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## New directions in collective decision research

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## Conclusions

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## CONCLUSIONS

Robert Thomson and René Torenvlied

The aim of this special issue was to illustrate some developments in models of collective decision-making and to present some applications. The article by Bueno de Mesquita contained an elaborate assessment of the state of the art in research on collective decision-making. We conclude by making some remarks on what are in our view the more general strengths and weaknesses of this research approach, and the issues that future research should address.

If one feature of the models should be mentioned, it must be the fact that they can be applied in a wide variety of social situations. Many social choice situations require that some collective choice be made to select a policy solution in response to a problem. Such situations can be studied theoretically and scrutinized empirically with the help of collective decision-making models. Although the articles in this special issue incorporate both theoretical work and applied research in a specific field, they share a common conception of the collective choice situation faced by actors. This conception is a highly flexible one, and includes the recognition that real world policy-making entails the interaction of a multitude of organizations on several substantive issues that may be linked with each other. All articles in this special issue display these aspects of real life collective decision-making. Two of the models' features contribute to their ability to deal simultaneously with many actors and many issues. The first feature is the introduction of a separation between the stages of bargaining (in which actors take 'voting' positions) and collective choice (in which actors reach a collective decision on the basis of their voting positions). The second feature is the dynamic model of the bargaining process. Bargaining is modelled as a sequence of updating information, formulating a common expectation of the outcome, identifying influence opportunities, accepting/rejecting influence attempts, adapting voting positions, followed by a new sequence of updating information, formulating a new

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common expectation of the outcome, and so on until an equilibrium is reached.

This common conception of the collective choice situation allowed the authors to examine a variety of theoretical and empirical questions within the same analytical framework. For Van Assen, Stokman and Van Oosten the theoretical problem was to identify the externality effects of political exchanges between groups of actors. For Abdollahian and Alsharabati the problem involved the linkage of collective decision-making on different issues under the assumption that actors are non-cooperative. For Torenvlied and Thomson the question was whether the implementation of a collective decision is in itself an intrinsically political process, or requires knowledge about the design of procedures governing principal-agent relations. They applied different models on Dutch local authority policy-making and implementation. For Achterkamp and Akkerman the theoretical problem was to construct a measure capable of describing industrial conflict resulting from a collective choice situation between trade unions. They analysed characteristics of collective bargaining and the subsequent occurrence of strikes – as an indicator of industrial conflict – in The Netherlands. For Payne and Bennett the theoretical problem was to link characteristics of national-level policy-making with those of regional policy-making. They made an empirical assessment of regional policy-making in Britain following New Labour's initiatives.

Testing the models and identifying the conditions under which some are more applicable is one of the most important challenges we face. Applying and testing these models requires the collection of detailed information on specific issues. Usually, these data are obtained by key informant research supplemented by intensive content analysis. This form of quantitative case study research is time-consuming, and at the moment most tests of the models have been performed on case studies. In 1996, Ray and Russett provided a review of the expected utility approach to political forecasting. We believe what they said of the expected utility model then is true of models of collective decision-making in general today. While recognizing that this approach to political forecasting is worthy of 'serious consideration as a "scientific" enterprise' (Ray and Russett 1996: 466), they note:

The evidence regarding the validity of the expected utility approach to forecasting is not definitive. There is a lot of room for increased confidence in it if and when it

is utilized by larger numbers of people less closely associated with its originators, and if it proves possible to arrange more systematic (and unclassified) comparisons of its performance with that of potential competitors (1996: 454).

Clearly, advances are being made. The applications presented in this special issue all attempt to test the models on a number of observations, and the results are promising.

To provide a broader test of the collective decision-making models, the case studies need to be embedded within an elaborate research design. In the first place, different types of policies should be included, reflecting variation in the distribution of preferences, salience and capabilities of actors. In the second place, policy-making on different levels should be included, reflecting variation in the size of (corporate) actors and the scope of the policies and issues. In the third place, policy-making over longer periods of time should be included in the test of the models. A longitudinal research design provides us with insights into (a) the validity of model assumptions on the (micro) level of bargaining, and (b) the question of how changes in the outcomes of collective decision-making can be explained by shifts in preferences versus changes in decision-making institutions.

Not only the selection of appropriate cases, but also the procedures followed when testing the models will determine the success of future research in this area. More attention should be devoted to the important baseline models in political science and policy analysis. In this respect, the median voter theorem and the mean voter theorem must serve as the critical models in assessing whether a micro-level model of the bargaining process has some value in the explained variance it adds to these baseline models. This is particularly important due to the fact that models of collective decision-making are associated with an elaborate method for measuring what are purported to be the key elements of decision situations (issue specifications, actor preference profiles and capability scores). At least some of the predictive power of the models may come from these measurement techniques. It could very well be the case that weighting the distribution of policy positions with capabilities and/or salience explains as much of the variance in policy outcomes as the more elaborate collective decision-making models. However, it is important to recognize that the veracity of the models' predictions of the policy outcomes is only one way of testing them. The models also generate rich propositions at the micro level regarding

the process of actor interaction, which makes testing possible at this level too. Arguably, this actor level, at which the models differ most fundamentally from each other, and at which insights have been drawn in previous case study research, is the most relevant for testing the models and the conditions under which they apply.

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