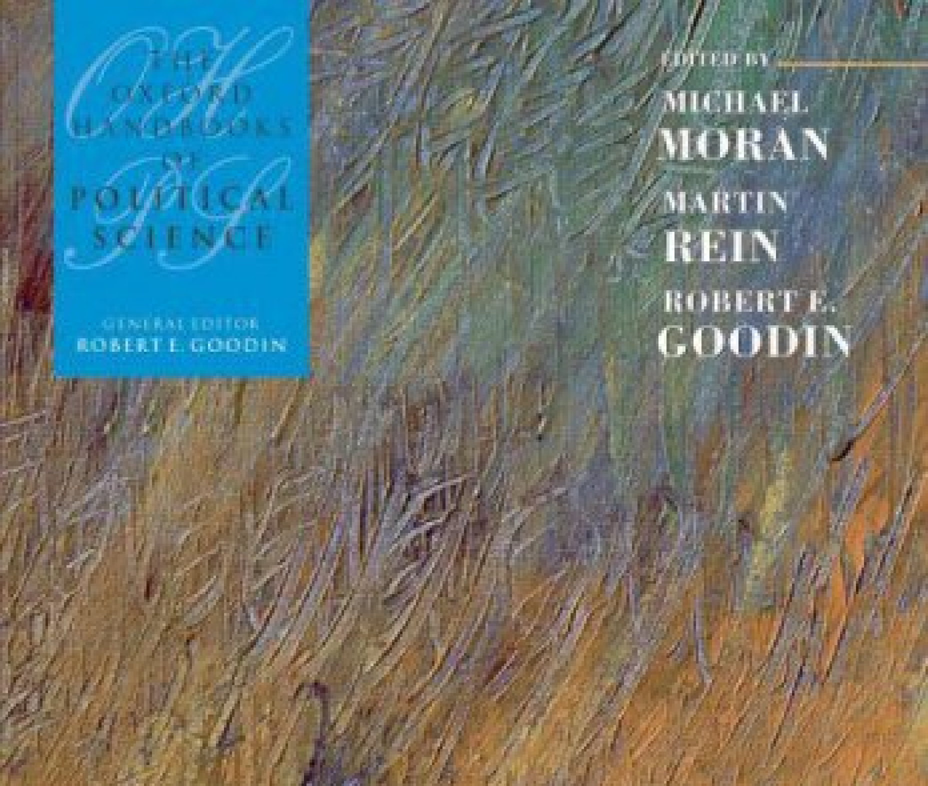

THE OXFORD HANDBOOKS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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The Oxford Handbook *of* PUBLIC POLICY

- getting rid of quotas and domestic monopolies;
- increasing exports;
- privatizing state-owned industries and utilities;
- deregulating capital markets and the domestic economy;
- opening banking and telecommunications to private ownership and competition; and
- allowing citizens to choose from an array of competing pension options.

This set of rules has also been referred to as the "Washington Consensus." This term, coined by Williamson (1990), refers to the advocacy of these policies by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and US Treasury, all of which are located in Washington, DC. The policies formed the basis of the conditions imposed on developing countries seeking assistance in dealing with the global debt crisis of the 1980s. The successful resolution of this crisis (at least in most middle-income developing countries) helped to create the consensus described by Williamson, which was particularly strong in the early 1990s.

In many accounts the question of whether the policies of the Washington Consensus are actually beneficial is, strictly speaking, irrelevant, since there is no alternative option. This is the point of the "straitjacket" part of Friedman's metaphor. Like other proponents of globalization, Friedman argues that governments must adopt the policy agenda of the Washington Consensus or face the wrath of the "Electronic Herd" of global financial traders. The only alternative is to create a closed society like that of North Korea.

There is little evidence to support Friedman's claims. It is true that policies of the kind listed above have been widely adopted in the past twenty-five years, but this is more a reflection of changing ideas than of the constraints imposed by global financial markets. Britain and the United States implemented much of the policy agenda described above in the 1980s, under the Thatcher government and Reagan. European governments have been much slower to follow suit. That has not prevented foreign exchange markets from bidding the euro up to unprecedently high levels against the US dollar.

Moreover, contrary to what might be expected from Friedman's arguments, the correlation between exposure to global trade and the ratio of government expenditure to GDP is positive, not negative. European countries have high ratios of trade to national product, and large government sectors. The United States and Japan have relatively small governments and relatively small exposure to trade. This may be coincidence or it may reflect a demand for government intervention to compensate for exposure to external shocks. Either way, it is inconsistent with the idea that globalization necessitates small government.

The actual relationship is more complex and interesting. In macroeconomic terms, the choices available to governments can be described in terms of the "impossible trinity." A government cannot simultaneously pursue an independent macroeconomic policy, maintain a fixed exchange rate, and allow free international capital movements. The analysis of the problem was first undertaken by Mundell (1963), though the origins of the phrase "impossible trinity" remain obscure.

Over the last century, governments have responded to this trilemma in very different ways. The economy of the nineteenth century, like that of the late twentieth century, was one of unrestricted capital flows, and tight constraints on government policies. As noted above, a radically different system was adopted in 1945. The Bretton Woods system relied on fixed exchange rates and restrictions on international capital flows. With these restrictions in place, the main policy instrument used to stabilize the economy, avoiding recessions and excessive booms, was fiscal policy. In periods of depressed activity, governments stimulated demand by cutting taxes and increasing public expenditure. The opposite measures were used to restrain potentially inflationary booms. Monetary policy played a subordinate role.

The abandonment of controls on capital flows and the shift to floating exchange rates in the 1970s had mixed effects on the scope for fiscal and monetary policy. As the impossible trinity argument shows, with no controls on capital flows, governments can adopt an independent monetary policy only if they are prepared to abandon any control over the exchange rate.

Few governments or central banks have been willing to disregard the exchange rate, often seen as an indicator of national economic worth, but Australian experience suggests that this is probably the optimal response. The willingness of the Reserve Bank to accept a sustained depreciation in the value of the Australian dollar, rather than raising interest rates to support the currency, was the main reason why Australia, unlike New Zealand, suffered little or no adverse effect from the Asian crisis in 1998. Similarly, Britain's forced exit from the European Monetary System in 1992, following the speculative attack on the pound by George Soros and others, is generally regarded, in retrospect, as highly beneficial.

The impact of globalization on the scope for fiscal policy is complex and, in some respects, paradoxical. In some important respects, the removal of controls on capital flows makes it easier for governments to adopt a flexible fiscal policy. In a closed economy, attempts to stimulate economic activity through tax cuts or higher public spending, financed by the issue of government bonds, tend to raise interest rates and may therefore "crowd out" private investment (including the purchase of homes and consumer durables).

By contrast, in the absence of controls on international movements of capital, interest rates are set on world markets. Provided that budget deficits are not so large or sustained as to raise concerns that governments may repudiate their debt or resort to inflationary financing, budget deficits have no direct effect on interest rates.

The main problem with globalization is not that it imposes tight constraints on governments, but that it makes national economies vulnerable to sudden shifts in sentiment. Until 1997, for example, Asian economies were seen as miraculously good performers, in spite of well-known deviations from standard Western investment practices in favour of relationships based on personal connections. Before 1997, the relationship-based approach was generally referred to in favourable terms, but it has subsequently become known as "crony capitalism." When relatively minor economic difficulties emerged in Thailand, there was a sudden panic and investors sought to pull funds not only out of Thailand, but out of all the major economies in Southeast Asia (as well as Korea and Taiwan).

One of the few Southeast Asian economies to emerge relatively unscathed from this process was that of Malaysia. Following the logic of the impossible trinity, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir imposed temporary controls on capital movements, thereby permitting the maintenance of the exchange rate for the Malaysian ringgit and the pursuit of an independent (in this context, non-contractionary) monetary policy.

An even more clear-cut example was that of Argentina. Following the international debt crisis of the 1980s, Argentina was the leader among South American countries in adopting the policies of the Washington Consensus. To demonstrate its unwillingness to pursue an independent monetary policy, with the associated potential for irresponsibly inflationary policy, the Argentine government handed over control of monetary policy to a currency board, which was required to maintain a fixed exchange rate with the US dollar, regardless of the impact on the domestic economy. All controls on capital flows were lifted, and public assets were privatized on a large scale.

The result was rapid capital inflow which permitted the government to run large budget deficits, partly disguised by the use of privatization proceeds to fund current expenditure. Laudatory articles about the success of the Argentine experiment with currency boards were still appearing in the financial press in 2001, when sentiment suddenly shifted.

In November 2001, there was a run on the Argentine peso and the government fell, as did a string of successors. In 2002, Eduardo Duhalde became Argentina's fifth president in two weeks. Convertibility of the peso was suspended and banks were closed, leading to widespread economic distress. Output fell by as much as 20 per cent, comparable to the Great Depression. Stability was restored only with the election, in 2003, of the Kirchner administration, which repudiated both the Washington Consensus and most of the debts incurred by its predecessors.

In both the Asian and Argentine cases, there was no obvious trigger for the crisis and even in retrospect, it is not clear which events were crucial. In a globalized economy, governments face vaguely defined constraints, but the penalty for violating those constraints, usually unwittingly, can be very severe.

3. Constraints and Trade-offs

One of the crucial ideas in economics is the duality between quantities and prices. One manifestation of this duality is the fact that a quantitative constraint, such as a budget constraint, can be expressed in relative price terms as a trade-off between the goods that are subject to the constraint.

The simplest example is a household's budget constraint. The fact that the household's expenditure must equal its income (net of saving or borrowing) means that there is a trade-off between any two items of consumption, given by their relative market prices. The example can be taken further when we consider the possibility of varying hours of work. There is a trade-off between leisure and items of consumption, given by the marginal post-tax wage rate and the price of the consumption items.

Constraints on government policy can similarly be expressed in terms of trade-offs. In all its various forms, the long-term balanced budget constraint means that higher spending and lower taxes today must be traded off against lower spending and higher taxes in the future. Within each period, there is a trade-off between taxes and public expenditure.

Unlike household budget constraints, policy constraints are non-linear; that is, the associated prices are not fixed. The higher the ratio of taxation revenue to GDP, the greater the marginal cost in terms of economic disincentives, taxpayer non-compliance, and political resistance.

3.1 Dealing with Constraints and Trade-offs

If a policy issue is considered in terms of a constraint, and an associated trade-off, three questions naturally arise. First, is the constraint binding, or is it possible to do more of everything? Second, how costly is it to relax the constraint? Third, given a binding constraint, what is the optimal trade-off?

Consider, for example, the problem of determining government expenditure, subject to a balanced budget constraint. To determine whether the constraint is binding, it is obviously necessary to measure the budget balance appropriately, as has been discussed above. It is also necessary to look for policy options that may allow for more spending on all objectives, without violating the constraint.

On the revenue side, a tax reform that increased the efficiency with which taxes are collected might allow for an increase in revenue with no increase in the effective burden of taxation. The replacement of retail turnover taxes by value-added taxes is commonly regarded as such a reform.

On the expenditure side, reorganization of government activities may eliminate duplication and waste, allowing provision of more services for the same cost. Of course, it is much easier for politicians to promise to cut duplication and waste than to actually do so.

A movement of the kind discussed above is referred to by economists as a potential Pareto improvement, since, assuming the extra resources are allocated appropriately, at least some people can be made better off while no one is made worse off. Examples of potential Pareto improvements are rare, and actual Pareto improvements even rarer.

A binding constraint is associated with a "shadow price," which corresponds to the cost of relaxing the constraint. In the case of the budget constraint on government expenditure the shadow price is the cost (economic, political, and social) of increasing tax revenue. From the Second World War to the 1970s, this shadow price was low enough to permit a gradual increase in the ratio of public expenditure to national income, with a corresponding increase in tax revenue. The "Tax Revolts" of the late 1970s brought this growth to an end but did not, in most countries, reverse it.

Finally, given a fixed constraint, it is necessary to choose the best available allocation of resources, given the trade-offs imposed by that constraint. There are a variety of institutional approaches to this problem. Businesses, including commercialized government businesses, use market prices as the basis for determining trade-offs, since this is the approach that maximizes profits. Governments can influence these trade-offs through taxes, subsidies, and community service obligations.

In many cases, market prices are not an appropriate guide to public policy. The techniques of benefit–cost analysis provide a formal basis for making trade-offs in such cases. Using benefit–cost analysis, seemingly disparate kinds of benefits and costs can be reduced to common terms (usually present-day money terms) for the purpose of making trade-offs between them.

The benefits of different health care for example, can be converted into the common currency of quality-adjusted life years (QALYs), and then compared against alternative life-saving interventions, such as improvements in road safety. These can then be traded off against alternative uses of public funds, giving rise to implicit values for QALYs and "statistical lives" (typical values are $100,000/QALY and $5 million/life). Loomes and McKenzie (1989) give a good survey of the QALY method and its competitors.

The most ambitious version of benefit–cost analysis, the "total valuation" framework (Randall and Stoll 1983), asserts that all social values can be reduced to aggregates of individual willingness to pay for benefits and willingness to accept costs. This assertion seems to assume a population made up entirely of classical utilitarians, however.

In practice, most political actors have conceded some role for benefit–cost analysis, but hardly any have accepted its more ambitious claims, let alone those of the "total valuation" school. In the real world, trade-offs are, inevitably, a mixture of economically based attempts at the scientific allocation of scarce resources and political exercises in the art of the possible.

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CHAPTER 26

POLITICAL FEASIBILITY: INTERESTS AND POWER

WILLIAM A. GALSTON

My topic is political feasibility, understood both in its general sense and more particularly, as shaped by the interests of individuals within a society and the distribution of power among them. I divide my discussion into four sections: some broad reflections on the concept of political feasibility; a historical/analytical examination of shifting conceptions of power; a exploration of the role of organized interests within the institutional and cultural context of US politics; and finally, a glance at the collapse of President Clinton's proposal for universal heath care—as a case study of the boundaries of the possible.

1. Political Feasibility: General Comments

I begin with some broad observations on the concept of political feasibility. To begin: this concept is nested within some broader ideas of possibility, some of which are outside the domain of politics. For example, if a policy proposal is logically or mathematically impossible (as many covertly are), then it cannot be politically feasible. Similarly infeasible are policies that contradict well-established natural scientific laws—the bizarre episode of Lysenkoist agriculture during Stalin's regime, for example. Nor can an option pass the test of political feasibility if it violates key findings from other social sciences such as economics or psychology.

Human nature as expressed through motives for action provides another core constraint on political feasibility. As the history of the twentieth century demonstrated, there are limits to human malleability. The effort to produce the "new Soviet man" ran aground, as did Maoist cultural revolutions in China, Cambodia, and elsewhere. While many individuals are capable of devotion to their fellow citizens and to the common good some of the time, and a few are capable of that behavior most of the time, any political program predicated on the belief that most citizens are capable of it most of the time is bound to run aground.

The refusal to assume pervasive altruism or civic devotion is the hallmark of American constitutionalism. In the words of George Washington: "A small knowledge of human nature will convince us that, with far the greatest part of mankind, interest is the governing principle; and that almost every man is more or less, under its influence. Motives of public virtue may for a time, or in particular circumstances, actuate men to the observance of a conduct purely disinterested; but they are not of themselves sufficient to produce persevering conformity to the refined dictates and obligations of social duty"(quoted in Morgenthau 1978, ch. 1). In *Federalist* 51 James Madison drew out the implications for political institutions: "The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?" While government is the greatest, it is anything but unique. Madison mused that "this policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives, might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public" (Rossiter 1961, 322).

If anything, the focus on the omnipresence of self-interest understates the motivational difficulty. Albert Hirschman (1977) has traced the effort of social theorists, starting in the seventeenth century, to replace the politics of the passions (aristocratic as well as religious) with the politics of the interests. Commercial society, it was hoped, would mute aggression and reduce violence. Fear for one's life and livelihood would tame the unruly excesses of the human spirit. This thesis culminated in the Edwardian confidence that the spread of trade and commercial relations had rendered war among developed nations unthinkable. The First World War delivered what turned out to be a permanent blow to this shallow optimism. Many young men eagerly embraced warfare as an antidote to the stifling constraints of bourgeois life. Courage, sacrifice, brutality, and death were the coin of the military realm.

Few religious thinkers of any depth were surprised. In the words of Jean Bethke Elshtain (2003, 152), "Augustinians are painfully aware of the temptation to smash, destroy, damage, and humiliate .... Violence unleashed when what Augustine called the *libido dominandi*, or lust to dominate, is unchecked is violence that recognizes no limits."

But a dark view of human nature can be just as superficial and one-sided as its opposite. A realistic appraisal stands removed from cynicism as well as wishful thinking. As a great modern Augustinian and democrat put it, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (Niebuhr 1944, xii).

Let me now move a step closer to my topic. The concept of political feasibility is embedded rather than free standing. The question is almost always, feasible where? And feasible when?[1] Public culture varies from place to place, as do political institutions; policies that are feasible in parliamentary democracies with statist beliefs may well prove impractical in regimes, such as the United States, with divided powers and anti-statist inclinations. Similarly, policies that are not feasible now may be feasible later, or might have been feasible before earlier decisions closed off options. (This is one of the implications of path dependency in human affairs.)

Political realists take pride in seeing the world "as it is," not as some might wish it to be, undistorted by hope, fear, credulity, or abstract theory. This is not a simple matter, however, because any clear-sighted view of the world must take into account the effects of human imagination and creativity, often characteristic of great leaders, as well as the element of plasticity in our collective life. An example of the former: after the first Zionist Congress in 1897, Theodore Herzl remarked that he had just re-established the Jewish state and that while no one could see that today, in fifty years the matter would be clear to all. His famous slogan, "If you will it, it is no fairy-tale," turned out to be more realistic in the long run than the sensible but blinkered doubts of the skeptics.

An example of the latter: the economist and social choice theorist Kenneth Arrow has shown that in many circumstances, the distribution of opinion in democratic publics does not dictate a single determinate outcome but rather admits of many potential majorities, each of which expresses a different ensemble of policy preferences. In such circumstances, which may not be rare, the influence of institutional structures and of entrepreneurial leaders can be decisive.[2]

In short, the field of political action, while bounded, is not fixed, but rather includes a range of possibilities. The passage of time and the mutability of belief, along with the variety of institutions and leadership, expand the range of feasible outcomes. A thin line separates the visionary from the crank, and no algorithm defines the location of that line.

In ordinary political discourse, the concept of feasibility plays three distinct roles: forward looking, as a guide to action; present regarding, as excuse; and backward looking, as explanation. When considering whether to undertake particular initiatives, political agents often do (and always should) ask themselves whether the goals they seek are feasible. When groups pursue a goal believing it is possible when it isn't, the opportunity cost is typically high; not only are they are likely to be disillusioned, but also they will have forgone other, more attainable goods.

We are all too familiar with the use of feasibility as excuse. A subordinate goes to a supervisor (or a citizen to a public official, or a newly elected member of Congress to the chair of a committee) with a request; the supervisor replies, "I'd love to help you

[1] See, e.g., Przeworski 1987; Huitt 1968; Majone 1975; Wildavsky 1979, esp. ch. 2; Meltsner 1972; Moynihan 1973; Philbrook 1953; Goodin 1982, ch. 7.

[2] Cf. Arrow 1963; Riker 1983, 1986; Mackie 2004.

out, but it's just not possible." Sometimes what the supervisor says is true, and when so, unobjectionable as well as dispositive. Often, however, feasibility is invoked as a way to evade a truth uttering which will entail costs for the supervisor: "You (the supplicant) aren't significant enough to help;" or "Honoring your request would divert resources from projects I (the supervisor) regard as more important;" or "Doing what you ask would require me to initiate a conflict I would rather avoid."

Feasibility, finally, can be used to explain why a political initiative didn't succeed: Although we didn't know it at the time (the story might go), the deck was stacked against us. Our opponents had us outnumbered and had used their superior resources to obtain the support of the decisive actors. No matter how well we played our hand, we were bound to lose. Like feasibility as excuse, feasibility as explanation is often valid, but its truth is hard to assess. Critics will often say that if you had played your hand differently, the results would have been different. Unfortunately, history is not a laboratory experiment; you cannot replay it, changing the variable whose impact you wish to assess. In the game of bridge, some contracts can be assessed definitively as doomed on their face, such that not even the world champion could fulfill them. In the world of public affairs, such judgements will usually be contestable, and at best matters of greater and lesser probability rather than certainty.

2. Political Feasibility and Power

Questions of political feasibility are often translated into the language of power, a concept that theorists and researchers have debated for centuries. Within contemporary social thought and social science, this discussion has proceeded through a number of distinct phases. Led by Robert Dahl, the early behavioralists focused on power over individual, empirically observable decisions. Critics of this approach, such as Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1970), emphasized the processes by which key issues are excluded from the decision-making agenda. In turn, Steven Lukes (1974) criticized both of these approaches as resting on an unexamined conception of human wants. A truly "radical" understanding of power would develop an objective conception of human interests and assess the extent to which the influence of processes within a given society unequally hindered certain groups from realizing those interests.

Lukes's influential thesis sparked two lines of critique and development. Some theorists noted that Lukes had failed to provide an account of how real human interests could be identified and sought to remedy this deficiency. (Jürgen Habermas's (1984, 1987) "ideal speech situation" is the most influential proposal in this vein.) Other theorists argued that Lukes had overemphasized individual human agency at the expense of the social structures that shape individual wants and decisions and had failed to clarify the relation between structure and agency. The work of Anthony Giddens (1984) exemplifies the efforts of many thinkers to overcome this dualism: agency produces structures, which in turn condition agency.

Most recently, Michel Foucault's influential work has shifted the debate over power in two ways. First, he replaces the duality of structure and agency with a conception of discursive practices that form the ensemble power/knowledge. As Stewart Clegg (1989, 158) puts it, "Foucault seeks to show how relations of 'agency' and 'structure' have been constituted discursively, how agency is denied to some and given to others ... The focus is upon how certain forms of representation are constituted rather than upon the 'truth' or 'falsity' of the representations themselves."[3] Second, and relatedly, Foucault rejects the focus of classical political theory on "sovereign" power in favor of discursive practices that pervade and "discipline" the entire social field. Because power does not have a definable center, it cannot be overthrown through regicide or its equivalent, but only resisted at specific points in the social field. We can best understand power, therefore, by studying "micropolitics" rather than institutions, structures, or causal relations.[4]

Against this backdrop of competing approaches, I want to investigate two conceptions of power—effective agency and domination—in somewhat greater depth. Many scholars trace this discussion in its modern form to Thomas Hobbes, who devoted a portion of chapter 10 of *Leviathan* to this topic. Hobbes defines the "power of a man" as his "present means, to obtain some future apparent good." Some means—such as strength, good looks, intelligence, charm, and the like—are aspects of an individual's natural endowment. Other means—wealth, fame, friends—are gained through the exercise of such endowments. The essential point is that these means are resources that determine the extent to which an individual has the *power to* attain particular ends.

Many reject this way of framing the issue on the ground that the most relevant understanding of power is as *power over* others. The underlying argument is that in our political and social life, our ability to attain our ends is thwarted, not only by the lack of personal resources, but also by the conflicting ends and intentions of other agents. It is this intuition that leads Brian Barry (1989) to argue that an individual has power if he has the "ability to overcome resistance or opposition."[5] In a similar vein, Robert Dahl (1957) argues that "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."[6] The modern origin of this way of thinking is Max Weber's (1947, 152) definition of power as "the probability that one

[3] Clegg 1989, 158. The preceding three paragraphs summarize the account that Clegg (1989, chs. 3 6) offers in his useful survey.

[4] This brisk canter through decades of complex disputation is all that space permits. Clegg (1989) offers a wealth of detail as well as a superb bibliography.

[5] Quoted and discussed in Morriss 2002, xxxiii. Morriss's volume complements that of Clegg by providing a comprehensive bibliography of the analytical philosophical literature on conceptions of power.

[6] Quoted and discussed in Morriss 2002, 13.