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Author(s): Paul H. Conn, David B. Meltz and Charles Press

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# The Concept of Political Rationality\*

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**Paul H. Conn**

Michigan State University

**David B. Meltz**

Georgia Institute of Technology

**Charles Press**

Michigan State University

*The authors seek to develop the concept of (instrumental) rationality into a useful analytic tool in political science. Analogous to the economists' hypothetical rational man, the political man seeks to maximize his power. They note the idiosyncratic limitations of assuming that all purposive behavior is rational by definition, and turn to the action with the larger payoff as the more rational strategy, but this situational definition of rationality offers its own problems. They conclude that in most political situations it may be impossible to discover with certainty the best strategy, so settle for a less demanding definition of rational political choices, which includes recognition of the cost of choosing. The starkness of game theory analysis is relieved en route by perceptive comments on political institutions and choices.*

*Paul Conn, associate professor at Michigan State University, has his Ph.D. from Yale University. He is the author of Conflict and Decision-Making, An Introduction to Political Science, and of forthcoming publications on parties and on electoral research. David Meltz, a Rochester Ph.D. formerly of the MSU political science faculty, is now at Georgia Institute of Technology in the College of Industrial Management. He is the author of articles in Law & Society Review and Behavioral Science. Charles Press, professor and chairman of the MSU department, is the*

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*co-author of Governing Urban America and other books, and author of articles in APSR, WPO, Midwest JPS, PAR, and various other journals.*

Political scientists have not hesitated to borrow and adapt promising formulations from other disciplines. To many, the analytic rigor of economic theory is particularly attractive. Increasingly there have been attempts to apply the concepts and models developed by economists to political phenomena.<sup>1</sup> While to some this work seems promising, many in our discipline are skeptical. They suspect that below the surface precision of transplanted economic models lies a definitional and conceptual quagmire.

In this paper we examine one such concept, that of rationality. The concept, initially developed by economists and elaborated by game theorists, has only recently been formally introduced into the lexicon of political science.<sup>2</sup> We examine the implications of the various definitions that have been proposed for the term and investigate how these may be applied to the study of political phenomena. The definitions we consider are those of Luce and Raiffa, William Riker, Anthony Downs, and Arthur Goldberg.<sup>3</sup> We suggest that most definitions of rationality do not successfully avoid the problems arising from the unavoidability of making interpersonal

1. Some of the more well known examples are: Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Harper and Row, New York: 1957); Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); R. L. Curry and L. L. Wade, *A Theory of Political Exchange* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968). The latter contains an excellent bibliography. In addition, there has been an interesting and somewhat fruitful attempt to apply game-theory to political analysis. William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). For a recent summary of work in this field see: Sven Groennings, E. W. Kelley, and Michael Leiserson, eds., *The Study of Coalition Behavior: Theoretical Perspectives and Cases from Four Continents* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1970). Finally in the tradition of Anthony Downs, an entirely new approach to political processes has emerged using the spatial modelling paradigm. For a (nontechnical) summary of this literature as well as a complete up-to-date bibliography see: Otto A. Davis, Melvin J. Hinich, and Peter C. Ordeshook, "An Expository Development of a Mathematical Model of the Electoral Process," *American Political Science Review*, LXIV (June, 1970), 426-448.

2. For an excellent and penetrating analysis of the concept of rationality see: Peter C. Ordeshook, *Theory of the Electoral Process* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1969), Chapter 1. Also, Fred M. Frohock, *The Nature of Political Inquiry* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press), pp. 132-137.

3. R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa, *Games and Decisions* (New York: John Wiley and Sons); William Riker, op. cit.; Anthony Downs, op. cit., Arthur S. Goldberg, "Social Determinism and Rationality as Bases of Party Identification," *American Political Science Review*, LXIII (March 1969), 5-25.

comparisons of utility and the necessity of considering idiosyncratic preferences in any analysis. On the other hand situational definitions of rationality often founder on the problem of ambiguous and often overlapping payoffs. After examining the difficulties of these definitions, we develop a concept of rationality which we feel alleviates these problems. We define rational political action as action which is motivated by the pursuit of power payoffs which result from control of political office. We feel that such a conceptualization may be a useful analytic tool for the development of empirically testable propositions.

### I. The Rationality of Means and Ends

We wish to distinguish between rationality in terms of ends from rationality defined as a choice of means to attain particular ends. The former is the province of political philosophy while the latter is used most fully by economists.

Political philosophy(ers) often consider the possibility that ends or goals of human action may be categorized as rational or irrational. This may be based on several grounds, intuitional or natural. Thus it is, for political philosophy, intelligible to maintain that a goal is correct or incorrect according to some rationally determinable absolute standard. We do not here argue for any particular position, that is for any particular understanding of intuition or nature. Rather, we merely remark that much argument exists which establishes the intelligibility of such discourse; it is incorrect to reject out of hand "normative" discourse because of "the logical distinction between is and ought," or a supposed "naturalistic fallacy." The most prudent position then, is to suppose a practical distinction between discourse of means and discourse of ends and that the questions surrounding their respective theoretical statuses are open.<sup>4</sup>

Social scientists including economists prefer to define rationality instrumentally. We may distinguish two basic types of such definitions: (1) the assumption of individual rationality, and (2) the concept of the rational strategy.

A major difficulty which plagues those who attempt to devise instrumental definitions of rationality is an inability to transcend individual assessments of utility and thus develop an operationalization of the concept that permits comparisons of utilities across individuals. What might be

4. There is much literature to be found which deals with these important questions. We mention briefly, W. K. Frankena's old but still important, "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind*, 48 (1939); P. F. Strawson, "Ethical Intuitionism," *Philosophy*, 24 (1949); Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism* (Yale University Press, 1969); to name but a few.

otherwise perfectly plausible conceptualizations of rationality flounder on this demonstrably insurmountable problem of making valid interpersonal comparisons of utility.

## II. The Rationality Assumption

The rationality assumption as used by game theorists states that individuals order their preferences transitively and choose that preference which is highest. Because this assumption asserts that individuals always act to maximize their expected utility, *observed* behavior is *always* rational behavior.

Luce and Raiffa use rationality in this sense and define the term as follows:

of two alternatives which give rise to outcomes, a player will choose the one which yields the more preferred outcome, or more precisely in terms of the utility function, he will attempt to maximize expected utility.<sup>5</sup>

Rationality, defined in this manner, reduces to the trivial conclusion that all observed choice is rational. Thus irrationality, if it has any empirical referent at all, is equivalent to indecisiveness. This is so because the rationality assumption presupposes that individuals engage in purposive behavior. We conclude then that all observed behavior is rational because, by prior assumption, all human behavior is purposive, even if a particular goal or purpose is incomprehensible to the researcher.

According to Luce and Raiffa an individual acts rationally when he prefers what he chooses, that is, if he chooses that alternative from a given set which provides him with the highest expected utility. The basic problem of this definition is that any concrete operationalization of the term immediately leads to tautologies. Since the utility index is merely a numerical device which the researcher develops in order to summarize the observed choices of an individual, in order to have empirical utility, some goal or end state must be specified for each situation. Our point is that the above assumption is incomplete.<sup>6</sup>

The rationality assumption does have heuristic value. Rather than as-

5. Luce and Raiffa, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

6. Luce and Raiffa, *loc. cit.* We shall take (the postulate of rationality) to be entirely tautological in character in the sense that (it) does not describe behavior but it describes the word "preference." Ordeshook, *op. cit.*, disagrees with this interpretation. For a different approach than this one taken in the study see his *Theory of the Electoral Process*, *op. cit.*

suming that individual behavior is random or ad hoc, it emphasizes the notion that behavior is purposive, and focuses attention on those alternatives which political actors actually choose. The basic shortcoming of this formulation is that insofar as it considers the question at all, it appraises the rationality of any given choice from the perspective of individual idiosyncratic preferences. That is, making such appraisals, the analyst must examine all individual preference rankings. One attempt to surmount the limitations of the rationality assumption and simplify this task is to add a further assumption that preferences are static. We may then develop predictive models based on the assumption that past behavior is a prime determinant in predicting future behavior.

Analysts of the Supreme Court employ this variant extensively. This application illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. By focusing on individual preferences there is no standard for judging the *political* rationality of decisions. The only possible applicable standards are those that relate to the individual justices' personal preferences and the consistency of his decisions with respect to them. Thus the emphasis of this approach is on the psychological aspects of judicial behavior and places less emphasis on the political or power seeking aspects of the court.<sup>7</sup> This line of analysis becomes idiosyncratic in the same way as all great men of history theories are. In effect, political situational variables are held constant or are considered irrelevant. The success of this methodology for analyzing the behavior of Supreme Court Justices is perhaps attributable to the relative political insulation of the Supreme Court, and is not indicative of a widespread utility for this mode of political analysis.

The method is particularly inapplicable in changing political situations. Using an individual focus one can observe changing preference patterns only after the fact. It is this which gives a static quality to much of Supreme Court analysis. Analysis which considers both the existing political context and change in that context is, of course, more likely to be a useful predictor of change. Basically, such attempts to develop models from the rationality assumption are incomplete. This results from the fact that the rationality assumption is tautological, requiring for its operationalization complete information about individual preference schedules. Assessments of such preferences can only be made indirectly and one of the more successful attempts, as illustrated in the case of the judicial behavior literature, is limited by the static nature of the assumptions.

7. One of the most interesting and promising attempts to reintroduce significant political variables into Supreme Court Analysis has been done by David Rohde. See his, "Policy Goals and Opinion Coalitions in the Supreme Court," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, xvi (May, 1972).

### III. The Rational Strategy

Some analysts employ the term rationality with reference to situational contexts, in an attempt to move away from the individualistic focus of the rationality assumption. When used in this sense, rationality still includes purposive behavior, but the referent of appraising rationality shifts from the individual's preference orderings to the strategic environment. William Riker's definition is an example. He states that:

Given social situations with certain kinds of decision making institutions (of which parlor games, the market, elections, and warfare are notable examples) and in which exist two alternative courses of action with differing outcomes in money, or power, or success, some participants will choose the alternative leading to the larger payoff. Such choice is rational behavior and will be accepted as definitive while the behavior of participants who do not so choose will not necessarily be so accepted.<sup>8</sup>

The key term to define in the above definition is "larger payoff." Clearly Riker is alluding to something other than each individual choosing that alternative which maximizes his idiosyncratic utility function. Riker suggests a situational definition of the term "larger payoff." Thus the six year old who chooses the nickel over the dime because it is larger may be choosing in accordance with his own highest utility but from an economic perspective his choice is irrational because in the market these coins are classified as money and the value of the dime is twice that of the nickel. Without a situational definition of what constitutes the larger payoff there could be no way of appraising whether or not the six year old is behaving rationally. If our analysis were limited to a group of six year olds we would have no mechanism for making interpersonal comparisons of utility and therefore could not establish how intensely one child might desire a physically larger coin as compared to his peer's desire for the coin with the higher monetary value. By placing the participant in an economic situation we assume that rational action is that action which achieves or raises the probability of achieving the stipulated larger payoff. A decision in this economic situation which achieves other desires, such as a preference for larger as opposed to smaller objects may prevent the achievement of the characteristic larger payoff.

Riker assumes that the market, elections, and warfare are all similar to parlor games. The rules of each of these "games" tell us what constitutes winning, and specify the characteristic prize of the game: in the market,

8. Riker, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

money; in politics, power; and in warfare, victory in arms. A rational strategy is, therefore, a choice of that alternative which leads to a larger payoff of the characteristic prize as defined by the rules of that game. It is, of course, necessary to assume that the rules are known and tacitly agreed to by those who choose to compete in that game.

We may assume that those who make the rules for the social and political order attempt to define what constitutes winning by using differential payoffs. The United States Constitution sets up a hierarchy of offices from representative to senator to president. The specification of qualifications such as age and residency for each office are indications of the political power of the various offices as the founding fathers defined them. That such political rules influence political behavior and are tacitly accepted by those who play the political game is demonstrated by an examination of modal participant behavior as revealed in political career patterns. Few political actors voluntarily move from what is constitutionally prescribed as a more powerful office to one with less political power. Almost all choose to go in the other direction.<sup>9</sup>

There are significant limitations to this conception. There is little agreement as to what constitutes the characteristic prize of politics. We have already indicated that the rationality assumption does not of itself lead to empirically testable propositions because it does not surmount the problem of making valid interpersonal comparisons of utility. The situational definition, on the other hand, leads to problems arising from the fact that there may be multiple payoffs in political games. These payoffs often overlap. Further, the rules governing the game are often imperfect instruments for achieving the results which their framers intended. Additionally the mixed motives of the participants may make it difficult for the observer to classify the characteristic payoff. For example, lawyers fresh from the bar examination have been known to run for the state legislature more for the salary and the opportunity it affords in building a law practice than because of a thirst for political power. In real life the mixture of payoffs may not be as distinct as analysts might wish. In Plato's ideal Republic, the philosopher king pursues knowledge and justice to the exclusion of all other goals which might in any way risk the perfection of the regime. In reality we know that in all polities the payoffs often provide mixed motivations for politicians and thus some corruption of the platonic ideal is inevitable as Plato predicts in his discussion of the timocracy.

A similar difficulty is that there does not appear to be a single political

9. The direction of office ambitions has been most successfully demonstrated and developed by Joseph Schlesinger. See his *Ambition and Politics* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966).

game with a clear hierarchy of offices leading to greater and greater power. Despite attempts of those who fashion political rules, such as bureaucratization is never fully achieved. Rather there are a variety of office payoffs the achievement of which often requires the choice of mutually exclusive strategies.

Not only do problems result from difficulties in delineating the payoffs of games, but a further difficulty arises in assessing the rules which govern how any particular game is to be played. Rules are often unclear in their intent and ambiguous in their application. It may be the case that the consequences are often unintended and yield results which thwart the intent of their framers. Certainly it is debatable whether or not the primary, initiative, referendum and recall have worked as their progressive framers wished. In another context Joseph Schlesinger argues that eliminating seniority in Congress, a rule to order the acquisition of power, could have the unintended consequences of destroying the two party system since what seems to preserve loyalty to a national party in a senator or representative is the fact that seniority is not automatically transferable from one party to the other.

Perhaps of even greater significance is the fact that political actors often manipulate systems rules in an attempt to provide an unintended set of payoffs. For example, the chairmanships of several important House committees have developed more political power than many senatorial seats, an outcome that certainly was not envisioned by the founding fathers. The power and authority of the Supreme Court, especially the assertion of the power of judicial review, provides an example of political actors who altered the rules and therefore the payoffs to suit their own desire for political power. Examples of this sort provide further difficulty for those who would look to the rules of the game to estimate their chances for success.

Finally, uncertainty always plays a role and reduces the effective confidence which participants place in the ability of the rules to suggest preferred courses of action. Some men without much initial political power spurned the vice-presidency only to find later that they had thrown away an opportunity to be president. Others, such as John Nance Garner, vainly gave up offices of considerable power for precisely that opportunity. Typically such decisions often rest on a calculation of the odds. Thus one may observe that over a 184 year period, only eight men have succeeded to the office of president. For an actor to choose rationally he must not only assess the rules of the game, but he must also include an estimate of the probability that certain events will occur given any particular choice.

Thus although defining rationality situationally alleviates one set of problems an entirely new set of difficulties remain to be resolved. Pri-

marily, the problem is to define the characteristic payoff of a game whose participants may have mixed motives and who are often playing multiple games. In these situations the rules do not unambiguously indicate unique paths to success. Compounding the problems is the fact that the rules themselves evolve and change, that they are dynamic. This introduces a particularly significant problem which we consider shortly.

#### **IV. Simultaneous Payoffs and Separate Political Games**

Anthony Downs among others assumes that actors in political games may desire payoffs other than power. He writes:

By rational action we mean action which is efficiently designed to achieve consciously selected political or economic ends to the actor.<sup>10</sup>

Downs argues that we may consider nonpolitical payoffs such as money, social prestige, etc., as possible by-products of political success, which he defines as the attainment of power. He thus reduces the dilemma of simultaneously pursued objectives. The acquisition of political power is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of other values. Failure is likely in the political game when the pursuit of nonpolitical values leads to strategic choices which are detrimental to the acquisition of power, thus leading to the loss of the valued by-products as well. Simultaneous pursuit of values is possible only if the means to these other values are congruent with the strategic choices necessary for attaining political power. Downs writes:

Politicians in our model are motivated by the desire for power, prestige, and income, and by the love of conflict, i.e., “the thrill of the game” common to many actions involving risk. However, they can obtain none of these *desiderata* except the last unless their party is elected to office. Therefore, we do not distort the motives of party members by saying that their primary objective is to be elected.<sup>11</sup>

Downs seeks to use situational rationality in a very specific way. He posits a goal for a particular game and assumes that all the players in that game desire that goal. Therefore, rational action is that action which permits or raises the probability that an actor achieves the situationally defined goal. Downs continues:

The central purpose of elections in a democracy is to select a government. Therefore any citizen is rational in regard to elections if his

10. Anthony Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

actions enable him to play his part in selecting a government efficiently.<sup>12</sup>

In Downs' model, a voter behaves rationally by voting for candidate x if and only if that candidate's views most closely coincide with his own. But what if at the same time, a voter is a professor of political science. Assume that he desires a governmental staff research appointment and estimates that his chances for this are better if candidate y is elected. As a voter, therefore he must choose between competing goals. According to Downs the voter (*qua* voter) to be rational should vote for x. We suggest that for the voter the basic goal is to secure the election of candidates whose policy preferences most closely approximate their own. The extent to which he takes risks in the electoral process to satisfy other desires will determine his probability of success.

We have suggested that the politician's goal is to control office. But even this rather simple concept may lead to difficulty. Thus a senator who desires to be president may find himself in a quandary. Coming from a small state he may discover that the policies and issues he should pursue for the presidential nomination may jeopardize his chances to remain in the Senate. Assuming that politicians at least wish to hold their present office and maximally desire to move toward more powerful offices, the decision to run for higher office is neither rational nor irrational in and of itself. Rather it is the probabilities of success and the relative valuations of the two offices which govern such decisions. We may note that the senator who estimates that he has only a .01 probability of getting the nomination, and who pursues that nomination and fails and in the process risks losing his present position is probably a poor calculator. Normally our value judgment is that taking such risks is irrational. Ambitious men, concerned with maintaining present rewards while preparing the ground for larger future rewards often find that short run and long run strategies are in conflict with each other.

We conclude that the problem of simultaneous and mixed payoffs in political games can be handled by positing power payoffs as determinative. As Downs asserts, political actors are motivated to achieve power. Their motivations may be mixed in that some desire power for itself, others desire power in order to achieve other goals. Yet in every instance power is a necessary condition. Decisions as to how much one should risk power for other values is often an individual decision. Analysts can, however, estimate probabilities of success and within those parameters make judgments as to whether they would consider such actions rational or not. This

12. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

is a strategic consideration which depends both upon an understanding of the rules of the game and the capacity of individuals to make estimates based on that understanding.

## V. The Problem of Isolating a Rational Strategy

We are now prepared to examine a second major aspect of the problem of instrumental rationality. The Riker and Downs definitions assume that the rules single out rational strategies for a series of political games in which actors seek power payoffs. We have already noted that rules may be ambiguous. We are now concerned with the possibility that participants are not able to isolate the winning strategies that the rules of the game suggest. It is unrealistic to assume that determining which strategy to use is a costless process or that all participants can do it equally well. Arthur Goldberg considers these points in detail. He notes that:

Put most simply, being rational in a decision situation consists in examining the alternative with which one is confronted, estimating and evaluating the likely consequences of each and selecting that alternative which yields the most attractive set of expectations. . . . All individuals are assumed to act so as to *try* to maximize expected value. In this sense all are equally rational. . . .<sup>13</sup>

In the present context this is equivalent to saying that all individuals desire to win whatever game they are playing, winning being a condition which is defined by the rules of the game. Goldberg's contribution is that he distinguishes between rationality as an assumption of behavior and rational choice as a measure of observed behavior. Goldberg concludes that although all individuals who play the game can be assumed to be rational in the intended sense, that is all prefer winning to losing, they differ markedly in their ability to isolate the winning strategy or in estimating probabilities of success.

What Goldberg suggests is that individuals vary in their effectiveness. He notes that:

. . . there is room for error in these calculations . . . the relevant probabilities are not necessarily known, and may have to be estimated; the quality and cost of information thus affect the accuracy of these calculations. The calculations themselves are not cost free, being far more costly for some than for others.<sup>14</sup>

13. Goldberg, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

14. *Ibid.*

Goldberg indicates two factors which affect the degree to which individuals vary in their choice of the winning strategy. The first is the costs of the resources necessary to choose that strategy and the second is the ability of the individual to effectively use those resources. The first set of costs are situationally determined. In any context the participants need certain resources or must incur certain costs by participating in a particular game. The second set of factors are individual variations which determine the effectiveness with which individuals can use and process the resources available to them.

For example, as a result of differences in intelligence, or access to necessary resources, some individuals are more able than others to obtain and correctly process the necessary information. The more information available, and the more accurately it is processed, the greater the likelihood that the individual will choose the optimal or winning alternative. The obstacle to such choice is costs—in this case the costs which necessarily accompany the process of gathering reliable information in the attempt to isolate and specify the optimal strategy. Effectiveness then is a function of the degree to which individuals can absorb these costs.

Viewing strategic decision-making in this way (as a costly enterprise) it is obvious that in most real world situations even the most “effective” players must settle for something less than perfect certainty in choosing what they believe to be the rational strategy. For it may be that the costs involved in isolating the best strategy are prohibitive. When this is the case, the individual, at some point, decides that the increased utility of obtaining more information and thereby reducing the probability of making the wrong choice is simply not worth the additional cost. The decision context may be conceptualized as follows. As information is received the individual reduces two possible sources of error: (1) the probability of not isolating the optimal strategy and (2) the probability of choosing a very poor strategy.<sup>15</sup>

The second error mentioned above, refers to the probability of choosing a strategy which results in an outcome which is very low on the scale of payoffs. As information is gathered, the individual at first disregards the least preferred strategies. As more information becomes available, the range of choice zeroes in on the winning or optimal strategy. Therefore, as the probability of not choosing the correct strategy decreases, the prob-

15. The argument in the text is similar to the satisficing model developed by Herbert A. Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” in Simon, *Models of Man* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1957), pp. 241–260. Also in the same volume see, Simon, “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment,” pp. 261–273.

ability of disastrous error also decreases. We assume that the process continues until the expected marginal utility for additional information is less than the marginal cost of that information. As information is received and processed the decision maker's probable error diminishes and his tolerance for whatever error remains increases. Games or situations often determine the amount of information necessary to reach the optimal strategy. Assuming decreasing marginal utility and constant or increasing costs for information,<sup>16</sup> and assuming a market structure for that information, the individual continues to buy until one of the following two conditions are met: (1) his resources are depleted or (2) his marginal utility equals his marginal cost.

This suggests that, because of information costs, calculating risks and estimating probabilities of success in order to take rational action may, in practical terms, be difficult for either participant or observer. In many two-person zero sum games there is no theoretical problem in making such estimates or in isolating the rational strategy. Riker argues, though not all students agree, that elections present such a situation since in this case one candidate wins the power payoff of office and all others lose. If one accepts Riker's arguments, an optimal strategy may be isolated for this significant political game. By introducing a few further assumptions (that is, that winning is equivalent to maximizing one's security level) one can show that the maximin (or minimax) strategy is *the* optimal strategy; and an elegant proof by Nash demonstrates that all two-person games have maximin (minimax) strategies available, if one admits mixed strategies into the domain of choice. Of course, in this case, we are again facing the problem of idiosyncratic utility functions.

The task of isolating the optimal strategies in non-zero sum contexts is quite different. There, it can be shown that the maximin and minimax strategies are not always in equilibrium and are not usually preferred strategies when used against each other. Therefore, exactly what is meant by winning in such a situation is unclear. Since most political conflicts are non-zero sum in nature, the assumptions, simplifications, or elegance of zero sum theory do not hold for most interesting political events. Thus while the above formulations concerning optimal strategy choices in the zero sum game may be useful in a few political situations, they are not applicable to those problems which most often face the practical politician or political researcher.

16. It seems reasonable to assert that there is an initial economy of scale which results in decreasing the unit price of information as the participant purchases the first batches of information. Soon afterward, however, the costs begin to rise as additional information becomes more scarce and thus more expensive.

Thus the conclusion we reach is that in most political situations, isolating the best strategy with certainty from the rules of the game may be impossible because (a) the information costs are too high for the participant to pay, (b) the skills required may be lacking, and (c) no single perfect strategy may exist. Rational political choice then is reduced to that action, consistent with the limitations noted, which most precisely permits the individual to choose that strategy, if it exists, with the highest probability of success and at a cost which the individual can afford.

We have indicated that for certain purposes, rational action is best defined in a situational context. Political rationality is premised on the assumption that all participants desire power as a necessary condition for satisfying their goals. This permits a consideration of the fact that individuals may pursue values in addition to power. The situational context sets the odds or probabilities that while pursuing power one may successfully seek to satisfy other values simultaneously. We have further suggested that isolating strategies which enable the participant to so behave may be difficult and may force participants to make suboptimal decisions. It is here that the rules of the game are crucial. Special problems are presented when rules change while the game is being played. We suggest our own resolution of this difficulty below.

## **VI. Game Rules: Static and Dynamic**

It is important to recognize that the significant game rules, whether formal or informal, are those that the participants adhere to. While this statement is as tautological as the rationality assumption, it suggests two points that warrant further consideration. The first is that the vast majority of players almost always have an investment in maintaining the rules of the game. The second point is that all players wish to permit the possibility that the rules can be changed. Let us consider each of these seemingly contradictory points in turn.

Rules orient players by reducing some of the uncertainties of playing and by increasing the predictability of actions and responses within the game. They give some indication of the risks involved in various actions by specifying the probable costs and benefits that would result. Rules also suggest the payoffs of the game and assign the value to these payoffs. In a horse race, spectators place bets. The rules determine how these bets are placed and the odds on each horse determine the value of the payoff. Note that these rules do not set the value of the payoff to the bettor. What is determined is the market value of the payoff which the odds provide and not the utility that such amounts of money may have for the particular players. People are willing to bet at a race track because they know that

as long as the rules are adhered to, the track will pay off and that payoff will be in accordance with the final parimutuel odds.

Players who have settled on a game as a means of satisfying their preferences are anxious that the structure of the game be preserved and that there be no reduction in the payoffs. Participants are often fearful of rule changes which may limit or impede their progress toward desired payoffs or which reduce the value of those payoffs once achieved. As we indicated earlier, politicians seek to move to offices of greater power. Many House members aspire to the Senate because it is a powerful position. We would not expect present or potential members of the Senate to endorse changes designed to make that body an honorific institution with little power, as for example Parliament did with respect to the House of Lords. It is useful to note that movement up to the House of Lords was not directly accessible to MP's. Such a step would be a devaluation of the currency which a Senate seat represents. Observe that while participants in a game are always eager to find shortcuts to the rewards, they avoid tactics which would debase those rewards.

Knowledge of the rules is an essential element in making calculations about the probability of success. The stability of the rules makes the calculation process possible and provides the opportunity for participants to seek an optimal strategy. Yet changes in the rules are common. Such changes occur when many or most of the players decide that such change is necessary to preserve the game or to remove present ambiguities in the rules. The reform rules which the Democratic party adopted at and subsequent to its 1968 convention were felt by many to be essential to the continued viability of the Democratic party. Many of the participants felt that the reforms reduced the tensions within the party. Looking at the reforms in operation after the 1972 convention, it is not clear whether they have really served their purpose. What is instructive is that the architect of those reforms became the Democratic nominee. George McGovern's nomination victory was in no small way attributable to the fact that he, probably better than any other candidate, understood the new and changed rules of the game.

Rule changes may be formal and codified, or they may become part of the traditional operating norms of the game. Occasionally such changes result from the use of daring action. John Marshall in *Marbury v. Madison* defined and enunciated the power of judicial review. In a single stroke he enhanced the power and influence of the court, thus strengthening Federalist power which had become increasingly limited as a result of Democratic electoral successes. The Supreme Court has continued to grow in influence. Early departures from the Court such as Justice Oliver Ellsworth's resignation to accept a diplomatic position from President Adams, have almost

disappeared (Justice Goldberg notwithstanding). The normal pattern is to give up existing careers and rewards to share in the power of the Court. Thus did Marshall create new rules in an ambiguous situation.

Our analysis suggests that the stability of the formal and informal rules provides a day to day predictability and the capacity for rule change permits flexibility. The rules determine the qualifications for participation in political games. Assuming that politicians seek to maintain and expand their power, the rules determine the parameters in which such action can be taken. Knowledge and understanding of the rules is essential to rational choice where the politician seeks to find the strategy which gives him the highest probability of achieving his goals.

Throughout this discussion our desire has been to use rationality in such a way that it establishes parameters for political action. This usage suggests that research progress in political science lies in moving away from a conception of rationality which is dependent upon knowing individual preference orderings. We say this despite the fact that many political scientists consider this usage to be important and analagous to the way in which economists use the term. We believe this assumption is too limited and impedes the effective use of the concept in political analysis.

The central focus of the economic approach is an analysis of individual behavior under market conditions. Economists begin by assuming that all participants in the market share a common preference—the desire to gain utility. The economist creates an artificial economic man who desires to maximize his individual wealth so that the definition of gaining utility changes to the measurable one of maximizing wealth. This is a limiting assumption and is made to facilitate analysis. For economic man, the motivation is gaining wealth and whatever by-products he may get as a result of that drive. The market assumptions provide the economist with a setting in which to place his economic man. The rules of the market provide the parameters for action and the point of departure from which we can examine the behavior of economic man. By manipulating and relaxing some of the market assumptions, economists examine the consequences of this for rational choice. This method of analysis has clear implication for political science. We have suggested that it is not necessarily only the market notion that we should be borrowing from the economist. This may or may not be appropriate in particular circumstances. What we should borrow is the idea that one can create an artificial construct of man, and place him in a defined environment in an attempt to predict the nature of the choices which can be made and to indicate what the range of rational choices would be.

Rational political man also seeks to maximize utility and that becomes transferred to saying that rational political man seeks to maximize his

power. The political environment and rules structure what are acceptable paths to attain that goal. Rules provide rewards for those who successfully compete and provide sanctions for those who violate them. The formal and informal rules, in setting parameters for political action, also determine what other values can be pursued simultaneously with power. The analyst, in predicting or explaining behavior, can use this framework to portray the range of options that are available to political actors and to estimate the probabilities of success which each strategy offers.