

The GOAT of Political Science

Tyler Cowen recently published "GOAT: Who is the Greatest Economist of all Time and Why Does it Matter?". The book is an entertaining and informing read, and has sparked great contributions on who the GOAT of economics is. I want to expand the debate to Political Science. I want to do a similar argument for Political Science. Some scoping conditions:

1. I will only examine the postwar period. I am not as well read as Tyler Cowen (I cannot think of a person that is), why I restrict my list to modern political science. This ignores some of the greats such as Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill and Max Weber. I will discuss them at the end.
2. I will only consider political scientists, understood as scholars who develop testable theories of political phenomena in the realm of political organization. I ignore political theory and international relations, which I treat as their own discipline.

Next, to answer this question, I will draw on the same considerations as Tyler Cowen, which are:

1. Groundbreaking Work: A GOAT has to have developed original ideas, that serve as seminal contributions to the field. These can be analytical as well as substantive contributions.
2. Influence and Legacy: The ideas and arguments that the GOAT forwards must still be discussed today, and potentially also have an effect on real world policy. The ideas of the GOAT must also have stood the test of time, and not seem entirely wrong today.
3. Breadth of Ideas: The GOAT must have made contributions to several fields, and not simply work with one topic. This also counts empirically: a GOAT can not simply focus on one historical or geographic setting. Their work must transcend time and space.

My shortlist of candidates are the following: Seymour Martin Lipset, Robert Alan Dahl, Herbert Simon, Samuel P. Huntington, and Francis Fukuyama. I will also discuss a wider list of notable mentions before I nominate my GOAT, and finally discuss the true GOAT, that is bringing back the "all time" element. I am again merely discussing the greatest postwar political scientist.

Seymour Martin Lipset: Modernization, Cleavages and Political Man

My first candidate is Seymour Martin Lipset. Lipset's modestly titled "*Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*" (1959) is perhaps one of the most influential articles in political science ever publishing, acting as the precursor for "modernization theory", arguing that a certain level of development is required to sustain democracy. This argument sparked a vigorous academic debate, as well it had substantial policy-implications. This was in a post-colonial period, where former empires were by force or will relinquished of their colonial possessions, and the question now was how these countries would develop.

There was also a debate on whether all countries could acquire democracy; cultural explanations have a static feature, where certain countries are destined to remain undemocratic. Here, Lipset was a voice of optimism, arguing that material improvements in education and income would provide the necessarily fertile ground for democratic development. Policy-wise, this engendered a belief that democracy could be furthered by supporting the economic development of nations.

Academically, this article also represents the development of a positive science, where Lipset highlights that he wishes to present testable hypotheses that present the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for democracy. However, his original hypothesis has since been heavily criticized, both due to limits in the empirical argument and lack of rigor in the theory (see Przeworski and Limongi 1997). However, Lipset's hypothesis has been vindicated to some extent since, where Glaeser, Porta and Shleifer (2004) argue that development must precede institutional improvement. Regardless of the exact empirical judgement, Lipset made a foundational contribution that is still discussed to this day, scoring highly on originality, legacy and breadth.

Next, alongside with Steiner Rokkan, Lipset pioneered the notion of political cleavages in democracy, which practically has become its own field of inquiry in political science. When theories today are being proposed on how labor market developments affect electoral coalitions - be it through skill-biased change, precarization or increased global competition - these arguments are building on the basic insights from Lipset.

But Lipset does not win GOAT. Why? To my imperfect assessment, Lipset deals with a too narrow set of questions in political science. His works stand out as they were so relevant in the period, and were the core questions of the time. However, the work pertains itself to investigate the values of citizens, how they form coalitions, and what this means for the current regimes. It

also seems restricted to a certain time period, and does not make a wider assessment of political history. While Lipset's argument still exerts significant influence today, his relative specialization limits him from becoming GOAT.

Robert A. Dahl: A Democratic Theorist Looking Around

The next contender is Robert A. Dahl. I clarified I would not consider political theorists, and Dahl falls between doing clean political theory and working empirically. But what makes Dahl a clear contender as a GOAT of political science, is the extent to which his democratic typology is still used in empirical political science today, to quantify the development of democracy. Next, writing on power and influence has shaped the discipline's focus on power. Testing this theory on New Haven local politics, Dahl also invigorated the study of decentral democracy, which scholars of local politics still orient themselves against today.

Dahl's ideal type of democracy ("polyarchy") has also had a real world effect in the sense that it qualified what polities could label themselves as democracies. I think political science exerts the greatest influence when it develops concepts and institutions that governments organize and obey to, and Dahl was wholly successful in this endeavor.

Does Dahl take GOAT? No. One major limitation in Dahl's work is that he primarily works on western cases, and does not engage enough with the undemocratic polities of the world. To be a GOAT, a scholar must engage with the political systems that a majority of the world lived in at the time. Dahl does so indirectly, but to the extent of my knowledge, does not fully engage with this question.

Herbert Simon: Canonical Figure of *Three Disciplines*

The oddest participant of this list is undoubtedly Herbert Simon. Simon had the explicit ambition of bringing mathematical rigor to the study of political science, and took graduate level classes in physics to familiarize himself with the "hard sciences". Somewhat ironically, it was Simon that would go on to challenge the underpinnings of neoclassical economics of the time, introducing the theory of "Bounded Rationality". This theory has had profound influence on psychology, the study of organizations, economics and international relations. Graham T. Allison grounded his analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis in bounded rationality, and the notion has only grown in influence with the possibility to better test micro-level phenomena. Simon's study of decision making led him to win the Nobel Prize in Economics, highlighting the scale

of his contributions.

Herbert Simon dusted off the study of public administration, which received little to no attention. With "*Administrative Behavior*", Simon outlined a research agenda for administrative scholars, with practical implications for the design and reform of bureaucracy. Later in his career, Simon was a pioneer in developing artificial intelligence, creating the "Logic Theorist" program, which has been described as the first artificial intelligence program. In other words, Simon made foundational contributions to the study of public administration, computer science and economics. Simon is a GOAT in terms of originality and breadth.

Yet, it may be Simon's breadth that leads him to be unsuitable to the GOAT of Political Science. While Simon was pivotal in reawakening the study of public administrative, his direct contributions to the rest of the field have been limited. Yes, the notion of bounded rationality has also been extended to study voters and politicians, but Simon did not do so himself to a great extent. Simon was more of a scientist than a political scientist, moving at ease between different disciplines. Perhaps this ease distracted him from having to fit in with the conventional questions of political science.

Samuel P. Huntington: The Prime Pessimist

Regrettably, Samuel P. Huntington is primarily remembered for his "*Clash of Civilizations*". It was popular and controversial, and it was the prime counterpoint to his former student Francis Fukuyama "*End of History*". I can only imagine how many high-school essays start with a discussion between these two books. It has become a cliché, and it hurts to read. But becoming a cliché is a testament of greatness.

To be upfront, "*Clash of Civilizations*" disqualifies Huntington from being GOAT. For one, its static view of civilization does not seem to have stood the test of time. This can be seen through that some countries have become democracies, and that some democracies are at the risk of breaking down. The cultural argument does not seem that strong. Next, the map of civilizations Huntington draws is atrocious. What are these cultures meant to mean? Europe gets two cultures, but the equally to more diverse India is a single culture? Japan gets to be the only country exception? This is not only confusing and unsatisfying, but seems deeply misleading and thoroughly unscientific. I consider this map an insult to political science itself!

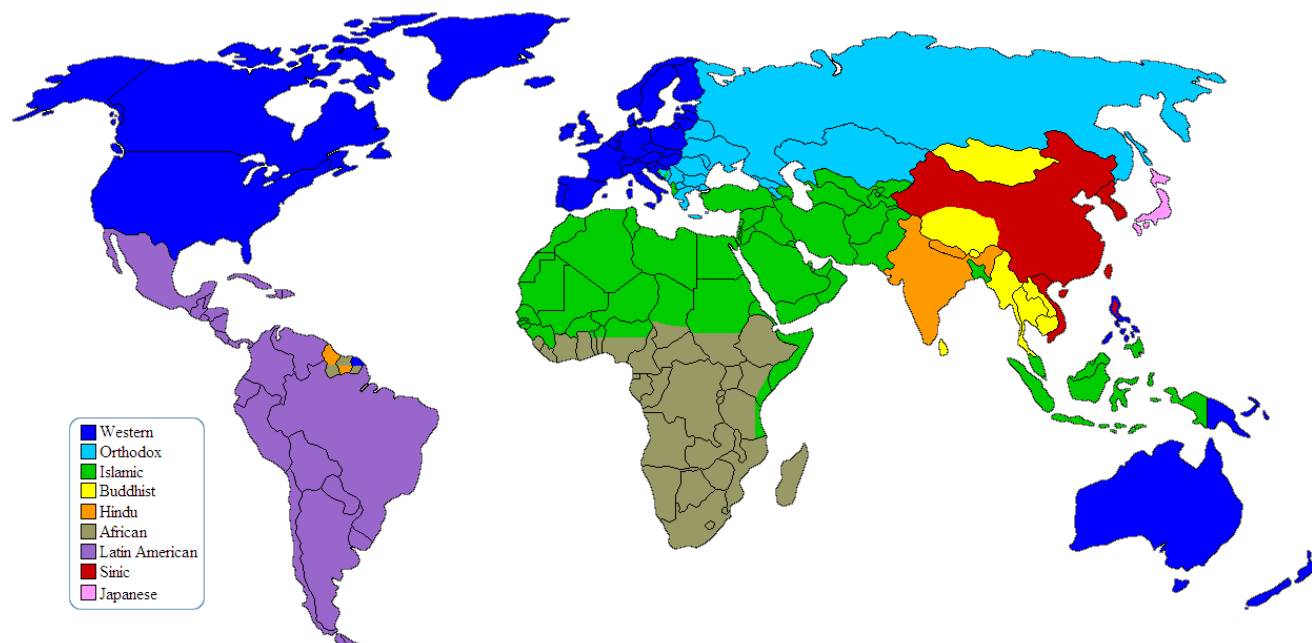


Figure 1: Caption for the Clash of Civilizations map

However, with that said, it is hard to underrate Huntington's contributions to the study of political development. "Political Order in Changing Societies" is an absolute classic, and has matured well today. For Huntington, order must precede democracy, and the key problem of development is to institute it. When order is affirmed, then democracy can develop. The strength of this analysis is how Huntington understands different societies, across space and time. And while being a careful student of democratization, Huntington always kept a careful eye on state capacity. And if we think of the modern efforts to democratize the world, the key failing has been that democratization has preceded political order, meaning reliable institutions that implement and govern by predictable law. "Political Order in Changing Societies" was written in a period of democratic optimism, but Huntington warned that democratic decay was as likely as development. In an era concerned anew challenges to the democratic order, Huntington's general theory of political development seems evermore relevant.

Honorable mentions: Theda Skocpol, Hannah Arendt, Elinor Ostrom, Arend Lijphart, Juan Linz, Adam Przeworski, William H. Riker, Anthony Downs, Gøsta-Esping Andersen

My first honorable mentions addresses a systematic disappointment of my list, and that is the painful lack of gender diversity. Some biographical points in their career highlight how women

have been discriminated in academia. First, Elinor Ostrom initially wanted to be an economist, but was rejected due to her lack of mathematical training in her undergraduate degree. According to her own account, girls were discouraged from taking math classes beyond algebra and geometry. This turned her to political science, that by no means welcomed her with open arms. The Department of Political Science at UCLA believed that only city colleges would hire women, and that would tarnish their reputation. Luckily for the discipline of economics and political science, Ostrom was admitted as one of three women out of a 40 person class. Ostrom later went on to win the Nobel Prize in Economics, for her contributions to overcoming the problem of collective action through institutions. Theda Skocpol was initially denied tenure at Harvard, and successfully won a case against Harvard that this was solely due to the fact that she was a woman. She went on to become the first tenured female sociologist at Harvard in **1984** (sic!).

I know less on Hannah Arendt, but I simply note that she chose to stay as an independent writer, than accept a tenured university position. Perhaps she had the impression that the milieu would not be welcoming – which would be a reasonable assumption. This goes on to form a general point that the discipline undoubtedly has missed out on talent, to the chagrin of contemporary thought.

Next, I want to highlight (and with some regret, fail in further diversity) Arend Lijphart and Juan Linz. Two outstanding scholars of institutional design, in a period where people literally were writing constitutions. They both stand out in the clarity of their positions, and contributions to democratic development. However, I must dismiss Lijphart for his methodological approach and empirical systematization. The typology in "*Patterns of Democracy*" seems utterly messy, and the deductive method from which he developed a continuum of democratic institutions is messy. It only works for Germany and Great Britain, which it is based on, and is weird for the rest. They also both value institutions too highly, and do not thoroughly enough address the problems of endogeneity in understanding the effect of institutions on political behavior. For this reason, they both fall short of GOAT.

Next, I wanted to include three scholars that have pioneered the formal study of politics: Adam Przeworski, William H. Riker and Anthony Downs. In reverse order, Downs provided the basic insight that politics is a spatial competition, and introduced the notion of the median voter theorem to political science. Riker was pivotal in institutionalizing the formal study of politics (i.e. mathematical) at Rochester, and contribute to debates on federal design, voting

choice, and political coalitions. His work on institutions has been memorized through the "Riker Objection" (as discussed by Shepsle 2008 and Pepinsky 2014), that was the point on the epiphenomenalism of institutions that Linz and Lijphart lacked an appreciation of. Finally, Przeworski stands out, particularly with the renewed focus set on institutions led by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. Beyond his analytical clarity, I think Przeworski stands out as a no-nonsense writer that gets to the point. I often revisit the conclusion of this 2004 article criticizing Acemoglu et al "*Reversal of Fortunes*", and the points made still make my head spin today.

Finally, I would not be a Dane with an interest in the welfare state without highlighting Gøsta Esping Andersen. "*Three Worlds of Welfare State Capitalism*" is seismic in the field of comparative political economy. Esping Andersen is probably the most confined of all candidates to the sole study of the welfare state, but he also stands out with his study of political parties. Next, he also reintroduces the family as a core component of understanding the design of the family, but this feature probably makes him more of a sociologist than a political scientist. Nonetheless, he is one of the greats for me.

My GOAT: Francis Fukuyama. End of Discussion.

The GOAT for me is Francis Fukuyama. For me, Fukuyama stands out on all dimensions. In terms of legacy, there is probably no book of political science that has had greater political influence than "*The End of History and the Last Man*". There is probably no book more hotly contested than it, but it presents a breadth of arguments that makes it stand out as a piece of political science. Chapter 7 alone on the linearity of history due to technological development is a masterpiece in itself. Yes, it has had many challengers, but is there any piece of political science that is more influential in the postwar period than this book? I do not believe so.

Next, Fukuyama stands out in his scholarly breadth. His book on Trust presents a thorough examination of social capital and the wealth of nations and industries, his two volumes on state development are a modern landmark of an encompassing theory of political development, and in "*Our Posthuman Future*", Fukuyama ventures into the consequences of the biotechnological revolution. The questions that Fukuyama engages with are fundamentally political, and have advanced the study of international relations, public administration and comparative politics.

The one area where Fukuyama stands out as an uneasy GOAT is in terms of originality. His tomes on political development are a modernized version of Huntington's "*Political Order*

in Changing Societies", his treatment of history builds on Raymond Aron and Alexander Kojève, and the work on social capital can also be ascribed to Robert D. Putnam. Still, I believe that Fukuyama stands out as a scholar that makes original arguments to all of these fields, while maintaining his breadth in political science. But in terms of analytical development, Fukuyama's contributions are more limited. He is also an odd modern social scientist in the sense that his contributions are mainly conveyed through books than journal articles. This has allowed him to keep his breadth by synthesizing existing knowledge, at the cost of developing original testable ideas. Despite this, I still view Fukuyama as the GOAT political scientist of the postwar period.

Going back to history: Looking for a true GOAT

My ranking has limited itself to the postwar period. In a sense, it is difficult to define political science, that can broadly be understood as the study of social phenomena, and not as a subscriber to a certain method of inquiry as is the case for economics. A true GOAT list would have to develop some conditions through which historical figures through time could be considered. Should we consider Aristotle a GOAT of political science, or is he a philosopher? But to venture a few names, and now abandoning the limitations I formerly presented, I will now go through some contenders to be a true GOAT of political science.

First, to list some great historical figures, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Niccolò Machiavelli, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill stand out. Hobbes and Rousseau for thinking in a social contract between governors and the governed, Machiavelli for his thinking about power, and Smith and Mill for their development of political economy.

Next, to go a bit closer to modernity, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, Alexis Tocqueville and Woodrow Wilson stand out. Marx for his study of historical materialism, the workings of the market and class coalitions. Weber for his contributions to the study of bureaucracy, culture and political leaders. Schumpeter for his study of capitalism and democracy. Tocqueville for the classical comparative study of political institutions and culture. Wilson for his contributions to the study of public administration and comparative state development.

This list is by no way exhaustive or suitable to elaborate on the magnitude of each of these thinkers, or all of the other potential candidates. This is beyond my ability to synthesize all contributions to political science, and this essay is meant to be the start of a discussion instead

of a definitive answer.