

We Do Too Have Morals: On Rational Choice in the Classroom

Paul Edward Johnson, *University of Kansas and Yale School of Management*

Jurg Steiner has argued (*PS*, 1990) that it may be harmful for us to teach positive variants of “hard-line” rational choice theory in our political science classes. He claims that it alienates students and instructs them in the ways of bad citizenship. His conclusion makes the narrow point that “as teachers we should be much more aware of the political implications of this teaching. . .” (p. 49), but the essay, as indicated by the subtitle “A Research Agenda and a Moral Question,” addresses a much larger agenda. Steiner would have us condition research and teaching on the moral acceptability of prescriptions flowing from research findings. I argue that rational choice theory does have a valuable moral component and that it is reasonable to teach rational choice theory in the classroom.¹

Rational choice has made a substantial contribution to positive theory and empirical research in political science. This has been documented in this issue of *PS* by Dow and Munger, who observe that articles based on rational choice make up an increasingly significant portion of our professional research literature. Steiner’s objection focuses not on the positive value of the theory, but on the morality of rational choice theory and its use in the classroom. Given the positive value of the theory, I have grave misgivings about debating its morality. There should be a strong presumption against censoring otherwise reasonable ideas from the classroom simply because some people find them distasteful. In general and over the long run, I believe that the beneficial applications of research outweigh the disadvantageous ones. There are many examples to support this predisposition, perhaps the most famous being the attempt to censor Galileo’s teaching that the earth revolves around the sun. Censoring current theories from the classroom forestalls research and improvements that mitigate the ill effects of applications.

If we do not reject Steiner’s argument on these general grounds, we should move on to consider the morality of rational choice in the classroom. The remainder of this essay investigates some particular rational choice theories: social choice, candidate behavior, and collective action. The principal arguments are that (1) the theory has an internally consistent set of normative

Social choice theory offers a way of thinking about the desirability of various institutions which might govern a society composed of rational individuals.

concepts and tools for normative analysis and (2) that teaching the positive aspects of the theory is beneficial for students.

Social choice theory. Steiner writes as if questions of value are foreign to rational choice research, which is quite incorrect. Social choice theory offers a way of thinking about the desirability of various institutions which might govern a society composed of rational individuals (Arrow 1963; Riker 1982). This work has led to many deep insights into the ethical desirability of majority rule and other governmental decision processes. Institutions are investigated under the assumption that people are rational—they have preferences and act purposively to bring about outcomes that are desirable to them. I see nothing that is *prima facie* immoral about picturing people in this way or evaluating institutions in light of their ability to aggregate meaningfully the preferences of rational individuals. Perhaps the objectionable part is not the assumption of rationality, but rather the conclusion that flows from the theory.

Arrow demonstrated the friction between aggregate rationality and basic requirements of fairness and representativeness. This impossibility theorem, as it is known, has surprising (and troubling) implications.

It may be true that the “most sensitive students may be shocked and repulsed. . .,” as Steiner puts it (*PS*, p. 47), to learn about this theory, but that does not discourage me from teaching the theory. For students the main advantage is a better understanding of political institutions. Some people go through life believing that governmental decisions reflect abstracts such as “the public interest” or “the will of the people.” They do not understand that the procedures followed can have as much impact as preferences on decision outcomes. People who understand the basic ingredients of social choice are better prepared to participate in political decisions and understand the political manipulations of their opponents. They are less likely to be bullied or exploited by the people who design decision-making procedures.

Reelection-seeking politicians. The literature that seems most offensive to Steiner assumes that candidates have as their primary motivation the desire for election and reelection. Here Steiner is attacking rational choice theory where it has its greatest strengths as a positive theory. High rates of reelection to the House and Senate illustrate that politicians do seek reelection. The reelection motive informs classic rational choice theories (such as Downs 1957) but it also informs an immense amount of empirical (not-so-hard-line) research (such as Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1977; Shepsle 1978).

It is critical to note that the theory of the reelection-seeking politician does not attribute this goal to personal economic greed or any particular motivation. A cursory look at the literature might lead one to think otherwise, but candidates are not assumed to be motivated solely by avarice or economic greed, as Steiner

implies. Rational choice theory is based only on the assumption that people (candidates or voters) have preferences and behave accordingly. Candidates may simply wish to implement their vision of good policy. This point is made clear in the textbooks. For example, Enelow and Hinich (who Steiner would call hardliners) observe that the concept of self-interest is "easily misunderstood" and that it may be broadly construed to include motivation by philosophical beliefs, not simply personal economic gain (1984, p. 2).² Most rational choice researchers would agree with Fenno's trilogy of candidate goals: reelection, influence within the Congress, and good public policy (1973, p. 1). Reelection is a prerequisite to the achievement of the latter goals, and thus it is safe to assume that it is a primary goal. Nevertheless, there is plenty of rational choice research that investigates the possibility that candidates care about policy as well as winning reelection (Wittman 1983; Calvert 1985; Alesina 1988).

To illustrate the evils of election-seeking politicians, Steiner asks "How would politicians behave in an environment dominated by journalists and voters trained in hard-line rational choice theories. . ." (p. 48). He claims that candidates would be short-sighted, subservient to organized interests, and more emphatic about tangible projects. Note that much of Steiner's argument is borne out by reality. Politicians do seek election, and we often observe policy results that are undesirable. However, we might as well give credit where credit is due: this is a longstanding theme in the rational choice literature (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Mayhew 1974; Shepsle and Weingast 1984). Given this emphasis in the literature, I have a great deal of difficulty understanding why Steiner feels the normative aspects of politics are ignored in rational choice theory.

It is important to emphasize that research on candidate behavior is an ongoing enterprise and that there are differences of opinion among researchers. While many have pointed out the maladies that result from the reelection motive, a majority of researchers would agree that reelec-

tion-oriented members of Congress are better than the alternative. It gives me a bit of comfort that my representatives in Congress are concerned about being reelected. If they did not care about that, nothing would motivate them to do either what is right or what is popular. However, I am quick to admit that these *a priori* beliefs should not guide our final decisions about the desirability of the reelection motive and the value of teaching a theory based upon it.

Instead, the desirability of the reelection motive is open to careful examination from *within* the rational choice perspective. Research indicates, for example, that the competi-

Rational choice theory is based only on the assumption that people (candidates or voters) have preferences and behave accordingly.

tive tendencies in our electoral system of which Steiner is critical also have the effect of generating representation. Contrary to Steiner's assertion that reelection-oriented representatives ignore unorganized interests, Denzau and Munger show how unorganized interests are represented in Congress (1986). In their model, reelection-seeking congresspeople may take money from interest groups in return for taking issue positions favorable to the group. Groups have the option of pressuring for policies that are unfavorable to the unorganized voters. Candidates might consider taking support from them because they need campaign resources, but they are leery of taking money from groups that will demand positions that are unacceptable to the unorganized voters. Denzau and Munger show formally that interest groups will not generally pressure members of Congress from districts in which the unorganized voters are hostile to the group's cause. The members vote as the interested, but unorganized, home town voters want and, as a result, congressional deci-

sions take into account the voters who are not active participants in interest groups. In that sense, unorganized interests are represented in Congress via the reelection motive. Other articles have explored the normative desirability of electoral processes based on individual rationality (see, for example, Tullock 1984).

The logic of collective action. Steiner argues that teaching rational choice theory is undesirable because students will somehow make the leap from explanation to justification. This seems to be a criticism of teachers rather than an indictment of the theory. The literature deals with the positive and normative questions. It makes it clear enough that the depiction of the world *as it is* does not mean the world is *as it should be*. This is especially true in the case of the collective action problem (Olson 1971).

In my undergraduate classes on interest groups, we spend a great deal of time talking about collective action. The main point of the theory is that most people do not make sustained, long-term contributions to causes when the only benefits are collective—i.e., available to noncontributors. Groups that want to represent broad publics—environmentalists, the homeless, the poor, the unemployed—have a very difficult time recruiting donors. I do not teach students to be free riders. I teach them why so many people do free ride. The groups that form and survive find some other source of funds or offer a noncollective benefit to donors.

Once people understand the collective action problem, they can make a lot more sense out of their world. A future interest-group organizer, for example, learns that formation of a lasting membership-based interest group will be eased if the members are offered something selective in return for their donations. The theory reminds future policy makers that inaction by certain groups—such as the unemployed—does not mean that they are elated with their situation in life (on this question, see an excellent essay by Jack Walker, 1990). These students will know that the most vocal and well organized groups, the ones that represent political minorities, are not representative

of society at large. This logic, incidentally, also helps us as members to understand the operation of organizations like the APSA. Many people belong to the APSA because they want to receive selected publications or services. They might not care to pay for other association activities if they had a choice. That's why the general membership fee includes all journals and services.

People who understand the logic of collective action (either from the classroom or by the college of hard knocks) are personally better off than people who do not, since they are less likely to be exploited or to play the role of "sucker" in the Prisoner's Dilemma game. I suspect that most students understand the collective action problem well enough before the class begins, although I hope that studying it in class brings new insights. It may be that some students are made more likely to free-ride, as Steiner asserts. It remains to be seen whether this is a good thing for society—it all depends on whether or not we agree with the causes in which these students might have participated. If understanding the logic makes polluters less likely to act collectively in opposing strict emission standards, I guess I have performed a public service. We should remember, as Olson emphasized, that the logic of collective action is the force that destabilizes cartels and other sources of economic inefficiency.

To this point, I have argued that rational choice theory includes tools with which to address normative issues and that teaching the positive variants is beneficial. In conclusion, I wish to discuss the use of normative and positive theory in the college curriculum. If we are teaching from the Austen-Smith and Banks (1988) article that Steiner mentions, for example, we have already reached a very high level of sophistication. By the time graduate students are interested in an article like that, they should already have a basic understanding of the difference between normative and positive theory. Hence, in a graduate class covering that article, I would not feel compelled to spend a great deal of time talking about the general philosophical question of the desirability of competition in an elec-

toral system. The normative question is sufficiently rich that it merits several classes. Austen-Smith and Banks rightly ignore questions that are not germane to their specific questions. Hence, at the graduate level, we can comfortably teach the positive theory more or less separately from the normative theory.

In the undergraduate curriculum, we are unlikely to reach levels of sophistication comparable to the Austen-Smith and Banks article. Instead, we are much more likely to be working with a textbook or general survey, such as Enelow and Hinich, Mueller (1989) or Riker (1982). These books make the positive and normative issues clear enough. The

The fair question is whether a theory has within its reach the substance and method to investigate normative questions.

scholars who use rational choice as a methodology do not necessarily agree about normative questions, either on the issue of goals or the ability of various systems to achieve them. I point to the lively normative debate as evidence that there is indeed a substantial normative component.

In brief, Steiner's analysis overlooks the empirical and normative value of work that has already been done within the field known as rational choice theory. It is difficult to argue with his narrow conclusion that we should tell students that the way people act is not "necessarily how they *should* behave" (p. 49), but this seems exceptionally trite after such a broad-scale attack on the field. Steiner's depiction of the practitioners of rational choice as a clan devoid of moral or normative concerns is unfair; the assertion that it is harming students is worse. Every theory that describes anything less than an ideal world can be criticized because it may potentially justify a bad situation. The fair question is whether a theory has within its reach the substance and method to investi-

gate normative questions. In the case of rational choice theory, the answer is clearly yes.

Notes

1. I eschew the use of the label "hard-line." Calling a segment of political science "hard-line" unfairly diminishes its credibility by conjuring images of other undesirable "hard-liners" (communists, John Birchers, etc.).

2. I was amused recently to see Parker's article (1989) emphasizing the importance of personal greed in understanding candidate behavior and downplaying the reelection motive.

References

- Alesina, Alberto. 1988. "Credibility and Policy Convergence in a Two-Party System with Rational Voters." *American Economic Review* 78: 796-805.
- Arrow, Kenneth. 1963. *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Austen-Smith, David and Jeffrey Banks. 1988. "Elections, Coalitions, and Legislative Outcomes." *American Political Science Review* 82: 405-22.
- Buchanan, James M. and Gordon Tullock. 1962. *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Calvert, Randall. 1985. "Robustness of the Multidimensional Voting Model: Candidate Motivations, Uncertainty, and Convergence." *American Journal of Political Science* 39: 69-95.
- Denzau, Arthur T. and Michael C. Munger. 1986. "Legislators and Interest Groups: How Unorganized Interests Get Represented." *American Political Science Review* 80: 89-106.
- Dow, Jay and Michael C. Munger. 1990. "Political Science and Politics: We Publish It But We Don't Teach It." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 23 604-609.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1973. *Congressmen in Committees*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Fiorina, Morris. 1977. *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mayhew, David R. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mueller, Dennis C. 1989. *Public Choice II: A Revised Edition of Public Choice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olson, Mancur, Jr. 1971. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Parker, Glenn R. 1989. "Looking Beyond Reelection: Revising Assumptions about

- the Factors Motivating Congressional Behavior." *Public Choice* 63: 237-252.
- Riker, William H. 1982. *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- Shepsle, Kenneth A. 1978. *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle: Democratic Committee Assignments in the Modern House*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shepsle, Kenneth A. and Barry Weingast. 1984. "Political Solutions to Market Problems." *American Political Science Review* 78: 417-434.
- Steiner, Jurg. 1990. "Rational Choice Theories and Politics: A Research Agenda and a Moral Question." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 23: 46-50.
- Tullock, Gordon. 1984. "A (Partial) Rehabilitation of the Public Interest Theory." *Public Choice* 42: 89-99.
- Walker, Jack L. 1990. "Political Mobilization in America," in *Institutions in American Society: Essays in Market, Political, and Social Organizations*, ed. John E. Jackson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 163-188.

Wittman, Donald. 1983. "Candidate Motivation: A Synthesis of Alternatives." *American Political Science Review* 77: 142-57.

About the Author

Paul Edward Johnson, currently visiting at the Yale School of Management, is an assistant professor at the University of Kansas. His fields of interest include formal and positive theory, methodology, political parties and interest groups.

Editorial Statement

Matthew Holden, Jr.*

Introduction

It is my particular honor to have been appointed Editor of the *National Political Science Review* for Volumes IV-VI (1992-94). Lucius J. Barker, my colleague of many years, has been brilliantly successful as the founding Editor. It is sufficient challenge to maintain the high and independent intellectual standard that Barker has established. No major changes of policy or practice are contemplated. As before, the first requirement is careful scholarship, but no particular methodological or theoretical orthodoxy is to be enforced. *If it is political science, the NPSR is interested.* As there is a special history, however, some additional comments may be helpful. The *National Political Science Review* has been, and continues to be, particularly open to research about the political relations of African-descended groups, especially in the United States.

Note on the Intellectual Background

On the basis of published research, over the past one hundred years, it is fair to say that the discipline of political science, overall, has proceeded as if these political relations were *exotica*. They might be interesting possibly to Blacks or to occasional white scholars.¹ On the whole, the political relations of African Ameri-

cans were treated *as if* they presented no analytically interesting questions. They surely were not deemed significant to *central issues of political science*. That is why Ralph J. Bunche could say, in 1941, that generally in political science "there isn't a very cordial reception for papers dealing with the Negro."²

The explanation probably lies in some combination of social and intellectual history. The central intellectual concern of late 19th and early 20th century political science was "popular government," restyled "democracy" later on. This political science studied, more than anything else, the law, philosophy, and history of "government," with an acute emphasis on American institutions, the governments of France, Germany, and Great Britain, and international law, with a moderate addition of Asian and colonial government. It emerged within the Anglo-centric intellectual tradition that dominated American scholarship well into the 20th century. Woodrow Wilson, A. Lawrence Lowell, Frank J. Goodnow and William Bennet Munro may be regarded as adequately representative figures in the tradition. The leaders of this emergent discipline more or less took for granted that the political community was essentially a "white" community.³ The big question, instead, was about both the empirical and the normal role of wealth in the polity. Whether understood as group (later "pressure group" and still later the cooled down "interest

group") politics or as class politics, with or without the Marxist variant, this treatment left no intellectually compelling issues regarding race or ethnicity. The assumption of the Anglo-centric polity remained an undisturbed feature of the canon.

The inklings of a "scientific" study of politics, notably in the work of Charles E. Merriam, just after World War I, anticipated by a long distance what would occur after World War II. After World War II, political scientists came strongly to accept a more self-conscious and explicit idea of "science" and a more abstract concern with "power." This did not alter, however, the central tendency of political scientists to think of Black-related questions as peripheral. They could, from the viewpoints held, be understood fully within existing intellectual parameters. Nor did the introduction of a social science saturated with intellectual problems defined from the moral problems of Central Europe make much difference for a long time. The moral and intellectual problems of the United States were substantially set aside.

Recent Work

There has been a perceptible shift, especially since about 1960 and certainly since the effects of the civil rights movement have come into academic life.⁴ There is now a book literature. There is now emerging a