

William Riker, "Implications from the Disequilibrium of Majority Rule for the Study of Institutions," *APSR*, Vol. 774, No. 2 (June 1980), pp. 432-446.

In short

This is essentially a review of majority voting equilibrium studies based on individual tastes, in an effort to demonstrate the importance of understanding institutions in determining the ultimate outcome when there is no stable equilibrium possible based on tastes.

Central Question

What explains the content of social decisions?

Central Hypotheses

Because individual tastes, when aggregated together, cannot yield a stable equilibrium, it is necessary to understand the institutional context in which they are made.

How he makes his argument

Riker traces the origins of our academic interest in institutions as explanatory factors back to Aristotle, who argued that constitutions determine social outcomes and individual character (433). Christianity, on the other hand, emphasized the primacy of individual values and tastes. Riker notes the characterization of democracy as an effort to combine individual values and tastes with government, but asserts that microeconomics has offered an even stronger contribution to the emphasis on tastes and values—as long as markets are held constant, individual tastes determine outcomes. Riker argues that political scientists have taken this insight and overemphasized the determinacy of taste in explaining political outcomes. He turns to majority voting systems as the locus of his critique, arguing that an equilibrium of values in such conditions is impossible except under exceptionally difficult circumstances. He asserts that hardly anyone has recognized that defects of majority voting systems may not be the product of tastes, but of the structures of the systems in which they are expressed. Essentially, Riker argues that even if individuals each have binary relations of preference among multiple alternatives, there exist certain circumstances in which a group of individuals cannot transitively order those alternatives. Black found that if each voter's valuation of alternatives was single-peaked, then it is possible to identify the winning alternative, based on the median voter. But single-peakedness tends to depend on the restriction of valuation to one dimension, something which is almost never seen in political science. Charles Plott attempted to extend this insight into multiple dimensions, and would up concluding that it was possible to identify a dominant equilibrium a for any number of voters among whom indifferent voters did not vote, for whom there was at least one voter for whom alternative a provided the maximum utility, and among whom the remaining voters could be divided into pairs of equal utility distance from utility(a). A defines a core of undominated points, and Rubenstein ultimately showed that where voting was concerned, the cores were empty.

Richard McKelvey went on to show that given continuous utility functions, policy is doomed to cycle, as there will always be any point that can garner enough votes to undo the status quo. He also demonstrated the importance of the agenda setter, who can bring about his/her desired alternative, based on a certain sequence of majority rule decisions. Schofield (1978) demonstrated a similar cyclical result using local alternatives that were only slightly different from the status quo, whereas McKelvey relied on significant differences between alternatives and the status quo. Given the instability of political outcomes, Riker recognizes political science as "dismal" in the sense that "there are no fundamental equilibria to predict," (443). However, he goes on to say that there is still some predictive power to be gained from understanding decision processes, suggesting that "the particular structure of an institutions is as least as likely to be predictive of socially enforced values as are the preferences of the citizen body," (443). For instance, the ability of a party to win successive elections is perhaps not so much a product of constant taste as it is the exclusion from electoral processes of issues that would upset the system of tastes that elected a particular party.

Riker encourages us to look at the kinds of outcomes that are likely given an institutional arrangement, citing Shepsle as an example of someone who has done so (Shepsle notes that decentralization and the creation of jurisdictions via the committee system as features that enable the passage of bills that could not be passed in any other structure). Riker recognizes, however, that given the consequential nature of rules for social outcomes, the rules themselves are not in long-term equilibria. They do, however, last longer than equilibria of taste.