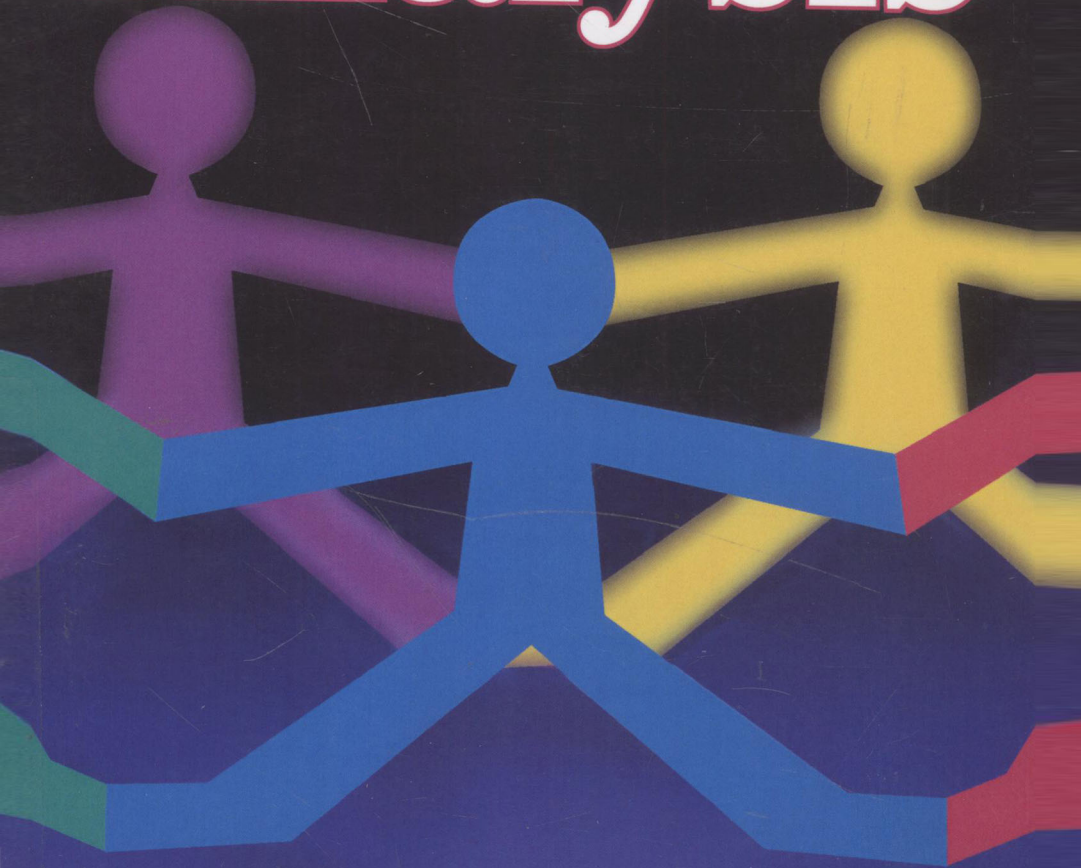
Pluralism *in* Political Analysis



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Preface

The preoccupation of many political scientists with political taxonomy obscures the fact that "democratic pluralism" remains the dominant theory of politics for modern industrial societies with competing party systems. Taxonomies—such as structural-functional analysis, systems analysis, communications "theory," and decision-making analysis—provide schema from which political theories can be generated. But whichever taxonomy is employed by contemporary researchers, the theory that most often emerges is the theory of pluralism.

The purpose of this volume is to subject pluralist theory to critical examination. The authors do not claim that the theory is totally untenable; we do contend that conventional formulations of the pluralist interpretation are defective in several respects. As empirical theory, the conventional interpretation rests upon precarious and, often, unacknowledged assumptions. As normative theory, it projects impoverished ideals. As ideology, it fosters complacency among students of politics when creative reappraisal is needed.

The essays by David Kettler and myself are published here for the first time. Myron Hale's essay is a revised and enlarged version of an earlier publication. Arnold Kaufman has added an epilogue to his earlier published essay. The essays by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, Andrew Hacker, Theodore Lowi, Marc Pilisuk and Thomas Hayden, and Brian Barry are reprinted here without revision. Acknowledgments are given at the beginning of each essay.

I would like to thank the contributors for suggestions about the format and content of this volume. Special thanks are due to Myron Hale, Arnold Kaufman, and David Kettler, who read and criticized an early draft of the introductory essay, and to Zillah Eisenstein, who helped prepare the index.

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The Classical Theory of Pluralism

Pluralism has long provided the dominant description and ideal of American politics. As description, it portrays the system as a balance of power among overlapping economic, religious, ethnic, and geographical groupings. Each "group" has some voice in shaping socially binding decisions; each constrains and is constrained through the processes of mutual group adjustment; and all major groups share a broad system of beliefs and values which encourages conflict to proceed within established channels and allows initial disagreements to dissolve into compromise solutions.

As ideal, the system is celebrated not because it performs any single function perfectly, but because it is said to promote, more effectively than any other known alternative, a plurality of laudable private and public ends. Pluralist politics combines, it is said, the best features from the individualistic lib-

eralism of a John Locke, the social conservatism of an Edmund Burke, and the participatory democracy of a Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The individual's active involvement in group life enables him to develop the language, deliberative powers, and sense of purpose which make up a fully developed personality. His access to a multiplicity of groups promotes a diversity of experience and interests and enables him to reach alternative power centers if some unit of government or society constrains him.

Society as a whole also benefits from pluralism. The system of multiple group pressures provides reasonable assurance that most important problems and grievances will be channeled to governmental arenas for debate and resolution. The involvement of individuals in politics through group association gives most citizens a stake in the society and helps to generate the loyalties needed to maintain a stable regime with the minimum of coercion. Stability is further promoted, in the long run, because public policy outcomes tend to *reflect* the distribution (balance) of power among groups in the society. Yet, the theory goes, innovation and change are also possible in pluralist politics. New groups, created perhaps by changes in economic processes or population distribution, can articulate new perspectives and preferences which will eventually seep into the balancing process, affecting the shape of political conflicts and the direction of issue resolution.

In short, pluralism has been justified as a system which develops individual capacities, protects individual rights and freedoms, identifies important social problems, and promotes a politics of incremental change while maintaining a long-term stability based on consent.[1]

The Legacy of Tocqueville

The intellectual roots of pluralist theory reach back to Aristotle. But James Madison and, especially, Alexis de Tocqueville have provided the intellectual springboards from which many contemporary thinkers have constructed their own formula-

tions.[2] Tocqueville, in describing and justifying American society of the nineteenth century, was careful to stipulate basic preconditions to the successful operation of pluralist politics. Some of these conditions persist today, for example, the universal suffrage, the competing parties, and the independent judiciary that Tocqueville celebrated. There are, however, notable discontinuities between many other conditions he specified and their contemporary equivalents. My purpose here is to ask to what extent twentieth-century society approximates the conditions for an ideal of pluralism formulated a century ago.[3]

A viable pluralism, Tocqueville believed, encourages among its citizens a widespread participation in politics "which originates in the lowest classes . . . and extends successively to all ranks of society." Such widespread involvement is necessary because "no one will ever believe that a liberal, wise, and energetic government can ever spring from the suffrages of a subservient people."[4] Students of twentieth-century politics, however, are unanimous in concluding that only a small minority of citizens, mostly from upper socioeconomic-educational brackets, participate actively in the political parties and interest groups of contemporary politics.

We need not remind contemporary readers that Tocqueville saw the "voluntary association" as a key agency for developing personality, protecting liberties, and channeling grievances to government. But the emergence of the large-scale, hierarchical organization has significantly altered the character of the voluntary association. It is at least questionable whether this contemporary institution serves as a medium for personality development. It advances the claims of some of its members more forcefully than it does those of others; and the individual's dependence on the structure within which he works may inhibit his opportunities to seek support from other units in times of stress. Moreover, the increased size and formalization required to make the "voluntary association" effective in contemporary politics alter the relationship between members and leaders envisaged by the classical ideal of pluralism. As C. Wright Mills has noted: "Voluntary associations have become larger to the extent that they have become effective; and to just that extent

they have become inaccessible to the individual who would shape by discussion the politics of the organization to which he belongs."[5]

The old middle class, whose economic independence and work life encouraged its members to form and participate actively in civil and political associations, is increasingly displaced today by the dependent white collar class. The work life of this new (and allegedly still middle) class resembles that of Tocqueville's "workman" in many respects; it is doubtful whether, on Tocqueville's assumptions, such a work life will foster the breadth of mind needed for responsible citizenship.

> When a workman is increasingly and exclusively engaged in the fabrication of one thing, he ultimately does his work with singular dexterity; but, at the same time, he loses the general faculty of applying his mind to the direction of his work. He every day becomes more adroit and less industrious. In proportion as the principle of the division of labor is more extensively applied the workman becomes more weak, more narrow minded, and more dependent. The art advances, the artisan recedes.[6]

Tocqueville viewed the American frontier as a safety valve for social tensions which could ease the pressure on the balancing process and minimize temptations to supplement the politics of consent with a policy of suppression against discontented minorities. He also viewed the country's relative isolation from foreign concerns as a central factor allowing the system of "decentralized administration" to mute and tame the power of "central government." But the frontier has disappeared today; and the combination of deep involvement in world politics with national problems of economy management, transportation, communication, poverty, urban slums, and ghetto riots has produced a tightening and enlarging of political and administrative processes. Even from Tocqueville's perspective, the stakes of politics are higher today; the earlier safety valves are largely defunct; the contemporary means for the explicit and implicit intimidation of disadvantaged minorities are enhanced.

Tocqueville saw a widely dispersed and locally owned "press" as the most "powerful weapon within every man's reach which the weakest and loneliest of them all may use."[7] But such a

press has been replaced today by centralized "media" remote from the individual and certainly more accessible to the privileged and the organized than to the "weakest and loneliest."

We can no longer say with easy confidence that "the American republics use no standing armies to intimidate a discontented minority; but as no minority has as yet been reduced to declare open war, the necessity of an army has not been felt."[8] And we might try to refute, but we can no longer consider irrelevant, Tocqueville's view of the probable relationship between a large military establishment and government:

> All men of military genius are fond of centralization, which increases their strength; and all men of centralizing genius are fond of war, which compels nations to combine all their powers in the hands of the government. Thus the democratic tendency which leads men unceasingly to multiply the privileges of the state, and to circumscribe the rights of private persons, is much more rapid and constant amongst those democratic nations which are exposed by their position to great and frequent wars, than amongst all others.[9]

If these structural changes have undermined some of the conditions specified by Tocqueville for the politics of pluralism, perhaps expanded educational opportunities and other new arrangements promote the needed conditions today; perhaps continuities in the electoral and judicial systems, more important in effect than the changes noted in the social and international context of politics, ensure that political pluralism remains fundamentally intact; or perhaps Tocqueville simply misread some of the most significant conditions of pluralism. Perhaps. On the other hand, in our eagerness to fit the comforting doctrine of an earlier period to the present system we might be prone to underplay the adverse ramifications of a new social structure and world environment; we might too easily assume that functions performed by old institutions in old contexts are still performed by those institutions in their new settings; we might quietly forget some of the functions celebrated in the classical ideal of pluralism and thereby fail to take full account of groups, concerns, and ideals which are not well served by the contemporary balancing process.

Tocqueville clearly realized that institutional evolution could undermine the politics of pluralism. His greatest fear, of course, was the emergence of "majority tyranny." Nevertheless, even while writing well before the period of rapid industrial growth in the United States, he could still point to that minority group which showed the greatest potential to gain ascendancy in the balancing process of the future:

> I am of the opinion, upon the whole, that the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes is one of the harshest which ever existed in the world; but, at the same time, it is one of the most confined and least dangerous. Nevertheless, the friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in this direction; for if ever a permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy again penetrate into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter.[10]

Contemporary Pluralist Theory

The dominant view among social scientists today is that some variant of pluralist theory provides the most adequate framework for understanding the contemporary political process. Two broad "types" of pluralist interpretation can be distinguished. The first, typically advanced by political scientists, views the government as the *arena* where major group conflicts are debated and resolved. The second, more often advanced by economists and sociologists, sees major social associations, especially organized labor and the corporation, involved in a balancing process which operates largely outside of government; the government acts more as *umpire* than as participant, setting rules for conflict resolution and moving in to redress the imbalance when one group goes too far. I will outline representative expressions of both the *arena* and *umpire* variants of pluralist theory. The summaries will be brief, identifying what I take to be the central thrust of these interpretations. Since relevant qualifications, hedges, and subordinate themes are necessarily given short shrift in a summary of this sort, the reader is referred to the works cited in the references for a more complete statement of both versions of pluralist theory.

The Arena Theory

Robert Dahl has formulated perhaps the most precise and persuasive interpretation of the arena version of pluralism.[11] Government is the crucial arena for the study of power, says Dahl.

> Government is crucial because its controls are relatively powerful. In a wide variety of situations, in a contest between governmental controls and other controls, the governmental controls will probably prove more decisive than competing controls. . . . It is reasonable to assume that in a wide variety of situations whoever controls governmental decisions will have significantly greater control over policy than individuals who do not control governmental decisions.[12]

There is no ruling class or power elite which dominates government over a wide range of issues. Rather, there are numerous bases for political power in American society—wealth, prestige, strategic position, voting power—and while each resource is distributed unequally, most identifiable groups in the system have and make use of advantages in one or more of these areas.

The competitive party system plays a major role in maintaining the system of pluralism. Since the "in" party's voting coalition is always threatened by the "out" party's attempts to create new issues which will shift marginal voters to its side. both parties constantly strive to increase their support among the major social and sectional groupings in the country. The result is a broad range of "minorities whose preferences must be taken into account by leaders in making policy choices."[13] Any "active" and "legitimate" group can usually "make itself heard at some crucial stage in the process of decision."[14] Or, as Dahl states the point in slightly more restrictive terms later: "few groups in the United States who are *determined* to influence the government—certainly few if any groups who are *organized, active*, and *persistent*—lack the capacity and opportunity to influence some officials somewhere in the political system in order to obtain at least some of their goals."[15]

Observation of issue resolution in the governmental arenas,