Constitutions, voting and democracy: A review

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Abstract. This review of William Riker’s work suggests that his interest in rational choice theory was based on his desire to understand profound constitutional transformation in U.S. political history. Although he argued that “anything can happen in politics,” his use of the notion of heresthetic allowed him to focus on key contingent events. Indeed his later work added depth to his inductive generalizations on the nature of “federal bargains” and coalition formation.

Recent work by Austen-Smith and Banks, Merrill and Grofman, and Lijphart is also discussed in the light of Riker’s earlier ideas on voting and democracy.

1 Constitutions and federations

William H. Riker became famous not just for his work on the functioning of democracy, but also for his singular vision in creating the school of rational choice (or positive political theory) in political science. After moving from Lawrence College, Wisconsin, to be chair of the Department of Political Science at Rochester University, Riker set about attracting young scholars and gifted graduate students who would go on to develop new ideas in social choice and game theory.1 Recently, Green and Shapiro [36] have criticized the

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1 Amadae and Bueno de Mesquita [3] discuss Riker’s influence and cite many of the scholars associated with Rochester: John Aldrich, Peter Aranson, David Austen-Smith, Jeff Banks, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita himself, Randy Calvert, Daniel Diermeier,
rational choice school in general, and Riker in particular, for an inattention to empirical falsification of the theory. In this review I shall consider Riker’s research program with the purpose of demonstrating that he pursued the rational choice model in order to answer substantive and profound questions of democratic theory. Indeed his view of theory can be neatly summed up by quoting from his review in 1965 [80] of a book on the pure theory of politics, by de Jouvenel [22].

A theory starts of course from a set of axioms. . . . It proceeds by constructing chains of syllogisms from the axioms and conclusions of prior syllogisms. . . . [However,] the axioms may themselves be wrong — indeed self-evident truths often are — and must therefore be subjected to verification or, as is now the style of statement, to attempts at falsification. Typically, one cannot verify the axioms directly: how is one to prove or disprove an assertion that [such and such] is a paradigm of politics? So one proves or disproves the axioms by testing the validity of the inference from them. If the inferences are empirically correct, then one has confidence in the axioms. If they are false, however, one must revise the axioms and begin building theory anew [80, p. 377].

Riker had previously elaborated this principle both in his earlier book on coalitions [78] and in two articles in a philosophy journal [75, 77].

This methodological position can be seen in his first substantial published piece, his book of 1953 on Democracy in the United States [72]. Although this book had the appearance of a textbook, it set out most of the substantive questions on American democracy that would preoccupy Riker throughout his life. The problems that underlay the fourth chapter on “The Constitution and the Theory of the Separation of Powers” were: how did the peculiar institution of Federalism come into being in 1787 in the United States, and how did it maintain itself and evolve over the generations? It was not until his later book in 1964 that Riker was able to grapple with this question.

The second problem that Riker considered was the relationship between the nature of the electoral system and the qualitative aspects of political competition. This relationship is often characterized today as Duverger’s Law and Hypothesis [27, 28]: elections based on single-member districts and plurality (winner-take-all) rule give rise to two dominant parties, while elections based on multi-member districts (using proportional representation, for example) allow for multiple parties (that is to say, three or more).

An early formulation of the two-party law was put forward by Schattschneider [101, pp. 65–75]. He noted that, in the U.S. context, a minor party can

James Enelow, Timothy Feddersen, Morris Fiorina, Keith Krehbiel, Gerry Kramer, Richard McKelvey, Peter Ordeshook, Keith Poole, Alvin Rabushka, David Rohde, Itai Sened, and Kenneth Shepsle. Other younger scholars associated with Rochester include John Carey, John Duggan, John Huber, Fiona McGillivray and Alastair Smith. Sadly, both Peter Aranson and Jeff Banks have recently died.