 Arguments about Theory…Again*

Kenneth A. Shepsle
Harvard University
June 2006

We political scientists never seem to tire of discourse and debate about theory. While PhD programs in Economics (or even Sociology) offer a first-year theory curriculum that is relatively consistent across departments – with common topics and methods, a standard sequence, even the same texts and materials¹ – there is no orthodoxy in political science. Our scope and methods offerings are a potpourri of approach: large-n methods, small n-methods, case study techniques; behavioral approaches, analytical approaches, narrative approaches (even analytical narrative approaches); description, explanation, prescription. We don’t agree on what should be given priority. Even if we were to give priority, say, to explanation, we don’t always agree on what it means to explain something.

Because political science is an elephant with so many distinct anatomical features, it should not be surprising that theory debates erupt from time to time with debating points often orthogonal to one another. In comparative politics, with so diverse a set of substantive topics on the menu, the issue of theory is especially complicated. It thus provides a useful test-bed for examining various perspectives. The present symposium on universal versus middle-range theory might seem, in light of this diversity, to offer hardly any scope for argument at all. How can so much diversity in comparative politics be captured by any common set of principles? Why bother aspiring to universal theory if each prospective observation seems so much a product of distinct, idiosyncratic, indeed unique, factors? Why would one ever expect the politics of Chad to resemble the politics of Chicago?

The topography (lay) of the comparative politics playing field (land), however, is not as irregular (steeply sloped) as might appear. Diverse and complex phenomena, whether the mass and motion of the physical world or the wide assortment of species in

¹Thanks to Robert Bates and Morris Fiorina for constructive comments on an earlier draft.
¹ In the standard graduate sequence in microeconomics, for example, one of the most widely used texts at the top departments is Mas-Colell, Whinston, and Green (1995).
the biological world, do not constitute domains incompatible with some scope for common explanations. So, for the purposes of my argument, let’s put to one side the issue of whether the complexity and diversity evident in comparative politics undermine efforts at universal explanation. On the evidence from other fields, we should not reject the possibility of universal principles of politics out of hand.

Perhaps, however, middle-range theories, which I take to mean theories tailored to particular settings and contexts, offer a more sensible program of research. Chad, after all, is different from Chicago, and those differences should be recognized and taken account of at the outset. I don’t think this necessarily follows; and even when it does, it does not settle the issue. In the remainder of this brief essay, I hope to make the case for the claim that middle-range theories are not at odds with those that tend toward universal principles, that the present symposium in effect poses a false dichotomy. I will do so by describing a body of research in which middle-range and universal theorizing exist side by side, cross-fertilizing one another. Whether such peaceful and productive coexistence can arise and sustain itself in comparative politics more generally is an issue best left to the reader’s cogitation.

There is a certain irony in the fact that some exceptionally good comparative political science has been conducted within the research program of American politics. In this field the most studied institution is the legislature, and the most studied of these is the U.S. Congress. Beginning in the 1960s, political anthropologists trekked to Washington to observe native species in their natural habitat. Taking Woodrow Wilson’s epigram to heart – that “Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in committee-rooms is Congress at work” – these scholars focused especially on the committees of the House of Representatives. The earliest studies were of the powerful “exclusive” committees – Appropriations, Rules, and Ways & Means – and the research products of Fenno (1966), Robinson (1963), and Manley (1965), respectively, read just like anthropological monographs. From this, a vast industry of

---

2 Their “methodology,” subsequently termed *soaking and poking*, is eloquently described in the epilogue of Fenno (1978). A later generation trekked home to the constituencies of politicians in order to observe them in their other natural habitat – the state or district.

3 Fenno’s weighed in at 700 pages, hardly a monograph.
committee studies emerged. Much that was reported was unique and special to each research site, not unlike the reports of naturalists about diverse species in different geographic settings, of anthropologists about practices in different tribes, or of area specialists about the history, values, and behaviors observed in different political systems.

At approximately the same time, in a parallel universe it often seems, another group of scholars was studying “committees,” but not in any natural setting. Instead, these scholars took a committee to be a generic collection of individuals (usually odd in number) with a decision to make. They often began, “Assume a set $N = \{1, 2, \ldots, n\}$ of individuals (the committee) that must choose among alternatives $A = \{x, y, z, w, \ldots\}$ according to a decision rule that requires a quota $q$ of votes to come to a decision.” Their research program tended toward the search for universal principles about how individual committee members and the collective committee would behave in these choice settings.

Among the more famous “universal principles” are Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem on individual rationality and social irrationality and Black’s Median Voter Theorem on majority rule equilibrium. The former, applying to a world in which committee members may hold any transitive preferences over the alternatives in $A$, demonstrates that no decision rule satisfying several clearly stated but general requirements can assure a strict collective ranking of the alternatives in $A$ (Arrow, 1951). In particular, simple majority rule is often associated with a collective preference cycle among alternatives – that is, no strict collective ordering of the alternatives necessarily emerges. This “rational (wo)man/irrational society” phenomenon is sometimes termed Condorcet’s Paradox.

Black’s result says that if preferences over $A$ are restricted in a precise sense – the set of preferences of the members of $N$ are single-peaked – then majority rule will not cycle (Black, 1958). In particular, if preferences are symmetric and single-peaked then the transitive pairwise preferences of the committee member with the median peak (most-preferred point) will also be the collective pairwise preferences of the committee.

Putting these two research traditions cheek by jowl – the soaker-and-poker students of empirical committees and the analytical students of generic committees – I want to

---

4 Some continued the participant-observation approach, but others took an historical form while still others were quantitative studies. In short, there was methodological heterogeneity in this research program, with every club in the bag used in one study or another.
make several points. First, the analytical students have produced “universal” principles. But notice that a universal principle – a theorem – is a relationship between assumptions and consequences. It does not say that something is true always and everywhere. It says that something is true if certain conditions are satisfied. It is universal only in the sense that it is always true if these specified conditions hold. So, let us be clear and not distracted by those who would ridicule a “universal” claim by characterizing it as saying that politics in Chad is just like politics in Chicago. Black’s median voter theorem makes the following (conditional) universal claim: whenever a committee of the Revenue Ministry of Chad sets a tax rate on a commodity in a manner that looks like majority decision making, it will share much in common with the Revenue Committee of the Chicago City Council setting a property tax rate – viz., if preferences among the deciders are single-peaked, then the tax rate preferred by the median committee member will prevail in each case. Universal claims in this case are about the operating characteristics of committees. Whatever else is different between Chad and Chicago, committees in both places operating according to majority rule with single-peaked preferences will share this common tendency toward median outcomes.5

Second, in the context of committees in the U.S. Congress, soakers and pokers and analytical types, though employing altogether different tools, techniques, and research strategies, found value in one another’s research programs. Quantitative, historical, and participant-observation research provided analytical types with a contextual frame that suggested appropriate modeling strategies and targets of opportunity. For example, information about the rules by which committee proposals are taken up by the parent legislature allowed modelers to derive results about the agenda power of some committees (whose products are freely amended on the floor according to an open rule on amendments) compared to others (whose products come to the floor under a closed rule prohibiting amendments). These agenda-power results, in turn, allowed substantive scholars to make some comparative sense of the ways in which different committees

---

5 The example in the text may suggest that the applicability of universal theories may only apply to institutions common in “consolidated” democracies, whereas much of comparative politics is concerned with a world of contested institutions and more fluid politics. However, I could have appealed to other generic theoretical results – say, Olson’s “logic of collective action” (Olson, 1965) – to suggest that attempts to mobilize reform movements to eliminate incumbent regimes, whether in Chad or Chicago, must overcome the difficulties of organizing collective action.
(differently) went about their business – what Fenno (1973) called a committee’s *strategic premises*. Students of individual committees (Fenno, Robinson, Manley), students of the comparative study of committees (Fenno), and analytical students of committees – some looking a lot like area-studies scholars, others looking like middle-range comparative theorists, and still others looking like theorists inclined toward general (and generic) results – all managed to operate in a synthetic manner. It was not middle-range theory *versus* universal theory, but rather middle-range theory *and* universal theory.

A third point has to do with intuition. Many of the theorems of Newtonian mechanics entail frictionless surfaces and atmospheres. They literally apply only to objects moving in a vacuum, not to those shot from a cannon or driven on a highway. They are universal principles (as long as the object is moving slower than the speed of light) – they consist of theorems derived from assumptions – but their assumptions may not apply to many of the circumstances we typically encounter in the real world. Nevertheless, they are suggestive in two respects. First, many real-world situations may approximate the Newtonian conditions – that is, their implications, subject to engineering corrections for friction, do in fact tell us things about the real world. Apples fall from a tree in a manner roughly described by Newtonian laws, even if leaves do not. Second, theories that entail universal principles are engines of discovery. A theory, a rich one at any rate, will have many implications about subjects not held clearly in mind by the founding theorist. The theory of agenda and veto power in a generic committee, when enriched with the substantive details of a real legislature like the US House, is capable of generating novel implications about campaign finance, lobbying, the pork barrel, congressional careers, and a host of other phenomena not contemplated by the original formulation.

I do not mean to sound like a Pollyanna in suggesting that universal theories (the ones without proper nouns in them, as Przeworski and Teune (1970) long ago told us) and middle-range theories work hand in hand. But to portray practitioners of these two crafts as adversaries rather than allies is to fail to appreciate the comparative advantage (pun intended) of each and the complementarities they bring to the table. “My way or the
highway” debates – universal versus middle-range theory, for example – produce more heat than light.

References


