

# Letters

## State Political Science Associations

To the Editor:

This is to update an item in Donald S. Vaughan's "The Role of State Political Science Associations" (*PS*, Spring 1987). Since Dr. Vaughan conducted his 1985 survey, the Pennsylvania Political Science Association has inaugurated *COMMONWEALTH: A Journal of Political Science*, an annual publication. I am happy to report that Volume 1 was published in 1987. Volume 2 is in preparation, and submissions are being accepted for Volume 3.

Some guidelines for manuscripts are as follows: the preferred length is 15-25 typewritten pages (including notes and references). Tables and figures should be on separate, consecutively-numbered pages following the text and preceding content notes with a note in the text indicating their placement. The number of copies to be submitted is four. To facilitate blind refereeing, author's name and affiliation should be on a separate cover page. Citation style: *APSR* (in-text) for references. All material should be double-spaced.

I will be pleased to respond to inquiries from prospective contributors who may contact me at Box 563, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA 17325.

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## Buchanan: A Behavioral Dimension, Too

As did many others, I read Professor Ostrom's "Buchanan and the Constitutional Bases of Political Decision Making"

(*PS*, Spring, 1987) with interest and benefit. Buchanan's continuing efforts to address the "constitutional level of analysis" was surely both a major reason for awarding him the Alfred Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences and an undertaking of considerable substantive concern to political scientists.

Regrettably, however, Professor Ostrom's discussion did not deal with another very important aspect of Buchanan's work. I refer here, of course, to his lifelong exposition and development of ideas originally advanced in 1896 by Knut Wicksell, ideas which led one scientific journal reporting the award to use the caption "Self-Interest in Politics Earns a Nobel Prize."<sup>1</sup> The significance of Buchanan's concern with the *behavior* of political decisionmakers is apparent both in the very first paragraph of the Royal Swedish Academy press release announcing the award<sup>2</sup> and in the opening sentences of Buchanan's Nobel Prize lecture:

On this of all occasions I should be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the influence of that great Swede, Knut Wicksell, on my own work, an influence without which I should not be at this podium. Many of my contributions, and especially those in polit-

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<sup>1</sup>*Science* story, 21 November 1986, p. 941. A *New York Times* story was headed "Why Governments Got Out of Hand," Sunday, October 26, 1986.

<sup>2</sup>"In a series of studies, Buchanan has developed a corresponding theory of decision-making in the public sector. This comprehensive theoretical formulation, known as the New Political Economy or 'Public Choice,' lies on the boundary between economics and political science and has some of its origins in the work of the Swedish economist, Knut Wicksell." *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 89(1), 1987, p. 1.

ical economy and fiscal theory, might be described as varied reiterations, elaborations, and extensions of Wicksellian themes; this lecture is no exception.

Quite apart from the role they played in stimulating Professor Buchanan's thinking, Wicksell's ideas—and Buchanan's subsequent elaboration of them—are as relevant to political science as they are to economics. In fact, given the present orientation of the two disciplines, they may be even more germane to the former than to the latter. For this reason, I think, they deserve at least brief treatment in any assessment of Buchanan's thought directed primarily at an audience of political scientists.

As Buchanan observed in his Nobel Prize Lecture, "stripped to its essentials, Wicksell's message was clear, elementary, and self-evident." Although constitutions and structural arrangements differ from country to country, in all cases political decisions are made by public officials—whether anointed, elected or appointed. But the mode of their selection is not the critical factor. However chosen, public officials inevitably bring to their offices many of the behavioral characteristics of *homo economicus*—i.e., a dedicated pursuit of self-interest. We must expect, therefore, that public actions and decisions will often be shaped by private and personal concerns.

Given human nature, Wicksell argued, ". . . neither the executive nor the legislative body, and even less the deciding majority in the latter, are in reality . . . what the ruling theory tells us they should be. They are not pure organs of the community with no thought other than to promote the common weal." In actuality, he continued, ". . . members of the representative body are, in the overwhelming majority of cases, precisely as interested in the general welfare as are their constituents, neither more nor less."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>These quotations are from Buchanan's Nobel Prize Lecture which cites, in turn, Knut Wicksell, "A New Principle of Just Taxation," *Classics in the Theory of Public Finance*, R. A. Musgrave and A. T. Peacock, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 72-118. Wicksell's original work was *Finantheoretische Untersuchungen* (Jena: Gustava Fischer, 1896).

Or, as the aforementioned press release delicately put it, "individuals who behave selfishly on markets can hardly behave wholly altruistically in political life."

From these basic behavioral postulates flow some rather mordant political conclusions. The votes of legislators are likely to be influenced by their perceived self-interest, the decisions of elected officials and bureaucrats are likely to be colored by the same imperatives. In either case, the "general weal" (assuming that such exists) will usually come off a poor second to other concerns and considerations. Small wonder, then, that Buchanan and so many others who espouse "public choice theory" seek to restrict the sphere of governmental activity and place such great weight on the need for fixed rules and constitutional constraints.

Professor Ostrom has quite correctly stressed the importance to political science of Buchanan's attention to the constitutional bases of political decision-making. No less important, I would say, is the emphasis which Buchanan—and Wicksell—place on the ineluctably self-serving behavioral tendencies underlying these same processes. Their ideas have obvious relevance, and considerable explanatory power, for those troubled by the frequent disparity between the professed objectives of the individuals or groups proposing a solution to "public problems" and the actual policy outcomes, whether legislative or administrative.

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## Ostrom Replies

Somit is correct. Buchanan has done important work at the collective choice and operational levels of analysis. I would, however, urge caution. The behavior of political decisionmakers applies to collective choice. The implementation gap is indicative of a distinction between collective choice and collective action.

The use of methodological individualism and a postulate of self-interest is original

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neither with Buchanan nor Wicksell. It is doubtful that Buchanan or Wicksell have improved in that regard upon the treatment offered by Hobbes in the Introduction and first 13 chapters of *Leviathan*. It would be hard to examine the works of Montesquieu, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Smith, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, or Tocqueville and conclude that either executive or legislative bodies are "pure organs of the community with no thought other than to promote the common weal."

One of the merits of *The Federalist* is Hamilton's and Madison's use of methodological individualism and a postulate of self-interest in addressing the problem of governance (Ostrom, 1987: Ch. 2). Majority coalitions represented a potential threat to them. Indeed, it can be argued that Hamilton and Madison went further in elaborating a logic for the constitution of liberty than Buchanan achieved in *The Limits of Liberty* (1975).

Recognizing that politicians serve their own interests should not be difficult. We see evidence of it every day. Rulers have exploited the ruled throughout human

history. The great trick is how to devise a constitutional order where politicians are obliged to serve others as well as serve themselves. This is why the study of politics must be more than the study of behavior. The critical importance of Buchanan's work is a recognition that the play of the game of politics requires that serious consideration be given to the rules of the game and the way that rules are constitutive of order in human societies. The American experiments in constitutional choice were efforts to subject political decisionmakers to a rule of law and by so doing secure the liberty of those who occupy the constitutional positions of citizens and persons.

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## References

- Buchanan, James M. (1975). *The Limits of Liberty: Between Anarchy and Leviathan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ostrom, Vincent (1987). *The Political Theory of a Compound Republic: Designing the American Experiment*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.