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# A Conversation with Robert A. Dahl

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Watch a video of this interview online.

## Editor's Note

Robert A. Dahl, the foremost living theorist of democracy, is the emeritus Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1940 and where he spent virtually his entire academic career. After five years working for the government—as a management analyst at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, then as an economist in the Office of Price Administration and the War Production Board, and finally as a member of the Army—he returned to Yale in 1946. With colleagues Charles Lindblom, Robert Lane, and others, he helped build the first modern department of political science, a department that asked major substantive questions while using the best social science techniques available at the time.

In the interview that follows, which I conducted on March 30, 2008, Dahl grounds his motivation for studying democracy not only in his academic encounters but also in his experiences growing up in Alaska, attending public schools there, and working with longshore workers as a boy. He does not want to replicate the utopian visions of classical philosophers. His commitment is to the development of an empirical model of democracy that guides scholars in their efforts to determine the extent of democratization throughout the world as well as in the United States. Normatively, he is committed to a democracy that recognizes the rights and voice of all who have a legitimate claim to citizenship.

Although he is known for his arguments about the procedures democracy requires, some of his most important work deals with the distribution of power. He engaged in debate with elitist theorists such as C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter, who argued that a small elite determined virtually all important policy decisions. Dahl's book *Who Governs?*, winner of the 1962 Woodrow Wilson Prize of the American Political Science Association, makes a very different set of claims. There Dahl analyzes decision making in several policy arenas and finds different key actors influencing the outcomes. The debate did not stop there,

of course, but Dahl transformed the style of argument by investigating how decisions were made and who made them.

Dahl continued to study and contemplate democracy, winning a second Woodrow Wilson Prize in 1990 for *Democracy and Its Critics*. By his admission, he concluded his writing career with a second edition of *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* in 2003 and *On Political Equality* in 2006.

Robert Dahl has received numerous honors. He was a Guggenheim fellow in 1950 and 1978, a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences in 1955–1956 and 1967, and an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Philosophical Society, National Academy of Sciences, and British Academy (as a corresponding fellow). He served as President of the American Political Science Association in 1966–1967. He was the 1995 recipient of the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science. He holds numerous honorary doctorates in addition to other major awards in recognition of his remarkable standing in the profession. The editorial committee of the *Annual Review of Political Science* was unanimous in its selection of Robert Dahl as the author of this first prefatory article by a distinguished living scholar to be published in our pages.

Margaret Levi

## A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT A. DAHL

**Margaret Levi:** Bob, maybe you could tell us a little bit about your history and how you got into political science, and some of the things that you did before you became a political scientist.

**Robert Dahl:** Certainly. I don't know how much of that you want me to narrate; I can go on endlessly, as my children and grandchildren have learned. I grew up in this little town in southeastern Alaska. I worked summers, partly to help pay my way through college and then later graduate school, where I came into contact with of course the local people whom I already knew, but also on the docks, people whom I didn't know, working people, and that exposed me to an aspect of life which I've never forgotten.

**ML:** So you were involved with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union before it became that.

**RD:** . . . before it became that, and, partly because I was a Norman Thomas socialist and a

radical and an advocate of unions and so on, I felt that they needed to be organized. And then in due time, they did indeed get organized, and one of the first things that they did, quite properly, was to turn it into a year-round job, and [laughing] I was no longer able to work on the docks.

**ML:** And you were quite a young man when you were doing that—twelve or . . .

**RD:** Yeah, I started out at the age of twelve, which of course is totally illegal now. But I was big and strong, so it wasn't really a problem. It was an important part of my life.

**ML:** And it informed your work later, I take it.

**RD:** It did. That and my military service, and growing up in a small town, just gave me a very deep and lasting respect for—what is often said, “ordinary people.” I don't like that term. But just plain ordinary human beings. I respect them for, among other things, they've got degrees of common sense which are not always so

obviously present in our colleagues and other intellectuals.

**ML:** Did that experience have an influence on the way in which you thought about democracy? That's been, of course, one of your major contributions is democratic theory.

**RD:** I think it gave me—without I think ever romanticizing (because these were people you romanticize as somehow super people), it gave me a very deep and lasting respect for the common sense and the abilities of human beings, adults. At the same time, it increased my awareness of the importance of information and the challenge that that posed, therefore the challenge of education. And the great gap between what people need to know in order to protect their own self-interest and what they do know, which of course in some Platonic and other theories is filled in by those who believe that they know best, a view which as you know I've always greatly distrusted.

**ML:** Maybe you could tell us a little bit why it was that you began to develop the kind of theory of democracy and polyarchy that you did.

**RD:** I had this sense that ideas about democracy, theories of democracy which I had learned about of course from graduate school on, from Aristotle and Plato onward, that they were inadequate. I don't want to diminish them; I have always retained a great respect for classical and medieval and eighteenth-century theory, but meanwhile a whole new kind of political system emerged to which the term democracy became attached, and for which democracy remained an ideal, even though classical democracy as an ideal was so far removed from reality. The gap between that ideal and the actual political institutions that had developed, particularly from about the sixteenth, seventeenth century on, was just enormous. And what we didn't have enough of, had very little of, was an adequate description of what the actual institutions of so-called democracy, modern democracy, representative democracy, were. As I've already said, they were radically different from historical democracy, and our descriptions of them



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Margaret Levi's interview with Robert Dahl can be found in video format at <http://www.annualreviews.org/go/RADahl.interview>.

and how they related to the ideals, I felt, at that time, were lacking.

**ML:** When you proceeded to develop a theory, your approach to it was also somewhat different from the classical theoretical approach to it. I mean, one of the things that I've noted in your work is that even though you're not known as a political economist per se, in fact you were very influenced by economic thinking and your work with Ed Lindblom and others.

**RD:** I was, yes. Ed was—is! I don't see him very often—a very close friend and colleague. I had been interested in economic theory and ideas even as an undergraduate, and had come to the conclusion that we in political science didn't pay enough attention to the importance of economics to politics and political science, so I spent a lot of my time trying to bring that together, including, as I've said, collaborating with Ed Lindblom—

**ML:** Ed Lindblom, who is known as Charles Lindblom as a published author.

**RD:** Yes, I'm sorry, yes, Charles Lindblom.

**ML:** But did that economic thinking also influence the way in which you thought about democracy, or were those really separate projects?

**RD:** Yes, it influenced it in the sense that that kind of abstract thinking and models, while I felt they often bore too little relation to the reality and the complexity of economic life, they provided a degree of rigor. Political systems are I think more complicated than economics, and political behavior is more complicated than economic behavior; nevertheless, economics provided the kind of model or hope of a model that we could make use of for increased rigor in political science.

**ML:** There's also a deductive quality in your thinking about democracy, as well as a concern about thinking about how it fits with reality.

**RD:** Yes, yes. I was influenced very early on, my first time at the—I spent a year at the Center at Palo Alto, the Center for Advanced Study there, and I became a good friend of Kenneth Arrow. I think he was not at the Center that year but he lived in Palo Alto.

**ML:** Marvelous man.

**RD:** Marvelous man. Both as a person and as a scholar. And I became as I say greatly influenced by the way in which he dealt with phenomena.

**ML:** And this was in the early 1950s?

**RD:** I think it was 1955 to 1960.

**ML:** You were in one of the first classes at the Center.

**RD:** Yeah, I was. I had been on the social science research committee under Pendleton Herring...

**ML:** Another former President of APSA.

**RD:** Right. That came up with the idea. And then helped get money from the Rockefeller Foundation to develop it.

**ML:** You know I'm the current chair of the board of the Center for Advanced Study.

**RD:** *[laughing]*: Yes, you are, yes, oh my yes! I'm very proud of that, having made what small contribution I did.

**ML:** You made a big contribution.

**RD:** Well, thank you.

**ML:** So, Ken Arrow and you started to talk, and he was of course working on issues of democratic theory in a sense at that time, right, his book had just come out.

**RD:** So I was influenced by that as a model, a way of thinking more abstractly, perhaps, than customary, about democratic theory. Making clear the premises, the epistemological assumptions and matters of that kind, and I think that sort of set the stage. And then once you get in of course, into that field, which was not highly—I don't know how to put this properly—as a formal field of political science was not highly developed at the time, once you get into it you quickly become aware of how rich the potential subject matter is. One of the enormous changes, perhaps anticipating your question, one of the changes in the world is the extraordinary increase in the number of countries that, by the standards that we use today, can be called democratic—always, I repeat this and repeat this, but, always keeping in mind the difference between the ideal and the threshold at which we now accept a country as democratic, or a polyarchy as I would say. And the enormous increase in the number of those available for study—when I was a graduate student, there were maybe half a dozen countries that you could study: France and Britain and, I'm not quite sure of Canada at that time... and then the expansion created out there a field... that was both a challenge and an opportunity.

**ML:** Your own work on democracy evolves over time, right? Maybe you could talk a little bit about the kinds of criticism that you got and how you responded to that, because your work really did just keep going with the times.

**RD:** It did. I helped form this group on the smaller European democracies, with people like a good friend of mine, Val Lorwin, who had studied Belgium, and Stein Rokkan, who studied Scandinavian democracies. Stein and I were walking down the streets of San Francisco—he was out at the Center one afternoon or evening,

and he said or I said or we both agreed instantaneously, “We need more studies of these smaller European democracies which are so little known, even among scholars in those countries themselves.” Or in some of them, like Sweden (less so at the time in Norway, but it had a strong tradition there)—not much studying by their own scholars. And we agreed that something should be done, and so we raised money and began to invite people to contribute to what first became a series of essays on the smaller European democracies, and then volumes! And now it goes on and on, as the number of smaller democracies around the world increases, so it’s a whole rich new gigantic field.

**ML:** And how did you get from democracy to polyarchy? What was that move? What did that represent?

**RD:** Polyarchy was a term that I think had been developed in the eighteenth century, as you know from the Greek meaning “many rulers” (poly; archon). I came to the conclusion early on that we should not keep trying to use the word democracy in both its ideal and in its realistic sense, particularly given the actual democracies that had evolved, with representation and the growth of political parties and a whole new species, a whole new different kind of political system. We needed, then, to modify our language, so that we could describe democracy as an ideal, using the term democracy there, but we needed a term—it never actually became a household term, but we needed a term that described actual eighteenth-, nineteenth-, twentieth-century democracies. And I stumbled on the word polyarchy and started applying that. As I say, it didn’t become the term, and I do think it’s still confusing that the term applies to both, but I think we’re a little bit more comfortable now, perhaps, than we were in making sure which it is that we’re talking about, and when we use the word democracy, whether we’re talking about small-scale democracy, large-scale democracy, polyarchy as I would call it, multi-party democracy, a whole, much more diverse, much more complex...

**ML:** I think the term democracy itself has become more of a continuum than just an ideal state.

**RD:** I agree. And a number of people of course have (even I’ve made my stab at it) attempted to develop a scale that I think very helpful, not to oversimplify it, but to be able to array the countries of the world on a 10-point scale from the most democratic, with the democratic ideal beyond that, those that are above a certain threshold the most democratic, and array them along a line to the least democratic. That’s very useful.

**ML:** Now, one of the things that William Riker did, he looked at the various notions of democracy and decided that the only thing they had in common was elections, contested elections. So you have a richer definition of democracy and polyarchy than that.

**RD:** Yes. I think, if we move to later democracy and the sort of thing that he was talking about, we have to include a wider array of institutions—to distinguish democracy from authoritarian governments, and even there we need a scale to do so. But it means not just elections, indeed free and fair elections; I think it’s come in the twentieth century to mean a universal electorate, male and female, moving the age down a bit, that’s now just standard. Political parties and political competition and free and fair elections, and something that I’ve tried to add on, without, I suppose, a great deal of success in the real world or elsewhere: the ultimate popular control over the agenda. If somebody else is controlling the agenda, what’s it all about?

**ML:** That seemed to me the interesting move that you made over the course of developing this, is that participation in various forms became much more part of your argument about democracy.

**RD:** That’s true. Yes, participation... even in my doctoral dissertation I’d seen that, but also we needed to think about democracy in other spheres, and I became more interested and did more research on democratic forms within

business firms. Well, my own optimistic perspective on that never prevailed, but I had hoped [*laughing*]...

**ML** [*laughing*]: And much less so today than you think...

**RD**: And less so today. Business has become more and more oligarchical, don't you think?

**ML**: I think that's true. Well, when I was an undergraduate and a graduate student, I was part of a group of people who were quite critical of "the pluralists." Right? Now, you were considered a pluralist.

**RD**: I was indeed, yes.

**ML**: Do you think that's a term that still has meaning today?

**RD**: Well, I think the core of the meaning is observing some political systems and seeing that—well, let me go back into the history. I was reacting to what seemed to me the oversimplified view of some, including the famous Italian theorists, about the ruling class. I began, and then my experience in Washington as an intern later fortified that, I began to see the ruling class as pluralistic in many countries, and as it turned out, in more and more countries—meaning by that that it was not a single homogeneous group of people (men, they would be) with a common unifying interest, but that there was more diversity there. That's not exactly the same as democracy, but it means that if you have democratic institutions, they're going to be more pluralistic in the sense that wider groups are going to be participating.

**ML**: And that's part of what's behind *Who Governs?*, right?

**RD**: And that's part of what's behind *Who Governs?*. I can remember sort of beginning to think about this while I was at the Center and afterwards, where I'd done a lot of thinking about this, talking about it, saying that, well, maybe I'd better take a look at some concrete, actually existing political system and see what's out there. Of course you can argue that I began with

a bias toward seeing diversity or plurality, and that would be a fair criticism. But once you begin looking for it in a country like the United States, or even in a place like New Haven, you begin to see it, starting with our ethnic diversity for example. And I found at that time that that, I wouldn't say dominant but very powerful tendency to want to see this as somehow simplified was too simplified.

**ML**: So you weren't just responding to the Italians, not just to Mosca and Pareto, but also to C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter and the whole community power elite structure.

**RD**: I was, yes. I did. I have great respect for C. Wright Mills (I didn't have that much respect for Floyd Hunter's work), but, I felt it was too simple. Just too simplified a view of politics... You could array countries around the world, as one of my students and later fellow scholars did, you could array them along a scale from those that were highly authoritarian to those that were nonauthoritarian...

**ML**: This is where your work on democracy and on power really sort of come together, right, in thinking about what a democracy is, that it has to have at least some pluralist element.

**RD**: Yes.

**ML**: Now, the concept of power is another thing in which you have clearly been a leader, and it comes out in the book *Who Governs?*, and it produced again an interesting argument. It was a major controversy... I took a seminar, as I mentioned to you, with Peter Bachrach when I was an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, which was on power, and of course, he was one of your major critics. But that was a very lively debate in the 1960s and well into the 1970s. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about that debate and what's happened with the way of thinking about power.

**RD**: There was then a dominant, rather simplified view of power. And what I think opened up was a realization of its complexities—how did you define its characteristic qualities—and



of political regimes as being much more diverse in the distribution of power. And also, then, the more serious attempt to figure out how to go about observing and measuring it. That . . .

**ML:** That's really crucial.

**RD:** That was really crucial. You can talk about it in the abstract, as the Italian theorists tended to do . . . but then you need to get out in the world and study it. How do you do that? What kind of methodology do you use? And I think there's been a great deal of progress in the field since the 1950s. *[Cut here in video]* I think also the enormous increase in the number of countries in the world, and the increase in the variety of political systems makes it a much more challenging field but a richer one as well . . . *[Cut here in video]* . . . scholars in those countries, maybe trained elsewhere but now increasingly trained within those countries, who study their own political systems. I mean, it's a much more difficult field for any scholar because it *is* so very rich, and trying to make some kind of sense out of it *all* is almost impossible. But it's a very big and, to overuse the term, rich field I think.

**ML:** It is. It's very exciting actually, what's gone on. *[Cut here in video.]* There was this, as we mentioned, very important debate that you really initiated to a large extent with *Who Governs?* in response to the simplified elitist views of the Italians. And there were others who got into that debate trying to operationalize the term, like Jim Coleman and others, and then there were a group of people like Peter Bachrach who I worked with, and ultimately Michael Lipsky and Francis Fox Piven and others, who were, and Steven Lukes, who were quite critical of your view of power. Right? Because they felt that there was a mobilization of bias or hegemony or something else that actually—they were called the neo-elitists, right, because there was an issue about voices that were left out or voices that weren't heard, in the way in which the process worked. Now, I'm interested in your response—because you then went on and responded to them, right? What was at issue for you in that debate as it developed? You started

by responding to the elitists, but then you had to deal with the neo-elitists.

**RD:** I guess that I continued to see politics and political life, life in Washington, as I say both living there and working there and so on, and afterwards, as more complex than I felt many observers, who were sometimes a bit distant from it all, did. Even when I worked in Washington during wartime with the War Production Board, I found that its decisions were a bit more complex, if I can keep overworking that word, than many people who looked at it from afar were aware of. Now, it's true that I think a function of science, and certainly a function of social science as well, is to simplify this complexity of reality, and to provide a more adequate way of understanding it and seeing it, because when we try to understand it as complexity we don't understand it. It's like looking out at the stars at night. It's great to look out at night and see the stars but you're not understanding anything about the nature of the universe. It has to be simplified. And in simplification you lose some potential information, but the gain is to provide comprehensibility and coherence.

**ML:** The other thing in my memory of what was going on at that time was, there was a real issue about how you operationalize and how you actually test, and what kinds of theories and models you can test and which ones you can't, and that's another area in which I think your contribution is quite significant.

**RD:** Well, I appreciate your bringing that up, because that too was something that I began to think about during that year that I spent at the Center in Palo Alto—issues of operationalizing concepts and testing concepts and so on. How to bring them into touch with reality in rigorous, methodologically rigorous ways became a challenge to me. And once again, people like James Coleman, their attempts at that I think had an influence on my way of thinking about it. *[Cut here in video.]*

**ML:** I'm hearing several themes as we talk. Your substantive interest in democracy and power, and democratization and diffusion of power, but

also your methodological commitment to testability and operationalization. Finally, I'm also hearing something which I guess I hadn't quite realized before, your commitment to a kind of interdisciplinarity. You're talking about being influenced by economists; James Coleman was an eminent sociologist. So, a way of thinking about social science as a social science, not just as political science. Is that something that you think is a good thing for us to be developing? One of the things that's happened is that social science has spread its boundaries. The disciplinary cores are shifting, in a sense. Is that good, do you think, for the future, or should we be going back to core ideas in political science?

**RD:** I think that it's important always to retain awareness of what you call core ideas, including those in the tradition of political philosophy. I think keeping in touch with those earlier political philosophers, being aware of them as part of our training, I think that's still quite worthwhile. I know, or I would guess less and less of that may be taking place. But at the same time, I think that we should try to remain aware of the richness and complexity of the world that we deal with out there, and how much more, in a way—[*laughing*] it's always been complex, but how much more complex it's grown. Especially the field of democracy now, in just the sheer number and varieties.

**ML:** So when you think about what has happened in social science since you began, do you see it as advancing? Are there things we've lost, things we've gained? What would be your assessment, looking back at this point in your life?

**RD:** A gain in social science is now the richness and variety of the types of inquiry that we undertake, and the fact that it is a worldwide discipline, which is enormously enriching this field. The cost of all of this is that as we grow more specialized, it becomes more and more difficult for anybody to grasp broad areas of the field. As we grow more specialized we may be less and less sensitive to aspects of the world that are outside of our specialty. Much as I respect

aspects of rational choice theory, to see that as somehow a dominant way of thinking would be a terrible blunder, because, as I say, it's important, but it cannot encompass the empirical variety and complexity of the world. Nothing can. But it can't be done by rational choice. That can be a part, it should be a part, but social science is a much broader enterprise. It's got to be.

**ML:** And is your sense that rational choice has that hegemonic or dominant role right now?

**RD:** I don't know about right now. I think it did for a while. It came to play I think too dominant a role, to the exclusion of kind of tough-minded empirical research out there in the world. There's only so much about the world you can deduce [*laughs*]. You've got to get out there and . . .

**ML:** But it seems to me at Yale, for sure, there is a large group of people now who are doing exactly that kind of tough-minded empirical work.

**RD:** There is. I'm very encouraged by that. Sure.

**ML:** And I think it's happening all over. I think rational choice has become another tool in the toolbox.

**RD:** I'm glad to hear that. That's been my impression and I think that's where it should be. The richness, I'm repeating myself, but, the diversity of research in political science is just impressive.

**ML:** I absolutely agree.

**RD:** It's a positive. You know, often there's a tendency for older people, whether social scientists or whatever, to look back on the good old days. The good old days were not that good in social science.

**ML:** Well, you've been somebody who's really brought the scientific impulse—I mean that in the nicest possible way—the emphasis on theory building, theory testing, conceptualization . . .

**RD:** Well, thank you.



**ML:** ...and that makes a huge difference. I want to conclude with a concern that I have, that I think you share, about what's happened to the field, and this comes back to your concern about power as being both a crucial concept to understand democratization and also a crucial concept to understand the political world. And my concern is that we aren't focusing very much on power as political scientists any longer. I don't know if that's your sense or not, and if you think that would be a loss if that were the case.

**RD:** You're a better judge than I as to where the field has gone, where it is now. But the answer is definitely it would be a loss. Power and influence have been the center of—this is not

necessarily an argument in favor of keeping it, but power and influence have been the center of the field of the study of politics from the beginning. And what's more, they are the central elements in all of our lives, our daily lives and our family lives, this interview going on—and they're enormously complex. If you expand as I tried to do some years ago to power as kind of a subset of the broader field of influence, with a variety of ways in which influence of human beings takes place, it's almost too complex to be able to turn into a scientific discipline. But that's the challenge.

**ML:** That's the challenge. Bob, thank you so much.

**RD:** You're welcome.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the presentation of this interview.



Robert A. Dahl