

# Pluralism and Social Choice

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*Pluralist political theory identifies certain patterns of political preferences as promoting the "stability" of democratic political systems and others as threatening to such stability. Social choice theory likewise identifies certain patterns of political preferences as leading to "stability" in social choice under majority rule and related collective decision rules, and other patterns as leading to "unstable" social choice. But the preference patterns identified by pluralist theory as promoting stability are essentially those identified by social choice theory as entailing instability. Thus the notions of stability and the implicit normative criteria associated with the two theories are very close to being logically incompatible. This incompatibility suggests that the social choice ideal of collective rationality may not be one that we should endorse. Indeed, the generic instability of the pluralist political process and its consequent collective irrationality may contribute to the stability of pluralist political systems.*

This article considers together two theoretical traditions in political analysis—pluralist theory and social choice theory, argues that there is an implicit normative contradiction between the two, and attempts to resolve that contradiction. I believe that the argument is of some significance for political theory generally and for a theoretical understanding of the bases of political stability in particular. The argument may be summarized as follows.

Pluralist political theory identifies certain patterns of political preferences (reflecting certain social and economic structures) as promoting the "stability" of democratic political systems; conversely, it identifies other patterns as threatening to such stability. Social choice theory likewise identifies certain patterns of political preferences as leading to "stability" in social choice under majority rule and related collective choice rules; conversely, it identifies other patterns as leading to unstable social choice. In the context of each theory, stability is characterized—at least implicitly—as desirable. Thus on the face of things, the two theoretical traditions appear to run in parallel, and in a sense they do—but in opposite directions, because the preference patterns identified by pluralist theory as promoting desired stability are essentially those identified by social choice theory as entailing instability. Conversely, the preference patterns identified by social choice theory as leading to stable choice are essentially those identified by pluralist theory as destabilizing for the system. Thus, not only are the notions of stability associated with the two theories logically distinct—a point that is reasonably evident (but I think sometimes missed)—but they are very close to being logically incompatible. The existence of one kind of stability typically entails the nonexistence of the other kind. Thus, also, the (explicit or implicit) normative criteria in the two theories are incompatible. Finally, this incompatibility suggests that the social choice ideal of collective rationality may not be one that we should endorse. Indeed, the generic instability of the pluralist political process, and its consequent collective irrationality, may in fact contribute to the relative stability of pluralist political systems.

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## Pluralist Theory and Political Stability

### The Pluralism of Pluralist Theory

It is clear that we cannot properly speak of *the* pluralist theory of politics. The term "pluralism" encompasses a wide range of definitions, concepts, and propositions which somewhat overlap but are logically distinct. This is not the place to review the various meanings of pluralism in detail, but I must say enough to indicate what I am, and what I am not, talking about in comparing pluralist and social choice theory.

*Normative Versus Analytical Pluralism.* The most general distinction is between 1) pluralism as an overtly normative philosophy asserting that the state is merely one association among many to which individuals belong and owe loyalty, and 2) pluralism as an analytical theory (usually with normative overtones) concerning the structure of

political action in the modern democratic state and patterns of influence on the government (cf. Latham, 1952, especially pp. 378-382). This essay (and the remainder of this introductory discussion) concerns the analytical side of pluralist theory.

*Pluralism as Dispersed Power.* Pluralism often refers to fragmentation and dispersion of political power (cf. McFarland, 1969). Thus the United States political system, with its separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, and undisciplined parties, is often viewed as more pluralistic than the British system. But dispersion of political power—if power is understood as "the capacity of an actor alone or (more likely) in combination with others, to bring about or preclude certain outcomes" (Miller, 1982a, p. 33)—is not our present concern. Dispersion of political power implies that politics is a nonsimple game—that almost no coalitions are powerless, almost none is all-powerful, and different intermediate-sized coalitions can bring about or preclude different sets of outcomes.[1] Instead, I assume here that political power relations are simple, probably majoritarian—i.e., any majority coalition can bring about any outcome (cf. Miller, 1982a, especially p. 44).

*Pluralism as Group Politics.* Pluralism often refers to the "group basis of politics" (Lathan, 1952) and more specifically to the notion that the raw material of politics consists of the demands of organized interest groups (and perhaps "potential groups" as well), and that "what may be called public policy is actually the equilibrium reached in the group struggle at any given moment" (Latham, 1952, p. 390; cf. Bentley, 1908; Truman, 1951). That all groups in society are equally likely to be organized and effective in interest group politics is a proposition that has been decisively refuted by both theoretical argument (Olson, 1965; but also see Chamberlin, 1978, and Hardin, 1982) and empirical evidence (e.g., Lindblom, 1977; McConnell, 1966); thus equilibrium among organized group demands—even if such exists and determines political outcomes—merits no particular approbation as fair public policy (see especially Schattschneider, 1960). In any case, my concern here is not specifically with interest group politics, although my formulation is abstract enough to be interpreted in such terms.

*Pluralism as Dispersed Preferences.* The variant of pluralist theory that is of concern to us here relates the pattern of group affiliations and conflict in society with patterns of political preferences and in turn relates these preference patterns to the stability of the political system, i.e., whether there is widespread acceptance of existing constitutional arrangements or whether the political system is threatened by such factors as civil war, revolution, separatism, widespread discontent, organized violence, and deep alienation.

The fundamental postulates of this variant of pluralism theory are that 1) all societies are divided along one or more lines of fundamental conflict or cleavage that partition its members into different sets, and 2) the preferences of members of society, with respect to alternative public policies, are largely determined by the set to which those members belong—individuals in the same set having (more or less) the same political preferences and individuals in different sets having (in one respect or other) conflicting preferences. We can refer to these sets, therefore, as *preference clusters.*

All societies are divided to some degree. But some societies, especially larger and more complex ones, are divided by a pluralism of cleavages that are often related to one another in a crosscutting rather than reinforcing pattern. The superposition of this multiplicity of crosscutting partitions is a fine partition of society into a large number of relatively small preference clusters. Two random individuals, therefore, most likely belong to different preference clusters and, if so, have conflicting preferences with respect to one or more issues but almost certainly agree on many issues as well. (For a far more extended and precise discussion along these lines, see Rae & Taylor, 1970.)

A subsidiary but significant theme in this literature is that, in a pluralist society, not only are preferences dispersed but intensities are likewise dispersed, i.e., different issues are differentially salient to members of different preference clusters. Thus, two random individuals not only probably agree on some issues and disagree on others but also tend to disagree on which issues are more important.

Finally, it is argued that such pluralistic preference patterns contribute to the stability of the political system (cf. Kornhauser, 1959; Lipset, 1963; Truman, 1951). In a famous quotation (Ross, 1920, pp. 164-165; quoted in Coser, 1956, pp. 76-77):

> A society, therefore, which is ridden by a dozen oppositions along lines running in every direction

[1] It may be noted, however, that dispersion of power in games apparently corresponds to "liberalism" and related conditions in social choice theory (cf. Miller, 1977a), and it is well known that such conditions, in conjunction with the Pareto condition, imply social preference cycles at some—probably many—preference profiles (Sen, 1970a; cf. Batra & Pattanaik, 1972; Stevens & Foster, 1978). So even if pluralism were defined in terms of dispersed power, instead of dispersed preferences, it would still be associated with social preference cycles.

> may actually be in less danger of being torn with violence or falling to pieces than one split just along one line. For each new cleavage contributes to narrow the cross clefts, so that one might say that *society is sewn together* by its inner conflicts.

More specifically, according to Lipset (1963, p. 77): "The available evidence suggests that the chances for stable democracy are enhanced to the extent that groups and individuals have a number of crosscutting, politically relevant affiliations."

## Pluralistic Preferences and Political Stability

But more precisely, why should pluralistic preferences be related to political stability? A number of distinct answers can be suggested.

*Stability Causes Pluralism.* For one thing, causality may sometimes operate in the direction opposite that postulated by pluralist theory. If, for whatever reason, the continued existence of the political system in its present form is open to serious question, the prospect of constitutional crisis will itself divide society into antagonistic complementary sets, presumably both of substantial size, and this cleavage will likely overwhelm all others in affecting political attitudes and behavior until the crisis is resolved (if ever). On the other hand, if an effective constitutional consensus prevails, members of society are free to pursue their own more particular preferences (for government outputs, rather than for forms of government), which are more likely to be pluralistically distributed.

Now consider the causal arrow pointing in the direction postulated by pluralist theory. There are, I think, at least four different arguments—logically distinct but by no means mutually exclusive—supporting the proposition that pluralistic preferences lead to political stability. Three of these arguments are standard in academic political science literature and are summarized below. The fourth is merely noted below and is then developed further in the last part of this essay.

*Pluralism Causes Moderate Attitudes.* The first argument is that, in a pluralist society, individuals tend to have more moderate or less intense preferences than in a nonpluralist society. This moderation results from the cross-pressure mechanism operating at the level of individual attitudes and interactions. In a nonpluralist society with just a few large preference clusters, social interactions take place largely within each cluster and, insofar as preferences are shaped by social pressures, the pressures on each individual are operating overwhelmingly in a single direction, producing intense and perhaps extreme political attitudes. Although social interaction undoubtedly is not entirely random in a pluralist society, many interactions must take place across preference clusters and, insofar as preferences are shaped by social pressures, these pressures are operating in somewhat contrary directions, producing less intense and probably less extreme attitudes. A specific but important corollary of this point is that party loyalty is likely to be relatively weak in a pluralist society, for no single party that is identified with specific positions on many issues can fully please many people. And if, as is usually the case, a party in a pluralist society takes fuzzy positions, it is unlikely to win intense loyalty from many people.

*Pluralism Causes Moderate Behavior.* Even if a pluralist society is not characterized by moderate preferences, its structure generates incentives for moderate political behavior on the part of both individuals and organized groups. In a polarized or dualist society, an individual or group has permanent friends (in the same large preference cluster) and permanent enemies (in the other large preference cluster), and there is a little incentive to behave moderately toward permanent enemies. (A counterargument, however, is that the obvious potential for political explosion may induce moderate behavior, especially on the part of group leaders; cf. Lijphart, 1969, 1977.) But in a pluralist society, "those who are enemies in one situation are sometimes required to act as allies in another situation. With an eye on future cooperation, they restrain their behaviour in present competition" (Bailey, 1970, p. 129). The same prudential calculations apply to both individuals and organized groups. The actions of the latter are further restrained because, although their memberships will be more or less united with respect to the specific matter on the basis of which the groups are organized (e.g., the economic interests of people in particular occupations), they will tend to be divided on other issues. Thus organizations in a pluralist society have an incentive to confine their actions to the businesslike pursuit of their narrow defining interests and not to pursue broad ideological goals. To quote Truman (1951, p. 168): "the fact that memberships in organized and potential groups overlap *in the long run* imposes restraints and conformities upon interest groups on pain of dissolution or of failure."

*Pluralism Distributes Political Satisfaction.* (See Brams & Lake, 1978; Straffin, Davis, & Brams, 1982; and Riker, 1982, pp. 206ff, for similar use of the term "satisfaction.") This argument is related to the previous one, but it focuses more directly on political outcomes than on the process by which these outcomes are brought about. In a society cut by cleavages (i.e., in any society), political outcomes cannot please all the people all the time. Whatever government does will please some of the people and displease others at any given time. The relevant question, there-

fore, is whether political outcomes please and displease the same people all of the time or whether they please and displease different people over time.[2]

In a polarized or dualist society, cut by a single cleavage, by several reinforcing cleavages, or by one cleavage of overwhelming salience, there are just two preference clusters. One cluster must be of majority size and will (under any more or less majoritarian constitution, as virtually all democratic constitutions ultimately are) constitute a majority faction that will win on every issue. The other cluster will lose on every issue. Political satisfaction and dissatisfaction will be highly concentrated. The totally dissatisfied cluster may be quite large, and its members may have resources to make trouble of one sort or another. And since they have little or no prospect of greater satisfaction in the future, some individuals within the cluster will likely make use of these resources. Thus the political system will be unstable.

In a pluralist society, crosscut by many cleavages and partitioned into a multiplicity of preference clusters, political satisfaction is distributed much more equally. No majority-sized preference cluster can exist. In the well-known words of Federalist 10: "Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens" (Madison, 1787). In the absence of a majority preference cluster, political outcomes are brought about by shifting coalitions of smaller clusters. Political outcomes probably please and displease nobody all the time; rather they please almost everybody some of the time. Political satisfaction, although probably nowhere total, is widespread. To quote Dahrendorf (1959, p. 215) on pluralism versus "superimposition" (reinforcing cleavages):

> If the inevitable pluralism of association is accompanied by a pluralism of fronts of conflict, none of these is likely to develop the intensity of class conflicts of the Marxian type. There is in this case, for every member of the subjected class of one association, the promise of gratification in another association. . . . Throughout [U.S.] history, the pluralism of associations and conflicts has made inclusive conflict groups held together by quasi-religious ideologies unnecessary. There has been no single group that has enjoyed universal privilege or suffered universal alienation.

Even if we can think of some groups that have suffered close to universal alienation throughout much of American history, the theoretical point remains valid that, if there are no universal losers and almost everyone wins about half or more of the time, the political system is likely to be far more stable than if universal losers constitute a large minority of the population.

It may be worth reiterating this point: the difference between a dualist system, with universal winners and losers, and a pluralist system, with widespread political satisfaction, is not a matter of the distribution of political power (we are assuming simple majoritarian power relations in both cases); it is simply a matter of the way preferences are distributed (and, presumably, of the underlying affiliations that structure these preferences). As Barry (1979, p. 179) observes in a slightly different context:

> The upshot of this very crude analysis is that, from behind the veil of ignorance, a person of reasonable prudence would accept outcomes produced in accordance with the majority principle for an atomistic society or a pluralist society, which we may take as the closest real-life approximation: that is to say, a society in which there are many groups and the relations between them are fluid. In such a society, the majority principle gives each group a good chance of being in the majority over half the time. . . . Conversely, the more closely a society approximates to the model of a monolithic majority bloc facing a minority which is always on the losing side, the more a reasonably prudent person would refuse to accept that, if he or she found himself in such a society and in the minority group, he or she would be bound to respect the laws that had been passed by the majority over minority opposition.

*Pluralism Encourages Political Strategems.* That the prevalence of such political maneuvers as logrolling, vote trading, coalition building and splitting, agenda manipulation, strategic voting, patronage, and pork barrel constitutes an important feature of political life, and especially so in pluralist systems, is often noted. Although the prevalence of such political strategems is not usually associated with political stability in the academic literature,[3] I believe that such a connection can be made. But before doing this, we must

[2]Technically, to speak in this fashion here and elsewhere we must assume that individual preferences are separable by issues, i.e., that preferences on one issue are independent of how other issues are resolved (cf. Miller, 1977b, p. 55).

[3]The function of such strategems in promoting political stability seems to be more clearly implied in the writings of some political figures who draw on their practical experience (e.g., Savile, First Marquess of Halifax, 1700; Burke, 1790; Smith, 1940), or in biographies of such figures (e.g., Oliver, 1930, on Sir Robert Walpole; Foxcroft, 1946, on the First Marquis of Halifax) and some broader histories (e.g., Plumb, 1967), and in some political novels (e.g., Trollope, 1869). I am

turn our attention to the second theoretical tradition with which this article is concerned.

## Social Choice Theory and Collective Rationality

### The "Problem" of Cyclical Majorities

It is now fairly well known to political scientists —although it was not a few decades ago—that, even if every individual in a group has a consistent preference ordering over a set of alternatives (e.g., candidates, policies, platforms), majority preference may be inconsistent or intransitive—that is, alternative X may be preferred by a majority to alternative Y, Y may be preferred by a majority to Z, and yet Z may be preferred by a majority to X. This "paradox of voting" was evidently first discovered some 200 years ago by the French philosopher, the Marquis de Condorcet, and it was then alternately forgotten and rediscovered until about thirty-five years ago. In the late 1940s Duncan Black published a series of articles on the theory of voting (subsequently assembled into a book; Black, 1958), which dealt prominently with the paradoxical phenomenon of majority preference cycles. At about the same time, Kenneth Arrow published the first edition of his enormously influential book, which made early reference to the "well-known paradox of voting" (1951, p. 2).

By about 1960, the paradox of cyclical majority preference had been clearly embedded into the consciousness of a small group of political scientists and economists concerned with social choice. And the paradox was—I think it is fair to say—almost universally regarded as a "problem" by those who were aware of it. Partly for this reason, there developed an extensive and well-known literature in social choice theory concerned with identifying conditions on "preference profiles" (i.e., combinations of preference orderings, one for each individual) under which the paradox of cyclical majority preference cannot occur. And a second literature developed concerned with the probability of this paradoxical phenomenon in various "cultures," i.e., probability distributions over preference orderings.

Lurking within these technical literatures, there has been a normative assumption—usually implicit but sometimes fairly expicit—that majority cycling is an undesirable political phenomenon, something that we should hope to avoid insofar as possible. This normative assumption is reflected in the language used to describe the phenomenon and its sources. Thus majority cycles result from (or are more likely to result from) preference profiles characterized as "discordant" (Fishburn, 1973); "anarchic" (MacKay, 1980, pp. 128ff; MacKay & Wong, 1979); or lacking in "inner harmony" (Riker, 1961, p. 906; Riker & Ordeshook, 1973, p. 105). Majority cycles in turn are said to result in "arbitrary" political decisions (Frolich & Oppenheimer, 1978, p. 17ff; Oppenheimer, 1972, 1975), in political "incoherence" (Riker & Ordeshook, 1973, pp. 84ff), "inconsistency" (a term widely equated with intransitivity), "instability" (Fishburn & Gehrlein, 1980; Koehler, 1975; Miller, 1982a) or "pathology" (Brams, 1976, p. 29), to threaten political "viability" (Abrams, 1975), and to contradict "collective rationality" (a standard term in the technical social choice literature for transitivity of social preference). Thus the conditions on preference profiles that make majority cycles impossible or less likely have been put forth hopefully—sometimes under the heading "Paradox Lost" (e.g., Abrams, 1980, p. 65; Riker & Brams, 1973, p. 1245n; Uslaner & Davis, 1975, p. 934)—as opportunities to escape from such distressing consequences as those described just below.

### The Consequences of Cyclical Majorities

Cyclical majority preference has these more specific and concrete consequences in varying political contexts.

1. *The "core" of the political process is empty.* This is the most fundamental consequence: for every possible political outcome, there is some coalition of actors who jointly prefer some other outcome and have the power to get it. (The core consists of all outcomes not dominated in this fashion.) Hence political choice cannot be stable —for example, no parliamentary government pursuing any set of policies can win a constructive vote of no confidence against every alternative. More specifically, the process of logrolling does not lead to stability, as logrolling coalitions can form and reform in an endless (cyclical) sequence.

The discussion just above focuses on an $n$-person majoritarian "cooperative" game (in which coalitions can form freely). Associated with any such game is a two-person symmetric zero-sum noncooperative game of electoral competition between two parties or candidates (cf. Downs, 1957). And if the $n$-person cooperative game has an empty core, the associated electoral game lacks a Nash equilibrium. Thus we have this second consequence of cyclical majority preference.

2. *Electoral competition between two power-oriented political parties or candidates cannot lead to equilibrium.* (For surveys of analyses

indebted to Lewis Dexter for impressing this point on me and for providing references.

along these lines, see Riker & Ordeshook, 1973, chap. 11-12; and Ordeshook, 1976.) No matter what platform or set of policies one party selects, it can always be defeated, and the outcome of electoral competition—even if modelled under the assumption of complete information—is intrinsically indeterminate and unpredictable, and the resulting electoral victories and attendant outcomes are thus arbitrary.

3. *Noncooperative voting decisions depend on what particular (majoritarian) voting procedure is used, on whether voting is sincere or sophisticated, and (if the procedure is sequential) on the order in which alternatives are voted on.* (Actually some problems along these lines can arise even if majority preference is fully transitive, but the problems are more prevalent and more profound in the presence of cyclical majorities. Cf. Bjurulf & Niemi, 1982; Black, 1958, pp. 39ff; Farquharson, 1969; Miller, 1977c; for a comprehensive summary see Riker, 1982, especially chap. 4.)

A fourth consequence, somewhat related to the third but coming out of the more abstract literature on social choice, is the following.

4. *Social choices from varying agendas vary in an erratic and unreasonable fashion.* For example, social choice violates the "weak axiom of revealed preference," as well as many weaker "rationality" conditions (Sen, 1970b, 1977). A familiar example is the way in which electoral choice between two "major" candidates can be affected by the presence or absence of a third candidate (i.e., by variation in the agenda). Generally, given cyclical social preference, there can be no assurance of "the independence of the final choice from the path to it" (Arrow, 1963, p. 120; cf. Plott, 1973). It is largely for this reason that the condition of transitivity of social preference—violated by cyclical majorities—is often labelled "collective rationality."

## Escape from Paradox

All conditions on preference profiles that logically preclude the paradox of majority cycles necessarily say that only a subset of all logically possible profiles are admissible. At least roughly, such conditions can be divided into three categories. With respect to social choice from finite sets of discrete alternatives, most attention has focused on conditions in the first (especially) and second categories, which in different ways point to the advantage of social homogeneity in avoiding cycles.

1. *Exclusion conditions* simply prohibit certain combinations of orderings from ever occurring. The best known of these is Black's (1958) single-peakedness condition. This is also the most plausible such condition, although its reverse, single-troughedness or single-cavedness (Vickrey, 1960, p. 514), also precludes majority cycles and may be plausible in certain contexts. Both conditions require that voters commonly perceive alternatives to be arrayed over a single dimension and evaluate them accordingly. Since the absence of majority preference cycles on triples of alternatives implies the absence of larger cycles, exclusion conditions can be stated in terms of individual orderings over triples. Sen's (1966; cf. Ward, 1965) value restriction (which subsumes both single-peakedness and single-cavedness) is the best known of these. (See Sen, 1970b, chap. 10*, for further generalization.)

2. *Popularity conditions* point out that preference profiles exhibiting sufficient consensus, even if exclusion conditions are violated, map into transitive social preference under majority rule. Most obviously, perfect consensus (all orderings are identical) precludes majority cycles (but such consensus satisfies all exclusion conditions as well). Hardly less obviously, so does majority consensus (a majority of orderings are identical).

3. *Balance conditions* do not exclude any combination of orderings or require any level of consensus but require a certain symmetry of disagreement, as it were, so that opposing preferences "balance out." For example, if in a given profile all individual orderings but one can be paired (assume $n$ is odd) so that the orderings in each pair are the opposite of each other, then majority preference is transitive, since the majority vote between each pair of alternatives is everywhere a tie broken by the one remaining unpaired ordering, and majority preference is identical to that ordering (and hence transitive).

In some contexts, especially electoral competition, it is necessary to examine majority preference over an alternative space. It is supposed that individual voters have ideal points in this space and, for example, prefer alternatives closer to that ideal to more distant alternatives. (This rough description suggests simple Euclidean preferences; more complex utility functions are often considered as well.) If the alternative space has a single dimension, the single-peakedness exclusion condition is met and transitivity is assured. But if the alternative space has two or more dimensions, no exclusion condition can be met in the absence of virtual unanimity (Kramer, 1973). And with an infinite number of alternatives, it seems highly unlikely that all, or even most, voters will have identical orderings. Thus, in the multi-dimensional context, most attention has focused on balance conditions, the most general being that given by Plott (1967); very roughly, Plott's condition is a generalization of the illustrative balance condition given above. But Plott's condition is extraordinarily fragile, both in the sense that it is

highly unlikely to be fulfilled and, in the event it is fulfilled, it would no longer be fulfilled if even one voter changed his preferences even slightly. Moreover, it turns out that this fragility has a third aspect: if Plott's balance condition is not perfectly met, the transitivity of majority rule fails entirely and a massive majority preference cycle encompasses the entire alternative space (McKelvey, 1976, 1979; cf. Cohen, 1979; Schofield, 1978a, b; 1982).

The probabilistic literature on the paradox of voting has been concerned primarily with 1) calculating the likelihood that cyclical majorities arise in an impartial culture, i.e., a uniform distribution over all logically distinct individual orderings, and 2) determining how this likelihood changes as a culture deviates from impartiality. The basic conclusions are that the probability of cyclical majorities in an impartial culture increases as the number of alternatives, voters, or both increases (Gorman & Kamien, 1968; Niemi & Weisberg, 1968). Moreover, as the number of alternatives increases, if majority rule fails to be transitive, the more likely it becomes that it will fail entirely and that one cycle will encompass all alternatives (Bell, 1978). Concerning departures from impartiality, the general thrust of conclusions is that greater social homogeneity (variously defined) with respect to preferences reduces the likelihood of cyclical majorities. (See, for example, Fishburn & Gehrlein, 1980; Jamison & Luce, 1972; Kuga & Nagatami, 1974; and Niemi, 1969; but cf. Abrams, 1975, 1976.)

## Pluralist Preferences Versus Collective Rationality

We now consider the two theoretical traditions —pluralism and social choice—together. The fundamental point that quickly becomes evident is that pluralistic preference profiles and preference profiles entailing collective rationality under majority rule are virtually disjoint sets.

Thus, in effect, pluralist theory argues that cyclical majority preference is desirable because such preference profiles are associated with the stability of political systems. Of course, writers in the pluralist tradition have not directly argued that majority cycling is desirable. Indeed, it is almost certain that only a very few of them have been aware of the phenomenon. (The only discussion of majority intransitivity that I am aware of in "pluralist" writings is a rather tangential one in Dahl, 1956, pp. 42n-44n.) But they have argued that certain preference patterns promote, and others threaten, political stability, and it turns out that the former typically entail, whereas the latter preclude, majority cycling. That is, *the sorts of conditions identified in formal social choice theory as sufficient to avoid majority cycles are just those sorts of patterns viewed unfavorably in the pluralist literature.* Conversely, *pluralistic preference patterns are those that most typically result in cyclical majorities.*

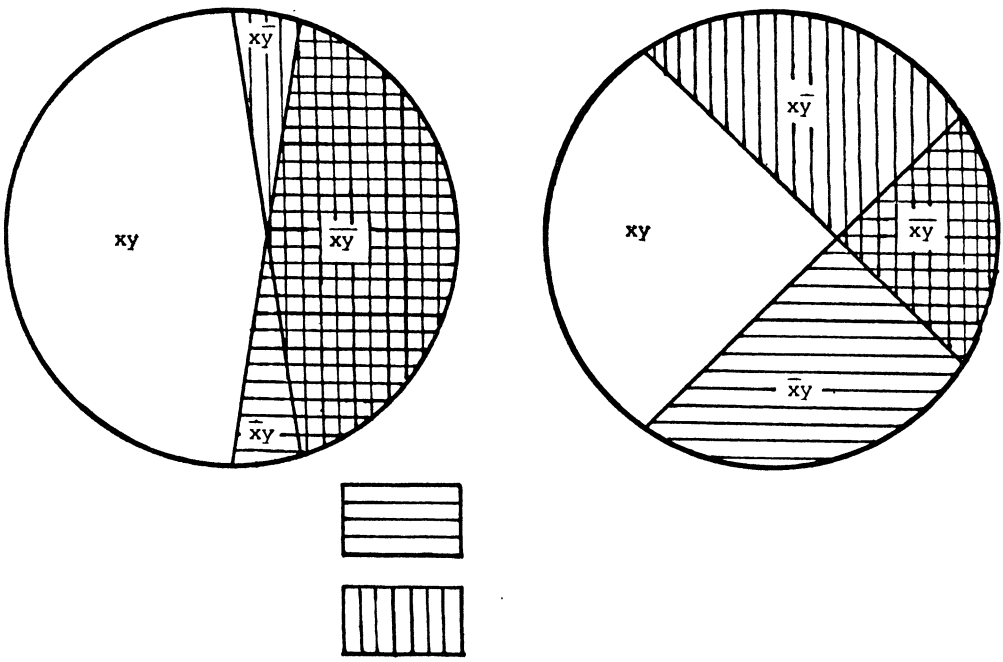
Let us review the situation. The most obvious condition that assures transitivity of majority rule is the popularity condition of majority consensus, i.e., one preference cluster includes more than half the population. Such a condition would be fulfilled in a dualist society, and it would result in what Madison (1787) and others would call *majority faction* or even *majority tyranny* and which typically (although not as a logical necessity) entails a large set of universal losers likely to be deeply alienated from the political system. It is, in any case, a nonpluralistic pattern, resulting from a single cleavage or from multiple reinforcing cleavages.

Next, the exclusion condition of single-peaked preferences assures transitive majority preference. But the most plausible translation of single-peakedness into substantive political terms of a systemwide nature is politics fought out on a single left-right (or other) ideological dimension. This also is a circumstance condemned in pluralist theory, although for a population to be arrayed over a one-dimensional ideological continuum (especially in a unimodal fashion) would be viewed as preferable to polarization of the population into two totally opposed ideological camps.

As we have seen, reinforcing divisions of a population into majority and minority groups (on different issues) preclude the possibility of cyclical majority preference, regardless of the distribution of intensity. On the other hand, crosscutting divisions of the population into majority and minority groups (on different issues) permit cyclical majorities, which will actually occur if intensity is distributed appropriately. Consider, for example, the diagrams shown in Figure 1, each of which shows a population divided 60%-40% on two issues, one in a more or less reinforcing fashion and one in a more or less crosscutting fashion (cf. the diagrams in Schattschneider, 1960, pp. 62ff). The table below each diagram shows the partition of the population into clusters in terms of first preferences for both issues (from which last preferences can be inferred).[4] The diagrams, and a fortiori the concept of reinforcing versus crosscutting cleavages, do not allow us to infer the second (and third) preferences, which are determined by "intensity" (i.e., for each individual, which issue he would rather get his way on, given that he can get his way on only one). But,

[4]This again assumes "separability"; cf. footnote 2.

Figure 1.




whatever the unspecified preferences, majority preference is transitive in the reinforcing case, there being a majority faction. On the other hand, in the crosscutting case, majority preference may be cyclical—and indeed is, if most voters (precisely, 70% of them) in the two middle clusters care more about the issue in terms of which they are in the minority than about the issue in terms of which they are in the majority. However, if there is (contrary to the subsidiary theme in pluralist theory identified earlier) a consensus of intensities —put otherwise, if the majorities on the respective issues are "passionate" (cf. Downs, 1957, pp. 64ff)—no coalition of minorities can form, and majority transitivity is assured.[9]

More generally, given multiple issues and separable preferences, cyclical majorities exist if and only if logrolling situations exist (Kadane, 1972; Miller, 1975, 1977b; Oppenheimer, 1972; Schwartz, 1977). Thus, Dahl's (1956) well-known assertion that "specific policies tend to be products of 'minorities rule' " (p. 128), justifying the conclusion that "majority tyranny is mostly a myth, . . . for if the majority cannot rule, surely it cannot be tyrannical" (p. 133), is an assertion that cyclical majorities are prevalent.

Although a single ideological dimension, implying single-peaked preferences, precludes cyclical majorities, the existence of two or more ideological dimensions almost guarantees (i.e., guarantees in the absence of fulfillment of Plott's very stringent balance condition discussed earlier) cyclical majorities. But in pluralist theory, multiple ideological dimensions are viewed more favorable than a single one. Thus, according to Dahl (1976, pp. 347, 366):

> Differences in political attitudes and loyalties [in American politics] are not highly interrelated among themselves. . . . To overstate the point,

[9]There is some reason to believe that majorities are usually not "passionate" and coalitions of minorities are often effective. Many political issues are essentially (re)distributive, and others have a significant distributive component. Insofar as dichotomous issues have a distributive component, losers, being fewer in number, lose more per capita than winners win. (If, as public choice theorists often suggest, redistributive transfers are typically inefficient, the argument is reinforced.) This this argument can only be suggestive, for the relevant comparison is not between majority versus minority intensity on a given issue, but between issues for given voters.

> every ally is sometimes an enemy and every enemy is sometimes an ally. Consequently, *polarization of politics along ideological lines is held in check*. . . . [Moreover] there are [multiple] dimensions of "liberal" and "conservative" ideologies that often crosscut views on government intervention.

Next, it was demonstrated long ago that purely allocative or distributive issues (such as patronage, spoils division, and pork barrel) of the sort often associated with pluralist politics and political stability entail massive majority cycles (Ward, 1961; cf. Miller, 1982b; Schofield, 1982). (On the other hand, more ideologically structured redistributive issues may allow transitive majority preference; cf. Hamada, 1973.)

Finally, we may note that pluralism implies a large number of distinct preference clusters (i.e., entities with distinct preference orderings), as well as a complex political environment (i.e., many alternatives for political choice); and, according to the probabilistic literature on social choice, both factors—a larger number of individuals and a larger number of alternatives—make cyclical majorities more likely. Moreover, we may note that a critic of pluralist theory has argued that, according to pluralism, "subjective interests [i.e., preferences] . . . are necessarily treated as *random;* i.e., as unstructured by the form of social organization as a whole" (Balbus, 1971, p. 155, emphasis added). I think that this overstates the case (preferences are complexly rather than simply structured), but it probably contains an element of truth. Translated into formal terms, the assertion is that pluralist theory presumes something like the impartial culture (at least if we allow small preference clusters to substitute for individuals) that makes the probability of cyclical majorities especially great.

## Paradox Welcomed: Autonomous Politics and a Critique of Collective Rationality

The conclusion of the previous section was that pluralistic preference patterns entail cyclical majority preference, and conversely, that those conditions that assure or make more likely majority transitivity virtually always entail nonpluralistic preferences. Thus, if pluralist theory is correct that pluralistic preference patterns entail—and nonpluralistic preferences threaten—political stability, there is a clear conflict between the value of collective rationality (transitivity of social preference and stable social choice) and the value of political stability (widespread acceptance of existing constitutional arrangements).

Nothing in the previous section, of course, bears on what choice we should make between these evidently conflicting values. On the whole, it seems clear that we should choose political stability, although we must recognize that collective rationality is not a merely technical condition, but one that has important implications, both normative (i.e., for the terms in which we can justify democracy; cf. Nelson, 1980, especially chap. 4; Riker, 1978, 1982) and empirical (discussed above). This section partially justifies such a choice by arguing further that cyclical majority preference is not merely an otherwise undesirable phenomenon that happens to come along with pluralistic preference patterns and that we must accept as the unavoidable cost of achieving the great benefit of political stability, but that the "generic instability" (cf. Schofield, 1978a) of the pluralist political process is itself an important contributing factor to the stability of pluralist political systems.[6]

Politics is important—it is played for high stakes. Politics concerns how the coercive power of government is to be used in the "authoritative allocation of values for a society" (Easton, 1953, p. 129). And the values at stake are not merely material. For various reasons, political conflicts are inevitably overlaid with powerful symbols, emotions, and loyalties, making the stakes even higher than they would otherwise be.

Political conflict inevitably produces losers as well as winners. A fundamentally important question (and *the* question of political stability) is how to induce losers to continue to play the political game, to continue to work within the system rather than to try to overthrow it.

An analogy may be useful.[7] Organized professional athletic competition is likewise overlaid with powerful symbols and loyalties for many fans (and maybe players) and likewise inevitably produces losers as well as winners. It is often noted that the present losers can console themselves with the thought: "Wait till next year." But this thought can be consoling only insofar as it is likely that "next year" may produce a different outcome. If it were in the nature of athletic competition that distributions of resources (talents, etc.) mapped in a determinate, predictable, and "stable" fashion into outcomes (and associated winners and losers), "Wait till next year" would provide little solace to the present losers, because the distribution of resources among teams remains approximately constant over (at least relatively short periods of) time.

[6]My reading of Riker (1982, especially chap. 8) was very important in developing the thoughts expressed below.

[7]MacKay (1980) invokes the analogy between athletic competition and social choice in a more precise way but for quite different purposes.

Thus the present losers could expect to be next year's losers as well.[8] In fact, however, athletic competition clearly preserves a significant range of instability in which the highly variable factors of strategy, teamwork, and simple luck hold autonomous sway. Thus "waiting till next year" may well be rewarded.[9]

Elections likewise arouse passions and likewise inevitably produce both winners and losers. And the losers (both politicians and their followers) can likewise console themselves with the thought: "Wait till the next election." But once again this prospect is comforting to the losers only insofar as there is some reasonable prospect that the next election may produce a different outcome with different winners and losers.[10]

Commonly in pluralist democracies, there is indeed fairly regular alternation of winners and losers in successive elections. *It is very important to try to understand what brings about this alternation.*

The most obvious answer is that there are substantial shifts in the distribution of political preferences over time. Although the assertion involves great methodological and conceptual complexities, I am inclined to argue that empirical research on public opinion generally supports the conclusion that *the distribution of political preferences—as that term is used in social choice theory,* i.e., complete preference orderings or utility functions over all alternatives—*changes only slowly over time* (mostly as a result of generational replacement) and does not account for alternation in electoral victories.

Suppose, in any case, that the distribution of political preferences is essentially constant from election to election. Then, if collective rationality holds and preference profiles map into stable social choice, all elections would have the same outcome,[11] and the thought "wait till the next election" would offer no solace to the losers.

This argument can be extended and related more closely to our earlier discussion. Let us think of politics as a series of dichotomous issues. Given a majoritarian constitution, if preferences are nonpluralistically distributed, the same people will tend to win and others lose across successive issues. If preferences are pluralistically distributed, then—*whether or not this distribution entails cyclical majority preference*—different people will win and lose on different issues. Thus, as argued earlier, political disaffection plausibly is reduced.

But now we can make this further argument. If preferences are pluralistically distributed, then—as argued in the previous section—majority preference is typically cyclical and, *if this distribution does entail cyclical majority preference,* the present losers on a particular issue can yet hope to become winners *on the same issue*—perhaps by entering into some new alliance, by trading away their votes on some other issue, or generally by engaging in the kinds of political strategems identified at the end of the second section as associated with pluralist politics, and which are efficacious only given cyclical majorities, i.e., in the absence of collective rationality. Precisely because social choice is *not* stable, i.e., not uniquely determined by the distribution of preferences, there is some range for autonomous politics to hold sway, and pluralist politics offers almost everybody hope of victory.

Many writers in the (more or less) pluralist tradition have recognized this range of autonomous politics even in the face of fixed preferences, even if they have not explicitly connected it with the phenomenon of cyclical majorities. Thus, forty years ago, Schattschneider wrote (1942, pp. 41-42):

> To speak of party politics as if it were a case principally of the creation and manipulation of opinion is to miss the point entirely. *Persuasion* [i.e., changing preference distributions] *is unnecessary or secondary.* Politicians take people as they find them. The politician has a technical

[8] In somewhat the same way, for a game (such as tic-tac-toe, chess, or any strictly competitive game with perfect information) to be "strictly determined" may be satisfying to the game-theorist, but—if the "strictly determined" solution is computable (as it is in tac-tac-toe but not in chess)—such a game is unsatisfying to the players.

[9] As Brian Cook has pointed out to me, some losers may continue to play because the play of the game itself has significant value to them—"it's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." And—to anticipate the other side of the analogy—political play can have similar value to participants, as is suggested by such titles as *The Endless Adventure* (Oliver, 1930) and *The Great Game of Politics* (Kent, 1923). But I do think that the intrinsic value of play in sports and in politics depends on some uncertainty concerning outcomes.

[10] An even more fundamental requirement, of course, is that there is a reasonable prospect of *having* a next election. And a corollary is that results of a one-shot election to determine the political future of a nation apparently for all time, or of a referendum to decide some essentially irreversible question, are less likely to be accepted by the losers.

[11] At least the winning platform would remain constant. In the established formal theory of electoral competition (without party loyalty), the two parties, having fully "converged," would alternate victories in a random manner. But if there were *any* degree of party loyalty in the electorate, unequally distributed, the same party would always win.

specialty based on a profitable discovery about the behavior of numbers.

Latham (1952) was quoted earlier as characterizing public policy as the "equilibrium reached in the group struggle." As Schattschneider elsewhere (1960, pp. 37-38) notes, this suggests that public policy is the resultant of opposing forces or pressures and will accordingly remain constant as long as these forces remain constant. Thus it is only fair to quote Latham more extensively and observe that he virtually characterizes the manifestation of cyclical majorities in pluralist politics (1952, pp. 390-391, emphasis added):

> What may be called public policy is actually the equilibrium reached in the group struggle at any given moment, and it represents a balance which the contending factions of groups constantly strive to weight in their favor. *In this process, it is clear that blocks of groups can be defeated.* In fact, they can be routed. Defeated groups do not possess a veto on the proposals and acts that affect them. *But what they do possess is the right to make new combinations of strength if they are able to do so—combinations that will support a new effort to rewrite the rules in their favor. . . . The entire process is dynamic, not static; fluid, not fixed. Today's losers may be tomorrow's winners.*

Finally and writing more recently, Riker, who is manifestly aware of the connection between "political flux" and cyclical majorities, characterizes the pluralist political process well (1982, pp. 197-198):

> [Social choice theory] raises extremely difficult problems for political theory and political philosophy. Yet simultaneously those same implications do permit a new and deeper understanding of the process of politics. We can now understand what always before has seemed an impenetrable mystery—namely, the motive force for the perpetual flux of politics.
>
> In an effort to comprehend this flux, theorists have put together all sorts of reductionist theories that purport to explain changes in popular taste but explain nothing about the effect of tastes in politics. . . .
>
> To understand political events we need to understand how tastes get incorporated into political decisions. This is precisely where the flux of politics occurs, and it is precisely where an explanation is needed. Previous theorizing about changes in tastes and values has mostly been reductionist. . . . Because of this reductionist feature, these theories by-pass the political mobilization of tastes. Yet it is exactly this mobilization that is at the center of political life, the very thing that *political* theories should explain. In this sense a vast number of supposed explanations of politics . . . are simply irrelevant to politics. They explain the origin, not the operation, of tastes.
>
> Now, however, we can explain the mystery, the perpetual flux of politics, in terms of the mobilization and amalgamation of tastes. Political evolution is now explicable, if not predictable. The force for evolution is political disequilibrium, and the consequence of disequilibrium is a kind of natural selection of issues. We do not know what will win in any given situation, but we do know why winners do not keep on winning forever.

Thus, a pluralist political system does *not* authoritatively allocate values in a stable fashion. Rather, it sets political competitors—who might otherwise be bashing heads instead of (repeatedly) counting them (and seemingly getting different counts each time)—running around "one of Escher's stairways leading always up yet always coming back to its own foundation" (to use Rae's metaphor; 1980, p. 454). Not only does each competitor "win some and lose some," but most wins and losses are themselves reversible. Thus the competitors can never be confident of their victories, nor need they resign themselves to their defeats. Of course, since considerable resources are devoted to this competitive treadmill, pluralist politics is somewhat inefficient in economic terms. But the state of affairs associated with severe political instability is far more profoundly inefficient.

## Conclusion

The argument of this essay has been that the pluralist political process leads to unstable political choice, and that such instability of choice in fact fosters the stability of pluralist political systems.

The question remains of whether political outcomes in a pluralist democracy are "arbitrary" and unrelated to public opinion. If so, this might be a high price to pay for political stability.

In this connection, it is significant that a variety of recent results in positive political theory have suggested plausible ways in which the outcomes of a competitive political process are likely to be restricted or bounded in a "reasonable" fashion even in the face of massive or all-inclusive majority cycles. These notions include the "minmax set" (Kramer, 1977), the "competitive solution" (McKelvey et al., 1978), the "admissible set" (McKelvey & Ordeshook, 1976) and the related "uncovered set" (Miller, 1980), as well as various probabilistic notions (e.g., Ferejohn, McKelvey & Packel, 1981). All these notions have the common characteristic of setting reasonable bounds on social choice, yet preserving some more or less large range of indeterminacy within which

autonomous politics can hold sway. It is also worth noting that experimental studies (e.g., Fiorina & Plott, 1978; McKelvey et al., 1978) do not show outcomes randomly scattered about the entire alternative space. Finally, of course, most of us would view political outcomes in the real world of pluralism as considerably unpredictable but clearly confined within certain bounds of "political feasibility."

In conclusion, I should emphasize that the argument presented here needs to be further developed. First, greater technical precision is clearly needed at several points. Second and more important, the argument at present is very abstract and needs more concrete specification in terms of recognizable political phenomena. For example, a distinction should be made between micro-level politics (e.g., a legislative assembly considering a particular bill or set of proposals) and macro-level politics (e.g., the broad structure of electoral politics over time). There are a variety of reasons why potential instabilities are likely to be submerged at the micro-level (cf. Shepsle, 1979; Shepsle & Weingast, 1981; Tullock, 1981). My sense is that the present argument pertains primarily at the macro-level and could profitably be linked with the established literature on critical realignment and electoral dynamics (e.g., Burnham, 1970; Key, 1955; cf. Riker, 1982, chap. 9).

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