William H. Riker
1920-1993

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“William Riker was a visionary scholar, institution builder, and intellect who developed methods for applying mathematical reasoning to the study of politics.” With these words, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and I began a biographical memoir for the US National Academy of Sciences to honor the life and accomplishments of one of the leading political theorists of the twentieth century. Harvard Ph.D. in hand at the end of World War II, Bill Riker began his teaching career at Lawrence College, right in the middle of the mid-century behavioral revolution in political science. He took a less-traveled path. He sought something different from the statistical truths and behavioral reality that were the currency of the day, something more fundamental, more foundational.

He did not, as did his behavioralist contemporaries, think of individuals in political life as bundles of demographic characteristics, sociological connections, or psychological predispositions, but rather as goal-oriented, purposeful actors. Individuals, for him, were rational: they had an innate capacity to assess alternatives in terms of preferences, to organize their beliefs about the likelihood of various events occurring, and to combine preference and belief in a logical manner. If preferences are represented by a utility function, and beliefs by subjective probabilities, then rationality entails maximizing behavior – choosing the alternative with the highest expected utility. For Riker, the rationality hypothesis provided the firm foundation on which to understand human behavior in general. To understand political behavior in particular, his instinct was to imbed rational individuals in institutional settings – in committees, legislatures, courts, bureaucracies, parties, electoral situations, even revolutionary groups. The study of politics from this perspective he called positive political theory (to distinguish it from normative political theory). (He rejected altogether another term common during the behavioral revolution – empirical theory – likening the latter to the more famous oxymoron, “incorporeal body.”) Through his teaching and writing, he created a new school of thought. Nearly half a century later it is part of the mainstream of political science and one of the essential building blocks of modern political economy.

Of the nearly hundred papers he wrote, the two most often cited are (with Peter C. Ordeshook), “A Theory of the Calculus of Voting” (1968) and “Implications from the
Disequilibrium of Majority Rule for the Study of Institutions” (1980). He is perhaps best known, however, for four books: *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1962), *Federalism: Origin, Operation, Maintenance* (1964), *Introduction to Positive Political Theory* (1972), and *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (1982). The first characterizes all that we think of as political as consisting of the forming of coalitions, where rational individuals engage in this activity in order to win. The volume on federalism, significant when it first appeared, had a renaissance at the end of the century when, with the fall of communism, federal experiments in nation-building accelerated. *Introduction* was essentially the very first textbook of political theory, transforming important parts of political science from civics and wisdom to science. *Liberalism Against Populism* demonstrated how an axiomatized logic of political choice could shed light on many of the philosophical issues at the foundation of democratic theory. Together, this corpus became the exemplars for how to do political science.

Riker’s crowning achievement was to institutionalize rational choice approaches to politics into a political science curriculum at the University of Rochester. He came to Rochester in 1962 as its chair and created a Ph.D. program in political science shortly thereafter. By the time of his death three decades later, Rochester had produced more than one hundred Ph.D.s and had become a brand name.

**Bibliography**


