

Chapter 1

The Political Frustrations of the Rational Chooser: The Structure of Elections, the Two-Party System and the Politics of Interest Groups

To many political scientists, rational choice theory is not political theory, but groundwork for empirical political science. To be sure, much of the work of rational choice theorists relies upon empirical data to explain the behavior of voters, public officials, or states. Yet in spite of rational choice theorists' absorption in empirical questions, many have theoretical ambitions as well. By "theoretical ambitions" I do not mean merely the ambition to articulate a guiding set of assumptions that help ask and answer empirical questions. Rational choice theorists could not do much without acknowledging the importance of that sort of theory. Rather, I mean that many rational choice theorists conceive of their work as providing a corrective to and perhaps even a replacement for political theory as it has been traditionally understood.

This sort of challenge to political theory is not new. Many practitioners of political science have, for a variety of reasons, thought political theory peripheral to their discipline. It is the way in which rational choice theorists challenge political theory and the consequences of their doing so that are of interest here.

Rational choice theorists are most likely to shrink from defining their work as political theory because that pursuit, in their terms, is a "normative" one. Normative pursuits, rational choice theorists insist, confuse the theorist's ideals with what is the case or what might be possible. Expectations raised by normative theory (about, for instance, the common good or popular consensus) are bound to be frustrated because they rely upon overly optimistic claims about

human capacities—claims that are never checked against, as William Riker puts it, an analysis of whether “the means are efficient for attaining the ends” (p. 4).¹ Criticizing political theory in this way, however, suggests that these particular critics do not scorn the sorts of questions political theorists have traditionally raised. Rather, they believe that political theory is worth doing right and that their approach reveals what a better political theory might be.

Riker, for instance, is explicit about offering a new theory of democracy—one that meets the instrumental criterion given above. Downs claims that rational choice theory could function as a sort of litmus test for normative theories, exposing the weaknesses of those theories which prescribe living in ways that, while seemingly commendable, are grossly inefficient. These criticisms amount to one claim: political theorists have judged the merits of political communities by the wrong standards. Instead of asking how a political community is to be just or equal, one should ask, rational choice theorists believe, whether the ends a community seeks are efficiently attainable.

Yet the force of the rational choice critique of normative theory leaves little firm ground upon which the theory’s practitioners can construct their own visions of a democratic polity. Freed from the constraints of traditional democratic theory by dismissing any aspirations towards achieving the public good or consensus, rational choice theorists promise to set us down on the conceptual bedrock of a viable democracy. But of what does this bedrock consist?

The rational choice revision of democracy is not rhetorically radical. Democracy, rational choice theorists say, is valuable because it strives to honor individuals and to honor them equally. The material out of which this unremarkable understanding of democracy is built, however, is the idea that individuals are honored in a democracy because they are given certain kinds of choices. The conceptual bedrock upon which the rational choice revision of democracy rests, therefore, consists entirely of a particular conception of choice. But it is this very conception of choice which, as rational choice theorists themselves so potently demonstrate, constructs a peculiarly unstable vision of democracy indeed.

We must now consider in greater detail why rational choice theorists wish to reduce expectations about democracy. We shall see how a particular conception of choice, so critical to reducing

expectations about democracy, is also primarily responsible for rational choice theorists' not being able to offer a coherent new account in the place of those they discredit.

Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* prepares the ground for the rational choice project of deflating democracy.² Schumpeter's criticisms of "the classical doctrine of democracy" as well as his proposed redefinition of democracy are well known. They concern us here not only because they reject most understandings of democracy in favor of an extremely restricted one, but because they rely upon economic metaphors to do so. This style of argument, formalized by rational choice theorists, remains an important constant in their work.

Schumpeter's quarrel with traditional democratic theory anticipates the objections rational choice theorists raise. Directing his impatience primarily at the concept of the "common good," Schumpeter takes traditional democratic theory to task for positing rather than proving that the common good exists and can be known. Schumpeter's criticism strikes the same note as do those offered by rational choice theorists: normative theorists have forgotten to show how their ends might be attained. In Schumpeter's view, however, this is much more than a dreamy philosopher's omission. The common good, as it has been traditionally understood, cannot be achieved; but, Schumpeter warns, it will continue to be invoked and will be fraudulent every time (pp. 250–252).

But is the idea of the common good dangerous or merely muddled? At times, Schumpeter seems to find it dangerous, because it assumes ordinary citizens can think clearly when Schumpeter himself believes they cannot—especially about politics: ". . . the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes primitive again" (p. 262). If those who call themselves democrats refuse to accept such an assessment of the typical citizen, then, Schumpeter warns, they may be forced to accept some horrible things in the name of democracy (pp. 240–243).

Schumpeter does not confine his criticism of the classical doctrine of democracy to these sorts of warnings, however. He also as-

sumes a different rhetorical tone to say that the classical doctrine is, above all else, muddled. One cannot expect the common good to be rationally discernible, much less expect a political community's policies to be guided by it: "[m]ore than anyone else the lover of democracy has every reason . . . to clear his creed from the aspersion that it rests upon make-believe" (p. 264). There are, then, two rhetorical modes to Schumpeter's criticism of the classical doctrine; as we shall see, rational choice theorists follow Schumpeter only in adopting the latter.

To clear the air of mistaken and dangerous understandings of democracy, Schumpeter proposes his own theory. Democracy, he says, should be understood as a method rather than an ideal: ". . . the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (p. 269). If democracy is best characterized as a competitive system, then one is only making the components of the analogy explicit by saying, as Schumpeter does, that politicians are comparable to entrepreneurs and voters to consumers. And once these components are in place, then Schumpeter can easily deliver the coup de grace of his redefinition of democracy, noting that there is a clear "division of labor" between politicians and those who elect them. According to such a division of labor, politics is the "business" only of the politicians and not of those who elect them (p. 295). By invoking economic ideals like efficiency and specialization to buttress his understanding of democracy, Schumpeter means to set himself even further apart from the "classical doctrine" he rejects.

Schumpeter's purpose in redefining democracy in terms borrowed from market economics is openly political. In contrast to the many American rational choice theorists who acknowledge their debts to him, Schumpeter is explicit and insistent about how political life would improve if it were understood and practiced in economic terms. He redefines democracy to make it immune to mass movements and excessive popular participation, which are, for him, destructive forces any democracy ought to curb rather than encourage.³ Instead of exhorting citizens to participate in the politics of their communities, Schumpeter admonishes them to exercise "democratic self-control" and to leave "political action" to elected officials. Schumpeter thus begins the

project his rational choice successors take up; that is, redefining democracy by deflating it.

Determined as he is to provide a view of democracy that takes a whole tradition of pessimism about such a system seriously, Schumpeter also anticipates the justificatory dilemma rational choice theorists face: once our expectations of democracy are lowered, on what grounds can we still make a case for it? Consider the definition of democracy Schumpeter proposes. On its own, it offers little material to make a case for democracy's merits; indeed, Schumpeter does not use it to make such a case. Instead, Schumpeter claims that any case made for democracy "presupposes not only a schema of hyper-rational values but also certain states of society in which democracy can be expected to work in ways we approve" (p. 243). Explicit as Schumpeter is about the contingent value of democracy, one ought not be surprised that in lieu of a justification of democracy, Schumpeter sings the praises of nineteenth-century England. And what Schumpeter deems praiseworthy about England are, among other things, the quality of its political elite and its people's democratic "self-control" (pp. 291–295). England's democracy works because its participants embrace the principle of the division of political labor the most fully.

Schumpeter's redefinition of democracy seems less of a solution to the shortcomings of the classical doctrine than a determined refusal to accept the question the classical doctrine addresses—"on what grounds can we justify democracy?"—as a legitimate one. But Schumpeter's acknowledging that democracy redefined cannot be justified is only one consequence of his theory: the other is that popular participation can now be discussed as a force to be curbed rather than an activity to be fostered. Both of these consequences flow from the economic analogues Schumpeter uses to redefine democracy. Rational choice theorists take up the project Schumpeter begins; they then inherit the problem Schumpeter first faced. Once democracy is deflated, can it still be justified?

An added dimension to this problem for rational choice theorists comes from their unwillingness to embrace the pessimistic conclusion Schumpeter regards as inevitable—once one redefines democracy as a method rather than an ideal, context is everything. Rational choice theorists are not willing to demote democracy to

the status of a mere method; they are also not willing to divest themselves of their unconditional loyalty to it. Yet they redefine democracy, albeit much more formally, much the way Schumpeter does. The tool rational choice theorists use both to deflate democracy and to establish its fundamental value is the same: it is their conception of choice, to which we shall now turn for the remainder of this chapter.

At the outset, any practitioner of rational choice theory must establish that most of what we call “politics” can be explained by focusing on its participants’ choices. Modest as such a premise may seem, it is bolder than it looks. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, accepting rational choice theory’s premise that one ought to focus on choices to explain politics entails accepting the counter-intuitive idea that one may leave most inquiries about how those choices came to be made out of account. Focusing on choices, in rational choice theory, also turns out to mean focusing on instrumental choices, or only on one type of choice. And focusing on choices also means seeing them in nearly everything we do.

This last point is particularly important to understanding how rational choice theorists use a conception of choice both to affirm and deflate democracy. The kinds of political choices offered to citizens of democracies, rational choice theorists argue, are often frustrating or too costly to make. Their work is best known for its grim assessments of the fairness of voting procedures and the rationality of political participation. But rational choice theorists do not argue that just any choice is bound to be costly or frustrating. Political choices, for instance, are more likely to be so than consumer choices. And ultimately, democracy is valuable because it honors individual choice—even though that principle has no apparent power to make political choices worth making.

To explain politics as rational choice theorists do, one must see even those who do not vote or those who “free ride” as making choices too. And if choosing to participate in politics is often costly or irrational, then not doing so is the rational choice. In an indirect way, this last point also affirms democracy to the extent that it rejects more pessimistic interpretations of nonparticipation in politics. Construing nonparticipation as a self-interested opting out of an inefficient system makes it look benign in a way no account that relied upon alienation, apathy or anger ever could. On this reading,

rational choice theorists' persistent overestimation of rates of non-participation looks less like a problem than a cushion: if rates of political participation were to drop even lower than where they now stand, we could still rely upon the theory to assure us that people are choosing to stay out of politics on the salutary basis of their reason alone.

A single conception of choice informs both rational choice theorists' pessimism about democratic politics as well as their faith in it. The pessimistic conclusions rational choice theorists reach about politics, however, have a corrosive kind of power. Once we accept that the political choices we face as citizens are inconsequential or too costly to make, then the claim that democracy is valuable because it provides nonpolitical choices sounds hollow, (particularly when our rejecting the political choices we are offered is said to be a choice itself). Does a necessary connection exist between democracies and societies in which people's non-political choices are honored? Rational choice theorists would have to answer this question with a strong affirmative to justify democracy as they have redefined it.

It is now time to turn to a detailed examination of how a conception of choice can be said to be at the heart of rational choice theory's deflation of democracy. We shall also see how this idea's corrosive power makes it impossible for rational choice theorists to justify democracy as they have redefined it.

I

Kenneth Arrow's *Social Choice and Individual Values*, published in 1951, is recognized by rational, social, and public choice theorists as one of the founding works in their field. Arrow, an economist, sets out to consider whether people's preferences can be democratically counted and combined in order to arrive at a "social state" preferred by the majority.⁴ His conclusion remains one of the central concerns of all contemporary choice theory.⁵ Arrow argues that if we grant all individuals' preferences equal weight in making social policy, and if individuals have at least three alternatives from which to choose, it is logically impossible to construct a procedure that allows us to move from individual preferences to a rational col-

lective choice.⁶ “Arrow’s paradox” assumes, of course, that everyone does not prefer the same alternative to each of the others and that appeals to the greater good of the whole either are not made or are ineffective (p. 3; for formal proofs, see pp. 48–60).

Although Arrow’s work has been of great importance to those who concern themselves primarily and explicitly with applying choice theory to politics, Arrow himself devotes almost no attention to political specifics. He also qualifies his conclusion by noting that comparing voting to the market is only one among many possible understandings of elections and politics and that his paradox does not exclude the possibility that democratic social choices can be arrived at by means other than formal decision rules (pp. 81–86). Important as these qualifications are, Arrow still maintains that social choice theory promises to provide the soundest foundation for democracy.

Arrow’s theory asserts an important similarity between voting and the market, and in doing so, calls our attention to how he uses choices to explain politics. Voting and the market are “methods” by which social choices are made; how individuals choose and how their choices are transformed into social choices can be symbolized in the same ways. It is surprising, then, that although Arrow speaks of “social choices,” “individual choices,” and “choice functions” or “choice mechanisms,”⁷ what matters in his analysis are people’s “tastes,” “values,” “preferences,” or “orderings,” rather than their choices (pp. 2, 12, 18, 34). When Arrow does speak of individual people choosing, he often does so indirectly: “In the present study the objects of choice are social states” (p. 17). But who chooses “the objects of choice?” Individual people, presumably; but Arrow does not say so explicitly. “It is simply assumed that the individual orders all social states by whatever standards he deems relevant” (p. 17).

When Arrow writes explicitly about individual people choosing, he establishes a puzzling connection between “choice” and “values” in the process: “We certainly wish to assume that the individuals in our society are free to choose, by varying their values, among the alternatives available” (p. 28). What would it mean to choose “by varying [our] values?” We commonly speak of our values informing our choices, implying that our values provide us with stable general criteria with which to judge the specifics of a poten-

tial choice.⁸ Arrow, then, seems caught in the dilemma of whether there is such a thing as a free individual choice, or whether our choices are, in effect, made for us by our values, our personal histories and conditioning forces, a possibility he entertains more seriously later (p. 86).

Another reason for Arrow balking at speaking of individual people choosing is due to what he imagines them choosing between; "social states" are vast, comprehensive imagined structures and resource allocations for an entire society.⁹ It strains the concept of choice to speak of individual people choosing between such vast alternatives. (Arrow, unlike other social choice theorists, does not speak of these alternatives as being defined before they are presented to voters; hence, people must not only choose between social states—they must define them as well.)

Surprising though his muting of individual choice may first appear, Arrow has a compelling reason for doing so. He consistently weakens the importance of individual choice in the various ways mentioned because it is the only way to dilute the corrosive power of his paradox. If it is the incompatibility of people's choices that forms the heart of the paradox, then the paradox can only be eased by admitting the possibility that people have tastes about social states but do not choose. As Arrow's own doubts suggest, there is something odd about reducing democracy—even for the sake of theoretical elegance—to the premise that all individuals' choices must be respected regardless of their nature. Democracies do not face reconciling preference A with B and C. They must reconcile and judge substantive preferences, and therefore protect their citizens from those whose preference orderings, although formally sound, are nevertheless dangerous and damaging.¹⁰ Although people may disagree about how to talk about what constitutes a dangerous or illegal preference, it is nevertheless the case that we all have some substantive, rather than formal, criteria that help us recognize such preferences.

Precisely because his paradox cannot capture the range of democratic solutions to political differences, Arrow's work indirectly demonstrates the impossibility of proposing a formal, choice-driven definition of democracy. If we take democracy to mean "respecting everyone's choices equally," we will find that democratic voting procedures are either paralyzed by such a principle or

cannot help but become profoundly undemocratic in the face of it. Unlike the social welfare function which unsuccessfully attempts to respect “the doctrines of citizens’ sovereignty and rationality” (p. 31), a society governed by a dictator has at least the chance of being “rational in the sense that any individual can be rational in his choices” (p. 2). Arrow then muses that democratic social choices might only be achievable by forming a consensus, not counting everyone’s preferences equally, and fostering loyalty to a democratic system as such (pp. 81–86, 90). Riker, as we shall soon see, uses the paradox of voting to encourage us to expect less of democracy; Arrow, by contrast, uses it to show that democracy cannot live on an economic theory of choice alone.

Still, Arrow is enough of a skeptic about traditional democratic theory to refuse to embrace any of its possible solutions to his paradox. He remains committed to finding a reliable democratic social choice mechanism despite his corrosive critique of such a possibility, a commitment displayed in his book’s title. Honest as it is about the difficulties of doing so, *Social Choice and Individual Values* preserves the hope that a method can be found for bringing individuals’ values together into a unique and democratically achieved social choice. To have any chance at coherence and democratic legitimacy, social choices must be accomplished by an impartial mechanism rather than by individuals. But this vision of democracy, in which political virtues like fairness and respect for others are infused in a procedure, is strangely divorced from human agency. Indeed, Arrow seems to rest his hopes on a sort of procedure that guarantees democratic outcomes regardless of people’s values or concerns, despairing as he does about people being able to reach a consensus by being persuaded to change their minds. If this approximates Arrow’s vision, we should not be surprised that democracy ends up seeming elusive to him, especially since he believes that not procedures but the results they yield win people over (pp. 90–91). The odd notion that procedures, not those who make and use them, can produce coherent choices, kills democracy in its attempt to save and perfect it.¹¹

When Arrow speaks of his conception social choices, therefore, one sees that they are not of individual people’s making. “Methods” are the catalyst for transforming or “amalgamating” individual values into a social choice: “The methods of voting and the market ...

are methods of amalgamating the tastes of many individuals in the making of social choices" (p. 2). Also, they are "two different, though related, methods of forming social choices from individual orderings" (p. 34). Arrow is not saying anything surprising in either of these passages apart from the way he juxtaposes individual tastes or orderings to social choices. His language emphasizes the distance and difference between individual tastes and social choices, placing the burden of making and forming social choices on methods. The alchemical character of this project becomes more intense when Arrow spells out his paradox and demonstrates that, so conceived, a democratically achieved social choice is next to impossible. Social choices may be achieved, but only if they are "imposed or dictatorial."¹² Although it seems impossible to Arrow to devise a method of social choice that is not vulnerable to allowing one person's preferences (rather than those of the majority) to dictate the content of social choices, he cannot embrace any other way of justifying democracy either. Arrow stops short of drawing general political conclusions from this theoretical impasse; such conclusions, however, form the basis of the more recent work of the social choice theorist, William Riker.

II

William Riker's *Liberalism Against Populism* is addressed to a wide audience. In Riker's words, he is writing for "political philosophers, students of political institutions, and beginning students of social choice theory" (Preface, first page). The confrontation between liberalism and populism, announced in the book's title, is Riker's formula for pitting social choice theory against the bulk of democratic theory. Riker does not deny that there have been liberal democratic theorists; rather, he maintains that once social choice theory tests the claims of the range of democratic theories, only liberal theories pass muster. Because of its power to test the viability of normative claims, Riker argues that social choice theory ought to be accorded more central a role in political theory as a result. Once Riker puts his version of social choice theory in that role, however, he is himself troubled by how weak a justification of democracy it is able to provide.

The name, “social choice theory,” suggests either that the theory deals with choices society makes or with choices about social policy or welfare made by individual people. But according to Riker’s account, “social choice theory” does neither. First, as Riker explains, society cannot choose (p. 18); second, individual peoples’ choices about social policy are not authoritative because no method of counting or “amalgamating” them can ensure that everyone’s choice (that is, everyone’s vote) is given equal weight in the final outcome (pp. 239–243; see p. 1 for this use of “amalgamating”). Indeed, in addition to questioning whether individuals’ choices can ever be counted equally, Riker implies that individuals rarely choose at all. Exploring Riker’s use of the word “choice” reveals that even while it is central to his theory, he repeatedly qualifies it, undercutting its relevance to the phenomena he seeks to explain.

Riker begins his book by qualifying individual choice: “The theory of social choice is a theory about the way the tastes, preferences, or values of individual persons are amalgamated and summarized into the choice of a collective group or society” (p. 1). But society’s ability to choose must be qualified as well: “Although individuals can arrive at a unique choice, in this case [the paradox of voting] society cannot even choose” (p. 18).¹³ Riker relies on “Arrow’s paradox” to prove that society cannot choose coherently. Imagine a society composed of three individuals who have three alternatives from which to choose. Assuming that each individual prefers the three alternatives in a different order (1, 2, 3; 2, 3, 1; 3, 1, 2) and that their preferences are transitive (that is, consistent over all three alternatives), then it is impossible to arrive at a majority choice that will be transitive (pp. 16–19). Transitivity can only be imposed on the majority’s decision by allowing one of the three individuals to dictate his preferences to the other two—an imposition that necessarily guts majority rule (p. 18). Dictatorship turns up in spite of the best democratic intentions; society cannot choose.

This is a puzzling conclusion, since Riker’s opening statement suggests that only collectivities make choices, while individual people’s “tastes, preferences, or values” provide only their raw material.¹⁴ But the use of the passive (“are amalgamated and summarized”) complicates the matter, sidestepping the conclusion that here, at least, Riker must mean that society does choose. By using the passive, Riker avoids saying who makes a choice; this

usage turns choice into an attribute rather than an act of society. And in those passages in which Riker designates society as the chooser by means of an active verb, he does so only with substantial qualification: “. . . the only way to make ‘society’ choose coherently is to impose a dictator” (p. 18). In his final chapter, Riker emphatically shuts the door on the possibility that we might ever speak of society choosing, by arguing that, according to the liberal view, society cannot choose because society is not an agent (p. 244). These are Riker’s reasons for saying that society cannot choose. But what might his reasons for being unwilling to say that individuals choose be?

We see this unwillingness most clearly when Riker enumerates the elements of the paradox of voting; here, he again employs the passive voice—this time with respect to individuals’ choices—as if these choices too are made without a chooser:

Given a society of n persons, where i is one individual, and given a set of alternatives, $X = (x, y, . . .)$, a rule of choice is a rule by which a choice, C , is made for all of the n persons . . .” (p. 17, emphasis added).

Riker, like Arrow, calls the power of individuals and societies to choose into question in order to claim that collective choices are made by electoral rules, rather than by people, either singly or collectively. Equating democracy with voting shrinks what many democratic theorists mean by democracy considerably; equating democracy with voting plagued by Arrow’s paradox shrinks it further still.

The doubts Riker wishes to raise in our minds about democracy depend on his ability to transform his doubts about voting procedures into doubts about democracy as such. To do so, Riker claims that any understanding of democracy must be fundamentally based on a theory of voting that takes the privacy and secrecy of voters’ preferences for granted: “Voting is in turn an indispensable feature of democracy because, however the goals of democracy are defined, its method involves some kind of popular participation in government. Although participation can take many forms, historically—and probably logically—it invariably includes voting” (p. 1). Once Riker has asserted the centrality of voting to all understandings of democracy, he explains that liberalism differs from populism most

fundamentally on the question of how election results should be interpreted. As a consequence, Rousseau, as Riker's designated populist, has a theory of democracy-as-voting attributed to him.¹⁵

Riker would have a stronger case against populism and democratic theory in general if Rousseau had in fact accepted voting as a central institutional component of the polity he imagined in *The Social Contract*. But what makes Rousseau's political thought so striking is rather his refusal to rely solely on voting to make a case for legitimate government. Indeed, the politics Rousseau imagines does not strive to honor individual people's private preferences. What Riker takes to be Rousseau's understanding of the general will in fact approximates what Rousseau calls the "will of all"—a mere tallying of the very private preferences Rousseau believes cannot help citizens determine the general will.¹⁶ In characterizing Rousseau as the original populist, Riker emphasizes the "computation" involved in arriving at the general will (p. 11). Rousseau is much more ambiguous, sometimes speaking the language of computation but also saying that the general will is an expression of "common interest" or "the social bond" whose expression is rare and never assured (pp. 69; 72–75).¹⁷ As a consequence, Rousseau does not accept what Riker characterizes as "the populist interpretation of voting": ". . . the opinions of the majority *must* be right and *must* be respected because the will of the people is the liberty of the people" (p. 14; emphasis in text). Majorities, for Rousseau, do not express the general will simply because they are majorities. Nor do particular electoral rules discover the general will.¹⁸

Riker's reading of Rousseau is as necessary to his argument as it is misleading. In his attempt to show that most democratic theorists have erred, Riker argues instead that his understanding of democracy is accepted by all. If one allows this argumentative move, then Riker can more easily show in his next move that the liberal understanding of democracy is more coherent than the populist one. All Riker has discredited, however, is one peculiar theory of voting rather than the bulk of democratic theory.¹⁹

This lacuna in Riker's argument becomes more obvious when one considers that modern democratic theorists, like Rousseau and J. S. Mill, had deep misgivings about a system of voting that allowed individuals' preferences to remain private and secret.²⁰ And ancient Athenian democracy, as discussed in chapter 3, relied principally on

a lottery system rather than a voting mechanism for selecting government officials. As a result, Riker's attempt to discredit all understandings of democracy besides the one he believes social choice theory validates has too small a scope to accomplish its aim.²¹

As a theory of voting, the view Riker seeks to discredit proves an easy target. If one believes that a system of voting alone can reveal the popular will, then one's "populism" will most likely not be able to deliver what it promises. But if social choice theory leads to the conclusion that "the people speak in meaningless tongues" (p. 239), what purpose remains in having elections or having any faith in democracy? In arguing against populism, Riker turns the force of his argument against his own understanding of democracy—that is, one based on voting. As long as other theories of democracy do not rely upon voting for the reasons Riker characterizes populists as doing, they escape his criticisms. But if it is elections that yield incoherent results, what coherence can one expect from a theory of democracy that believes voting to be "at the heart of both the method and ideal of democracy"? (p. 8).

Riker is clearly troubled by the bleak perspective on democracy that social choice theory obliges him to hold. Realizing that the consequences of reducing democracy to a liberal theory of voting are "democratically unpalatable," he muses whether giving up the idea that the results of elections are expressions of popular will leads to gutting them of meaning altogether:

It is possible that alternative x (say, some political platform) repeatedly beats alternative y (another platform) so that one is fairly certain that x has a good majority over y . But suppose x wins only because z was eliminated earlier or was suppressed by the Constitution or by the method of counting or by manipulation. What then is the status of x ? If x is as precise as a motion, then one can still be fairly sure that x at least beats y . But if x is as vague as an ideology, it is far from certain that a clear decision is ever made (p. 239).

The value of elections is no longer assured if we can think of so many reasons to mistrust and even discount their results.²² And if elections are at the heart of democracy, then the value of democracy itself stands or falls with them. Riker's attempt to dispatch rival understandings of democracy ends up turning against his own.²³

Riker concludes his book by offering a drastically qualified justification of liberal democracy. We must, Riker says, simply expect less of elections. Although they cannot serve as invariable expressions of popular will and guides to policy, elections can still serve as potent checks against elected officials' abuse of power. From worrying about whether our elections allow us choices at all, Riker moves swiftly through a series of steps to place his confidence in a mere possibility: "Liberalism requires only that it be *possible* to reject a putatively offending official, not that the rejection actually occur" (p. 243 emphasis in text). An electoral system checks the actions of public officials not because the people express their will during elections, but only because electoral results determine public officials' fate. Riker's liberal democracy depends a great deal, however, on public officials' still believing in the existence of a popular will and conducting themselves in accordance to their perception of it (p. 11).

Social choice theory, at least in Riker's terms, leads to the dispiriting conclusion that the only "choices" democratic systems must honor are those removing officials from office; indeed, even such a choice seems less important than the institutional mechanisms and residual beliefs that make it a credible threat.²⁴ It is odd indeed to watch a theorist who seems to base his understanding of individual behavior in politics so fundamentally on a conception of choice conclude that, among all the kinds of political choices people are ordinarily taken to make, only voting against someone counts as a political choice. But the same doubts Riker has about other political choices must apply to the choice to reject an official as well. Ultimately, Riker's liberal democracy rests on the belief of elected officials that there is some nonarbitrary connection between their actions and their prospects for reelection. On its own, the possibility that elected officials have such a belief cannot support the weight of the case for democracy as a system that honors individual choice.

III

Arrow and Riker use rational choice theory to lower our expectations of democracy by discrediting more optimistic theories of it. Both find it difficult, however, to stop their critiques of democratic theory from corroding the more modest understandings of

democracy they propose. James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, however, embrace the corrosive power of rational choice theory by advocating fundamental changes in electoral politics. Their position goes beyond that of most rational choice theorists, many of whom attempt to use the economic basis of their theory selectively to criticize a few democratic excesses while pronouncing what they believe to be the essence of democratic theory in harmony with the principles of rational choice. This position, as we have seen, proves to be a difficult balance to maintain. Buchanan and Tullock, by contrast, are not so delicate in their application of rational choice theory to democratic theory. In embracing the corrosive power of rational choice theory, Buchanan and Tullock jettison the very democratic norms that give Arrow's paradox its bite—the principle of political equality and the prohibition against the buying and selling of votes—in favor of individual choice, transformed into what is for them the ultimate democratic norm of liberty.

Buchanan consistently uses market choice as the standard against which political choice ought to be measured. Early in his career, Buchanan, considered to be the founder of public choice theory, argues that market choice is more “articulate” than political choice.²⁵ In a book written some 30 years later, Buchanan muses whether “choice” is even an appropriate word for what people do when they vote, since saying the (poorly informed) voter in a large polity is choosing is as perverse as saying one is choosing when one expresses one's preference about the weather for the following day.²⁶ Buchanan's use of “choice” demonstrates that he takes choice to be at home in the world of buying and selling but finds it ill-suited to the institutionally constrained and collectivized world of politics. Buchanan's project can be understood, I think, as an attempt to reform politics into a hospitable environment for “articulate” market choice—and to reform our understanding of democracy in the process.

Our market choices are more articulate than our political choices, Buchanan argues, because in the market we choose among a wider array of things, and do not face the prospect of being denied what we have chosen. Economists, when speaking of consumers' choices, speak of consumers choosing bundles of commodities. Although we might also say that when we vote for a particular candidate we are also choosing a policy bundle, we choose the candidate

cum policy bundle more or less as a package, in a way that the supermarket shopper filling a cart full of groceries and then paying for them does not. Buchanan explains this distinction between our market and our political choices by saying that while our income is easily divisible, our voting power is not. Elections are structured in such a way that each person has one and only one vote to “spend” on each issue or office. Consequently, if our candidate, initiative, or bond measure does not win, we have spent our vote and gotten nothing—and perhaps, worse than nothing, a disappointment—in return (“Individual Choice,” pp. 338–339).

It bears noting that Buchanan uses “articulate,” an adjective usually applied to speakers, to capture the distinction he wants to draw between market and political choice. Recall Riker’s claim that election results inevitably lead to the conclusion that “the people speak in meaningless tongues.” Surely this does not mean that either Buchanan or Riker wants to characterize the market as an arena devoted to speech. Rather, it is as if Buchanan, at least, considers consumers’ activity their most important expression of freedom—consumption and exchange trump the more capricious “voice” of the people, becoming their most fundamental form of democratic expression.

Buchanan’s first major work, *The Calculus of Consent*, (written together with Gordon Tullock), serves as one the most basic and comprehensive texts of public choice theory. In this book, Buchanan and Tullock contrast the benefits of voluntary arrangements and market choices to the inefficiencies and coercive implications of “collective action.”²⁷ Buchanan and Tullock maintain that only a unanimous vote on which areas of life ought to fall under government jurisdiction, and on how policies regarding them ought to be adopted, accords with basic democratic principles. Such principles, they add, cannot be violated by voluntary agreements.

Buchanan and Tullock’s insistence on unanimity in laying political foundations stems from their understanding of “democratic liberty” (p. 97). According to Buchanan and Tullock, only a unanimously adopted plan (outlining governmental jurisdiction and methods of policymaking) involves no “costs” to democratic liberty. Although arriving at unanimity may be time-consuming and “costly” in that sense, Buchanan and Tullock argue expenditures of

time do not violate anyone's liberty. The kinds of costs that do pose a threat to liberty are the costs imposed by a system of majority rule, in which only a simple majority decides the shape of a group's political foundation (or constitution, as Buchanan and Tullock call it [p. 81]). A system relying exclusively on majority rule has no checks against a majority laying governmental claims to the property of dissenting minorities; it is such threats to individuals' property which Buchanan and Tullock believe to be the most basic violations of democratic liberty (pp. 56, 97). For the same reason, Buchanan and Tullock generally advocate voluntary arrangements rather than governmental action as a means to solving problems individuals cannot solve by themselves (p. 56).²⁸

When Buchanan and Tullock say that "democratic liberty" is endangered by governmental interference, they mean that politics is hostile to the kinds of choices individuals make in ideal markets. When Buchanan and Tullock argue for governmental decentralization, they speak of saving individual choice from the political process. Presumably, if governmental units were small and sufficiently independent of each other, individual people could easily choose between them and move from the jurisdiction of one to another.²⁹ Buchanan and Tullock also offer a more general definition of freedom of choice as the freedom of any person to buy or sell anything she/he chooses without the interference of others. Although they recognize no exceptions to freedom of choice so understood, one wonders how permitting the buying or selling of term papers, nuclear weapons, or other people could be construed as expressions of democratic liberty.³⁰

Buchanan and Tullock do not address such issues; instead, they devote their argumentative energy to convincing us that one particular democratic norm unjustly infringes upon democratic liberty; we ought, they argue, to be free to buy and sell votes. "Individuals' votes have economic value" (p. 122); current restrictions against buying or selling votes, according to Buchanan and Tullock, would be unnecessary if this were not so. Because all issues do not matter to everyone to the same degree, Buchanan and Tullock propose an open market in votes to allow people to register the relative "intensity" of their preferences on any given issue (pp. 125–126). Trading a vote on one issue for a vote on another would be permissible; so would "side-payments"—buying someone else's vote (i.e.,

paying them not to vote or to vote against their inclination) or selling one's own vote on an issue one deems unimportant (pp. 124–125, 154–155, 186–188, 209).

The variety of reasons one might think of to justify prohibiting a market in votes, the principal one of which would be the vast differences in people's ability to buy them, are not extensively addressed. Instead, Buchanan and Tullock suggest that this prohibition is based on the assumption that political equality means devising a system of voting that makes it seem as if everyone feels equally strongly about every issue.³¹ This is clearly not the case, as Buchanan and Tullock marshal the example of logrolling to indicate (p. 123). They interpret the practice of logrolling as an ongoing effort to approximate market exchange in a restrictive and hostile environment, arguing that we ought to acknowledge its meaning and make politics more like the market. That way, politics would be able to reflect what we want more accurately and be able to give us what we want more often.³²

This proposal, farfetched though it may seem, reveals something about Arrow's paradox by the way it goes about dissolving it. If votes were marketable in the way Buchanan and Tullock imagine, the norm that drives Arrow's paradox—that everyone's preferences count equally—would have to be rejected. Therefore, Arrow's paradox is only troubling to rational choice theorists who, while declaring some democratic norms off limits to the theory's critical power, find that the theory imperils them all the same. Buchanan and Tullock, however, readily accept the critical implications of rational choice theory, promptly discarding all norms the theory could be taken to question.

Not only do Buchanan and Tullock believe that the market permits unconstrained choice; they take market choice to be the paradigm for choosing because they believe politics cannot offer choices that improve upon those available in the market. Indeed, Buchanan and Tullock take the notion of the free market so literally that they seem blind to the ways in which the market itself may constrain and limit choice. In his later work, Buchanan still adheres to this view, arguing that while individual choice in the market is "autonomous," individual choice in politics is "irresponsible" to such a degree that it may not be appropriate to call it "choice" at all (*LMS*, pp. 230–234).³³