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978-0-521-58524-8 - Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference

Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky

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Do voters in large-scale democracies reliably vote for the electoral outcomes they want? Is voting essentially like choosing a job or selecting an asset portfolio? Or is it more like cheering at a football game? And if the latter, what are the implications for the functioning of democracy when policies are determined by who cheers the loudest? This book is concerned with answering these questions. In the most narrow construction, the book offers a critique of the interest-based theory of voting behavior characteristic of modern “public choice” theory – and does so using the decision-theoretic apparatus of standard economics. The central claim is that fully rational voters will not reliably vote for the political outcomes they prefer. The broader objective of the book is to present an “expressive” theory of electoral politics as an alternative to the “interest-based” account. The authors argue that this expressive theory is both more coherent and more consistent with what is observed than is the interest-based orthodoxy. In particular, they believe that this theory can explain, for example, the propensity of democratic regimes to make war, the predominance of moral questions (the sexual conduct of candidates or the abortion issue) on the political agenda, and the distributive activities of democratic governments – facts that represent something of a challenge to the interest-based account.

The significance of this account should be clear. If, as economists frequently assert, proper diagnosis of the disease is a crucial prerequisite to treatment, then the design of appropriate democratic institutions depends critically on a coherent analysis of the way the electoral process works and the perversities to which it is prone. The claim is that the interest-based account incorrectly diagnoses the disease. Accordingly, this book ends with an account of the institutional protections that go with expressive voting.

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The pure theory of electoral preference

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*To James Buchanan,
colleague and friend*

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Preface

The writing of this book has spanned a decade, and several continents. It was begun during the fall of 1982 at the Center for Study of Public Choice in Blacksburg, Virginia, where Lomasky was spending the year as a visiting fellow. It was finally completed during a fortnight's visit at the Australian National University in August 1991. The world may not have "eagerly awaited" the emergence of the book, but the authors certainly did.

The period of its gestation is partly a testament to the difficulties of trans-Pacific collaboration – particularly when one of the authors is a devotee of nineteenth-century technology. Collaboration for us, at least on this project, has required face-to-face contact: the opportunity to talk things through and the discipline of having one's door battered down by an irate colleague when drafts are overdue. We have become converts to the view that live theater has no satisfactory substitutes.

The delay is also partly attributable to difficulties in collaboration across disciplines. There has been no great difficulty in coming to a mind on the central argument of the book or on the more detailed aspects developed in the various chapters. Our problems have not been ones of communication with each other, but rather of communication with our various imagined audiences. Each of us has wanted in the writing, naturally enough, to address our respective disciplinary peer groups. And here, such matters as style, technical complexity, the nuance of argument, even the meanings of terms, have become serious problems. A line of reasoning that is utterly familiar to philosophers will be novel, even controversial, to economists, and vice versa. To be inclusive, as we have aimed to be, runs the risk of being tedious to everyone (though, we hope, tedious at different points). But at least no reader should be able to lodge a complaint over the technical complexity of the argument. Those points at which a little technique appears (some of Chapter 4 and a few parts of Chapters 5 and 8) can be skipped without loss of the central thread. This book should, we reckon, be accessible to economists, political scientists, political philosophers, and even that much-mentioned but uncommon breed, "intelligent laypersons." And with luck it should be intriguing to them as well.

We do concede, however, that this book is written with a particular audience primarily in mind – namely, those who believe that voters vote their interests. This group is wider than the set of "public choice" scholars, although public choice scholars *do* make the notion of self-interested voting an axiom for their analysis. Also included are those who adopt more casually the presumption that politics is essentially a battle of rival interests and those who take it for granted that elections reliably aggregate expressions of private interest into some version of the "public interest." In our experience, the total group is broad indeed, and we have tried to make our argument available to the whole of it. Even so, mainstream public choice scholarship is a central target. We aim to persuade scholars in that tradition – as we

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ourselves have become persuaded – that one central component of their models is seriously defective. That central component is the claim that electoral choice and market choice are essentially alike. Our claim, by contrast, is that electoral choice and market choice are radically different. This difference, we argue, has profound implications for our understanding of electoral politics – of its problems and possibilities. But arguing all this represents the substance of the book. The intellectual context of that argument we attempt to set out in Chapter 1. The argument itself occupies Chapters 2 through 11.

Because the argument is critical of public choice orthodoxy, it may seem a trifle strange to be dedicating this book to James Buchanan, a man who more than any other is identified with the public choice movement. After all, the “integration of the theories of economic and political decision-making” for which Buchanan won his Nobel Prize is, on our argument, more problematic and decidedly more complicated than public choice theorists allow. Nevertheless, the approach we follow is very much in the public choice tradition, and although we believe the argument is entirely general and will be of interest to the whole range of political theorists and political philosophers, the particular influence of Buchanan’s work will be evident. We have both at different times collaborated with Buchanan – and for Brennan in particular the collaboration has been an academically and intellectually crucial one. We both count Jim as a friend and regard him with great affection and deep respect. Besides, the ideas here were foreshadowed by early Buchanan pieces; and in Buchanan’s most recent work, he has been inclined to distance himself from the use of the homo economicus model, except in restricted analytic settings. Indeed, earlier versions of the central argument here were originally developed in collaboration with Buchanan and most notably in Brennan and Buchanan (1984).

Although our debt to Buchanan is the most notable, it is not the only one. Parts of the book have been aired in various settings over the decade of its writing, and we have had useful comments from a wide array of persons. We want to make particular mention of John Head, Dennis Mueller, Philip Pettit, Jonathan Pincus, John Quiggin, Perry Shapiro, and Viktor Vanberg. Ken Shepsle at the eleventh hour read the entire manuscript and provided many useful suggestions.

It is apt that this book has had its origins and completion in two institutions that have been, in different ways, quite critical to its creation. We wish to place on record our debt to the Public Choice Center (now at George Mason University) and to the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, for stimulation and support – and to Betty Tillman and Eileen Berry, who at different times had the tedious job of typing the bits and pieces of the manuscript. We should also express our gratitude to the University of Minnesota, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green State University for financial support. And finally, we wish to express our thanks to Liberty Fund Inc., Indianapolis, which first brought us together and has nurtured us on occasion since.