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# Letters to the Editor

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## **Comment on Robert S. Erikson, “Why Democrats Lose Presidential Elections”**

**W**e much appreciate the penetrating empirical analysis and the seminal political insight represented in Professor Erikson's paper. However, we feel that he has understated the implications of his work for the advance of a truly theoretical political science. Erikson's analysis is deeply rooted in a choice theoretic framework. What he fails to note is that the choice framework is naturally embedded within the Marxian model of social theory. Consider the following theoretical explication.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Erikson shows that it is in the Democratic Congresspersons' collective interest to nominate otherwise inexplicably incompetent presidential candidates. We extend his analysis by positing that the Democrats are driven by a *legislative* strategy, and the Republicans by an *executive* strategy. The differences in strategies is conveniently explained by an asymmetric theory of party competition based on the differences in the social order between Republicans and Democrats. This theory allows us to argue that both the Democrats and Republicans are indeed acting in a rational fashion.

The answer lies in the obvious once we think of party competition as asymmetric. Republicans and Democrats have variant perceptions about the costs and payoffs associated with the game's strategies. Consider the opportunity costs of a political career. Republicans, a silvery-spooned lot, may normally expect a successful career path in the private sector, typically a vice-presidency in their parents' firm and a membership in the local country club.

Democrats, rising from the petite bourgeoisie, are faced with a lifetime of ambulance-chasing or divorce court. Clearly the variance in the social orders dictates that the opportunity costs are more weighty for an aspiring Republican, as opposed to a Democratic, public servant.

Consider the differential payoffs to be expected from executive service as opposed to a legislative career. A political appointment in any administration holds promise. As contemporary experiences in the EPA or DOD reveal, the official who understands honest graft may take advantage of his or her chances. The payoffs may be quite high, perhaps in the millions. However, this strategy is high risk: only a few executive officers may expect truly lucrative payoffs and political appointees must consider the chance of extended Federal service making license plates. On the other hand, a Congressional career promises a lifetime stream of income. Congresspersons may expect proper treatment from campaign contributors, excellent tours of the world's finer resorts, and substantial inducements to share their speechifying talents. These payoffs, however, rarely approach the amounts to be expected from executive service. Yet, modest as they may be, they are assured in the long-run. As theory would indicate, Congress sets its own standards of ethical excellence. More important, the *doctrine of legislative appointment*, otherwise known as the incumbency factor, allows members of Congress to retire at their personal convenience.

Thus, we may characterize executive service as a high-payoff high-risk strategy, one to be most highly valued by the otherwise risk-acceptant. Legislative careers on the other hand, represent a modest-payoff low-risk strategy, one attractive to

the risk-acceptant. Conversely, Democrats possess concave utility functions and are risk averse. Republicans, as rational actors, choose to control the executive, while Democrats, acting in the same rational fashion choose to control the legislature. Q.E.D.

We understand this phenomenon to be a routine manifestation of the *theory of asymmetric strategic rationality*, a theory profoundly based in the meta-scientific and positive principles of Marx. The theory explains much of what is unknown about political life and demonstrates that the remainder is of little interest.

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### Note

1. The theory is presented as a set of verbal conjectures. The formal proofs of the underlying theorems and their corollaries may be found in the Appendix (which has been deleted for lack of interest).

## Bravo for Gabriel A. Almond

I strongly agree with Almond's claim that "mainstream political science is open to all methods that illuminate the world of politics and public policy" (*PS*, Fall 1988). It is a welcome plea for tolerance and openness in the profession. With my academic activities both in Europe and the United States, I encounter the lack of tolerance mainly in two forms, on the one hand by many Marxist colleagues in Europe and on the other hand by many rational choice theorists in the United States. Almond enlightens us that both approaches have one characteristic in common, namely the unwillingness of many of its adherents ever to challenge seriously their basic premises. Just as many Marxists are never willing to consider that social class may not always be the most fundamental cause of political conflict, so do many rational choice theorists never accept that political decisions

may sometimes be based on motives of morality and altruism. As a consequence of this unwillingness to challenge their most basic premises, both Marxism and rational choice theory, when used and applied uncritically, tend to lead to closed systems of explanations.

Both approaches can have in many ways the function of religions, and Almond speaks correctly not only of schools but of sects. Belonging to a sect makes you an advocate of its causes. For Marxists, Almond observes that theirs "is a call to the academy to join the political fray, to orient its teaching and research around left ideological commitments." Rational choice theorists usually make their political message less explicit but it is a political message nevertheless, namely that it is o.k. to be selfish. If we teach our students year after year that political life can best be understood if we assume that voters and politicians act selfishly, then the assumption may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If these students in later life run for political office, they may indeed care for the homeless or protect the environment only under the condition that such actions help them to gain and keep political office. The political message of rational choice theory, if not explicitly then implicitly, is to validate the rat-race of extreme individualism: winning is always better than losing, much power better than little power, lots of money better than less money. With less emphasis on individualism in European culture, rational choice theory finds hardly any support in Europe, a point convincingly made by David McKay in the same issue of *PS*.

Almond has rendered the profession a great service in pointing out so elegantly and forcefully that as scholars we must truly be willing—not just as lipservice—to challenge constantly our premises. It is only in this way, to use Almond's metaphor, that we can move our separate tables again together and engage in a common intellectual discourse which by all means should also include open-minded Marxists and rational choice theorists.

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## APSR Reviewed

I would like to add to Patterson's account of Mansfield's editorship of the *Review* in his article on "The American Political Science Review: A Retrospective," Fall, 1988.

Patterson's account acknowledges the historical centrality of volumes 50 to 59 in the refinement of the discipline and illustrates Mansfield's catholicity, pithy language and modest reasoning, but then goes awry by supposing that Mansfield tried to carry this off by a process of merely occasionally consulting referees outside his own department.

The profession must be full of people who refereed articles at that time—and even fully of people who received a vital part of their education from Harvey's constructive way of pointing out the lessons from referees' reports when submissions were returned.

I remember the procedure perfectly well, as does Jane Shaw, Mansfield's editorial assistant for all technical matters. The only member of his own department who played a regular role, except in the rare cases where one of them was especially plausible as a referee, was myself, during five of those years. And I merely served in lieu of the present-day army of interns and other editorial assistants, reading reports for Mansfield's first screening of submissions: for \$1200 a year, I wrote a brief summary and ventured a reasoned opinion on each of the eight to ten articles submitted each week, as best I could. Mansfield did dispose of about a fifth of the submissions on the basis of his reviews of these reports: we had a few brief formulas designed courteously to reject autodidactic authors who'd obviously come to the wrong place. Everything else went to referees: only one at first, as a rule, but then on to one or more others, if the analytical critiques didn't seem convincing, or if the pieces seemed to be getting less than a fair hearing because of novel or controversial approaches. Our weekly meetings covered all new submissions, finding suitable readers for them, and assessed all the evaluations returned. He'd been in Washington a long time, and

knew how to use brash juniors like me without leaving them in any doubt as to who was running the show. It did sometimes happen that my initial report also went along with the referees' reports, where Harvey thought it might be helpful, but the idea that those volumes could have been produced by the collective expertise of the Ohio State department of the time (given our obvious limitations) is self-evidently far-fetched.

My brief account confirms the impression to be gained from Patterson's report; Mansfield never saw the journal as an impersonal operation, with judgments emanating from some disembodied "prevailing doctrine" in the profession. He knew whose opinions he especially valued—V. O. Key, Harold Stein, Sam Beer, Alex Heard, Wally Sayre, Dwight Waldo come immediately to mind—and he called on them again and again to judge the newer work and to help diagnose problems and propose improvements. This was a generation with a shared Washington experience, for the most part, and an inter-related vision of the discipline. They had an experienced but light hand with managerial revolutions. They were tough-minded, sceptical, cosmopolitan, connoisseurs of quality. Key used to fill page after page with detailed private tutorials, for example, explaining that he felt a special responsibility for counteracting the trivialization of the analytical techniques he had pioneered. Under Harvey's stewardship, the journal was open to the "behavioral revolution" because it promised non-sentimental analysis and engaged some brilliant minds, but the journal was also—sometimes to my disgust—open to the Straussian counter-revolution, for the same reasons. Then he looked around for informed and intelligent dissent from either or both. Mansfield's policies as editor—and his choice of a Franz Neumann student, trained in little beyond "continental" notions about the history of political theory, as his assistant—embody at the very least a massive qualification of John Gunnell's recent melodramatic reconstructions of the "genealogy" of the contemporary state of the discipline [cp. John G. Gunnell, "American Political Science, Liberalism, and the Intervention of Political

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Theory," 82 *American Political Science Review* 1 (March, 1988), pp. 71-87]. Some American political scientists at the very center of the discipline had learned to tolerate a lot of ambiguity and complexity: there was nothing they loathed more than the habit of mind that Harvey once unapologetically characterized as the application of just any dogma to beat a stigma.

Mansfield trusted his judgments about the key cast of characters in the post-war movement to free political science from the stubborn admixture of dull description and earnest uplift that had filled the large spaces between the work of the few extraordinary thinkers in the discipline. And in the end he trusted his own taste about style and substance: he was an editor, not a compiler. Submissions by famous people were not rarely rejected or ruthlessly edited. Not everyone liked that, and admittedly sometimes the decisions were quirky. Harvey and his generation were also so very comfortable with the American government they'd help to shape that Harvey had to work very hard to listen for the voices of the nonestablished and oppositional. But he tried, and

he was never mean-spirited when he just couldn't make out what they were trying to say or thought that it was ingenious nonsense.

That's what went into volumes 50-59 of the *American Political Science Review*. Whether the subsequent progress of professional proceduralization in the production of the journal has fulfilled the promise of these beginnings must be weighed by those who have attended to the discipline more patiently than I have done. My impression is that the generation of emancipated bureaucrats epitomized by Mansfield's editorship had a kind of worldliness and curiosity and self-assurance that is sorely missed. And Mansfield's volumes of the *Review* contain more seminal pieces, I'd bet, than any comparable series before or since. There's an hypothesis for someone to operationalize and test. If the research design would actually allow the researcher to read the volumes, the study couldn't help but be instructive.

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