



DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper discusses the failure of rational decision approaches to public policy analysis to adequately address the question of democracy. Even though public policies encourage or hinder the development of democracies, most rational choice approaches fail to discuss this issue. The author criticizes some key assumptions of the utilitarian foundations of the rational decision approach. In assigning values only to policy outcomes, the rational decision approach displaces the question of the policy process, hence of democracy. The paper argues that democracy is a different kind of value than the self-interested, individualistic-preferences, the rational choice model is geared to accommodate.

Resumen

Este trabajo discute el fracaso del enfoque racionalista en considerar la cuestión de la democracia en el análisis de las políticas públicas. A pesar de que las políticas públicas fomentan o impiden el desarrollo de las democracias, la mayoría de los enfoques racionalistas no consiguen discutir este asunto. El autor critica algunas suposiciones claves de los fundamentos utilitaristas del enfoque racionalista. El enfoque racionalista desplaza la cuestión procesual de las políticas fuera de la democracia dado que solo considera a las políticas resultantes. El trabajo argumenta que el modelo racionalista, acostumbrado a tratar con preferencias autocentradas e individualistas, no consigue ligar con la democracia.

INTRODUCTION

Our images of the building of democratic governments are moments of extraordinary constitutional drama: fifty-five men gathering in Philadelphia for the hot summer of 1787, or Lincoln issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. Similarly our images of the destruction of democracy are crisis events: the burning of the Reichstag or the armed seizure of la Moneda in Chile in 1973.

Democracy is strengthened and weakened in less dramatic, more commonplace ways, however, through the normal processes of formulating and implementing public policies. Such claims are familiar in public debates over policy issues. If steps are taken to eliminate school desegregation and to lessen inequality of educational opportunity, one argument goes, then the quality of democracy will be enhanced. The insulation of actions by the Federal Reserve Board from review by the President or Congress, another argument has it, constitutes a serious imperfection in democratic management of the economy. Or: the choice of a hard energy path (oil, coal, fission, fusion) rather than a soft path (biomass, solar) will lead inexorably to increased centralization and military dominance, with disastrous consequences for democracy. These particular claims may be open to objection, but assertions of this sort

are worth considering carefully. What seems foolish is the assertion that public policy concerning education, the economy and energy are irrelevant to democracy.

If you open a public policy textbook, particularly one elaborating the rational decision approach to policy analysis, however, you encounter almost complete silence about democracy. Despite the renewed attention to values in public policy analysis, some texts never even utter the word. What are we to make of this? At the very beginning of Edith Stokey and Richard Zeckhauser's A Primer for Policy Analysis, probably the most widely used text in the field, there appears this remarkable disclaimer containing one of their very few mentions of "democracy:"

" Most of the materials in this book are equally applicable to a socialist, capitalist or mixed enterprise society, to a democracy or a dictatorship, indeed wherever hard policy choices must be made." (p 4)

We can take it that Stokey and Zeckhauser would not be more pleased if their text sat on office shelves in Sofia as well as in Washington, nor if it were adopted for classes in Asuncion as well as in Cambridge. Rather, this is a thoroughgoing statement of value neutrality, a central canon of the approach.

It does, however, give us some insight into the remarkable silence of rational decision textbooks about democracy: they

take it for granted. It is a given context within which public policy issues are raised, contested and settled. Stokey and Zeckhauser see democracy as unaffected by policy processes and outcomes. Policy analysis, they write, "is a discipline for working within a political and economic system, not for changing it." Public policy decisions (they seem to be saying) will not make the United States less nor North Korea more democratic, and the same analytic tools can be used in both settings.

This paper begins with the premise that democracy cannot be seen as the taken-for-granted context of policy issues. Rather, democracy is something that may be seriously affected by public policy. The analytic tools we use in public policy analysis must allow us to see these consequences for democracy.

I take democracy to be a political system based on "the idea that free and equal persons should together control the conditions of their own association" (Cohen and Rogers, 1983: 18). It is an ideal "at the extreme limits of human possibilities" (Dahl, 1982: 6), one that cannot be captured in any single set of institutional arrangements. Equality in voting is essential to democracy, but it is certainly not sufficient. Dahl lists four other criteria for "an ideal democratic process:" inclusion in the demos of all adults subject to its laws (except transients), equal and adequate opportunities for participation for all citizens throughout the process of collec-

tive decision making, equal and adequate opportunities for all citizens for arriving at considered judgments as to the most desirable outcomes, and final control over the agenda of decision making exclusively lodged in the hands of the demos. While it is unlikely that any political system could fully satisfy these criteria, one can be said to be democratic to the extent that it fulfills them. It is precisely because democracy is such a difficult ideal, one embodying a "way of life" rather than just a set of procedures, that public policies strengthen or diminish our fulfillment of the promise of democracy. Public policies can and will affect what we achieve along each of these five criteria.

In this paper I seek to understand why the rational decision approach to public policy analysis is so silent about democracy. I will focus particular attention on A Primer for Policy Analysis because I take it to be a distinguished presentation of the state of the art. My account of the silence suggests that the fault is inherent in the approach and not easily correctable, but the elaboration of an alternative approach is well beyond what I can hope to accomplish here (see Bennett and Sharpe, 1982).

DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS

As public policy analysis has become an established profession with graduate degree programs at major universities and an increasing number of practitioners in the employ of governments and consulting firms, the rational decision approach has emerged as the dominant methodological perspective within the field. Based on microeconomics, systems analysis and operations research, and more broadly on utilitarianism, the rational decision approach to public policy analysis provides a technique (or a family of techniques) for solving public policy problems. A problem is defined, alternative solutions are identified, the consequences of each of these are anticipated, values are assigned to each of these solutions, and finally the best solution -- the one with the greatest net social utility -- is chosen. While the sophisticated analytic apparatus of the rational decision approach (simulations, linear programming, etc.) principally concerns predicting the consequences of alternative courses of action and estimating their likelihood, a great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to assigning values to the consequences. There has been an attempt to widen what is considered beyond monetary costs and benefits to equality, safety, environmental standards and the like. Nevertheless, the rational decision approach proceeds by translating

all values to a common denominator, because only then can comparisons among outcomes be made.

The normative basis of rational decision analysis is utilitarianism, though on the whole the approach has made little effort to deal with the most common failings of utilitarianism. (For basic critiques of utilitarianism, see Williams [1973], and Sen [1979].) Making social choices is a matter of seeing which outcome is best among those available. Outcomes are ranked solely by summing the utilities of individuals under these alternative outcomes. If an option improves the welfare of at least one individual without decreasing the utility of anyone else, it satisfies the Pareto criterion. Otherwise interpersonal comparisons of utility must be made to establish whether the gain in the utility of some offsets the loss in utility of others.

Central to the rational decision approach is the idea of a trade-off. When no Pareto-improving solution is available, tradeoffs between individuals must be made. Moreover, individuals may have to trade off one value against another when the outcomes in question embody several different objectives.

Values enter the rational decision approach as individual utilities, and these are summed in valuing outcomes for society as a whole. But how are individual utilities determined? While there are a variety of different answers to this question within the tradition of utilitarianism, in the rational deci-

sion approach to public policy analysis individual utility generally consists in the satisfaction of preferences. Each individual determines what is best for him or her, and there is no questioning whether these preferences are right or wrong. As Stokey and Zeckhauser put it: "We must recognize that objectives are at heart personal judgments about which intelligent and well-informed people can disagree" (p 260).

There is an egalitarian spirit to public policy analysis. At least in principle, every individual counts as much as any other. Because it provides a systematic approach to making decisions about complicated matters, public policy analysis seems ideal for fitting democracy to the technical complexities of the modern age. I am unaware of any policy study using the rational decision approach that brings democracy into consideration to any significant degree, but what is to prevent us from making democracy a central value in such an analysis? In such a study, the consequences for democracy of alternative courses of action would have to be anticipated. To assign values to each of these alternatives, each individual would have to weigh his preferences with regard to the gain or loss in democracy against his preferences with regard to the gain or loss in other objectives. Finally, in aggregating the resulting preference orderings of individuals, the greater weight some individuals give to considerations of democracy would have to be traded-off against the greater weight that others give to dif-

ferent values. If a little cumbersome, this seems straightforward enough at first glance. But there are serious problems with proceeding in this fashion.

In first mentioning the question of values as a "critical and inevitable part of policy analysis," Stokey and Zeckhauser comment that they "follow in the predominant Western intellectual tradition of recent centuries which regards the well being of individuals as the ultimate objective of public policy" (p4). They add later that "the points made here underlie most present discussion in both academic and practical policy-making circles on the appropriate goals for public policy" (p258). They give the impression that there is nothing controversial about their approach to values, and that there are no alternative ways that values could be handled. The utilitarian foundation of the rational decision approach, however, turns on several assumptions which are hardly past contention. (1) It assumes that values are sharply distinct from facts and that rational discussion can only take place in the realm of facts. (2) It assumes that values are individual preferences, and that these must be taken as "givens" for each individual within the purview of the analysis. (So rendered, preferences become facts which can be input to the analysis.) (3) It assumes that values are similar in character one to another, and that in consequence the rational decision approach is neutral among them. (4) More specifically, it assumes that all

values are continuous and fungible, so that (at least in principle) tradeoffs among individual preference orderings are always possible. Finally, (5) it assumes that social welfare is fully specified by aggregating individual preferences. Each of these assumptions is open to serious objection, and taken together they make it difficult for democracy to be considered in public policy analysis, or at least without significant distortion to what we mean by democracy.

Values as Givens. First, the rational decision approach takes values as givens: each individual has his or her own values. They are preferences, idiosyncratic views of what is good or right, and there is no conception of how these are taken on or how they might change. Because preferences are simply givens in the rational decision approach, when individuals disagree about goals or values, there is no alternative except to strike a trade-off that satisfies some and not others. On this view, compromise is a technocratic problem to determine which alternative allows the largest number of people to satisfy their objectives.

We can acknowledge, however, that "the well-being of society depends solely on the welfare of its individual members" (Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978: 261) without agreeing that the welfare of individuals consists simply in satisfying their preferences. Each individual may generally be "the best judge

of his own welfare" (p 263), but it is a long and unwarranted step from this to the assertion that we should identify an individual's welfare with his current preferences. It is foundational to democracy that each individual casts his own votes, but in any well-functioning democracy, there are institutions and processes for debate, discussion and persuasion. It is anticipated that people will change their minds. There will be energetic attempts to convince people that they have been making a mistake about their own welfare. It is implicit in such politics that values can not only change but be changed through the exercise of reason. Values are not simply "given." They are reshaped in and emerge from the democratic process itself.

Whether we see welfare as an individual's given "preferences" or as his "judgment" about what is best for him may have implications for the character of the political order. The rational decision approach hardens conflict by making it strictly a matter of winners and losers; democracy softens conflict by seeking to mold consensus on basic values.

Qualitative Differences Among Values. In viewing values as preferences, the rational decision approach assumes all values to be essentially alike. There are differences among values, however, that allow some to be more easily accommodated into the rational decision approach than others. Democracy is one value that does not comfortably fit, for at least three dif-

ferent reasons.

(1) It is difficult to see democracy as merely one preference among many other preferences because democracy is the structure, the whole, within which other preferences have political meaning. If democracy is not valued, we risk weakening the legitimacy of other procedures that have equal reference to the preferences or needs of all citizens. If we do not accord some special priority to the principle of political equality, what justifies viewing social welfare as composed equally of the welfare of all individuals?

(2) Within the rational decision approach, all values are seen as continuous and fungible. That is, like money all values are held to permit of degrees, and if some of a value is good, more is better. Treating values in this fashion allows all values to be reduced to a single common denominator, and thus allows us to weigh values relative to one another more easily. "To the economist [or rational decision analyst], everything has an exchange rate, and his behavior and choice procedure reflect his willingness to trade" (Zeckhauser and Schaefer, 1968: 37).

If a policy option dissatisfies an individual on one value of particular concern, enough of some other value must be sufficient to provide compensation. This assumption underlies the uniform urging of rational decision analysts for effluent taxes as an approach to pollution problems, for example. If a

manufacturer wants to discharge industrial wastes and a group of homeowners in the vicinity want clean air and water, then the rational decision approach might suggest a compromise in which the manufacturer would pollute less and the homeowners tolerate more waste. If we assume that both sides to this conflict value money, there is another possibility: the manufacturer can pay a fee for the right to pollute, and the money can be paid as compensation to the residents for putting up with the fouling of their environment. The amount of the tax and the compensation would depend on how much each side valued its objective. This is possible within the rational decision approach because the values in question (the amount of pollution, money, even the enjoyment of the environment) are all held to be continuous and fungible.

Not all values have these same characteristics as money, however. There are some values (like thinness, pace Gloria Vanderbilt) which are good only up to some point beyond which more is worse. Other values are only continuous across a range which makes them incommensurable with other values. To take a famous example: "A man would not agree to have his arms and legs cut off in exchange for any number of desserts" (Zeckhauser and Schaefer, 1968: 38). (Zeckhauser and Schaefer add: "but if he were faced with the prospect of no desserts for the rest of his life he might accept a scratch on the finger." It seems tendentious, however, to presume that a scratch is only

quantitatively different from loss of limbs.) There are also values which are not fungible, or not easily so. Some people consider environmental quality to be such a value. They may be willing to accept monetary compensation for pollution but only up to some point beyond which no amount of money (or of anything else) is an acceptable tradeoff. While it is useful to think of regimes as being more and less democratic, beyond some point they are not democratic at all; the difference in quantity becomes a difference in quality. Precisely because democracy is the context within which public choices are made, it is nearly unthinkable to consider a tradeoff that would yield a little more of some value in return for what might turn out to be not just "a little less democracy" but a wholesale transmutation of political arrangements.

(3) The rational decision approach also assumes that all values refer to states of affairs, not processes, and this too tends to make it unaccommodating to democracy. The alternatives to which values are assigned in public policy analysis are outcomes: a dam to be constructed or a program to be implemented. Democracy should not be seen as merely a process -- that is a dangerously simpleminded view -- but democracy cannot be conceived only as an "outcome" without significant distortion. In a democracy, how we arrive at an outcome is important as well as the outcome itself. A rational decision analysis might weigh the benefits of a policy alternative against its

consequences for preserving the processes of democracy, but this turns these processes into outcomes. The rational decision approach is unable to value the processes of democracy as processes. As Tribe argues, "This lack of concern for process comes about partly because procedures for choice must include processes to resolve conflicts among individuals and their interests, and most policy analysts believe that methods which rank as 'objective' within their intellectual heritage can never settle how true conflicts should be resolved" (Tribe, 1972: 82).

The Displacing and Demeaning of Democracy. In assigning values only to outcomes, the rational decision approach depicts itself as the process by which the preferred outcomes come into being. Implicitly, it displaces or demeans democracy. How it does this is most easily seen by trying to understand the relationship that the rational decision approach sees between itself and democracy in the making of public policy.

On one view, the rational decision approach is a tool every citizen in a democracy can use to think more clearly about policy alternatives. At times, this seems to be what its proponents have in mind. As Stokey and Zeckhauser put it:

The approach to policy analysis throughout this Primer is that of the rational decision maker who lays out goals and uses logical processes to

explore the best way to reach those goals. He may perform the analysis himself or he may commission others to do parts or all of it for him. The decision maker may be an individual or a group that acts essentially as a unit. (p3)

Were everyone to avail himself of the techniques of policy analysis, there would certainly be greater rationality in making and implementing public policy, but of course this is a pipe dream. Whether they attempt the analysis themselves or commission others, the techniques of the rational decision approach require intelligence and resources well beyond the reach of most citizens. If this conception of the relationship between policy analysis and democracy is insisted upon, policy analysis becomes yet another source of inequality that distorts democracy. Those who are skilled in its ways turn out to have more weight in making decisions than those who are not.

If we cannot view policy analysis as an essential component of citizenship, we must see it as an adjunct to democracy in the policy-making process. A second possibility, then, is that the techniques of the rational decision approach are useful in preparing issues for consideration through the institutions and processes of democracy. Here we have to consider two further alternatives. Policy analysis seeks to discover the best solution, the best outcome, to a given problem. It does this by identifying all possible solutions and discerning which

of these maximizes social welfare. There may be or again there may not be a solution which satisfies the Pareto criterion, one which increases the welfare of some people without decreasing the welfare of anyone else. If there is a solution which satisfies the Pareto criterion, then public policy analysis has discovered the best solution. What is there for democracy to accomplish? This "best" solution will still have to be submitted to the democratic process. If it is adopted then (in this case at least) democracy has stood the test of reason, but it is democracy that has been judged by policy analysis, not the reverse. Suppose now this best solution is not ratified. Then democracy has failed the test, shown itself to be irrational. From the standpoint of policy analysis there is no question of the best solution's being found wanting. It is democracy not policy analysis that has been called into doubt. In either case democracy has been shouldered aside -- displaced.

Consider now the situation where there is no solution which satisfies the Pareto criterion. If tradeoffs between individuals are necessary democracy may have a role to play but not a particularly noble one. In a situation such as this, Stokey and Zeckhauser suggest two alternative courses of action. The first is technocratic: try to calculate "maximum net benefits" for society as a whole by making interpersonal comparisons (the Kaldor-Hicks approach). Taking into account

the increase in welfare of some individuals and the decrease in welfare of others, try to ascertain the solution that affords the largest net increase. There is no way we can do this without comparing how much a solution increases or decreases the welfare of various individuals. From a technical standpoint, this is a procedure open to significant objection. "The fundamental problem frustrating efforts to rank social welfare," Stokey and Zeckhauser acknowledge, "is that we have no demonstrably correct procedure for making interpersonal comparisons of welfare" (p 275, emphasis added). In consequence they are driven to offer this alternative: "we should simply accept the ranking of social states that is produced by society's established decision process" (p 283). Where reason fails, that is, democracy may yet have a role to play. In this case, democracy has not been displaced altogether but it has been demeaned as merely the realm of the irrational.

If the rational decision approach to public policy analysis cannot become an integral part of the democratic process without introducing a further source of inequality, and if it cannot be an adjunct to the democratic process in preparing issues for decision without demeaning or displacing democracy, there is yet a third possibility. Public policy analysis can be an adjunct to the democratic process in identifying implementation strategies once democracy has resolved the basic direction of policy. "In some circumstances," Stokey and Zeck-

hauser voice this possibility, "a society will accept a general analytic principle, such as maximize net benefits, as a guide for policy choices, with decisions made on a rather technocratic basis" (p 284). They offer the Army Corps of Engineer's purview over flood control projects as an example. On this third possibility democracy maintains the lead; policy analysis plays a key supporting role.

AN EXAMPLE

Because democracy is not simply a characteristic of outcomes, because democracy is not straightforwardly traded off against other values, and because democracy is a value that is a precondition for other values, it is a different sort of value than the rational decision approach is geared to accommodate. Worse, the rational decision approach tends to demean and displace democracy unless it is kept within a carefully circumscribed role. An example may help to clarify this argument.

Rationing vs. Decontrol. "My students always like gasoline rationing, Thomas Schelling notes in an article on "Economic Reasoning and the Ethics of Policy," but "I can talk most of them out of it." His demonstration involves showing the students that if they prefer rationing, there is another option

they will prefer even more. His students are concerned about the poor: if we rely on the market rather than on rationing, the poor will not get their fair share of gasoline. Schelling persuades them to allow ration coupons to be bought and sold in the marketplace. At first this offends the students, he says, but they come to see that the poor may well prefer money to gasoline. If we are genuinely concerned about the poor, why should we prevent this transaction? If we allow ration coupons to be bought and sold, however, we have in effect created a second form of money -- and a cumbersome one at that. Wouldn't it be better to allow the price of gasoline to rise until there was no shortage and tax away the windfall profits? If we are concerned about the poor having to pay more for gasoline, we can always rebate the tax revenues to them.

Schelling's example is a straightforward application of the rational decision approach to public policy analysis. A problem is identified and an objective clarified: if there is a shortage of gasoline, how can we allocate this scarce good fairly and efficiently? Two alternatives are identified: rationing and decontrol. These two alternatives need to be assessed in view of more than one value: there are considerations both of efficiency and of equity. The analysis reduces both to a common, fungible monetary standard -- and shows decontrol to be the superior alternative.

In carrying through this analysis, Schelling takes the preferences of individuals to be given -- and filled with a very particular content. Each individual is assumed to be selfishly concerned with maximizing his own preference satisfaction. This is not so crude as merely maximizing his income and access to gasoline. Schelling's example supposes that individuals also prefer to assist the poor. Yet however broadly and generously we construe an individual's egoistic preferences, they cannot encompass the whole of human welfare. This conception renders relationships among human beings into market-like transactions (how can a preference satisfaction model accommodate trust, dignity or friendship?). More seriously, in taking preferences as givens, and in concerning itself only with whether the outcomes are fair and efficient, it obscures the shaping of preferences by social, economic and political processes. Handling an energy crisis through the market is likely to shape values in one way; handling it through rationing in quite another. As Marc Landy has argued, "They convey quite different lessons to the citizen as to what the energy crisis is all about, and what his response to it ought to be." (Landy, 1981: 479). Decontrol encourages the citizen to act merely as a consumer; buying gasoline remains a matter of "private calculation." "He is not even encouraged to make a connection between his own behavior and the existence of a crisis." Rationing, on the other hand, "informs people that they are expected to do with less." It asks for a "common sacri-

fice;" "reduced consumption takes on the aspect of a public obligation." Schelling's assumptions lead him to see no value in a political process that might nurture a greater measure of consensus among the citizenry concerning energy problems. With values cum preferences given, and with only outcomes as what is valued, rational decision analysis can derive the one correct solution, and the one correct solution turns out to be reliance on the market. What role is there for democracy in this? Normal democratic procedures may have to be followed in order to ratify this solution, but there is nothing to be learned from within the political process itself. The democratic process can either follow the lead of a rational analysis that lies wholly outside the democratic process, or it mess things up.

CONCLUSION

Stokey and Zeckhauser make a claim to value neutrality concerning economic arrangements ("most of the materials in this book are equally applicable to a socialist, capitalist or mixed enterprise society") as well as concerning political arrangements ("...[and] equally applicable to a democracy or a dictatorship").

As Schelling's argument well illustrates, the rational decision approach is founded upon an adherence to market arrangements as the superior way to handle policy issues, unless market arrangements are seen to fail. Stokey and Zeckhauser conclude: "When contemplating action in any policy area, the first step is to determine whether and why there is a problem at all. In a market-oriented society, the question becomes: Is the market performing satisfactorily in this area and if not, why not?" (Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978: 320-21). With admirable consistency they assert that their adherence to market arrangements is more a matter of "personal preference and belief" than of "logic and methodology" (p 293), but the roots of the rational decision approach in the principles of the market are much deeper than this would make it appear. Its analyses seek to restore the functioning of the market (cf. Schelling), to devise solutions which resemble market processes (Schultze, 1977), or to devise solutions yielding outcomes as close to what a well-functioning market would have

yielded as possible. Given the centrality of market arrangements to countries where A Primer for Policy Analysis might be used, there is nothing surprising in this. What is puzzling is Stokey and Zeckhauser's claim that "most of the materials in this book are equally applicable to a socialist, capitalist, or mixed enterprise society" (p 4). There are limits to the formalism of this as to any other method.

What, then, of the other half of their claim to value neutrality, that "the materials in this book are equally applicable....to a democracy or a dictatorship?" Harold Lasswell's pioneering conception was for "policy sciences of democracy" (Lasswell, 1951: 10). His hope was for "the development of knowledge pertinent to the fuller realization of human dignity," and he offered An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy as an exemplar (Myrdal, 1944). The rational decision approach does not wholly live up to this promise precisely because it draws its analytic apparatus more from the principles of the market than from any substantive understanding of democracy. If nothing else, its borrowing of "economic man" for its conception of human nature cripples its ability to comprehend and to further human dignity. There is more to human motivation than egoism, more to human values than "having preferences," more to human relationships than "outcomes" -- and the realization of democracy is intimately bound up with what more there can be.

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