
The Natural Selection of Political Issues: An Interpretation of Political Disequilibrium

The General Possibility Theorem—and all it implies about the manipulation of outcomes from voting and about the politically even more devastating consequences of the frequent (indeed, typical) nonexistence of equilibrium under majority rule—raises extremely difficult problems for political theory and political philosophy. Yet simultaneously those same implications do permit a new and deeper understanding of the process of politics. We now can understand what always before has seemed an impenetrable mystery—namely, the motive force for the perpetual flux of politics.

In an effort to comprehend this flux, theorists have put together all sorts of reductionist theories that purport to explain changes in popular taste but explain nothing about the effect of tastes in politics. Thus, Marxists, for example, say change is entirely a matter of technological innovation. More humane but equally dogmatic writers say change is all a matter of new systems of philosophy. (Recall Keynes' remark: "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else.")¹ Still others, more cosmic, look for change in the forces of nature, the weather, sun spots, or even in events outside the solar system. It is possibly true that all these things affect tastes, though we know almost nothing about how tastes and values are in fact formed and influenced.

Still, knowing that tastes change does not tell us anything about how politics changes. To understand political events we need to understand how tastes get incorporated into political decisions. This is precisely where the flux of politics occurs, and it is precisely where an explanation is needed. Previous theorizing about changes in tastes and values has mostly

been reductionist. Hence it has been aimed at explicating the internal history of these tastes and values, and it also has been based on the assumption that their effects on politics are automatic. Because of this reductionist feature, these theories by-pass the political mobilization of tastes. Yet it is exactly this mobilization that is the center of political life, the very thing that *political* theories should explain. In this sense a vast number of supposed explanations of politics (economic, technological, ideological, astrological, and others) are simply irrelevant to politics. They explain the origin, not the operation, of tastes.

Now, however, we can explain the mystery, the perpetual flux of politics, in terms of the mobilization and amalgamation of tastes. Political evolution is now at least explicable, if not predictable. The force for evolution is political disequilibrium, and the consequence of disequilibrium is a kind of natural selection of issues. We do not know what will win in any given situation, but we do know why winners do not keep winning forever.

All methods of amalgamation involve illogicalities in choice, which is the fundamental basis for disequilibrium. If, furthermore, choice is made over continuous alternatives by voting, especially by majority rule, then disequilibrium is an almost certain consequence. Disequilibrium is in turn the setting for a natural selection of issues, and this natural selection in turn ensures that no winner will win forever. We cannot say when one issue will be displaced by another, thus bringing new leadership to succeed old leadership; nor can we say which new issue will be the vehicle for new leaders. But we can describe the process of natural selection and display the motives that make it inevitable. This description and display is the subject of this chapter.

8.A. Disappointments with Disequilibria

The hope of identifying a political equilibrium dies hard because the failure to identify is a disappointment both scientifically and philosophically. It is beginning to be evident, however, that the wisest course for a science of politics is to abandon the search for equilibria and try to understand what the world is without them. Nevertheless, there is intense intellectual resistance to such a course because of the disappointments involved. By way of introduction to the new understanding of political dynamics, therefore, I will devote this initial section to a discussion of just how deep these disappointments are.

Concerning first the scientific disappointment, social scientists have always been eager to identify and describe equilibria. And for good reason. The usual definition of *equilibrium* is the ultimate state of a process toward which its internal forces propel it and at which these forces are so balanced that it remains in this ultimate state. One property of such an equilibrium is that, if the process is adventitiously disturbed, it again moves toward that ultimate state when the disturbance disappears. The classic social example is the structure of prices, which is, in the competitive equilibrium, a state of balance about willingness to trade all commodities. If one price is fixed by some outside force (such as a government), the effect ripples through the system until a new balance of prices is achieved. Once the fixing is undone, all prices again readjust, other things being equal, to what had been the original price structure.

Even less deterministic notions of equilibrium have this same property of returning to the balance when an external disturbance is removed. For example, nonunique equilibria consist of several possible ultimate states toward one of which, however accidentally targeted, internal forces propel and from which, once reached, there is no expectation of departure. The only difference in the nonunique cases is that there exists a *set* of ultimate states. If the process is diverted from one of them, it returns, when the disturbance is removed, to some one of those ultimate states, though not necessarily to the one it was originally in or targeted toward. The classic example here is the game with a solution containing several possible outcomes. If driven off the target of one outcome, the play moves, when permitted, toward the same outcome or toward another one in the solution (the particular outcome being determined by "irrelevant" factors such as the course of the play and the personalities of the players).

In either kind of equilibrium the important feature from the scientific point of view is the tendency of the process, even after disturbance, to move toward one or one of several ultimate states. Given this property, the scientist who has identified and described an equilibrium can confidently predict social outcomes. Knowledge of equilibria is therefore knowledge of the future and carries with it the power of the seer.

In terms of specifically political equilibria in a democratic setting, the hope, from a scientific point of view, of finding political equilibria is that one might isolate political phenomena from the complexity of the whole social and biological world and, simply by understanding that abstracted process, might then predict political outcomes. The political facts in a democratic process are, of course, relatively simple: participants' values and the constitutional structures wherein these values are amalgamated. Hence, if equilibria exist, prediction (and explanation) would

also be relatively simple, thereby conforming to the scientific ideal of slicing the world up into self-contained pieces in order to predict and explain each piece by itself. The achievement of that ideal depends, however, on the pieces in fact being self-contained, and in the political case it depends specifically on the political process being independent of the mottass of participants' perceptions and personalities, which are features of the world entirely outside the political abstraction.

The absence of political equilibria means that outcomes depend not simply on participants' values and constitutional structures, but also on matters such as whether some people have the will or wit to vote strategically, whether some leader has the skill, energy, and resources to manipulate the agenda, or whether some backbencher—in a committee or out—has the imagination and determination to generate a cyclical majority by introducing new alternatives and new issues. These are matters of perception and personality and understanding and character. The fact that the absence of equilibrium makes them relevant to prediction means that the power that comes from scientific knowledge is well nigh unobtainable for political abstractions. Of course, then, there is much scientific disappointment over the results described in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

There is much philosophical disappointment also. Political disequilibrium means that political forces (individual values and the operating features of constitutions) are insufficient to account for political outcomes. This insufficiency means in turn that democratic political outcomes are not simply a mechanical, impersonal, unbiased amalgamation of individual values, but rather are an amalgamation that often operates quite personally and unfairly, giving special advantages to smarter or bolder or more powerful or more creative or simply luckier participants, counting their values for more than other people's. Given disequilibrium, therefore, the democratic ideal of equal participation cannot be regarded as always achievable. And, furthermore, the notion that political outcomes are the will of the people must be revised to say that they are the will of the smarter, bolder, more powerful, more creative, or luckier people. Consequently, there is a philosophical (or ideological) disappointment along with the scientific.

Simply because these disappointments exist, however, we cannot deny political disequilibrium in democracy or any voting bodies. The theory of disequilibrium is too powerful and the describable instances of disequilibrium too many to dismiss it with a shrug. Instead, we are obliged, I believe, by both the theory and the facts to look at the political world anew, as if disequilibrium is indeed its salient characteristic. What kind of world, we must ask, do we have then?

That is the kind of new look at politics I propose for this chapter.

8.B. Voting Disequilibrium: What It Means to Lose

The main feature of disequilibrium in voting is the deep dissatisfaction of many people with the outcome. To appreciate the depth and extent of this dissatisfaction, it is instructive to compare the concept of losing in several contexts, economic and political. Let us consider first the economic context, especially within the competitive equilibrium.

Losing Economically

At the beginning of a time period there are traders with initial endowments; during the time period all feasible trades are made; and at the end the market is in equilibrium. At this stage in this voluntary system, everybody is better off because, by definition, no trade occurs unless the traders improve their positions. This situation is Pareto optimal in the sense that no additional trades can be made that will make the traders better off. (That is, any new trade would make one trader better off only at the expense of making another worse off. Assuming voluntary trading, the trader who would be worse off does not agree to the new trade, which is why the process has come to balance.) Furthermore, this competitive equilibrium is the best that the market as a whole can do, for every possible coalition of traders has achieved at least as much as its members could expect to achieve, given their initial endowments. (In game-theoretic terms, this is an outcome in the core, which, if it exists, is the solution of a game in which every player and every coalition achieves at least its minimal value.)²

Although everybody is better off in the competitive equilibrium, it does not follow that everybody is satisfied. Some are unhappy because of accidents—human errors and natural disasters leading to bankruptcy or natural windfalls leading to great wealth. But here I do not consider accidents simply because they are accidents. Others are unhappy because—as in the case of unemployment—they are excluded from economic participation. Such exclusion is always temporary unless it is politically enforced (as, for example minimum-wage laws exclude the unskilled or union contracts exclude blacks). So I also do not consider the political manipulation that makes markets unfair.

Even in the highly idealized equilibrium that remains, however, where, ignoring luck and political oppression and assuming intelligence, everybody is better off, some people are still dissatisfied. In the definition of Pareto optimality, people are better off relative to where they started.³

And some people may have started off badly, either poor or having chosen a declining trade. Furthermore, in the operation of the market some poor people may become just a little better off while some rich people may become very much better off. Or scions of old wealth may see themselves far surpassed by the nouveau riche. Pareto optimality does not necessarily mean that inequalities or profound unfairness are either created or erased; it merely means that, relative to a given initial endowment, everybody is better off in some amount, however small. One can thus be deeply dissatisfied with the operation of a market either because it preserved an unfair initial distribution or because it generated an unfair final distribution. The same potential dissatisfaction is equally characteristic of solutions in the core. That every coalition achieves the value implicit in its initial endowments is not particularly satisfactory if the initial endowments are themselves thought to be unfair.

However real and politically significant is the resentment of a poverty not alleviated by the operation of the market, still the market does not make people worse off, unless—as in the case of unemployment—they are politically excluded from participation. Since exclusion is temporary unless politically imposed, losing in the market is a remarkably mild kind of losing compared with losing in politics. Losing politically is typically much worse than losing economically.

Losing Politically

Losses of roughly the same scale are worse in a political context than in an economic context. For both individual citizens and the whole society, losing a war and being pillaged, harried, and murdered is worse than chronic unemployment and poverty. For economic groups and regional coalitions, losing a series of elections so that government policy generally is tilted against the losers is worse than losing jobs and business contracts.

Nineteenth-century journalists called economics the “dismal science.” They overlooked politics, which by its fundamental nature is far more dismal. In politics, there are almost always losers and losing usually involves not being better off. It is the expectation of this fact that makes politics dismal.

To begin with, some kinds of political situations are, in game-theoretic terms, zero-sum, which means that the winner gains exactly what the loser loses. (Two-candidate elections are a good example: The winner gains office and the loser misses it.) It is apparent that such games

cannot have a core; that is, unlike the market equilibrium, not all coalitions can obtain their initial expectations. Suppose that there are three minority factions, any two of which can elect one of the two candidates, and suppose that each of the successful factions gains from its participation in the choice. Then the successful candidate can be elected by a coalition of (1 and 2) or (1 and 3) or (2 and 3). It is apparent that one faction cannot win and thus cannot achieve its initial expectation. To lose in this circumstance is to lose all, although of course one can always hope to win another day.

Zero-sum situations may occur infrequently in politics, except for two-candidate elections. Nevertheless, a similar kind of losing is a common feature of non-zero-sum political situations. Suppose that, although the political game is not in the technical sense zero-sum, it is still the intent of each possible winner to impose some kind of external cost on the losers. Then, no matter who wins, there exists a loser who is the worse off for having participated in the political system.

Before the Civil War era, for example, there were three main political positions on slavery: (1) to extend by national decision the geographic area in which slavery was permitted, (2) to restrict the area of slavery by national decision, (3) to make local decisions on the subject, not national ones. It is apparent that the adoption of any of these three precludes, indeed denies, the other two. If position 1 is chosen, then position 2 is directly contradicted on slavery and position 3 is directly contradicted on the level of decision. Similarly for position 2. As for position 3, its adoption denies both 1 and 2 with respect to the level of decision and either 1 or 2 with respect to the nature of the decision. Thus, no matter what position wins, adherents of the other two positions will suffer and will indeed be worse off than if the status quo—local decision—is maintained. But one of the three positions was *certain* to occur. Hence some unspecified people were *certain* to win, and other unspecified people were *certain* to lose.

Many political situations—perhaps most—are very similar to this. The fundamental reason for this fact is that political or moral scarcity is more deeply punishing and more profoundly dissatisfying than economic scarcity. Economists make much of scarce resources, but they mean thereby no more than that resources are limited with respect to human wants at the moment. (This is not, as is sometimes said, the assumption that wants are insatiable or that “more is better”; rather it is just an assumption that at the moment there is not enough land, labor, and capital to produce everything that people would currently like to

have.) Economic scarcity forces the use of a rationing device such as market prices or planning allocations. It means that those who cannot pay for a resource or who cannot persuade a planning body to allocate it to them cannot use it.

But that is all it means. Simply, those who do not have must go without. Economic scarcity does not also require that the nonpossessor suffer additional punishment for nonpossession, nor does it mean that the nonpossessor is legally prohibited from gaining possession. Economically, it is enough that the poor go hungry; politically and morally the poor may—perhaps, must—also be publicly ridiculed for starving and permanently condemned to starvation.

Political or moral scarcity arises when contradictory values are believed by some participants in the political system to be universal. The believers in a putatively universal value wish the value to be applied and enforced generally, even on nonbelievers. Nonbelievers resist because they are unwilling that it be enforced and are able to prevent its enforcement. Then follows a contradiction. The putatively universal value cannot actually be universal because its adherents cannot secure its universal acceptance. Scarcity is the absence of the universality of acceptance because of the unwillingness of people who accept one value to be guided by a conflicting value. For a moral or political position to have worth in society (that is, to be scarce), some people (for instance, those who are hurt by it or lose by it) must reject it.

For example, just prior to the Reformation, relatively few people in Europe cared about political enforcement of religious orthodoxy, although they enjoyed and believed in killing Muslims. In that sense there was very little political value in Christian belief in Europe. Once the Reformation aroused in people on all sides the desire to impose their distinct religious beliefs locally, religions became universal ideals. Simultaneously, they became politically scarce, simply because not everyone was willing to be converted.

For another example, when abortion could be induced only at great risk to the life of the pregnant woman, it was uncommon and hence not a subject of intense moral and political concern. In the last century or so, owing to advances in sanitation and surgery, abortion has become easy, relatively safe, and common. Contradictory values have developed around the practice (for example, "Abortion is murder." and "A woman has a right to control her body."); and, by reason of this dispute, these values have become both universal and scarce.

There is a huge number of such issues in the contemporary world, issues over which some people are prepared even to kill others. Nearly everywhere civil liberties and enforced military service are such issues.

And in all places where significant racial, religious, linguistic, and even cultural minorities exist, issues between the minority and majority generate universal political values and political scarcity.

But of all the kinds of political and moral scarcity extant, that having to do with manipulating markets and money is the most common. Those who want to rig markets and income distribution to their own advantage typically assert that their kind of business or their social state is more desirable or more deserving than others. Naturally, not everyone agrees with such assertions of special economic rights, thus rendering them scarce. These assertions are, of course, propaganda devices to rig markets and economic outcomes, but they are typically presented as universal political and moral values.

An assertion of the general virtue of rural life on the family farm justifies farm subsidies. An assertion of the general moral value of the economic health of communities (tied in, typically, with arguments about "infant industries," "defense needs," and "regional unbalance") justifies tariffs, subsidies, and noneconomic government contracts. An assertion about the general moral value of helping the unfortunate justifies a huge variety of welfare subsidies such as social security. An assertion about the general moral value of a "fair wage" justifies excluding some laborers from the market in order to lessen competition for others. Assertions about the general justice of rewarding inventors, investors, or consumers justify monopolies (almost all of which are granted or maintained by governments and regulation). Assertions about the general moral value of labor peace and "fair" bargaining power justify the cartelization of labor in unions. Assertions about the moral repugnance of the spoils system justify grants of permanent tenure to civil servants. Etc.

Almost all politically imposed special economic privileges and market manipulations depend on assertions of a universal morality. Because these assertions, when acted upon, make some people *worse off*, they are not universally acknowledged. Hence these political values are scarce in the sense that some people reject them.

Just as economic scarcity requires some method of allocation (namely, the market), so does political and moral scarcity. The method is governmental authority, which prescribes which of conflicting moral beliefs will be acted upon, or socially enforced. Thus the outcome of a voting decision in a political context is, typically, to choose which of politically scarce values to enforce. And the act of enforcement in the face of scarcity requires not only that the losers forfeit the values they believe in but also that they abide by, if not accept, the values they despise.

Thus, to lose on issues of political and moral scarcity (which issues are the stuff of politics) is much worse than to lose in the market. One

must suffer outcomes in which one is economically or emotionally deeply deprived. Truly, it is politics, not economics, that is the dismal science.

8.C. Voting Disequilibrium: The Quantity and Quality of Political Dissatisfaction

To consider the kind and amount of dissatisfaction with outcomes of voting, I will here attempt to estimate these features from a survey of the varieties of outcomes.

The least dissatisfaction exists when the outcome is unanimous. Unfortunately the subjects of such decisions are usually trivial. It may be true that members of a group are unanimous on the subjects that brought them together in the first place, though this unanimity seldom exists for very large groups like nations and even on such fundamental subjects as whether the nation ought to continue to exist. But people usually do not vote on these important questions where unanimity is conceivable. When they do so vote, the operation is largely ceremonial and does not typically involve a political decision.⁴ On the other hand, when decisions do appear to be both political and unanimous, usually nobody cares very much about the outcome. Examples are the 90 percent or so of legislation passed by Congress by unanimous consent, which is unanimous because the subjects are politically trivial.⁵ So although unanimity guarantees minimal dissatisfaction, one expects very little dissatisfaction on low-salience issues.

Absolute majorities of first-place votes, which are necessarily in strong equilibrium, tend to minimize the number of dissatisfied persons, but other conditions may affect the degree of dissatisfaction. Given an outcome in the core, as might happen if a legislature distributes a windfall by cutting taxes, even losers are to some degree content. Zero-sum situations, on the other hand, mean an empty core. And in all cases, zero-sum or not, involving moral scarcity, losers lose badly.

A Condorcet winner, even without an absolute majority of first-place votes, is in equilibrium if voters vote sincerely. This means more people are satisfied than not. But some winners do not get their first choice, and relative dissatisfaction is greater, other things being equal, than with an absolute majority. Of course, Condorcet winners also involve the dissatisfaction inherent in moral scarcity. Situations with Condorcet winners under sincere voting are subject to manipulation that may vastly increase dissatisfaction. With strategic voting, for example, an alternative favored only by a minority may be adopted. Suppose there are three

motions and c is the status quo. Voting by amendment (a vs. b , survivor vs. c) on profile D

D
$D_1:$ $a\ c\ b$
$D_2:$ $c\ a\ b$
$D_3:$ $b\ a\ c$

yields a as the winner. But 2 can make c win by altering D_2 to cba , thus generating a cycle. This revised outcome is, of course, vulnerable to attack by 3, who can alter D_3 to abc so a has an absolute majority; but if 2 succeeds, then a majority (1 and 3) is dissatisfied in the sense that both of them prefer the loser a to the winner c . The depth of their dissatisfaction varies by whether the issue involves moral scarcity.

A similar situation arises when cycles exist naturally. If procedures force a decision, as in ordinary elections and amendment procedures, then, in the absence of manipulation, an alternative opposed by a majority is certain to be chosen, thereby maximizing the number of dissatisfied persons. If the issue also involves moral scarcity, the dissatisfaction is maximal.

This survey of the quality and quantity of losing leads to these conclusions:

1. Even in equilibrium, substantial though minority dissatisfaction is to be expected. But, for reasons already discussed, equilibrium is itself a rarity if alternatives are continuous in multidimensional space. And even with discrete alternatives, important issues are not likely to be in equilibrium. Hence, one can expect majority dissatisfaction as the typical situation in political decisions.
2. Furthermore, this dissatisfaction is typically intensified by the fact that political issues involve matters of moral scarcity. Politics thus truly is what David Easton described as the “authoritative allocation of values.”⁶ Unfortunately, Easton’s formulation masks the awful fact of moral scarcity and fails to reveal that the values thus allocated to benefit some simultaneously punish others.
3. In a world of disequilibrium under majority rule where the subjects of decision are morally scarce—that is, in the world of politics—the main feature of life is continuing and intense dissatisfaction for a *majority* of participants.

8.D. The Consequences of Dissatisfaction: A Model of Political Change

The various members of the majority of dissatisfied losers, who may have little in common except their distaste for the status quo, have a compelling motive to upset the current outcome. Indeed, political life in a democracy—or indeed in any voting body—consists of continual efforts to dislodge the temporary authorities who have authoritatively but temporarily allocated despised values. The losers do this in two ways: First, within current dimensions of politics, they generate new alternatives that may be able to beat the current winner. The existence of global cycles assures us this is possible. Second, by inventing new dimensions of politics, they create new political structures in which an old equilibrium, if it exists, is upset. In practice, these activities are probably so much alike that they can be distinguished only by observers, not by participants. The reason for distinguishing between them is simply to note that losers have a method of displacing outcomes in equilibrium as well as the more typical and frequent outcomes in disequilibrium.

All this adds up to a model for political change with three components:

1. *Voters in a voting body, from committee to nation in size.* Each voter perceives alternatives in a limited number of dimensions—two or three, perhaps. In any given situation, however, the number of dimensions perceived by all voters may be numerous (perhaps more dimensions than voters), and these dimensions overlap among voters in many and various ways. Voters do not ordinarily create either alternatives or dimensions; but commonly they are receptive to leaders' suggestions of both, and they are able to accommodate quickly to a new space or a new pattern in an old space. Voters are fickle: They can accept new versions of the world in which old leaders are losers and old losers are new leaders.
2. *Leaders in a voting body.* Mere members of a voting body are transformed into leaders by reason of creating and urging new dimensions, new platforms, and new policy alternatives. Success in persuading the acceptance of new alternatives is what makes a leader, and the failure of a leader to persuade voters to support his or her alternatives is what unmakes a leader. Assuming that leaders obtain special satisfaction from the alternatives they create as well as from the positions they occupy, a motive exists for constant competition for leadership. This motive is the driving force behind political change.

3. *The interaction between leaders and voters.* Leaders in voting bodies may be likened to entrepreneurs in a market. Entrepreneurs succeed by offering new products, and so it is with leaders. Of course, entrepreneurs often fail, offering products no one wants. So also with voting leaders: New alternatives, new issues, are like new products. Each one is sponsored as a test of the voting market, in the hope that the new alternative will render new issues salient, old issues irrelevant, and, above all, will be preferred by a majority to what went before. This is the art of politics: to find some alternative that beats the current winner. Such an alternative almost certainly exists, given disequilibrium. But given that the opponents of the current winner may agree on nothing but their opposition, it is difficult to find a way to put together a coalition that beats it. Yet politicians constantly do so.

8.E. The Natural Selection of Issues

The difficult task of putting together a winning coalition is the constant occupation of would-be political leaders. The fundamental dynamic of political life is their restless search for the issues and alternatives around which a new winning coalition can coalesce. Assuming that leaders and citizens interact in the way just described, prospective leaders must as a matter of course raise new issues—of all sorts and just about all the time. A new issue, expressed in terms of a specific alternative, may appear initially as a proposal to help in the election of a particular candidate or in the passage or defeat of a particular bill. If that alternative appears unattractive, then it is dropped, probably never to be heard of again. But if it should attract some response, it is started on a life of its own. It no longer belongs exclusively to the person who invented it. Anybody can take it up, and it often happens, especially when an alternative catches on, that opponents seize an inventor's alternative and use it to forward their own cause. Furthermore, it can no longer be expected to retain its original form. If the alternative makes a new issue salient, then other related alternatives exploiting the issue quickly appear. The array of alternatives exchanges elements, thus presenting the society with an infinity of new alternatives.

None of this happens by magic, of course. Each step of the proliferation is carried forward by a politician with an interest. This is why a new issue is raised by one person, why it is stolen by another, why still others jump on the band wagon, why still others combine the alternatives in

novel ways. In this way, the market for alternatives is very much like the market for products in which proliferation is motivated by the desire of producers to make money.

In another sense, however, the market for alternatives is quite unlike the market for goods. Entrepreneurs and politicians are alike in motive and method, but consumers and voters are quite different. Given budget constraints, buyers choose among goods mainly on the basis of clearly defined and specific needs, only secondarily on the basis of taste. One buys a lamp in order to light a room but chooses the design because of aesthetic concerns. Voters, however, respond to needs that are often ill defined. They know they want to be better off. But, although many platforms are offered as a means to make them better off, the objective connection between particular platforms and the actual solution of voters' problems is seldom clear. Consequently voters' choices have a much larger component of style as distinct from need than do buyers' choices. Even altruism—sometimes apparent, sometimes real—may, for example, play a significant role in voting, though seldom in buying.

Consequently, although the entrepreneur can be guided in picking products by objectively known human needs, the politician has less objectively verifiable knowledge about his or her "market." In this situation the politician must try out alternatives more or less randomly. Furthermore, although artifacts are usable in any society, values expressed in political alternatives are always relative to the culture of a particular society. The content of culture is moreover always rather vague, so, in still another way, politicians as a whole must behave fairly randomly in generating alternatives.

The world of political issues can thus be better compared to the world of organic nature than to markets. New issues are produced, more or less randomly, just as genetic recombinations are constantly produced, more or less randomly. Some few of the animal and vegetable recombinations find a niche in the environment and survive and flourish; most of the recombinations fail. So it is also with issues. Most find no significant audience and fail; but some are responded to enthusiastically and flourish, even to the point of completely reshaping the environment in which they arose.

Thus, the rise and fall of issues is a process of natural selection, in which politicians, like genes, seek to survive and flourish. We know very little about the course and direction of that process. We can chart the history of biological evolution. We can show that over time more complex creatures appear (although, of course, very simple creatures persist). We know details about the process, such as the fact that highly specialized species stand little chance of surviving a change in habitat. Still we cannot

see any clear direction in the process, and it seems likely there is none. Indeed, if a biologist possessed of all current knowledge about the principles and processes of evolution but no details of evolutionary history were transported back 100 million, 500 million, or 1, 2, or 3 billion years, it is doubtful that at any point the biologist's predictions of the future course of organic development would be correct, although the biologist *might* make better guesses at 100 million years ago than at 3 billion. So it is with the history of political issues. No seers have ever existed, although sometimes well-informed people have made pretty good guesses about the short-run future.

If there is any significant difference in the procedure of natural selection among creatures in the biological world and natural selection among issues in the political world, it is that the past lays a heavier hand on the course of biological evolution than on political evolution. A species does not disappear unless the environment changes markedly; issues do not have long lives and may disappear even though social conditions remain fairly stable. In this sense, the natural selection of issues is somewhat more random than the natural selection of species.

8.F. Structural Regularities in Natural Selection

To admit that disequilibrium is the characteristic state of politics and that the rise and decline of issues is a random process does not mean that it is impossible to generalize about regularities in the process. Biologists are able to generalize about regularities in organic evolution, and there is no reason why political scientists cannot generalize about similar regularities in political evolution. Features of the environment do affect the selection of both creatures and issues, and, for issues, the most salient features of the environment are institutions or constitutional structures, which have always been of great concern to political scientists. We know, for example, quite a bit about the way single-member district systems influence the development of issues and even something about the way proportional representation does; and we know quite a bit also about the way highly abstract institutions such as zero-sum elections and transferable and nontransferable utility generate structural equilibria.⁷

In less scientifically satisfying ways we know a great deal about political socialization and the vagaries of political opinion in governments with different constitutions—not just the contrast between democracies and absolutisms, but even the more delicate contrast among different

kinds of democracies. Furthermore, all sorts of new questions are subject to investigation in light of the theory of natural selection. For example, it seems possible that different kinds of constitutions make for different rates of evolution of issues. There is no theory on this subject, and common sense is not a very good guide. All kinds of governments involve some amalgamation of preference, and even perverse tyrannies like Mao's are from time to time required to change direction in accord with popular values. It is not obvious, however, and would indeed be interesting to discover whether such tyrannies, because tyrannical, tend to slow down evolution more than other governments or whether, because perverse and capricious, tend to speed it up. Thus, to say that disequilibrium and natural selection exist is not to say that science is impossible. But it is to say that prediction of the rise and decline of particular issues is probably impossible.

9

Manipulation and the Natural Selection of Issues: The Development of the Issue of Slavery as a Prelude to the American Civil War

As an illustration of the public importance of manipulation of the agenda in a democracy and of the way the natural selection of issues works, in this chapter I will examine the creation of a new issue on a grand scale—namely, the issue of slavery, between 1819 and 1860. This history shows that new issues are rooted in the voting system, in the necessary existence of losers and of the opportunity they have to control the agenda in such a way as to become winners. By extension it indicates that great political events can be interpreted as part of the continuing effort by participants (either leaders or losers) to manipulate outcomes to their advantage.

The particular event here studied involves losers introducing new issues to generate cycles and disequilibrium, from which, with luck, they can emerge as winners. In this case the losers were ultimately successful: They did produce disequilibrium, and they did reshape American politics so that the fundamental coalitions during the latter part of the nineteenth century were quite different—and to the advantage of the previous losers—from the coalitions in the first part of the century. I want to emphasize, however, that this particular outcome was not entirely due to the wit and persistence of the losers. The outcome of efforts at manipulation is also conditioned by the external circumstances in which the manipulation occurs, the underlying values, the constitutional structure, and the state of technology and the economy. Numerous efforts are made at manipulation. Not all succeed. The choice of which ones do succeed is partially determined by these external circumstances. This is the significance of the process of natural selection.¹

To delimit the subject of this chapter, I emphasize that I do not inquire into the cause of the Civil War.² Rather I inquire into the reason

for one necessary condition of that war—and probably of all civil wars—namely, the existence of an issue that occasioned some degree of territorial separation of the disputing factions. My interest in the inquiry is not, however, in explaining the Civil War as an event or the slavery issue as a phenomenon, but rather merely to illustrate, with an event of supreme political importance, how manipulation works on the grand scale of national politics, how disequilibrium is generated over a long time-span, and how the natural selection of issues occurs in the gross social world in rough analogy to natural selection in the gross organic world.

9.A. The Appearance of Slavery as a National Political Issue

The initial status quo on slavery, incorporated in the Constitution and the initial actions under it, was an acknowledgment of the existence of slavery as decided by the states internally and by the United States within territories. This status quo persisted for a generation without significant challenge, and during that time slavery was not a salient political issue. Then political losers raised it, presumably as a way to generate disequilibrium from which they might improve their position by detaching some of the winners' support.

From 1800 to 1860, the United States was usually governed by that hardy intersectional coalition of agrarian expansionism: Jeffersonian Republicanism and Jacksonian Democracy. That coalition was built on the initial status quo, which included a tacit approval of slavery, and most of its major leaders were slaveowners. Nevertheless, several essential components of the coalition—the Middle Atlantic states and later the states of the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin)—were free territory. Hence to raise the issue of slavery was to threaten that dominant coalition, whose parts could agree on slavery only so long as they ignored it. Therein lay both the difficulty and the opportunity for opponents.

The issue was difficult to raise because it threatened a winning majority, most of which would ignore it for the sake of winning. But because it was potentially so divisive it was probably the best opportunity the continuing losers had. Ultimately, they were able to raise it in a way that wholly disrupted the dominant coalition, generated a cyclical majority that was resolved by the Civil War, and set the scene for a new coalition on a new theme that dominated American politics for even longer than the Jefferson-Jackson coalition had.

Manipulating the social agenda with a new issue that generates disequilibrium allows old losers to become new winners. This is what happened with the slavery issue. It was introduced with that purpose, turned out to work, and was selected from among other issues just because it did work.

9.B. Slavery as an Issue from the Ratification of the Constitution Through the Missouri Compromise

The initial status quo in the Republic involved recognition of the legality of slavery, where established, with almost no controversy on the subject. The Congress of the Articles of Confederation never sought to legislate about domestic institutions of member states, but it did, of necessity, govern the territories and produced (apparently without much dispute) the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which prohibited slavery in that area. In the constitutional convention slavery did occasion much discussion and one important compromise, although the great compromise was between the large and small states. By the slavery compromise, on the one hand the Constitution did not prohibit navigation acts and on the other hand the importation of slaves was prohibited after 1808 and slaves were to be counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of apportioning representatives. This agreement implicitly recognized the legality of slavery as the status quo. Thereafter slavery did not enter national politics as an issue in any significant way until 1819.

Of course, some people condemned slavery on moral grounds. Even in the constitutional convention, liberals such as Gouverneur Morris and Rufus King, as distinct from Southern and Northern conservatives, condemned slavery on grounds of morality rather than expediency. And quite a few Northern politicians, especially Federalists, whose party was mainly confined to the North after 1800, resented the fact that nonvoting slaves were counted for apportionment. Federalist resentment, however, was directed not at slavery itself but at the advantage it gave to Republican politicians. Probably most Federalists would simply have preferred that slaves not be counted at all, without caring much whether slavery continued to exist.

In 1819, however, a bill to admit Missouri occasioned a proposed amendment prohibiting slavery in the new state. What may well have been intended as no more than a local maneuver very swiftly caught on nationally. Anti-Missouri rallies were organized all over the Northeast.

State legislatures instructed congressmen to vote for the amendment. Newspapers carried on a dramatic debate. Jefferson wrote that the issue terrified him "like a firebell in the night"—as it should, for *his* coalition was under attack. Prophecies of war and secession became journalistic commonplaces.³

Why, one might ask, did slavery suddenly become a salient issue, 200 years after it was initially introduced in Virginia and 30 years after the framers of the Constitution, without serious dispute, accepted it as the status quo? This question is all the more difficult because the Missouri agitation was a brief episode, soon settled, and the issue was not seriously revived in national politics for another 15 years. One can hardly argue there was any economic reason. Nothing happened in or around 1819 to change the relative economic significance of slave and free labor. Indeed, the very episodic feature of the event precludes an economic explanation. Nor can one argue that there was a profound humanitarian explanation. Antislavery sentiment had long existed, although the Missouri agitation provided a good vehicle for propagating it. Still no great change of the American heart occurred in 1819–1820, and the concern about slavery was easily inhibited for another decade. Lacking an alternative, we must, I believe, say that the precipitating force was political; and political it was, rooted in an effort by losers to manipulate the agenda to their advantage.

(By attributing the origin of the issue to political ambition, I do not imply that the motives were cynical or cheap. In a democracy, the function of a politician is to find an issue on which he or she can win, for thereby a politician expresses some part of the values of the electorate. Political opportunism is not evil, therefore, but is instead the engine of democracy.)

The immediate origin of the Missouri issue can fairly be attributed to the pettiest of politics. The motion to amend the Missouri bill was offered by James Tallmadge of New York. He was about to become a candidate for the state senate from New York City as an ally of DeWitt Clinton, the maverick Republican who had run for president with Federalist endorsement in 1812. Clinton and Tallmadge both had previously denounced slavery. Their opposition in New York was the Tammany faction, led by Martin Van Buren, then the chief New York supporter of the Republican intersectional alliance and of William Crawford of Georgia for president in 1824. Tallmadge had a special reason for raising the slavery issue against Van Buren: In New York City there were a significant number of free black voters, concentrated in marginal wards and

typically Federalist in loyalty. Contemporary writers as well as recent historians have asserted that, as a result of his amendment, Tallmadge stood to gain blacks' votes.⁴

It is foolish, however, to attribute a huge social movement to the private ambition and local manipulation of one man. The interesting fact is that, even if the motion was initially a personal ploy, it aroused the entire North. Events like the Missouri agitation may be attributed to some individual advantage (as, for instance, Tallmadge's) or to a conspiracy (here the main conspirator often blamed is Rufus King); but such attribution is self-deluding, for the movement was far greater than one man or one conspiracy. It reflected the interest of a large public, and it is this interest that must be specified in order to explain the event.

In 1819–1820 the Federalist party was substantially eliminated as a political force. Only 15 percent of the House was then Federalist; and in 1816 Rufus King, the last Federalist candidate for president, carried only Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Delaware, 34 votes out of 225, or again 15 percent. The victory of the Republicans was so complete that James Monroe was reelected later in 1820 with only one dissenting elector.

The reasons for the decline of the Federalist party are easy to identify. From Washington's time onward, it had been infused with a commercial and somewhat aristocratic spirit at the very time the legal electorate was being slightly expanded to include all white males. (The states west of the Appalachians had all entered the Union with white manhood suffrage, and most of the original 13 states had by 1820 abolished property qualifications.) More significantly, the actual electorate was being enormously expanded by the Jeffersonian enthusiasm to use government for distributive advantages for farmers. Hence, Federalism was ideologically out of touch, while expansionist agrarian Republicanism captured the imagination of a society still over 90 percent rural. Furthermore, Federalism had been identified with treason because prominent Federalists (and only Federalists) were at the Hartford Convention of 1814. This convention was popularly interpreted as a step toward a separate peace and secession for New England. So, as the party with an old-fashioned ideology and a recent history interpretable as treason, Federalism was dying out. As it died, careerist politicians deserted it, even when they believed its ideology. By 1819 it was almost defunct.

Discredited the party might be, but its main economic content still had appeal. The desire for tariffs, internal improvements, and commercial development did not go away simply because its spokesmen were mute. And it was not just Federalists who wanted these things. Many who had

drifted into the Republican camp—such as John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay—were eager for commercial development even though Republican orthodoxy frowned on it.

Consequently, there was a substantial class of losers on an issue of political and moral scarcity. Highly simplified, the issue was this: Should government encourage agrarian expansion or commercial development? To encourage the former meant, for example, that there would be no subsidies for the latter. (Characteristically, President Monroe in 1817 had refused national assistance for the Erie Canal.) To encourage commerce, on the other hand, meant that there would be policies such as tariffs, which would be costly to farmers. (Again characteristically, it was John Quincy Adams' Tariff of Abominations in 1828 that occasioned nullification in South Carolina.) So truly the great issue of the era was politically and morally scarce: To favor one side was to hurt the other. Furthermore, as Federalism declined, one side of that issue was losing badly. The triumphant Virginia dynasty, inspired as it was by Jefferson's vision of a republic of yeomen farmers, more or less consistently ignored commercial needs and interests.

There was a chance, consequently, for new leadership to put the case for commercial development, provided additional issues could be introduced that would slice up politics in different coalitions. One such issue was slavery, especially when expressed in the conventional free soil terms of the Northwest Ordinance. And so the anti-Missouri movement, once launched, attracted both old Federalists, like Rufus King, who led in the Senate, and Republicans disillusioned with the Virginia dynasty, like John Taylor of New York, who led in the House. These people, the losers of the moment, were trying out a new issue. As one recent student of the agitation remarked, "It is noteworthy that almost every prominent leader of the Missouri agitation was found in the Adams camp soon afterwards.... [T]he Missouri question played an important part in crystallizing what would be known as the National Republican party."⁵ Generalizing, this is to say that the motive for the agitation was to find a new and disequilibrating program, a new agenda whereon dissident Republicans and old Federalists could combine to win.

So interpreted, there is nothing surprising about the sudden popularity of the slavery issue. Even with a huge Republican majority, there were still losers: One cannot have, for example, a policy against internal improvements without depriving those who want them. These losers needed new combinations of issues to win, and the Missouri agitation was a tentative step toward the manipulation of the agenda for just this purpose.

The logic of this manipulation is perfectly straightforward. If the dissidents could not beat Monroe on conventional agrarian issues, then

they could introduce a new issue to split the sectional alliance. The puzzlement expressed both then and now about the meteor-like development of the Missouri agitation can be erased with the understanding that this agitation was merely a normal incident in the search by losers for a platform from which to beat previous winners. It is comparable to the anti-Masonic movement a decade later and the nativist movement a generation later. Since the slavery issue promised to split the sectional winning coalition, it was embraced with enthusiasm in 1819 and repeatedly thereafter until it generated cyclical majorities and civil war.

The anti-Missouri agitators were, however, losers in the nation as a whole, and they could not carry off victory the first time they tried. The leaders of the enduring Jeffersonian alliance, recognizing the strains the slavery issue would subject it to, produced a compromise: Maine and Missouri were to come in together; slavery was to be permitted in Missouri but prohibited north of the Missouri line in all the Louisiana Purchase. A good many Northern Jeffersonians—"doughfaces" as they were later called, meaning Northern apologists for slavery—voted for this compromise, and almost all of them were immediately defeated for reelection. Their defeat was a harbinger of what the slavery issue might become. But the compromise effectively buried the issue for the time being because the Republican establishment won and the anti-Missouri agitators lost.

9.C. From the Missouri Compromise to the Gag Rule

In the theory of manipulation, losers bring forth new issues to generate disequilibrium in hope of exploiting it to their advantage. But the losers on the Missouri Compromise had no motive to raise the slavery issue again for nearly a decade. Between 1820 and 1829, they sought the election and reelection of John Quincy Adams, who had won in 1824 by reason of a split among the Jeffersonians. His supporters, the commercial party generally, therefore had no motive to drive away any Southern votes. Similarly, the old Jeffersonians—turned Jacksonians after 1824—were dependent on the sectional alliance and, even though temporarily losers, had no motive to discuss slavery. So the issue was not broached from 1820 to 1829.

Nor was it broached during most of Andrew Jackson's administration. Northern opponents of Jackson again had a motive to raise the question, but they were distracted by two developments. First, in the North anti-Masonry was an alternative issue to slavery. It drained the

political energies of exactly those politicians in New England and New York who later promoted the slavery issue. Anti-Masonry failed and was discarded, just as nativism (the Know-Nothings) also failed as an alternative to the slavery issue in the mid-1850s. But while the natural selection of issues was selecting against anti-Masonry, the slavery issue could not be broached. Second, in the South the opponents of the Jackson alliance had for the first time since early in the century a strong organization based on economic issues. This was the beginning of Southern Whiggery, and it infused all of Jackson's opponents with the hope of an intersectional alliance of their own. Thus, the rise of the National Republicans, later the Whigs, turned politicians away from the slavery issue to conventional economic issues like the Bank of the United States.

On the other hand, although slavery was, for these reasons, not an issue during most of Jackson's administration, two things happened that prepared for its revival. One was that Jackson's opponents lost on both anti-Masonry and economic issues. The other was that Jackson more or less fortuitously isolated South Carolina, which then became a territorial center of slaveholding imperialism. Apparently deciding that he did not need South Carolina to win, Jackson effectively expelled John Calhoun and his coterie over the nullification issue.⁶ In the next two elections South Carolina had its anti-Jackson political party, never incorporated into Whiggery. When South Carolina was welcomed back into the Democracy, it was as the center of proslavery fanaticism, which gradually took over most of the Southern wing. If, as some argue, the Civil War was a revolution by slaveholders, then a crucial step toward that outcome was the political isolation of South Carolina so it could develop the ideology of that revolution.⁷

The isolation was crucial to the development of the slavery issue also, for it gave abolitionists and Free-Soilers a concrete target. Had South Carolina been contained in the Jacksonian alliance, perhaps the Northern populists in that alliance would have been able to ignore the slavery issue. But after South Carolina in the 1840s effectively forced the commitment of the Southern Democracy to the defense of slavery, Northern Jacksonians were also forced to reconsider their loyalties.

Toward the end of Jackson's administration, therefore, the scene was set for a revival of the slavery issue. His opponents had failed on anti-Masonry and economic nationalism; so they began to test out the slavery issue again. It worked; and, from the mid-1830s until the end of the Civil War, it was never far from the center of American politics.

It has long been assumed that the spread of antislavery agitation in the 1830s resulted from secularizing religious enthusiasm. But many reform movements—temperance, penal reform, free education, women's

rights—vied with antislavery as proto-political issues. Only one, however, was fully absorbed into politics. Why? One answer is that the evil of slavery was worse than the others and so quite properly received the attention it deserved. Another answer, less moralistic, is that abolition was in the air: Britain emancipated in 1833. Both answers imply that the issue was pushed into politics by social forces outside the political system, forces that would have made slavery an issue regardless of the structure of politics.

It has also been often argued that the antislavery agitation of the 1830s was an economic response to the swift increase in cotton planting in the 1820s and 1830s. The assertion is that, since cotton was especially adapted to and profitable with slave cultivation, this new agriculture threatened free labor and provided an economic motive for the antislavery movement. This explanation also locates the slavery issue outside of politics in a kind of economic or technological determinism.

Both these nonpolitical theories are suspect, however, because they entirely fail to explain the Missouri agitation. In 1819–1820 secularization of religion had hardly begun, and the cotton culture was still economically modest. Yet to explain the antislavery movement adequately one needs a theory that ties together both the agitation over Missouri and the agitation over the gag rule, which was the occasion for the rally of free soil and abolition.

Such is the argument offered here. In both eras the issue of slavery was attractive as a way to win office. It was peculiarly attractive politically to Northern Whigs in the 1830s because it played on the geographic strains in the Jacksonian coalition. I do not, of course, deny the genuine moral fervor of antislavery propagandists like William Lloyd Garrison or later Harriet Beecher Stowe. Nor do I mean to suggest that men like John Quincy Adams and Joshua Giddings, two leaders against the gag rule, were insincere opportunists. It is true, however, that Adams never mentioned slavery while he was president. And as late as 1858, Giddings refused to support suffrage for blacks in Ohio.⁸ These facts suggest that these men were Whigs first and abolitionists second. Their moral concern was surely genuine, but idealism and political interest ran hand in hand. Given the large Jacksonian majority, only a new issue could split that majority. Slavery was such an issue, and fortunately the Northern Whig leaders who fought the gag could simultaneously promote Christian principles and party advantage.

Slavery was always an evil but not always a political issue. What made it a political issue was that, by reason of the structure of politics in the mid-1830s, it was to some people's advantage to place abolition on the political agenda.

The issue was introduced by a petition campaign launched by anti-slavery societies and propagandists, most of whom probably had no deep partisan attachment. The petitions took the form of prayers for abolition of the slave trade or slavery in the District of Columbia. Whig congressmen received them, encouraged more, and overwhelmed the House.⁹ Without the concerted and deliberate encouragement and instigation of Whig congressmen the petition campaign would have come to nought. But they did encourage and instigate and their motive was, of course, obstruction.¹⁰

Democrats had two motives to refuse to receive and discuss the petitions, that is, to gag the petitioners and the congressional presenters. From the point of view of governing, Northern and Southern Democrats alike wanted to get on with "real" issues rather than waste time on slavery, which they regarded as a partisan distraction. From the point of view of Southern proslavery fanatics, the gag was necessary to silence abolitionist agitation, which obtained a certain legitimacy by focusing on a legitimate subject for national legislation—slavery in the District of Columbia. So they passed gag rules (rules prohibiting the acceptance of petitions for the abolition of the slave trade—or, later, slavery—in the District, a proper subject for federal legislation). These rules were then the focus of antislavery agitation from 1835 to 1842. The leader of the opposition to the gags was John Quincy Adams, who may, therefore, be judged to be the chief generator of the slavery issue that ultimately destroyed the Jackson coalition.

The issue was uncomplicated so long as Democrats ruled: Whigs simply secured and presented a continuing flood of petitions. But when in 1841 they took office, themselves an intersectional coalition—really a somewhat more commercial version of the Jacksonian coalition—Whigs did not know how to deal with the petitions. Those who were fully committed to breaking up the Democracy with the slavery issue simply continued their campaign. But those who wished to govern passed a gag rule (with Democratic help). The Whig gag produced a crisis, common enough in radical movements, in which it is necessary to discipline natural allies the better to attack the enemy.

There were three main events in the course of the discipline: Adams' censure, Giddings' reelection, and the Liberty party of 1844.

John Quincy Adams, bolder and bolder in denouncing slavery, eventually attacked the behavior and character of members of Congress. The Whig majority, seeing their national coalition subjected to the same strains the slavery issue had imposed on Democrats, sought in 1842 to censure him. His defense, the dramatic claim of constitutional rights by an old and great man, won the sympathy of the country and of Con-

gress. The motion to censure was tabled. Also in 1842, however, Joshua Giddings of Ohio was censured for antislavery resolutions. He immediately resigned and was triumphantly reelected. He was quickly readmitted to Whig councils, probably, as Gilbert Barnes remarks, because his vote and the votes of other antislavery Whigs were needed on party issues.¹¹ From that point on, constant discussion of slavery could not be kept out of Congress. Finally in 1844, the Liberty party offered James G. Birney for president, and he got enough votes (drawing mainly from Whigs) to elect James Polk. (In New York Polk beat Clay by 6,000 votes while Birney had 16,000. With Birney's votes Clay could have obtained New York's 36 electors and beaten Polk by 141 to 136.) This was a salutary lesson to all Northern politicians, Democrats as well as Whigs. From then on, a large contingent in both parties would be prepared to adopt antislavery positions. This was the beginning of the end for both Whig and Democratic intersectional alliances.

9.D. The Wilmot Proviso

The point at which Northern Democrats clearly adopted an anti-slavery stance was at the offering of the Wilmot Proviso in 1846. The political background for this motion was Northern Democratic resentment that the North-South balance in the intersectional Democratic coalition had been tipped in favor of the South. Polk ran in 1844 on a platform of maintaining the balance by admitting both Texas and Oregon. But Texas came in before Polk took office, and Polk then compromised on Oregon, giving up what is now British Columbia. So, when the Mexican War began, with the prospect of even more slave territory in the Southwest, David Wilmot, a Pennsylvania Jacksonian, moved to prohibit slavery in land acquired from Mexico.

The Wilmot Proviso was offered first in August 1846 and then numerous times in 1847 and 1848. It always failed; but it laid the basis for the Free Soil party of 1848, which nominated, of all people, Martin Van Buren, who, from the Missouri Compromise until the end of his own presidency, had been the archetypal doughface, the Northern voice of proslavery Jacksonian populism. But as a Free-Soiler, in 1848, Van Buren drew enough Northern Democratic antislavery votes to give the election to the Whigs.

The people involved in the proviso controversy typify the strains in the Democratic party. Polk represented the old Jacksonian agrarian, populist imperialism and was a slaveholder, though not a fanatic defender of

slavery. He believed that the slavery issue was not genuine and that both sides were simply opportunists. Fortunately, we have a candid statement of these opinions in a diary kept as a political reminder and never intended for publication.¹² I will quote several passages as evidence that one remarkably astute observer, intimately acquainted with events and personalities, honestly assessed the slavery issue as political opportunism on both sides. Polk may have been excessively cynical, but his remarks ring true, given that very few Free-Soilers were abolitionists or even very much interested in blacks. Let Polk speak for himself:

Mr. Hamlin [Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, later Republican vice president, 1861–1865] professes to be a [D]emocrat, but . . . is pressing a mischievous course . . . on the slavery question. . . . The slavery question is assuming a fearful and most important aspect. The movement of Mr. King [Preston King, New York Democrat, managing the Wilmot Proviso], if persevered in, will be attended with terrible consequences to the country, and cannot fail to destroy the Democratic party, if it does not ultimately destroy the Union itself. Slavery was one of the questions adjusted in the compromises of the Constitution. It has, and could have no legitimate connection with the war with Mexico. . . . It is a domestic and not a foreign question. . . . Of course, Federalists [Polk's pejorative name for Whigs] are delighted to see such a question agitated by Northern Democrats because it divides and distracts the Democratic party and increases their [i.e. Whigs'] prospects of coming to power. Such an agitation is not only unwise but wicked [January 4, 1847, Vol. 2, p. 305].

Or the next year:

The agitation of the slavery question is mischievous and wicked, and proceeds from no patriotic motive by its authors. It is a mere political question on which demagogues and ambitious politicians hope to promote their own prospects for political promotion. And this they seem willing to do even at disturbing the harmony if not dissolving the Union itself [December 22, 1848, Vol. 4, p. 251].

Polk was just as cynical about the motives of the other territorial wing breaking off from the Democratic coalition:

I remarked to Mr. Mason that Mr. Calhoun had become perfectly desperate in his aspiration to the Presidency, and had seized upon this sectional question as the only means of sustaining himself in his present fallen condition, and that such an agitation of the slavery question was not only unpatriotic and mischievous, but wicked [April 6, 1847, Vol. 3, p. 458].

Polk resented the Whig delight at Democratic discomfort, but it was Northern Democrats, Polk's own political friends, who were causing him trouble. These Democratic Free-Soilers were not abolitionists. Wilmot himself, for example, was a conventional Jacksonian populist from a wholly rural Pennsylvania district.¹³ He was against slavery in the territories because he was fearful of slave competition with free labor.¹⁴ His concern was for whites, not for blacks. He was afraid that Polk's failure to maintain the North-South balance by losing part of Oregon would render the Northern Democrats vulnerable to Whig agitation. The Wilmot Proviso was the Democratic defense against the Whig antislavery agitation of the previous decade.

As Polk intuitively understood, the proviso generated disequilibrium. Early in August 1846, Polk conceived the Machiavellian plan for a quick victory over Mexico by buying off whoever might be in control of its army. He asked Congress for \$2 million for that purpose.¹⁵ To this appropriation Wilmot moved as an amendment the proviso prohibiting slavery in any territory acquired. The proviso was voted on eight times on August 8, 1846, but the largest and crucial vote was on a motion to lay on the table the motion to engross (that is, to make a fair copy), which was defeated by 79 to 93.¹⁶ The details are in Display 9-1, where a vote nay is a vote in favor of the proviso.

All Southerners voted against the proviso; almost all Northerners, Whigs and Democrats alike, voted for it. In two ways this outcome involved disequilibrium. Let us identify the possible outcomes thus:

- a. Appropriation without the proviso
- b. Appropriation with the proviso
- c. No action

Polk almost certainly ordered *a b c*. The Senate had already in secret session agreed with him.¹⁷ So as a body it held either *a b c* or *a c b*. The House action showed a preference for *b*. Probably, Wilmot and Northern Democrats held *b a c* and Southern Democrats *a c b*. Northern Whigs, certainly a minority, were probably the only ones who placed *c* first: *c b a*. But *c* won. The House attached the proviso to the appropriation and sent it to the Senate several hours before adjournment. Senator John Davis, a Massachusetts Whig who favored *c* and who had voted against an earlier resolution on the appropriation (which passed by 33 to 19), then filibustered until the clock ran out. So *c*, probably the least-desired alternative, won—clearly an outcome in disequilibrium and, incidentally, one that probably prolonged the war that Davis opposed.¹⁸

Display 9-1

The Vote on the Motion to Lay on the Table
the Motion to Engross the Wilmot Proviso

	North		Border		South		Total	
	Democrats	Whigs	Democrats		Whigs	Democrats	Whigs	Total
			Whigs	Democrats				
Yea	7	2	8	8	46	8	61	18
Nay	51	39	—	3	—	—	51	42
Total votes	58	41	8	11	46	8	112	60
Total membership	77	58	10	12	53	13	140	83

Furthermore, there was almost certainly disequilibrium in the House itself on this motion. There were not enough votes to ascertain preference orders, but it is easy to guess what they were:

7	Northern administration Democrats	<i>a b c</i>
51	Northern Free Soil Democrats (Wilmot)	<i>b a c</i>
8	Border Democrats	<i>a b c or a c b</i>
46	Southern Democrats	<i>a c b</i>
2	Northern prowar Whigs	<i>c a b</i>
39	Northern antiwar Whigs	<i>c b a</i>
3	Border Whigs	<i>b a c or b c a</i>
16	Southern and border Whigs	<i>a c b</i>

If this guess is even approximately correct, *b* beats *a* (as happened), *a* beats *c* (which is reasonable because all Democrats, 60 percent of the House, supported the administration on the war), and *c* beats *b* (which is reasonable because favoring *c* is a majority consisting of all Southerners—Democrat or Whig—who despised the proviso and Northern Whigs who wished to impede the administration on the war). So there is a clear-cut cyclical majority, which is of course complete disequilibrium.

Thus, the issue of slavery, first broached in 1819 as a means to break up the Jeffersonian intersectional coalition, actually did so in 1846. Although the Whigs both generated the issue when out of office and tried to suppress it when in office, they could not really succeed until Northern Democrats were so afraid of losing on Free Soil issues that they would also raise the issue that threatened their own coalition. This is what they did, however, in the Wilmot Proviso, which may thus be regarded as the final act in the construction of the slavery issue. From then on the issue would have a life of its own. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the Dred Scott case in 1857 would put slavery in the very center of politics. And in 1861 would come civil war, surely the product of this issue.

9.E. From the Wilmot Proviso to the Civil War

Although the issue was fully developed by 1846, much had to happen before the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian coalition could be finally split.

Some Northern Democrats broke off from the party in 1848, and Van Buren ran on the Free Soil ticket, thereby electing Whigs. As always, Whigs in office played down the slavery issue and produced the Compromise of 1850, while Democrats, chastened by defeat in 1848, closed ranks in 1852 to win with a huge majority. This election revealed to Whigs that they could not win as an intersectional alliance on conventional economic issues. Initially they tried nativism again—a kind of replay in 1854 with the American or Know-Nothing party of the anti-Masonic movement of 1831–1832. But they soon found that nativism had a limited appeal. So, in 1856, capitalizing on the Democratic error with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, they went back to the slavery issue. The Northern Whigs, the bulk of the party, discarded their Southern branch and drew in the Free Soil Democrats (like Wilmot). That coalition, now called Republicans, was able to get office in 1860 and to get a majority in the whole country by 1868, a majority that won much more than half of the time from 1868 to 1930.

The Republican success in 1860 was in a sense a replay of the disequilibrium of the Wilmot Proviso. Abraham Lincoln won by a plurality of about 40 percent. Since it seems likely that he stood second in very few voters' preference orders, one suspects that there may well have been a cycle in this case also. Knowing only first-place votes, I have tried to guess at the full preference orders of voters in each region who cast first-place votes for each of the four candidates—Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, John C. Breckinridge, and John Bell. In Display 9-2 are listed 15 of the 24 possible preference orders for four candidates, with estimates by party and section of the number of voters who held these orders. In the Display, each row contains a preference order followed by my estimate of the number of voters who held it. In the last column of each row is an explanation of how my guess was arrived at. Thus in row 1, the number 450,000 consists of one-fourth of the number of voters for Lincoln in New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the Midwest, plus all of the voters for Lincoln in the South.

If my guesses are even roughly like the true situation, then Lincoln, Douglas, and Bell were in a cycle, and all three clearly defeated Breckinridge. So by majoritarian voting, we get:

Douglas P Lincoln P Bell P Douglas P Breckinridge

Using the Borda count or using approval voting with each voter casting three approval votes (highly unlikely in the circumstances), Douglas wins:

Douglas P Bell P Lincoln P Breckinridge

But using approval voting with each voter casting two approval votes, Bell wins:

Bell P Lincoln P Douglas P Breckinridge

Thus, with five methods of voting, Douglas wins twice, Bell once, Lincoln once (the method actually used), and they are in a cycle and hence tie once. Clearly, if my guesses are even roughly right, there was complete disequilibrium in 1860, which is how the slavery issue destroyed the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian coalition.

* * *

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate how losers manipulate the agenda by introducing new issues. The new issue breaks up the old majority and in the resultant disequilibrium the original losers have a chance to win. This is what happened with the slavery issue. It was raised by Federalists and dissident Republicans (the group that later became National Republicans and then Whigs) in 1819 and again in 1835 and after to put strain on the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian coalition. National Republicans and Whigs were not eager to raise it, however, when they held office or had a good chance for it (between 1820 and 1828, 1841 and 1845, 1849 and 1852). The issue matured when Whigs had sufficiently frightened Northern Democrats that they too became, defensively, enthusiastic Free-Soilers, as in the Wilmot Proviso episode, the Free Soil party, and ultimately the Republican party.

Nevertheless, there was no straight-line progression in the Federalist-Whig development of this issue. Not only did they ignore it when they too held national office on the basis of an intersectional coalition; but also they ignored it when they tried out other issues—anti-Masonry in 1830–1832, nativism in 1855–1856, and economic issues for an intersectional coalition in 1832–1835—and when they held office. The slavery issue gradually displaced these others by a kind of natural selection. It worked and the others did not. Anti-Masonry and nativism had rather too-local appeals to serve as the basis of a nationally successful party. And the Federalist-National Republican-Whig economic position of commercial development was based on a national coalition that was repeatedly demonstrated to be *smaller* than the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian coalition of agrarian populism. Failing all else, the slavery issue came to be chosen

Display 9-2

**Possible Preference Orders in 1860,
by Candidate of First Choice and by Region**

	Preference orders				Number	Location
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th		
1.	L	D	B ₁	B _k	450,000	One-fourth New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest Lincoln voters All Southern Lincoln voters
2.	L	B ₁	D	B _k	1,414,000	Three-fourths New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest Lincoln voters All Border and Western Lincoln voters
3.	D	B _k	L	B ₁	173,000	One-third New England and Mid-Atlantic Douglas voters
4.	D	B _k	B ₁	L	489,000	One-third Mid-Atlantic and Midwest Douglas voters One-half Border and Western Douglas voters All Southern Douglas voters
5.	D	L	B _k	B ₁	83,000	Two-thirds New England Douglas voters
6.	D	L	B ₁	B _k	318,000	One-sixth Mid-Atlantic Douglas voters One-third Midwest Douglas voters One-fourth Border and Western Douglas voters
7.	D	B ₁	L	B _k	319,000	One-sixth Mid-Atlantic Douglas voters One-third Midwest Douglas voters One-fourth Border and Western Douglas voters
8.	B _k	D	B ₁	L	329,000	New England Breckinridge voters One-half Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Border, and Western Breckinridge voters
9.	B _k	D	L	B ₁	104,000	One-fourth Southern Breckinridge voters
10.	B _k	B ₁	D	L	413,000	One-half Mid-Atlantic and Midwest Breckinridge voters One-half Mid-Atlantic and Midwest Breckinridge voters
11.	B ₁	L	D	B _k	270,000	Three-quarters Southern Breckinridge voters All New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest Bell voters One-half Border and Western Bell voters One-third Southern Bell voters
12.	B ₁	B _k	D	L	146,000	One-third Southern Bell voters One-sixth Border Bell voters One-quarter Western Bell voters
13.	B ₁	B _k	L	D	31,000	One-sixth Border Bell voters One-quarter Western Bell voters
14.	B ₁	D	B _k	L	28,000	One-sixth Border Bell voters
15.	B ₁	D	L	B _k	114,000	One-third Southern Bell voters

Note. L = Lincoln. D = Douglas. B₁ = Bell. B_k = Breckinridge.

because it alone proved able to split the persistent, winning Jeffersonian-Jacksonian coalition and thereby generate cycles in which anti-Jacksonians had a chance to win. The slavery issue thus survived by a natural selection that is always motivated by the drive for losers to win. A fortunate by-product of that process was the abolition of slavery, even though civil war was needed to achieve it.

10

Liberalism, Populism, and the Theory of Social Choice

In Chapter 9, I showed how a very large, apparent, popular majority was fractionated and replaced with a partially overlapping, partially contradictory one—an illustration of the fragility of even the strongest majority. This is a concrete instance of what I have previously shown by abstract argument—namely, that the outcomes of voting are not necessarily fair and true amalgamations of voters' values, that these outcomes may be meaningless, and that the majorities that make outcomes are themselves in flux. Having thus raised a variety of issues about the interpretation of voting, I will now return to the main problem raised in Chapter 1, the significance of the theory of social choice for the theory of democracy.

10.A. The Adequacy of Voting

In the democratic tradition, theorists have seldom raised questions about the reliability of the voting mechanism in amalgamating individual values into a social decision. Many writers have indeed feared tyranny by the majority. But their fear has rarely, so far as I can discover, led them to question the adequacy of the way majorities are made.

Fear of majority tyranny is a fear that the values of the "majority" may be morally scarce and that enforcement of them will deprive the "minority" of its values. This fear has led some writers (from gentle Christians like T. S. Eliot to modern tyrants like Lenin or Mao) to reject democracy altogether. Others have argued that, to minimize the danger, on the more important political issues an extraordinary majority ought to be required. And still others (following the lead of Madison) have defended democracy by showing that majorities are temporary, arguing that