

# Dahl, Robert

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Robert Allen Dahl (1915–2014) was a founder of the postwar political theory of pluralism. Pluralism and the historically related behavioralist model of science was the dominant paradigm of Anglo-American political science between the 1940s and the 1970s. Current political science can only be properly understood in the context of the critiques of pluralism and behavioralism.

## CORE IDEAS

Dahl published more than 20 books and dozens of notable articles. Although he revealed he felt he had just reformulated the very same ideas over and over again, his work shows great diversity and breadth.

Pivotal to his worldview is ethical pluralism, his conviction that humans are confronted with a multitude of significant values and goals, that these values and goals unfortunately often clash, and that, when that happens, we inevitably have to strike a balance. Since in different situations different values have different weights, it is impossible to define a context-independent hierarchy of values on the basis of which societies can be grounded and policies formulated.

In open, pluralistic societies it is both unavoidable and laudable that individuals organize on the basis of different values, interests, and definitions of the common good. The resulting conflicts are kept in limits and made productive for rational public decision-making by the structures and processes of democratic politics. These

tap off the insights about man and society available in every political community, and enable the necessary balances and compromises. In democratic politics independent interest groups acting as power buffers and communication channels between state and individual play a pivotal role, Dahl believes. Public decision-making is a continuous process where, at different levels and positions in the political system, always provisional decisions are produced under the influence of competing, bargaining, compromising, and cooperating actors.

Dahl's never-ending search for sensible compromises and balances is illustrated by *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (1953), coauthored with his Yale colleague Charles E. Lindblom. To make optimal use of available resources to realize public goals like

freedom, equality, democracy, and economic progress and security, societies can apply a variety of social techniques: market, bureaucracy, bargaining, and polyarchy (polyarchy describes the actual political practices in what we usually call "democracies": the competition between elites for power and for the support of the electorate). Which (combinations of) techniques are applied in which particular domains should be decided on nonideological, pragmatist grounds, and these decisions are always provisional and awaiting improvement.

Dahl's evenhandedness is further apparent in *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society* (1970), *Democracy and its Critics* (1989), and *On Democracy* (1988) in his claim that democratic decision-making takes place at varying levels of abstraction and citizen participation. Modern mass states need more time-consuming political expertise and engagement than the members of a commune

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or of small communities are usually able to deliver. At the same time, starting in *Congress and Foreign Policy* (1950), Dahl argues for more political participation and deliberation by ordinary people to further their political competence, improve the quality of public decision-making and foster citizen control over representatives.

## INFLUENCES

Dahl's thinking was influenced by diverse theorists and schools, as well as by his life experiences. The French legal and political theorist Léon Duguit and his PhD supervisor Francis Coker might have put him on the path of pluralism. Coker introduced him to English pluralists such as John Figgis, Harold Laski, and A. D. Lindsay, all criticizing the statist thinking inspired by German idealism that dominated Anglo-American political scholarship in their times. Dahl discovered the work of Max Weber and especially Karl Mannheim in the early 1950s and that of Alexis de Tocqueville surprisingly only in the 1960s. Also influential were the philosophical pragmatism and political liberalism of William James and John Dewey: most important about ideas is not whether they are right, but whether they work; and the solution for the problems of democracy, especially the apparent political disinterest and ignorance of the masses, is not less but *more* democracy. The traditional emphasis in US thinking on the separation of powers and on independent social institutions as a means to prevent concentrations of power is another important influence.

Nevertheless, Dahl considered his personal life experiences more important than the influence of specific authors and schools. In "A Brief Intellectual Autobiography" (1997a) he stressed the lasting influence on his thinking of *Growing up in Skagway* (2005),

Alaska, a cohesive community of 500 souls. *Size and Democracy* (1973), coauthored with Edward Tufte, illustrates his awareness of the pivotal role that *scale* plays in social and political life.

The mass unemployment, the social distress, and the establishment of totalitarian states in the 1930s, and the resulting World War II were other important experiences. These events strengthened Dahl's conviction that the nature of the economic order should be subservient to the values of democracy, collective self-determination, freedom, and human equality and dignity. This motivated his quest for an alternative social-economic order. His 1940 Yale dissertation, "Socialist Programs and Democratic Politics" explored how to combine socialism with democracy. Here, and in *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985) Dahl advocated a form of market socialism whereby socially owned and governed corporations compete in a market.

Another probable consequence of living through the 1930s and 1940s was Dahl's appreciation for political consensus and stability, and his insistence on combining widespread political participation with political education and socialization. This is no sign of elitism. He later typically writes about his formative experiences as a soldier:

Coming to know my comrades with the intimacy and solidarity that, alas, perhaps men can gain only in combat, my respect for the qualities of "ordinary" human beings was deepened even further. Ordinary people, I came to understand, have extraordinary capacities, though too often, I fear, these are insufficiently developed. (Dahl 1997b: 70)

## RECEPTION

Dahl was a lifelong staunch social democrat, advocating redistribution of income, wealth, education and power, welfare state

provisions, and meaningful and widespread political participation and deliberation, both in the political and economic sphere. Nevertheless, his behaviorist efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to make the study of politics more “scientific,” brought Dahl in these years to focus on observable (re)actions of individuals, and to ignore the powers exercised via nondecision-making and by anonymous social structures and processes. This led him to a relatively benign view of the status quo, exemplified by *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956); *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961), an empirical study that ranks among the classics in pluralist-behavioristic scholarship; and *Pluralist Democracy in the United States* (1967). One of his key theses in these works is that during the normal practice of political decision-making in the United States, all the active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves effectively heard at some crucial stage, and that, partly as a result of this, public policies are to a great extent shaped by the citizen’s preferences and interests. Power and influence are fairly diffusely distributed across competing elites, and inequalities in political resources, the existence of which Dahl certainly does not deny, are not cumulative.

This over-optimistic view Dahl strongly corrects in his later works, starting with the second edition of *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (Dahl and Lindblom 1976/1953) and *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (1982). He acknowledges that interest groups collectively do not represent, probably less and less, all the existing preferences, and that they, probably more and more, can stand in the way of the realization of common goods. This brings him back to his original social-democratic question: how to advance the Good Life and the Common Wealth in a society typified not so much by cultural, social, and political

pluralism as by seemingly uncontrollable processes of rationalization, differentiation, and individualization.

SEE ALSO: Behaviorism; Civil Society; Democracy; Equality; Methodological Individualism; Power; Public Interest; Socialism

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