

Robert A. Dahl: Questions, concepts, proving it

David R. Mayhew

Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

P.O Box 208301, New Haven CT 06520-8301

203-432-5237

david.mayhew@yale.edu

David R. Mayhew is Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University. He is the author of works on the Congress, parties, elections, policymaking, and political history of the United States including *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, *Divided We Govern*, *Electoral Realignments*, and *Partisan Balance*.

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Abstract: What were the ingredients of Robert A. Dahl's genius as a political scientist? First, he asked good questions. Those were ordinarily bold, broad questions central to political theory that appear at the openings of his works and orient them. Second, he was resourceful in creating or tailoring holistic concepts such as 'democracy' and 'power,' as well as compositional categories such as 'cumulative' versus 'noncumulative' resources, or 'participation' and 'contestation' as routes to democratization. Third, he evangelized for hypothesis testing and reliance on datasets as the future of political science, and he acted on this advice.

Keywords: Dahl; democracy; polyarchy; power; Constitution

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Introduction

What was Robert A. Dahl's genius as a political scientist? Of the many ingredients of that genius, I would like to discuss three. They entail questions, concepts and the use of evidence. I draw on Dahl's writings as well as, in certain details, personal acquaintance with him. I close with comments on Dahl as a democrat.

Questions

Charles E. Lindblom once asked me: 'Why does Bob Dahl stand out so much as a scholar?' I didn't know how to answer that, so I just listened. 'He asks such good questions,' Lindblom said.

That seems right. Certainly it is one feature. Dahl was upfront with the questions that animated his works. You couldn't miss them. Often they appeared in the first paragraph. They were clearly stated and obviously the product of reflection. They were broad questions that we all might want to hear an answer to, not narrow ones carrying out a theory or a method or a

paradigm. Their signature content was a blend of classical political theory with the empirical complexities of the modern world. The political theory side was key. Dahl got his early training in political theory, and you couldn't read far into his works without encountering Plato, Machiavelli, Mill, Marx, Tocqueville and the rest. Political theory was necessary as a *source* of questions for political scientists, Dahl believed (Munck and Snyder 2007, pp. 116-119, 134, 146).

Here are some of Dahl's lead-in questions:

- 'What are the conditions under which numerous individuals can maximize the attainment of their goals through the use of social mechanisms?' --*Politics, Economics and Welfare* (Dahl and Lindblom 1976, p. xlv).

Yes, this question owes to Lindblom as well as Dahl in their coauthored work first published in 1953. It is a wonderful question. It joined the processes of the economy to those of the polity. Notice the early postwar date. The authors were saying that we needed to steer past the mid-century frame of socialism versus capitalism as a choice for organizing society. In popular discourse, a fork seemed to exist back then: Choose one system or the other. Not so fast, they argued. Capitalism is a complicated, not easily graspable thing. And socialism taken as a design for effectively administering an economy, whatever else its attractions, might not work well in practice. For one thing, the British Labour Party's troubled experience in running that country's industries nationalized after World War II—Dahl and Lindblom took this record as decisive—threw cold water on the idea (Dahl and Lindblom 1976, pp. 511, 514-518). In the circumstances, analysis and aspiration needed to move elsewhere.

- ‘How does popular sovereignty function in America?’ --*A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Dahl 1956).¹

Dahl’s *Preface*, an argument drawing on political theory to sort through American experience, did much to popularize the term ‘democratic theory.’

- ‘In a political system where nearly every adult may vote but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually governs?’ --*Who Governs?* (Dahl 1961b, p. 1).

This opening sentence to *Who Governs?* may be Dahl’s best-known orienting question. It grew from his experience as a federal government intern in the 1930s that showed him that political influence tends to reside in many places. It grew also from ruminations at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, from living in New Haven (the focus of the study), and, finally, from research along with graduate students at Yale that came to target the ‘power elite’ and ‘community power’ ideas of C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter (Polsby 1980, pp. xix-xx, Dahl and Levi 2009, p. 6).

- ‘Given a regime in which the opponents of the government cannot openly and legally organize into political parties in order to oppose the government in free and fair elections, what conditions favor or impede a transformation into a regime in which they can?’ -- *Polyarchy* (Dahl 1971, p. 1).

This is another no-frills opening sentence. Besides Dahl’s roots in political theory, this *Polyarchy* question apparently grew from his experience in Palo Alto plus a year in Rome that fed an interest in democracies beyond the United States, especially the small ones. He went

comparative (Munck and Snyder 2007, pp. 125-127, 140, Dahl and Levi 2009, pp. 4-5). Thus he framed along with others the scholarly industry that keeps addressing the topic of ‘democratic transitions.’

- ‘[I]s “democracy” related in any way to “size”? How large should a political system be in order to facilitate rational control by its citizens?’ --*Size and Democracy* (Dahl and Tufte 1973, p. 1).

Coauthored with Edward R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy* combined theory with empirical analysis to address the old idea of city-states and democracy. Athens was one thing, but how about today’s units as diverse as the Swiss cantons, the Netherlands, the United States, and India as locations of democracy?

Traction could be a problem with questions as broad as these. They called for normative or definitional judgments as well as daunting evidence. How could clipped, conclusive answers be expected? But what kinds of question should be posed at all, Dahl must have reflected. Go for the big ones. Also, by offering such questions he aimed to show how to think about a topic freshly or to order a topic to make it more amenable to empirical investigation by others.

Concepts

Second, Dahl crafted and deployed concepts in a memorable way. Nothing is more inherent to his trademark.

By concepts I mean intellectual inventions of a certain sort—or at least tailorings of already existent ideas—and of two different kinds. The first kind is of, let us say, holistic concepts, by which I mean characterizations devoted to some large whole area of reality—not to the parts or partitions of a reality. You cannot understand political science at its creative edges in

the 1950s through the 1970s without appreciating such holistic concepts. We learned of ‘modernization,’ ‘totalitarianism,’ ‘authoritarianism,’ ‘civic culture,’ ‘electoral realignments,’ ‘political system,’ ‘incrementalism,’ ‘institutionalization,’ ‘belief system,’ ‘consociational democracy,’ and more. Each such term had a blended predicate of causal statements, appealing arguments of various other kinds, and well-processed facts. To organize thought in this way could have immense bite.

Enter Dahl, who became the prime deployer, or at least the sharer of that distinction, of three such holistic concepts or their families. ‘Pluralism,’ for which it is probably fair to say that Dahl shared an updated post-World War II patent with David B. Truman, became the signature label for a kind of polity built on a jangling messiness among interests as its decision process. Yet the concept had a normative connotation too: What’s wrong with that sort of politics, and who would expect anything better?²

A solo patent went to Dahl for his management of the term ‘democracy.’ This was the main thrust of his career.³ His treatment was complicated. In 2002, Dahl looked back on defining democracy as ‘an ideal type in two senses.’ First, it is ‘an abstract definition of what democracy would be given certain assumptions.’ Second, it is ‘something to be aspired to’ (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 131).⁴ Neither of these two senses offers much messy reality. In tune with this ideal-typing, Dahl often supplied a list of ‘criteria’ that an ideal democratic process would satisfy. In one of his statements those are: equality in voting, effective participation, enlightened understanding, final control over the agenda, and inclusion (Dahl 1982, p. 6).

But in quick order came the messy reality—the distorting shadows on the wall of the cave. With open eyes Dahl launched ‘polyarchy’ as a term for what might pass as a best approximation of democracy in a large, modern, commercial state where ‘politics is a sideshow

in the great circus of life.’⁵ Thus centered on, ‘polyarchy’ could be said to actually exist in a fair number of locations in the world, and Dahl wrote many works illuminating and assessing it in those locations.

Another solo patent went to Dahl for managing the terms ‘power,’ ‘influence,’ and sometimes ‘control.’⁶ This is a terminological family. As with democracy, another scholarly industry received a boost. As with democracy, we see here a characteristic methodological move. Dahl called on terms with long histories of often discordant popular usage and brisked them up for deployment in the social sciences. They took on new precision as analytic tools. Thus marshaled, they could solve some questions, open up others, and sometimes bring on fierce new controversies. George Von der Muhll (1977, p. 1080) has summed up Dahl’s definition of ‘power’ or ‘influence’ as ‘a demonstrably asymmetrical causal connection among actors.’ There could be wrinkles. Influence, for example, could be ‘indirect’ as opposed to ‘direct,’ or ‘potential’ as opposed to ‘actual’ (Dahl 1961b, chs. 12, 24).

Beyond these holistic concepts, Dahl also organized his work in a series of what might be called compositional concepts. By this I mean sets of subsidiary concepts that contribute to some whole. This was a much-repeated intellectual strategy. Two principles seem to have been in play. On the one hand, Dahl’s instinct was to decompose, to be literally analytic (Von der Muhll 1977, p. 1094). Often, he showed by example, a good way to understand a topic is to break it into pieces in a fashion that assigns a credible essence to each piece and then examine the pieces and the relations among them. On the other hand, his instinct was to simplify. Science means simplification. ‘Without simplification you cannot deal with complexity. You need some kind of map that simplifies reality,’ Dahl once remarked (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 136). And an especially fine comment: ‘It’s like looking out at the stars at night. It’s great to look out at night

and see the stars but you're not understanding anything about the nature of the universe. It has to be simplified. And in simplification you lose some potential information, but the gain is to provide comprehensibility and coherence' (Dahl and Levi 2009, p. 7).

Decompose, the advice of these seemingly competing mandates is, but not into too many pieces. The pieces need to be simplifications themselves, and the array of them needs to be small in number and readily graspable.

This brand of organizing scheme appears in many of Dahl's works. Following are several instances.

Politics, Economics and Welfare (with Lindblom) centers on 'four central sociopolitical processes' that '[a]ll modern industrialized economies combine, though in different ways' (Dahl and Lindblom 1976, p. 369). Where did the authors get this quartet of processes? Well, they created it. Analytically, it was a way to proceed. There is 'the price system,' the territory of competitive markets. There is 'hierarchy,' by which the authors meant control by bureaucratic leaders in both the governmental and private organizations of modern societies. There is 'polyarchy,' or control of leaders by publics—a taste in 1953 of Dahl's concept that would keep appearing. And there is 'bargaining,' a form of 'reciprocal control among leaders'—an idea that the authors applied especially to interactions within government.⁷ One suspects that Dahl drew on his experience working for the federal government in the late 1930s and World War II for devising the second and fourth of these categories—the hierarchy and bargaining. He worked in the National Labor Relations Board, the Department of Agriculture, the Office of Price Administration, and the War Production Board, not to mention the U.S. Army (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 115, Dahl and Levi 2009, p. 1). (He told me once about marching into Austria in 1945.) This surprising richness of experience—how many academics could match it?—had to be

an education in the disorderliness of government processes American-style. At any rate, socialism versus capitalism, Dahl and Lindblom were saying as of 1953, was an unpromising frame for seeing the real or likely processes of society. Better their four ideas than this popular dualism.

Dahl's categories in *A Preface to Democratic Theory* are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive: 'I shall take up a few representative types of democratic theory, beginning with one that is familiar to Americans' (Dahl 1956, p. 2). That number one is 'Madisonian Democracy'—a formally guaranteed compromise between the power of majorities and the power of minorities. Next comes 'Populist Democracy,' which he handles as a purely abstract principle of majority rule that can raise questions of intensity, interpersonal comparison of utilities, the Arrow Problem, and so on. These first two categories are 'maximizing' theories. But then he moves to his satisficing number three, yes, 'Polyarchal Democracy.'⁸ This category is strongly empirical. It embraces the disorderly, imperfect, fallback reality of how American democracy has actually worked. In *A Preface*, the fallback version doesn't look all that bad. At its core, the book is an interplay among these three categories. Number three wins out. In Dahl's well-known account, formal Madisonianism suffers the difficulty of not accounting for democracy well. Britain, Sweden, and other countries do not need formal separation of powers in their national institutions to make democracy work, so why should the United States? Q.E.D. Populist Democracy, for all its smartness, suffers the difficulty of not hitting the ground. Hence an analytic retreat to real American experience, where, among other things, it is often true as a matter of informal practice that 'minorities rule' (Dahl 1956, p. 128). Overarching it all, the country's unceasing election processes at least help insure 'that political leaders will be somewhat responsive to the preferences of some ordinary citizens' (Dahl 1956, p. 131).

At the core of *Who Governs?* are five compositional concepts. In analytic terms, what were the possible patterns of influence in the city of New Haven in the 1950s (Dahl 1961b, chs. 15-18)? The first, ‘Covert integration by Economic Notables,’ proved on investigation to be a blank. Dahl, his eye on community power theory, took obvious delight in torpedoing the hypothesis of an ‘essentially clandestine or covert exercise of influence by the “real” leaders’ of the city, perhaps operating by ‘covert negotiations and discussions carried on in the privacy of their clubs, homes, business firms, and other private meeting places.’ An industrious hunt by Dahl and his research team brought no evidence of such a cabal.⁹ Category number two, ‘An executive-centered “grand coalition of coalitions,”’ hit some pay dirt (Dahl 1961b, p.184). It accommodated the large, ad hoc coalition that Mayor Richard C. Lee assembled in the public spotlight to pursue urban redevelopment in the 1950s (Dahl 1961b, ch. 17). Dahl does not do much to develop his category three, ‘A coalition of chieftains.’¹⁰ Category four, ‘Independent sovereignties with spheres of influence’ (Dahl 1961b, p.199), could accommodate ‘the various petty sovereignties that made up the official and unofficial government of New Haven.’ A neighborhood controversy over building metal houses supplied an instance (Dahl 1961b, ch. 16, quotation at p. 190). Category five, ‘Rival sovereignties fighting it out,’ could apply to ordinary competition between the city’s two political parties. The Republicans were still a force in the 1950s (Dahl 1961b, ch. 18). This quintet of categories, a product of crossing theory with evidence, seemed to fit the reality.

Separately, an analytic dualism infuses *Who Governs?* A society’s inequalities in politically relevant resources—wealth, social standing, sources of information, the vote, control over jobs, and so on—may be ‘cumulative’ or they may be ‘noncumulative’—a synonym for ‘dispersed’ (Dahl 1961b, chs. 1, 7). The history of New Haven, in Dahl’s telling, had progressed

from the former condition to the latter (Dahl 1961b, Book I). In the late eighteenth century, a Puritan oligarchy enjoyed a lock on all relevant resources. By the mid-twentieth century, supplies of resources were scattered across social classes, ethnic groups, professional specialists, and elsewhere. Pluralism had arrived. Various kinds of actors could maneuver and prevail on various kinds of matters (Dahl 1961b, Books IV, V).

One line of analytic enterprise is to decompose time into eras—as in the ‘electoral realignment eras’ proposed by various authors in the 1960s. So far as I can tell, Dahl showed no interest in the realignments research program, and, in general, the ordering of time was not his game. But the eras motif does make an appearance in *Who Governs?*, and there is another interesting instance. In a 1977 piece, Dahl sorted the two centuries of American experience into five ‘historical commitments’ that he saw the country having arrived at. In each case, bitter conflict gave way to, if not consensus, at least lasting acceptance on a fundamental matter. These commitments were to: a constitutional and liberal order in the late eighteenth century, democracy in the nineteenth century, corporate capitalism starting in the 1890s, a welfare state in the 1930s, and an international role as a world power in the 1940s (Dahl 1977, pp. 2-4). We see here the concept of a ‘historical commitment’ as well as a workout of it in manageable specifics.

In the 1960s, Dahl (1966) edited a project that ended in essays on ‘political oppositions’ in ten Western democracies. What to make of it all? That was a teaser. The essays as well as the countries they reported on were a heterogeneous lot. Dahl decided to focus on the important ways that oppositions can differ. He came up with six ways: an opposition’s cohesion, its competitiveness, its site of opposing the government, its distinctiveness, its goals, and its strategies (ch. 11). Italy with its Communist Party, Belgium with its communal division, Britain with its ‘loyal opposition,’ and the United States with its diffuse and confusing processes were

among the countries that needed to be accommodated in these cells. Political opposition in democracies is a complicated matter.

Finally, there is the compositional scheme in *Polyarchy*. Little in the Dahl canon has enjoyed more resonance. In especially European history, he saw the evolution toward democracy as having two dimensions. One was toward the ‘participation’ (or ‘inclusion’) of publics. The other was toward effective ‘contestation’ in politics (or ‘liberalization’) (Dahl 1971, ch. 1). Conceptually, to pair each of these achievements with its absence allowed that favorite device of social scientists—a fourfold table (Dahl 1971, p. 7). From such a design Dahl guided a comparative history. Contestation in advance of participation could be good news for eventual democracy as in the cases of Britain and Sweden. The reverse could be bad news as in Germany’s Second Reich. Simultaneous moves to participation and contestation could bring big trouble as in France in the 1790s. The trick was favorable sequencing (Dahl 1971, ch. 3).

Concepts, categories, classifications: What kind of activity is it to develop ideas like these? Art as well as science seems to figure. The terms need to be grounded in reality, and the right joints need to be cut at, but there is no getting around having an inspired intuition and flexing it in an appealing way.

Proving it

What was the behavioral revolution in American political science in the postwar years? According to Dahl (1961a, p. 766), widely seen as its signature leader, it was ‘a protest movement’ against the ‘historical, philosophical, and the descriptive-institutional approaches’ that had long marked the discipline. Political science at that time, possessed of a feisty new generation of scholars short on patience, needed a reset. To find out what was actually true or not—that was the way to go. It meant becoming more scientific.

For Dahl, that meant for one thing an attraction to the ideas of Carl Hempel, the philosopher of science then at Yale, an exponent of positivism (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 122). It meant a search for ‘genuinely testable propositions’ (Dahl and Lindblom 1976, p. xlv). Dahl became an evangelist for the idea of hypothesis testing. That was the sort of thing political scientists should be doing. A commonplace idea now, it was not commonplace going into the 1950s. To read into *A Preface* or *Polyarchy* is to encounter blizzards of suggestions for hypotheses that might be tested. Axioms, assumptions, definitions, conditions, and propositions, not to mention logical symbols, make an appearance. It is a style of argument.¹¹ James Madison wouldn’t have known what hit him: ‘There ensues [in *The Federalist*] an extremely dubious and probably false set of propositions... .’ (Dahl 1956, p. 16).

But how should hypotheses actually be tested? In much of his work Dahl pursued abstract theory of one type or another, but he was formidable in full fledge as an empirical researcher. He did field work, as for his first book *Congress and Foreign Policy* in 1950. ‘I figured if I was going to write about Congress, I needed to know about it, and that required talking to some people. I did a lot of interviews, and that was quite enlightening’ (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 139). This is another practice that seems commonplace now but was not that going into the 1950s—certainly not in congressional studies where arm’s-length scholarship had been standard.

Who Governs? is Dahl’s masterpiece of empirical work. He designed it as a multi-method enterprise. There was fieldwork. He and his graduate assistants Nelson W. Polsby and Raymond Wolfinger conducted 46 lengthy interviews with participants in significant New Haven decisions. Wolfinger interned in the city government. (Both Polsby and Wolfinger got dissertations out of the project.) Dahl supervised three sample surveys. He had students in a seminar prepare detailed events studies. He used aggregate voting data. He drew on various

historical materials including standard histories, the U.S. Census, city directories and other documents and records.¹² The Dahl research team zeroed in on New Haven in these complementary ways.

In empirical terms, perhaps the leading theme in Dahl's work is: Get hold of a dataset and use it. That is what you need to do if you want to figure out if something is true or not. If possible, count things. (I remember V. O. Key, Jr. also proselytizing for this view in the 1950s.) Again, this piece of advice is standard in political science today but it hasn't always been. Often Dahl crafted his own datasets; sometimes he drew on other people's. In all cases, it is probably fair to say, the questions he wanted to tackle preceded his datasets rather than vice versa. At base, he was he was question-driven, not dataset-driven.

To appreciate Dahl it helps to get a sense of his datasets and their use. Below is a sample. I include instances where he cites an N and performs arithmetic with it, but also instances where he somehow canvassed, with seeming credibility, a full universe of something and arrived at a judgment about it without reporting the N or the arithmetic. The key to it all is a mindset of stipulating a universe and then examining the items in it.

- 'Of the fifty-seven successful actions [regarding urban redevelopment in New Haven], half can be attributed to only two persons: the Mayor and the Development Administrator' (Dahl 1961b, p. 124).
- '[O]f the 29 countries with polyarchal regimes in 1970, in only 12 was polyarchy inaugurated after independence and not during a period of overt foreign domination' (Dahl 1971, p. 197).
- 'Yet in the 120 years since the Communist Manifesto was published, no country has developed according to the Marxist model of conflict, nor has any regime, whether

hegemonic or competitive, fallen or been transformed because of a clear-cut polarization of working class and bourgeoisie' (Dahl 1971, p. 106).

- 'Specifically, there seems to be no significant relationship between turnout in national elections and population, area, or density among some 33 representative democracies' (Dahl and Tufte 1973, p. 44).
- 'Madison proved to be right [this time]. There has, in fact, never been a significant conflict between the citizens of small states and the citizens of large states' (Dahl 1967, p. 52).
- 'Over its whole history, the Supreme Court has held Congressional legislation unconstitutional in seventy-seven cases... . [Yet] [t]here is, I believe, no case on record where a persistent law-making majority [that is, a succession of elected officials] has not, sooner or later, achieved its purposes' (Dahl 1956, pp. 109-110).
- '[N]ot one of the fifty prominent citizens interviewed in the course of this study—citizens who had participated extensively in various decisions—hinted at the existence of such a cabal [that is, an elite of Economic Notables operating covertly in New Haven]' (Dahl 1961b, p. 185).

Dahl mastered and discussed the intricacies of his datasets. That was necessary to their use. The wrinkles could be as informative as the regularities. In his New Haven study, the neighborhood uprising against building metal houses showed that the ““slack” resources’ of the system could, given the right provocation, turn un-slack in a hurry (Dahl 1961b, pp. 192-199, quotation at p. 305). In the prose or footnotes of *Polyarchy*, he discusses by my count 58 individual countries for one reason or another and hits another 14 in the accompanying charts.¹³ Deviant cases drew his curiosity—Argentina for its underperformance, the Netherlands for its

ethic of accommodation, India for a variety of reasons including size (Dahl 1971, pp. 135-140, 160-161, 204-205).

The behavioral revolution came in the 1950s and 1960s. Years later, Dahl was not all that enthusiastic about another dose of science—the rational choice revolution. His view: ‘As important as rational choice theory may be in dealing with some types of problems, it’s not a satisfactory way of dealing with the most important problems’ (Munck and Snyder 2007, pp. 124, 147, quotation at p. 147). ‘It cannot encompass the empirical variety and complexity of the world’ (Dahl and Levi 2009, p. 8). Also, I would guess that he wasn’t willing to give up on classical political theory as a source of orienting questions, and that by his nature he was too much of an inductivist to buy into rational choice.

Dahl the democrat

Dahl’s work was a blend of the normative and the positive. I have emphasized the positive side. His questions and concepts faced both ways, yet they ordinarily fed somehow into empirics—certainly in his quest for hypothesis testing.

But I would like to close by taking a look at Dahl as a democrat—both small-D and in American terms capital-D, although on the latter front Dahl wasn’t a very aggressive partisan. Generally speaking, he sort of went along with partisanship American-style rather than getting obsessed by it. He was a cool partisan.

Where did Dahl’s small-D democracy come from and what did it consist of? He left some nice testimony on these points. There is a frontier flavor. Growing up chiefly in the Alaska panhandle (Iowa figured previously, too), a coastal site of primary-sector industry, seems to have left a mark. He wrote a fond book about the experience late in his life (2005). From a doctor’s family, Dahl earned money working on the docks with longshoremen starting at age twelve

where, in his words, ‘I came into contact with of course the local people I already knew, but also on the docks, people whom I didn’t know, working people, and that exposed me to an aspect of life which I’ve never forgotten.’ That experience, as well as ‘my military service, and growing up in a small town, just gave me a very deep and lasting respect for—what is often said, “ordinary people.” I don’t like that term. But just plain ordinary human beings. I respect them for, among other things, they’ve got degrees of common sense which are not always so obviously present in our colleagues and other intellectuals’ (Dahl and Levi 2009, pp. 2-3).

Yes, there was the challenge of education: People needed to be informed in order to protect their interests—a recurrent Dahl theme.¹⁴ But generally speaking, the ‘common sense’ of the public deserves respect. Beware of intellectuals or anyone else trying to tell ordinary people what or how they should think. Dahl keeps coming back to this point. ‘Who is a better judge than I of what my “will”, my policy, really is?’ (Dahl 1967, p. 17). ‘In making governmental decisions, among adults no person or group is better qualified, with only extremely rare exceptions, to judge what those interests are and thus to substitute their judgment for that of the person whose interests are affected. The claim of one group to possess superior knowledge of the interests of another group of persons, and also to possess a reliable commitment to protect those interests, seems to me utterly falsified by historical experience’ (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 130).

It is easy to slide over statements like these. They seem like bromides. But read them carefully. Dahl crafted them with care, and they seem to have expressed a bedrock ingredient of small-D democracy as well as a moral imperative.¹⁵ He meant that victory in policymaking should ordinarily go to the views of ordinary people—arrived at by themselves—not to the didacticisms of liberals, progressives, conservatives, prophets, private corporations, unions,

judges, the media, or whatever. Among the American chattering classes of today this is a surprisingly rare stance.

How did Dahl's belief in small-D democracy play into his personal positioning in the partisan and ideological politics of the United States? The following is speculation. For the first half of the twentieth century into the 1950s, the side of American politics inhabited by progressives, liberals, and Democrats seized on majority rule as one of its emphatic premises and aims.¹⁶ The thinking is familiar. Fundamentally, politics was seen to hinge on social class at least in the homegrown American sense of the people versus the special interests. Given this stipulated map of interests and preferences, a successful execution of majority rule meant that ordinary people in a class sense would beat the special interests. The role of the progressives and the rest was to steer politics through a customary clutter of institutional, moneyed, and private organizational obstacles to achieve this agreeable end. Key to it all was the principle of majority rule.

Again, Dahl was not a ferocious partisan, but his range of writing insofar as it bleeds partisanship or ideology seems to locate him as above. The driving political views of ordinary people are economic; majority rule allows those views to prevail; that is a good thing; generally speaking, the progressive side helps along that end-state so two cheers for it. One clear clue to Dahl's personal positioning is his affection for the New Deal. He came of age with it. It 'influenced my conviction that change is possible' and left a lasting positive impression (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 138). To be sure, majority rule for Dahl was not a clipped, arithmetic thing. In the American tradition it sported curlicues of intensity expression, slack resources, cross-cutting cleavages, 'minorities rule,' and the rest, but at the end of the day it was, or should be, the

process to which everyone would have to accommodate, and it was a framework favorable to ordinary people. It was favorable in that way in the 1930s.

Dahl was a New Deal-ish liberal, not a socialist—at least not after an early-years fling with Norman Thomas socialism (Dahl and Levi 2009, p. 2). Then he wrote his Yale dissertation about socialism—Ph.D. 1940—and gave it up (Munck and Snyder 2007, pp. 119-120). He was never a Marxist. The analytic moves of Marxism left him cold (Munck and Snyder 2007, pp. 117, 119). Later in his life, when the American and European center-lefts were growing hard to tell apart, he still wasn't 'terribly comfortable' being characterized as a democratic socialist—'in part because I discovered when I was in graduate school doing my dissertation the deep dark secret of socialists (and I thought of myself as a socialist at the time): They really had no realistic conception of how to operate an economic order, or for that matter, a democratic political system' (Cameron *et al.* 1988, p. 159).

But a basic economic ontology of politics—that it is about economic stratification—as well as a frame for accommodating that ontology—majority rule—seems to have stayed with Dahl. Those were basics. Beginning in the 1960s, the American left drifted into race and multiculturalism as an alternative ontology of cleavage. Dahl didn't do that. Certainly he deplored the historical American racial order, and he wrote about it (1961b, pp. 293-296, 1967, pp. 65-67). He had an apt phrase for the traditional South—'a kind of polyarchy for whites and hegemony for blacks' (1971, p. 28). He was a strong civil rights advocate. But race was never central to his writing. Also, as the American left came to rely on the judiciary to pursue its rights causes, thus ceding populist ground to a Republican Party engaging the white working class—who was the champion of majority rule anymore?—Dahl stayed put. In general, in the long run,

rights could be protected best by the ordinary swordplay of competitive politics. Rule by judges, after all, is not an expression of democracy.¹⁷

How well was democracy working in the United States? On this question, Dahl did drift somewhat. He was pretty happy about things in the fifties and sixties. The New Deal had set a pleasing course, and compared with what? Before, during, or after World War II, who could avoid watching or remembering the horrors elsewhere in the world? (Munck and Snyder 2007, p. 138). Although not lacking problems, the American system was not ‘so obviously a defective system as some of its critics suggest’ (Dahl 1956, p. 150). In democratic terms, it was one of a small pack of the world’s success stories (Dahl 1956, p. 74). ‘[I]t appears to be a relatively efficient system for reinforcing agreement, encouraging moderation, and maintaining social peace in a restless and immoderate people operating a gigantic, powerful, diversified, and incredibly complex society’ (Dahl 1956, p. 151).¹⁸ The jangling pluralism of New Haven came off well in *Who Governs?*. The country’s ‘democratic creed’ was available as a backup crutch in the face of, say, McCarthyism (Dahl 1961b, ch. 28).

But after the 1960s Dahl soured somewhat on the American record. One sees this in a fresh preface to *Politics, Economics and Welfare* in 1976 (although on rereading this preface I guessed that it owed an awful lot to coauthor Lindblom). Concerned about business power, Dahl came to write about the ‘corporate leviathan’ and the potential of worker control within firms (Dahl 1970, pp. 115-140). He grew especially worried about ‘the extent of economic inequality among Americans.’ Perhaps a pluralistic system of the American kind, for all its virtues, was a dubious bet to lessen that inequality (Dahl 1978, pp. 199-201). Once one of the democratic pack, the United States was sliding into downside outlier status. There were better models elsewhere. This country was ‘a long way from having achieved the redistributive policies of the

Scandinavian countries' (Dahl 1982, p. 119). And not just the Scandinavians (Dahl 1982, p. 174-5).

A theorist of democracy needs to wrestle with the American Constitution, and Dahl repeatedly did that. He was not a fan of the Constitution. In his early writing he saw it as gratuitous but largely harmless. It was an eighteenth-century settlement that unfortunately butted into a nineteenth-century polity that was naturally crystallizing into a Tocquevillian ideal-type of democracy and that reached that destination anyway. The separation-of-powers design of the Constitution was not much of an impediment. As a practical matter, Thomas Jefferson's spirit of popular control proved a fair match for Madison's complicating blueprints.¹⁹

But the Constitution gnawed at Dahl. He really didn't like it. It was not that he bought into the standard Beardian interpretation that a crafty upper class self-servingly wrote it (Dahl 1967, pp. 32-34). He just didn't like the provisions. Thus witness his recent 2002 book, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?*, which opened with a blockbuster of an orienting question that left no doubt about the content to follow:

- 'Why should we feel bound today by a document produced more than two centuries ago by a group of fifty-five mortal men, actually signed by only thirty-nine, a fair number of whom were slaveholders, and adopted in only thirteen states by the votes of fewer than two thousand men, all of whom are long since dead and mainly forgotten?' (Dahl 2002, p. 2).

In this work, he offered chiefly a formalist critique of the Constitution—the crazy electoral college, the Wyoming to California makeup of the Senate, judicial review, and certain other features that in early days impeded rule by national majorities—slavery, no popular election of senators, state control of the suffrage, and weak congressional taxing and regulatory

powers. National majorities of the public were and are procedurally hamstrung, or they can be. That was his spirited treatment (ch. 2). He went on to a case about consequences: The American system doesn't work any better than a peer group of countries in maintaining democratic stability, protecting rights, ensuring fairness, encouraging consensus, or solving problems. Yet those other countries get along without Madisonian constitutions (ch. 5). Case made. This is the kind of argument Dahl once offered in *Polyarchy*. Surprisingly, at least in light of current public dialogue, there is nothing in the *Constitution* book suggesting a causal path between the operations of the Constitution and the country's condition of relative economic inequality. Dahl steered clear of that one. He was always a careful, evidence-based arguer.

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1. The question cited here appears on the cover of the book as a kind of subtitle, although it is not exactly that.
 2. ‘Pluralism’ as term and idea wends its way through Dahl’s work, notably in *Who Governs?* (1961b), *Pluralist Democracy in the United States* (1967), *Pluralism Revisited* (1978), and *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (1982).
 3. Culminating in *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989).
 4. The year of this book’s interview with Dahl was 2002.
 5. Dahl discusses drawing on the term ‘polyarchy’ in Dahl and Levi (2009, p. 5). The sideshow quotation is from Dahl (1961b, p. 305).
 6. As in Dahl (1957), Dahl (1982, ch. 2), Dahl and Stinebrickner (2003, ch. 2).
 7. The authors deploy these four categories in respectively chapters 6-7, 8-9, 10-11, and 12-13 of Dahl (1976). The phrase ‘reciprocal control among leaders,’ which Dahl also uses in later work, appears at p. 324.

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8. These three theories are taken up in respectively chapters 1, 2, and 3 of Dahl (1956).
 9. This theory is pursued in chapter 6 and also at pp. 184-186 of Dahl (1961b), quotation at p. 184.
 10. Dahl (1961b, pp. 186-187) left open the possibility that the idea might apply better in other settings such as Congress.
 11. As seen in Dahl (1956, chs. 1, 2); Dahl (1971, ch. 1).
 12. Discussions of the enterprise appear in Dahl (1961b, p. vi and Appendix B), and in Munck and Snyder (2007, p. 139).
 13. There are more yet in the book's appendixes.
 14. It makes an appearance directly after the quoted material of the previous paragraph.
 15. On the idea as moral imperative: Munck and Snyder (2007, p. 130).
 16. See the argument in Gerring (2001, ch. 6).
 17. Dahl's suspicion of judicial review went way back, but it was still lively, if not un-asterisked, in Dahl's (2002) *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?*, pp. 152-154.
 18. A similar summary judgment appears in Dahl's (1967, p. 4) American politics text.
 19. These judgments about the history come across in Dahl (1967, chs. 2, 3).