

Roll Over, De Tocqueville

Author : W.A. Edmundson

Date : June 19, 2015

Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, [Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens](#), 12 **Perspectives on Politics** 564 (2014).

“Money is the mother’s milk of politics,” said California pol Jesse Unruh, way back in the 1960s. Benjamin Franklin, in the 1790s, could not have said it more memorably; but wouldn’t it shock us if it had been Franklin, and not Unruh (or Karl Marx) who first said it? The certainty of death and taxes is a hard lesson, but it doesn’t prepare us for the bitter thought that politics is helpless before the power of money.

Students of American democracy have divided on the point. [Martin Gilens](#) and [Benjamin I. Page](#) assign the principal theories of American politics to four schools: Majoritarian Electoral Democracy, Economic-elite Domination, Majoritarian Pluralism, and Biased Pluralism. *Majoritarian Electoral Democracy* holds that policy outcomes are determined largely by the views of average citizens. *Economic-elite Domination* holds that policy outcomes are largely determined by the views of the wealthiest citizens. The two other types of theory focus not on individual voters, but on interest groups. *Majoritarian pluralism* is the view that policy outcomes are mainly responsive to pressures from mass-based interest groups. *Biased pluralism* maintains that pressure from business-orientated interest groups is what mainly determines state policy.

Each of these types makes a prediction, and thus is empirically testable, so Gilens and Page posed the natural question: how do they compare as predictive theories of policy outcomes? This is a question that is much easier to formulate than it is to answer. No attempt had ever been made to answer it within a unified statistical framework. So, Gilens and Page and their assistants assembled “a unique data set that includes measures of the key variables for 1,779 policy issues” (P. 564), and performed a series of multivariate analyses. “Who governs? Who really rules?”—the authors report finding that

economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence. The results provide substantial support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism. (P. 564.)

The authors are careful to point out that elite opinion and mass opinion often coincide, and that it could look as if the average citizen is getting her way anyway. But their analysis, they say, shows that to think so would be to mistake “democracy by coincidence” (P. 573) for the real deal. In fact, “the issues about which economic elites and ordinary citizens disagree reflect important matters, including many aspects of trade restrictions, tax policy, corporate regulation, abortion, and school prayer, so that the resulting political losses by ordinary citizens are not trivial.” (P. 573.) We might comfort ourselves by the thought that, as to abortion and school prayer, it might be better if the elites made the call. But that is small comfort if Gilens and Page have indeed discovered that

reality is best captured by mixed theories in which both individual economic elites and organized interest groups (including corporations, largely owned and controlled by wealthy elites) play a substantial part in affecting public policy, but the general public has little or no independent influence. (P. 572.)

Their findings are even more troubling insofar as they merely depict the “first face” of politics, that is, outcomes of overt policy contests. They can only hint at the configuration of the “second face” of political power, i.e., governmental agenda setting; and the “third face,” the shaping of public opinion and preference (P. 576.)

So what? Gilens and Page admit that “Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise.” (P. 577.) These political and civil liberties are formally equal, at least in large part. But Gilens and Page confirm that what philosopher John Rawls called the “fair value of the political liberties”—a roughly equal chance had by rich and poor alike to affect political outcomes—is demonstrably absent in the United States. As Anatole France wrote, both the rich and the poor are equally forbidden (or permitted, as the case may be) to sleep under bridges. But justice requires more than this. As to the specifically political liberties, merely formal equality is not enough—or so Rawls believed.

Insisting on the fair value of political liberty has consequences. The type of regime Rawls called “welfare state capitalism” guarantees formally equal political liberty but is insouciant about its fair value, and for this reason alone (though there are others) he concluded that a regime of this type cannot realize justice. Some political philosophers have recently contested Rawls’s assumption that the wealthy invariably tend to dominate politics. It cannot, they say, be assumed as a matter of common sense, or as a settled finding of social science, that the wealthy—severally or in combination—have this advantage. That they do is unlikely, given collective action problems; and whether they do or do not is anyway a complicated empirical question, which means that Rawls was wrong to condemn welfare-state capitalism as inherently unjust. If there is a problem, they argue, it is not one that the legislative branch of a welfare-state capitalist regime cannot sort out. Such a regime might, for example, enact laws to insulate politics from money, if the worry about money in politics (beyond quid-pro-quo bribery) is not merely valetudinarian. Valetudinarian or not, the US Supreme Court insists that ensuring the fair value of political liberty is not even a permissible Congressional goal, much less a “constitutional essential.”

Gilens and Page’s paper has been described as “the Piketty of politics”—referring to Thomas Piketty’s [Capital in the Twenty-First Century](#). This is apt, in that it focusses the discussion of inequality on its specifically political effects. Whether Gilens and Page, or the Piketty boom, will have a specifically political effect in the United States is a separate question. But the influence that Gilens and Page can be expected to have is inversely related to the correctness of their findings; and Rawls himself, I am sorry to note, has yet to be cited in any opinion of the Court, dissent, or concurrence. As Rawls wrote:

Historically one of the main defects of constitutional government has been the failure to insure the fair value of political liberty. The necessary corrective steps have not been taken, indeed, they never seem to have been seriously entertained . . . for when parties and elections are financed . . . by private contributions, the political forum is so constrained by the wishes of the dominant interests that the basic measures needed to establish just constitutional rule are seldom properly presented. (*A Theory of Justice* 198-99)

“Are seldom”—after the line of cases from *Buckley v Valeo* to *McCutcheon*—has turned into “shall never.”

Cite as: W.A. Edmundson, *Roll Over, De Tocqueville*, JOTWELL (June 19, 2015) (reviewing Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, *Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens*, 12 *Perspectives on Politics* 564 (2014)), <http://juris.jotwell.com/roll-over-de-tocqueville/>.