal political theory following Rawls (1971) was kinder to democracy, but was much more liberal than democratic: for Rawls (1993, 231–240), the Supreme Court is the exemplar of public reason, not the parliament, not the people. After Habermas (1984; 1987), an emphasis on the transformation rather than the mere aggregation of preferences stimulated wider academic interest in democracy (Elster 1986b; 1998). A robust normative democratic theory, primarily but not exclusively on the theme of deliberation, is beginning to appear.

Although democratization is the main trend in the world today, the main intellectual trend in American political science is the view that democracy is chaotic, arbitrary, meaningless, and impossible. This trend

originated with economist Kenneth Arrow's impossibility theorem, which was applied to politics by the late William Riker, political scientist at the University of Rochester. The earlier academic attack on democracy by Mosca, Michels, and Pareto was revived with fashionable new methods. Riker had great organizational resources, and used them to promulgate a particular interpretation of Arrow's theorem, to further elaborate a doctrine he called "positive political theory" ("scientific," rather than "ethical"), and to recruit and place his students far and wide.

Riker calls *populist* any democratic theory which depends on a systematic connection between the opinion or will of the citizens and public policy, and *liberalist* any democratic theory which requires only that voting result in the random removal of elected officials. Riker rejects populist democracy as infeasible, and offers his liberalist democracy in its place. What almost everyone means by democracy is what Riker calls populist democracy; and, I shall argue, Riker's liberalist alternative fails, descriptively and normatively. Thus, I am tempted to label his doctrine *antidemocratic*. I believe that it is antidemocratic in consequence, whether or not it is antidemocratic in spirit. But to use such a label throughout this volume would be tendentious. To call his doctrine *antipopulist*, though, is to beg the question in his favor: the word *populism* has many negative connotations, and I do not mean to defend such things as Peronism, short-sighted policy, or mob rule. Since Riker's claim is that in the political sphere the rational individual opinions or desires of citizens cannot be amalgamated accurately and fairly, it is apt to describe his doctrine as one of democratic irrationalism. Riker's irrationalist doctrine emphasizes principled failings of democracy and recommends a constitutionalist libertarianism and the substitution of economic markets for much of political democracy (Riker and Weingast 1988).

Displaced by the forces of economic globalization, I came to graduate school in midlife from a background as a founder and an elected leader of a large forestry workers' cooperative movement, as a lobbyist for forestry workers with state and federal administrative and legislative agencies, as a litigant for forestry workers, as an organizer of issue and candidate electoral campaigns, as policy aide to an elected official at the apex of a large county government, and as a political journalist. I was quite flabbergasted by the irrationalist dogma I encountered in the political science literature. The elegant models of impossibility and disequilibrium I was taught bore no relation to my democratic experiences. I am not one of those who holds that every human life is best fulfilled in politics, but I know that my life was best fulfilled in that activity. Although in democratic politics I had seen plenty of crazy things, some inexplicable, and had been

a hard operator, I had seen nothing that supported the irrationalist models and interpretations of Riker and his followers; and I had seen more crazy things happen in the economy than in politics. At that point I did not know why the models were mistaken, but I did know that if the models do not fit the facts, then it is the models that must go; my political experiences had made me suspicious of those who belittle empiricism. I had already struggled against antidemocratic leftist doctrines in my own mind and in my political environment, and rightist doctrines of the same consequence aroused my suspicions. I am afraid that younger students, without the experience and confidence that I had, tend to accept the irrationalist models, which are transmitted with professorial authority and sometimes by means of hasty and mystifying formalisms.

One day in graduate school I was talking with someone who knew a great deal about China. I asked him what he thought about the student movement for democracy there. He replied that Arrow and Riker had shown that democracy is arbitrary and meaningless, and that what China needed was paternalistic dictatorship by the Communist Party. I was dumbfounded. "The models are wrong!" I said. "How are they wrong?" he asked. I could not answer him then, but I had learned something important: not only is positive political theory empirically erroneous, it can have dangerous consequences. The proposition that democratic voting is arbitrary and meaningless can be used not only to justify a constitutional libertarianism such as Riker's, it can also be used to justify a dictatorship that appeals to the values of stability and order. The irrationalist doctrine is taught in America's leading political science departments, law schools, and economics departments. Students absorb these teachings, and then move on to join the political and economic elites of the world. I shudder to think of the policies demanded in the international consultancies and financial agencies and the national treasury departments of the world by people who were taught the findings of Arrow as interpreted and expanded by Riker's school of thought. I worry that authoritarian movements might find comfort in Riker's (1982) irrationalist credo, *Liberalism against Populism*. One purpose of my work here is to show that Riker's irrationalist doctrine is mistaken, and thereby to restore democracy as an intellectually respectable method of human organization.

I have sketched the progress of democracy in the world, an ongoing academic disdain for democracy, and my motivations for countering the current version of the academic attack on democracy. Next, I introduce the problems of voting that inform the irrationalist view. After that, I provide a sample of quotations from the literature in order to establish that there is a trend to democratic irrationalism in academic opinion.

Problems of voting: the basics

This section is an introduction to the problems of voting. We start with majority rule. Majority rule doesn't always report a winner with more than two alternatives, so we might turn to plurality rule. Plurality rule might pick a winner that a majority of the voters is against, so we look for other methods. The Borda method counts the number of times an alternative beats all other alternatives, but it violates a condition called the independence of irrelevant alternatives. The Condorcet method says to pick the alternative that beats all others in pairwise comparison. The Condorcet method might lead to the paradox of voting, however: no alternative wins, called cycling. The Arrow theorem is a generalization of the paradox of voting. If there is cycling, unfair manipulation of the outcome by agenda control and by strategic voting is also possible. Different methods of voting can yield different social outcomes from the same individual preferences.

Ordinary majority rule seems to be the most natural, or commonsensical, way of voting. A majority is made up of more than half the voters. Often a majority-rule vote is taken over two alternatives; for example, in a committee a proposal is made to alter the status quo, or often there are only two candidates in an election. When there are two alternatives, majority rule will deliver a winner, except when there is a tie. A tie can be decided by some convention, such as a bias to the status quo, recounting of the votes, or flipping a coin. Everyone is familiar with ordinary majority rule.

When there are three or more alternatives there can be problems with majority rule. If there are three candidates, and none receives a majority, then there is no winner, and the method is incomplete. Perhaps without too much thought we might turn to plurality rule as a simple extension of majority rule: whoever gets the most votes, even if short of a majority, is the winner. We might not notice the defects of plurality rule because, as it happens, plurality rule tends to strategically deter more than two serious candidates from the field. If there are five candidates, two of those will be seen as most likely to win the election, and many voters will cast their votes so as to decide between the top two rather than waste their vote on expressing a preference for one of the likely losers. Candidates interested in winning the election, knowing this tendency among voters, tend not to enter the race unless they are likely to be contenders. These are tendencies, not certainties, and I only mention them to explain why we don't see too many plurality elections with more than a few serious candidates, and that this may blur the distinction between majority rule and plurality rule in our minds.

Table 1.1. *Preference profile of three factions over three alternatives*

	1–40	*2–35*	*3–25*
1st	A	C	B
2nd	B	B	C
3rd	C	A	A

There can be a problem with simple plurality rule, however. Suppose that there are three candidates A, B, and C in an election, and 100 voters. For simplicity, everyone has strong preferences (denoted by $>$, meaning that voters are not indifferent over any alternatives). Faction *1* is made up of 40 people, and ranks the candidates $A > B > C$. Faction *2* is made up of 35 people and ranks the candidates $C > B > A$. Faction *3* makes up 25 people and ranks the candidates $B > C > A$. It will help to display the preference rankings. With plurality rule, everyone casts a vote for their first-ranked alternative. With the profile of voters' preferences in Table 1.1, A would win by plurality rule, even though 60 percent of the voters are against A. If election were by plurality rule, Factions *2* and *3* might anticipate this outcome and unite their forces on candidate C, who then would win, showing again the tendency to two candidates under plurality rule. The tendency is imperfect, or the election might be among alternatives that don't respond strategically, and in such circumstances it seems undesirable that A would win the election, as Margaret Thatcher did in these circumstances.

Borda wrote on the theory of elections in 1784 (see Black 1958; McLean and Urken 1995). Borda noticed this defect with plurality rule, and proposed his method of marks, which we shall call the Borda count, to remedy the defect. Borda thought we should count whether alternatives are ranked first, second, third, and so forth. He proposed that if there were, say, three alternatives, then we would assign two points to each voter's first-ranked preference, one point to her second-ranked prefer-ence, and zero points to her third-ranked preference. For the profile in Table 1.1, Alternative A gets $2 \times 40 + 0 \times 35 + 0 \times 25 = 80$ points. Al-ternative B gets $1 \times 40 + 1 \times 35 + 2 \times 25 = 125$ points, and is the Borda winner. Alternative C gets $0 \times 40 + 2 \times 35 + 1 \times 25 = 95$ points. The full Borda ranking is $B > C > A$ (125 for $B > 95$ for $C > 80$ for A). In a *pairwise-comparison matrix*, as in Table 1.2, we display the alternatives by row and by column, and the cell entry is the number of votes the row entry gets against the column entry. Alternatives don't get votes against themselves, so those cells are empty. Borda's method counts the number

Table 1.2. *Pairwise-comparison matrix for profile in Table 1.1*

	A	*B*	*C*		*Borda*
A		40	40	=	80
B	*60*		65	=	125
C	*60*	35		=	95

Table 1.3. *Another voter profile*

	1–51	*2–35*	*3–14*
1st	A	C	B
2nd	B	B	C
3rd	C	A	A

of times that an alternative beats all other alternatives, and the Borda score is also the row sum of the entries in the matrix.

Condorcet, another French thinker, wrote on the theory of elections in 1785 (see also McLean and Hewitt 1994; McLean 1995). Condorcet proposed as a criterion that the alternative that beats all other alternatives in pairwise comparison should be the winner. In our example, examining the italicized cells in the matrix, $B > A$, $B > C$, and $C > A$, or $B > C > A$. In this example (and in most practical circumstances) the Condorcet winner and the Borda winner coincide. They need not, however. Condorcet objected to the Borda method on the ground that it is possible for it to violate a condition that later came to be called the independence of irrelevant alternatives. Assume the profile in Table 1.3. By the Condorcet method, the social ranking is $A > B > C$, the same as the ranking of the faction with the slender majority of 51. Observe, however, that A is the last choice of 49 voters. The Borda method takes that into account and reports a social ranking of $B > A > C$. The dispute is this: Condorcet insists that in pairwise comparison A beats every other alternative, Borda insists that B gets more votes over every other alternative than does any other alternative. The Borda method violates the independence condition because in deciding the social ranking between two alternatives X and Y it takes into account individual rankings of alternatives other than X and Y, such as between X and Z and between Y and Z. To comply with the independence condition, for example for faction *2*, we can count that an individual ranks $C > B$, that she ranks $B > A$, that she ranks $C > A$, but not that she ranks $C > B > A$.

Table 1.4. *Strong preference
rankings over three alternatives*

1. A > B > C	4. C > B > A
2. A > C > B	5. B > C > A
3. C > A > B	6. B > A > C

Table 1.5. *Condorcet paradox of voting*

	Huebert	**Deuteronomy**	**Louis**
1st	A	B	C
2nd	B	C	A
3rd	C	A	B

There is also a problem with the Condorcet method, however, known as Condorcet's paradox of voting. Suppose there are three (or more) alternatives and two (or more) voters. Given three alternatives, there are six possible strong preference rankings, shown in Table 1.4. Given three voters, one each with cyclical rankings 1, 3, and 5 (or with 2, 4, and 6), the result of voting by the Condorcet method over three alternatives is inconsistent, that is, A beats B, B beats C, and C beats A. Suppose that the Duckburg Troop of the Junior Woodchucks have misplaced their Guidebook (which has a section on democratic decision making), and are deciding on how to spend their treasury over three alternatives, as in Table 1.5. Huebert and Louis favor A over B, Huebert and Deuteronomy favor B over C, and Deuteronomy and Louis favor C over A. The collective choice cycles over $A > B > C > A$. Arrow's possibility theorem can be understood as a generalization of Condorcet's paradox, applying not just to simple voting but to any social welfare function that aggregates individual orderings over alternative social states. The Arrow theorem requires that the social ranking be transitive, not intransitive as is the cycle. The Borda method would count the cyclical profile in this paradox example as a tie, $A \sim B \sim C$ ($\sim$ denotes indifference), and thus would not report an intransitive social ranking, but the Arrow theorem also requires that a voting rule not violate the independence of irrelevant alternatives condition, thus disqualifying rules such as the Borda count. Historically, Arrow's theorem is the consequence of noncomparabilist dogma in the discipline of economics, that it is meaningless to compare one person's welfare to another's, that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible.

Cycling is one problem with Condorcet voting. A second, and related problem, could be labeled *path dependence*. What if there were first a vote between *A* and *B*, which *A* wins, and second a vote between *A* and *C*, which *C* wins? It seems that we have voted over all three alternatives and that we have a winner, *C*. We neglected, however, to vote between *C* and *B*, which *B* would win, and which would have disclosed the cycle to us. Unless we take pairwise votes over all alternatives we might not notice the cycle, and normally we don't take all pairwise votes. To make things worse, what if Louis controlled the agenda, and arranged for that order of voting, *A* against *B*, and then the winner against *C*? Then Louis would have manipulatively brought it about that his first-ranked alternative, *C*, won, *arbitrarily*, and voters Huebert and Deuteronomy might even not have noticed.

A third problem is *strategic voting*. Suppose again that we have a cycle as above, and an agenda as above, *A* against *B* and then the winner against *C*. Then Huebert would have an incentive to vote strategically in the first round: rather than sincerely voting for *A* over *B*, Huebert strategically votes for *B* over *A*. *B* wins the contest in the first round, and beats *C* in the second round. By voting strategically, Huebert has avoided the victory of his third-ranked alternative *C* and brought about the victory of his second-ranked alternative *B*. *Inaccuracy* is a fourth problem. I showed already that the Borda and Condorcet procedures can select different social outcomes from the same profile of individuals' preferences. If apparently fair voting rules each select a different public good from the same voter profile, then arguably the public good is arbitrary. Inaccuracy, agenda control, and strategic voting also raise the possibility that a social outcome might tell us nothing about the sincere individual preferences underlying the outcome. Based on these and further considerations, Riker's hypothesis is that democratic politics is in pervasive political disequilibrium.

These are the basics. For those new to these topics, be assured that they will be presented more slowly and in greater detail as we proceed.

A sampling of the literature

Those unfamiliar with the particular intellectual subcultures may doubt my claim that there is a trend to democratic irrationalism in academic opinion. To establish my claim, I offer what I shall refer to in the remainder of the volume as a hall of quotations, an unconventional but I hope useful method of exposition. The people we shall hear from are in economics, sociology, history, legal theory, political science, and philosophy; they are anarchists, socialists, liberals, or libertarians; some are my teachers,

colleagues, or friends. We begin with an essay introducing a recent survey of the state of the political science discipline:

- The fall of the Weimar Republic and, more broadly, the collapse of many other constitutional democracies with the rise of fascism and bolshevism in the interwar period alerted the [political science] discipline to the terrible consequences of unstable democracies. Later, Arrow's impossibility theorem, a key instance of incisive analytical work on the core problems of liberal regimes, set forth the theoretical challenge in stark terms. Instability is an immanent feature of liberal democracy. Under broad conditions, majority rule leads to the cycling of coalitions and policy; only nondemocratic practices can alleviate this deep tendency, convoking a tradeoff between stability and democracy. (Katznelson and Milner 2002, 17–18)
- At its most extreme, Arrovian public choice predicts that literally anything can happen when votes are taken. At its most cynical, it reveals that, through agenda manipulation and strategic voting, majoritarian processes can be transformed into the equivalent of a dictatorship. In a more agnostic mode, it merely suggests that the outcomes of collective decisions are probably meaningless because it is impossible to be certain that they are not simply an artifact of the decision process that has been used. (Mashaw 1989, 126–127)
- interpersonal comparison of utility has no meaning . . . If we exclude the possibility of interpersonal comparisons of utility, then the only methods of passing from individual tastes to social preferences which will be satisfactory and which will be defined for a wide range of sets of individual orderings are either imposed or dictatorial. (Arrow 1963/1951, 8, 59)
- This clearly negative result casts doubt on all assertions that there is a "general will," a "social contract," a "social good," a "will of the people," a "people's government," a "people's voice," a "social benefit," and so on and so forth. (Feldman 1980, 191)
- Aristotle must be turning over in his grave. The theory of democracy can never be the same . . . what Kenneth Arrow proved once and for all is that there cannot possibly be found . . . an ideal voting scheme. The search of the great minds of recorded history for the perfect democracy, it turns out, is the search for a chimera, for a logical self-contradiction. (Samuelson 1977, 935, 938)

- How can we define and give expression to the collective wishes of a community? Arrow's argument shows that our intuitive criteria for democratic decision cannot in fact be satisfied . . . Put crudely, what Arrow has done is to show that strict democracy is impossible. (Runciman 1963, 133.)
- Almost anything we say and/or anyone has ever said about what society wants or should get is threatened with internal inconsistency. It is as though people have been talking for years about a thing that cannot, in *principle*, exist . . . The central result is broad, sweeping, and negative. Paul Samuelson rates it as one of the significant intellectual achievements of this century . . . It certainly weighed heavily in the decision to award K.J. Arrow the Nobel prize in economics . . . the cycle is *the* case and *not* the exception . . . the phenomenon is pervasive . . . If the concepts, which help us speak about how we feel whole societies, polities, and even worlds should behave, do not work at all for the simple case of a society with a handful of people with just a few alternatives, then perhaps we apply them at the global level only because we really do not understand them . . . the concept of social preference itself must go. (Plott 1976, 512, 514, 517, 525)
- It is not stating the case too strongly to say that Arrow's theorem and the research that it inspired wholly undermine the general applicability or meaning of concepts such as the "public interest" and "community goals." (Ordeshook 1986, 65)
- what Arrow showed, with as much rigour as any human scientist could conceivably demand, was that the programme of an educated citizenry deciding social values . . . did not make sense. (Tuck 1993, 79)
- there is no universally workable way for aggregating individual interests, preferences, or values into collective decisions. A positive implication of this finding is that no government of a complex society is likely to be coherently democratic . . . A normative implication of this lesson is that political theory cannot be grounded exclusively in democratic procedural values . . . This is not to say that the democratic, majoritarian urge is wrong . . . But it is nevertheless conceptually incoherent. (Hardin 1993, 169–170)
- In fact it turns out that majority rule is fatally flawed by an internal inconsistency which ought to disqualify it from consideration in any political community whatsoever . . . the inconsistency of the voter's paradox infects virtually every method of

social choice which can lay a reasonable claim to being "demo-cratic." . . . There would appear to be no alternative but to em-brace the doctrine of anarchism and categorically deny *any* claim to legitimate authority by one man over another. (Wolff 1970, 59, 63, 72)

- Arrow's contribution provides incontrovertible support for market process and encouragement for those who seek to con-strain the range of collective choice to the limited functions of the minimal state. (Rowley 1993, xiii)

- One general approach to [the puzzle of why the majority will should be constitutionally constrained] is to deny that it is at all puzzling . . . by denying that there exists any meaningful sense in which *any* process could even hope to "reflect" any such thing as the will of the majority, given the well-known the-orem for which Kenneth Arrow received his Nobel Prize in Economics . . . At the least . . . the analysis puts the burden of persuasion on those who assert that legislatures (or executives) deserve judicial deference as good aggregators of individual preference. (Tribe 1988, 12)

- Judicial review is often defended as the only way to escape the potential tyranny of the majority, but it simultaneously creates the potential for the tyranny of the judges. The general func-tion of constitutional theory has been to specify how judicial review can exist without becoming judicial tyranny. The Arrow theorem metaphor suggests that constitutional theory must fail in that task. (Tushnet 1988, 16–17)

- The idea that there is a "social decision" that can satisfy ev-eryone has been annihilated by Kenneth Arrow, who in his "impossibility theorem" has demonstrated that no social deci-sion can amalgamate the diverse preferences of a group in the way a single individual can amalgamate his own. Thus, theo-retical economics, in its denial of a communal welfare func-tion . . . undermines the application of rationality to public de-cisions . . . William H. Riker has . . . shown that . . . amendments might be adopted which are not favored by a majority – without this fact ever being known! (Bell 1974, 365, 307–308)

- William Riker is one of the most influential political scientists at present writing on the theory and practice of democracy. (Weale 1984, 369)

- Riker's later theory of democracy can be viewed as a system-atic attempt to work out the implications for the theory of

democracy of Arrow's general impossibility theorem within the theory of social choice. (Weale 1995, 377)

- accurate preference aggregation through politics is unlikely to be accomplished in the light of the conundrums in developing a social welfare function (Riker 1982; Arrow 1963/1951). Public choice theory has shown that cycling problems, strategic and manipulative behavior, sheer chance and other factors make majoritarianism highly unlikely to provide an accurate aggregation of preferences. (Sunstein 1988, 335)

- In the light of social choice theory, as argued particularly by Riker (1982), the democratic process would not converge to a unique welfare maximum even if one existed. The reasons are those offered by Arrow (1993/1951): There is no procedure for aggregating preferences that would guarantee a unique outcome. Hence, one cannot read voting results as identifying any unique social preference. (Przeworski 1991, 17)

- Particularly great attention has been paid to equilibria in the subfield of rational or public choice. One depressing conclusion has arisen from this work: In politics, unlike in economics or the natural sciences, virtually no naturally occurring equilibria exist. This has distressed a number of workers in the field, including its great guru, the late William Riker. For this finding means by implication that, in politics, almost anything (theoretically) can happen at almost any time, as equilibria are disrupted with virtually no advance warning. Two examples of this process, of fundamental importance to the course of world history in the twentieth century, can be cited here: the post-1928 Nazi surge among major parts of the German electorate – an essential condition for the elite decisions that brought Hitler to power in 1933 – and the abrupt and wholly unpredicted collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and 1992. (Burnham 1999, 2250)

- The most influential social choice theorist after Arrow is William Riker, who is also founder of the Rochester School of rational choice theory, which now dominates the pages of the American political science discipline's leading journals. Riker radicalized social choice theory to attack any notion of authentic democracy, particularly what he called "populism." . . . Not all social choice theory has this radically anti-democratic political cast, but within the discipline of political science the most influential strand is indeed that associated with Riker and his followers. (Dryzek 2000, 35–36)

- the rhetorical convention of discussing "the majority" makes no sense. When there exists a modest diversity of preference, which is, after all, the bare necessity for political controversy, then cycles are ubiquitous – there are "too many majorities." The actual social state chosen by the legislature is determined, not by some process that yields an alternative presumably better than all the rest, but by the order in which the alternatives arise for a vote. The absence of an equilibrium implies that the person in control of the agenda (e.g., a committee leader) can bias legislative choice in favor of his or her most preferred alternative. Thus, there is a fundamental arbitrariness to social choice under majority rule . . . Similarly, strategic voting, typically secret, is always possible . . . Although strategic voting occurs often, it is hard to discover . . . All of this shows that the notion of a "will of the people" has no meaning . . . In modern political science . . . electoral majorities are seen as evanescent, and the legislator himself as a placeholder opportunistically building up an ad hoc majority for the next election . . . Knowing as we do that decisions are often, even typically manipulated, but being unsure just when manipulation occurs, we are forced to suspect that every outcome is manipulated . . . Our examples show that this problem actually arises in practice. (Riker and Weingast 1988, 393–396, 399)
- Much of the discussion of public policy has assumed that political solutions can improve on market failures. The model we offer shows that this assumption is not justified . . . political institutions . . . often lack equilibrium outcomes . . . political choices typically entail preference cycles. For our purposes, the lack of equilibrium implies that there is no basis for unambiguously claiming that a political solution will improve or fail to improve upon the market failure it sought to correct. (Shepsle and Weingast 1984, 417, 421)
- *There is, in social life, a tradeoff between social rationality and the concentration of power.* Social organizations that concentrate power provide for the prospect of social coherence – the dictator knows her own mind and can act rationally in pursuit of whatever it is she prefers . . . Though [social organizations in which power is dispersed] may appear fairer and more democratic to the person in the street, they may also be more likely to be tongue-tied or inconsistent in ordering the alternatives under consideration . . . Short of actually *eliminating* one of the fairness conditions – for example, by permitting dictators – the

Arrow result does not evaporate . . . It is nearly impossible to arrange for the making of fair and coherent group choices. (Shepsle and Bonchek 1997, 67–69,166)

- The various paradoxes of collective decision making seriously challenge the presumption that legislative changes generally represent welfare improvements, even in the *de gustibus* sense of reflecting changes in public taste. Enactments that instead reflect mere cycling, or changes in the agenda setter or in political tactics, may better be viewed as random and purposeless from the social welfare perspective. (Shaviro 2000, 68)

- Arrow's theorem casts a very long, dark shadow over democratic politics . . . All voting systems have some normative blemish and all voting systems can be manipulated. Social choices in democracy depend on the particular type of majoritarian voting procedure used by a group, on whether voting is sincere or strategic and on the order in which alternatives are considered . . . Voting cycles, according to social choice theory, are endemic to democracy. Social choice theory tells us that for most policy issues, there is some coalition of actors who jointly prefer some other outcome. Whenever they have the power to get this outcome, the social choice may simply reflect their power. Stability in politics may well be an arbitrary feature of an institutional arrangement, with losers attempting to dislodge winners of their temporary authority . . . Social choice research shows that policy agreements in a democracy may simply be the product of agenda manipulation . . . It seems that we cannot validly infer anything about the preferences of the society based on the laws produced by a legislature. Nor can we say anything about the preferences of the society when a policy is not produced. This has certainly raised fears among many about the legitimacy of laws in a democracy. (Cain 2001, 111–112)

Weale and Dryzek are each commenting on the irrationalist trend rather than endorsing it. Riker and Weingast are brisk and conclusive about the supposed incoherence of democracy, Hardin is mournful and nuanced. Notice that people seize on the disequilibrium results in order to promote their more favored and demote their less favored institutions. Tribe uses the results to elevate the judicial over the other branches of government; Tushnet observes that the judiciary is just as tainted. Rowley, and Shepsle and Weingast, upgrade the market by downgrading the government; Wolff would abolish government altogether. Arrow

(1997) has recently gone on record that his theorem does not show that democracy is impossible, since it applies to all aggregations of individuals' preferences, whether by one branch of government or another, and, I would make clear, whether by government or market. The irrationalist doctrines I criticize are *not* Arrow's, they are based on *interpretations* by others of Arrow's theorem.

Many influential people suggest that democracy is impossible. The main purpose of this book is to argue against that view.

Plan of the volume

I hope that I have established both that there is an irrationalist trend, and that there is a long dark shadow cast over democratic politics. The proper interpretation of Arrow's theorem and related social-choice results is a serious endeavor that deserves lengthy and detailed scrutiny. It will take a good deal of spit to displace that ocean of theory. I will argue that the irrationalist interpretations of social choice theory are based on unrealistic assumptions, or illustrate logical possibilities rather than empirical probabilities, or emphasize remediable problems, or are outright mistaken.

This volume proceeds in three stages. First, the theory of democratic irrationalism is presented and criticized. Second, the empirical examples used by irrationalists to illustrate and popularize the theory are presented and criticized one after another. Third, briefly, the theory is located in the larger intellectual and political context. Chapter 1 surveys the practical advance of democracy, introduces the problems, and establishes that there is a trend to democratic irrationalism in the academy. Chapter 2 argues that the irrationalist trend has wide influence in political science, introduces Riker's distinction between liberalism and populism, and attacks as self-contradictory (among other problems) what I call Riker's basic argument pattern. Riker repeatedly deploys the basic argument pattern in order to show that preferences are unknowable and hence that democracy is arbitrary and meaningless. Chapter 3 presents Riker's argument that democracy is arbitrary because it is logically possible for different decision rules to yield different outcomes. I counter that this is logically possible but empirically improbable. Riker also objects that the axiomatic approach does not justify any one unique voting rule. I respond that the axiomatic approach considerably narrows the range of reasonable voting rules, and that choice from among the reasonable voting rules is not arbitrary.

Chapters 4 through 6 closely interrogate and denaturalize key assumptions of Arrow's theorem. Chapter 4 introduces Arrow's theorem, the

basis of the claim that democracy is meaningless. The theorem arises as the consequence of the appearance of the doctrine of noncomparable utility in economics. I show that the cycles that are alleged to make democracy meaningless are rare. Again the question is not one of logical possibility but rather one of empirical probability. In Chapter 5, I examine Arrow's condition of universal domain (U). Individual preference orders resemble one another, enough so as to avoid cycling and related problems most of the time, which is why we observe so few cycles in the real world. Models of constant-sum redistribution predict total cycling, but such models neglect behavioral constraints that produce approximately fair outcomes but for pathological exceptions. The few cycles that do occur should be trivial, and any which are not trivial can be eliminated by accurate and fair voting rules. In Chapter 6, I criticize the formal and practical arguments offered in justification of Arrow's condition of the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). Surprisingly, many people who support the skeptical interpretation of Arrow's theorem do so on the basis of a misunderstanding of the content of its independence condition. I show that violating the independence condition can be substantively rational, and argue that the theorem's conditions are methodological assumptions rather than claims with descriptive or normative force. I scrutinize several justifications of the condition, and conclude that none is sufficient to justify the repugnant conclusion of Arrow's theorem: that social choice is impossible except by dictatorship.

In Chapter 7, I examine the contention that strategic voting, logrolling, and agenda control permit the undetected manipulation of outcomes. These models of manipulation assume, however, the knowability of preferences, demonstrating again the self-contradictory nature of Riker's basic argument pattern. Further, we see that the possibility of countermanipulation frequently deters attempts at manipulation; and hence that such manipulation is *not* frequent, harmful, or irremediable. In Chapter 8, I take up the McKelvey and Schofield "chaos" theorems, interpreted by Riker to mean that there is complete disequilibrium in multidimensional issue spaces. The predictions of the chaos model fail in human subject experiments, are perhaps impossible to test in natural settings, and utterly lack realism. Realistic amendments to the model result in outcomes in the normatively attractive center of preferences. Moreover, the widespread parliamentary rule permitting a division of the question upon the motion of any one member practically disposes of any problem. These two chapters mostly summarize existing developments in the literature.

It is Riker's dramatic empirical illustrations of political disequilibrium, more than his theoretical arguments, that are responsible for the wide

Table 1.6. *Summary of empirical findings*

#, Cite	Subject	Mackie Finding
1 APSR 1958	Agricultural Appropriations	No cycle in sincere preferences (Riker recognizes strategic votes); best alternative won.
2 LAP APM	Agenda Experiment, Flying Club	Asymmetric institutions (in this case agenda control and information control) yield asymmetric outcomes.
3 LAP APM	Powell amendment	Riker and others allege cycle in 1956 vote; assume irrational voters. Votes, debates, and inferences in 1956 and 1957 show that school aid would have failed with or without Powell's desegregation amendment. No cycle; best alternative won. Adds to Krehbiel and Rivers 1990.
4 LAP	17th Amendment	Eleven errors of fact; assumes irrational voters. No cycles, not in 1902, not in 1911. 17th Amendment would have failed with or without a voting-rights rider. Passed in late 1911 due to changed composition of the Senate. Confirms conjecture of Green and Shapiro 1994.
5 LAP	Wilmot Proviso	Cycle alleged among Mexican war appropriations, antislavery amendment and status quo. Based on egregious misreading of *Congressional Globe*. No cycle, best alternative won.
6 LAP	Lincoln election	No cycle. Free soil was primary issue in 1860, and the further north the more antislavery: latitude was attitude. Riker 1982, 230, line 2 mistaken: many Lincoln voters ranked Douglas ahead of Bell. Complemented by Tabarrok and Lee (1999). (Douglas was best alternative, not selected due to antimajoritarian design of electoral college.)
7 LAP	Antebellum period	Eruptions of slavery issue not due to arbitrary manipulation of multidimensional issue space. Dimensions highly constrained (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Eruptions related to disruption of political balance following territorial acquisitions (Weingast 1998).
8 APSR 1984 APM	Morris at the Constitutional Convention	Alleged cycle arises from treating similar alternatives as identical. If alternatives properly individuated, then no cycle.
9 APM	Lincoln at Freeport	Mistaken details; "magic bullet" interpretation of Freeport debate now rejected by American historians. Douglas did face a dilemma, but it was one forced upon him by the changing preferences of the Northern and Southern populations, not by Lincoln's discourse.
10 APM	The Masters	Not examined. Based on fiction.
11 APM	Pliny	Shows that agenda control was defeated by strategic voting: best alternative won.

Table 1.6. (*cont.*)

#, Cite	Subject	Mackie Finding
12 APM	Vote trading	Not on point. Trade fairly represented opinion?
13 APM	Abstention	Idiosyncratic.
14 APM	Gerrymander	Undocumentable.
15 APM	Magnuson	Many details mistaken, does not fully understand the parliamentary situation. Magnuson's bill supported by vast majority; an explicit deal was made to pass Gravel's more radical amendment in the Senate, and to withdraw it in Conference, in order to gain Nixon's attention, and exactly that happened.
16 APM	Reed, Cannon	Not on point. Majorities enabled?
17 Blydenburgh	Internal revenue 1932	Flawed logic; inconsistently applied inferences of preference orders. No cycle, best alternative won.
18 Bjurulf and Niemi	Scandinavian parliaments: hospital	Half of voters absent; evidence of strategic voting; if only 2 out of 37 voters were strategic then equilibrium in sincere preferences, and best alternative won.
19 Bjurulf and Niemi	Scandinavian parliaments: telephone and telegraph	Claim that strategic voting led to rejection of best alternative. Based, however, on unwarranted assumption that some voters were irrational.
20 Bjurulf and Niemi	Scandinavian parliaments: rifle club	Agenda control countered by creative response such that best alternative prevailed in long run.
21 Neufeld, *et al.*	Muscle Shoals	Cycle only apparent and due to bungled strategic voting that authors recognize; sincere preferences in equilibrium; best alternative won.
22 Lagerspetz 1997	Finnish electoral college, 1931	Cycle, and won by non-Borda winner, but perhaps for extraparliamentary reasons. Institution poorly designed to deliver popular outcome.
23 Lagerspetz 1997	Finnish electoral college, 1937	Cycle among same four candidates as 1931, but won by Borda winner. Poorly designed institution.
24 Lagerspetz 1993	Finnish electoral college, 1956	Non-Borda, non-Condorcet winner selected by electoral college. Poorly designed institution.
25 Gross	Iowa Corporate Farming	Great evidence, but given that alternatives are on one dimension, cycle unlikely in sincere preferences.
26 Kurrild-Klitgaard	Danish prime minister	Cycle among three evenly tied prime ministerial candidates in fleeting poll data. Borda-winner succeeds in actual election.

Sources: APM = *The Art of Political Manipulation* (Riker 1986), APSR (1958) = Riker (1958), APSR (1984) = Riker (1984), Bjurulf and Niemi (1978), Blydenburgh (1971), Gross (1979), Kurrild-Klitgaard (2001a), Lagerspetz (1993, 1997), LAP = *Liberalism against Populism* (Riker 1982), Neufeld, *et al.* (1994).

popularity of his irrationalist views. That the US Civil War came about because of a cycle, for example, is an unforgettable lesson. If the illustrations fail, then so does the doctrine of democratic irrationalism. Chapters 9 through 15 tackle the stories of political disequilibrium. Sometimes the going is tough, but my exposition and commentary is never more difficult than the original material, and is often easier. My examinations are thorough, which serves several purposes. First, I show that almost all published and developed cycle claims are mistaken, and my claim would lack credibility in the absence of thorough argument; remember that I am challenging the most cherished scriptures of a dominant congregation of scholars. Second, by example, I show how it is possible to marry an understanding of historical background creatively to methods of roll-call analysis so as to generate new insights in political history. Third, several of the interpretations I develop of historical events are novel and interesting in their own right, for example, why Douglas lost to Lincoln in 1860.

Chapter 9 is about the Powell amendment, a desegregation rider to a school construction aid bill in 1956. Riker believes that a cycle was contrived based on his inference that some voters voted strategically. A manipulation would not have been possible if all voters had voted strategically, so Riker's finding of a cycle depends on the assumption that some actors were irrational. Riker's inference of preference rankings is mistaken, however. It is quite clear that the events Riker strives to explain are a consequence of incomplete knowledge of preference rankings among the actors. Chapter 10 is about Senate deliberations on the 17th Amendment to the US Constitution, which provided for direct election of US senators. Again Riker alleges a cycle, and again he unwittingly assumes irrational actors. Riker's interpretation of the 17th Amendment collapses due to gross errors of fact.

Chapter 11 begins the account of Riker's major case study on the US Civil War. The Wilmot Proviso in 1846 sought to prohibit slavery in the vast western territories about to be acquired by the United States. Riker's assertion of a cycle here depends on an incontrovertibly erroneous reading of the Congressional record. Chapter 12 concerns Riker's allegation that the election of Lincoln in 1860 and the momentous events that followed were the consequence of cyclical preferences among the voters. Riker's apparently complex argument actually depends entirely on a single claim that Bell, the candidate of the Upper South, and not Douglas, the candidate of the Lower North, was second-ranked by Lincoln voters. Riker does not warrant the claim, and the claim is contrary to the consensus of historians. Douglas was the candidate favored by the median voter in the 1860 election, and in Chapter 13 I offer a hypothesis as to

why the flawed presidential election system failed to select Douglas. I go on to criticize Riker's account of the slavery issue from 1800 to 1860, which he intends to illustrate the possibility of contrived disequilibrium by means of introduction of new issues and dimensions. Riker contends that changes at the collective level on the slavery issue were due to arbitrary manipulation of multidimensional issue space by superior political actors. I defend the conventional hypothesis that collective changes were a consequence of changes in individuals' views on the issue.

Riker's remaining cycling claims are debunked in Chapter 14. He claims that there was a cycle in the US constitutional convention on the question of the selection of the executive: arbitrary instability formed the US Constitution. I argue that another interpretation of the record is more plausible, and with that interpretation of preference rankings there is no cycle. In 1958 Riker claimed to find a cycle in US House consideration of an agricultural appropriations measure. Riker's inference of a cycle incorrectly aggregates both sincere preferences and sophisticated votes. The finding of a cycle is based on a conceptual error, because with the aggregation of sincere preferences only there is no cycle. The remaining published and developed claims of cycles from the political science literature are presented in Chapter 15. Blydenburgh claimed to find a cycle in deliberations over the Revenue Act of 1932. His analysis fails because it is confused about which alternatives are pitted against which; after the confusions are sorted out, there is no cycle. Bjurulf and Niemi investigated instability and manipulation in Scandinavian parliaments, but I show that their several inferences are defective. Neufeld *et al.* uncover an apparent cycle in US Senate deliberations over Muscle Shoals in the 1920s, but, as they recognize, sincere preferences were in equilibrium and the alternative favored by the majority prevailed. Lagerspetz produces the best evidence and argument on behalf of a cycle claim, but his cases arise in a poorly designed institution that encourages instability and unpopular choice. A few minor cycle claims are examined. In sum, theoretical considerations show that cycles, disequilibrium, and harmful manipulation are of little practical importance, and almost every published and developed example of cycling and manipulation is called into question.

Chapter 16 returns to the possibility of manipulation by the introduction of new issues and dimensions. Why don't we see the introduction of thousands of issues and dimensions as a manipulative political tactic? The answer is that such introduction is constrained by the consent of the audience to the claim of relevance by the speaker. Furthermore, deliberation in multidimensional issue space can identify a central outcome such as the intersection of the medians from each dimension. It is not

discussion, only voting, and only voting under the unrealistic assumptions of the McKelvey model, that leads to chaos. Disequilibrium is not a problem of much practical importance, but I note ways in which deliberation could further tame disequilibrium should it be a problem. Then I present two anecdotes from Riker's *The Art of Political Manipulation* (1986) that he intends to illustrate the theme of destabilizing introduction of new dimensions. One is the debate between Lincoln and Douglas at Freeport. The other is a controversy over the shipment of nerve gas involving Senator Warren Magnuson. I show that Riker commits errors of fact that undermine his cases, and argue that it is not arbitrary manipulations of multidimensional issue space but simply the distribution of preferences in the respective populations that explains these cases.

In the end, Riker rejects "populism" (democracy) and accepts "liberalism" – defined as the mere possibility of rejecting officials in an election, the theme of Chapter 17. One problem, I argue, is that the objections Riker lodges against populism, if valid, would apply to his liberalism as well. Further, Riker's liberalism is not the unique alternative to "populism" (democracy). If democracy were arbitrary and meaningless then it could be argued that superior individuals should impose the objective good upon the population. I trace Riker's ideas on democracy to Pareto, who affirmed such a policy of liberal autocracy. The doctrine of democratic irrationalism can have dangerous consequences. Chapter 18 argues that theoretical instabilities equally afflict private organizations and the market. The Arrow theorem applies to the market, there are market analogues to the chaos theorems, and to the Gibbard–Satterthwaite manipulation findings. Thus, there is no basis to the argument that democracy should be minimized and the market maximized because of the findings of positive political theory. The chapter also answers the claims made in the hall of quotations.