

## Introduction to the Public Choice Society at 50 years symposium

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**Abstract** This introduction presents a brief background of the Public Choice Society, its 50th anniversary conference, and the purpose of this symposium. This symposium consists of 13 papers within four of the main pillars of public choice: Virginia political economy, Bloomington political economy, experimental economics, and social choice. These papers pay homage to the Society's first 50 years while demonstrating the breadth and vibrancy of modern public choice scholarship.

**Keywords** Public Choice Society · Virginia political economy · Experimental economics · Bloomington political economy · Social choice

This Symposium commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Public Choice Society. The Society was founded by Jim Buchanan and Gordon Tullock after the tremendous early success of *The Calculus of Consent* (1962), prompting the two

...to initiate and organize a small research conference in Charlottesville in April 1963. We brought together economists, political scientists, sociologists, and scholars from other disciplines, all of whom were engaged in research outside the boundaries of their disciplines. The discussion was sufficiently stimulating to motivate the formation of a continuing organization, which we first called the Committee on Non-Market Decision-Making, and to initiate plans for a journal initially called *Papers on Non-Market Decision-Making*... [A]fter several annual meetings there emerged the new name "public choice," for both the organization and the journal. In this way the Public Choice Society and the journal *Public Choice* came into being. (Buchanan 2003, p. 1)

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Since that initial gathering the Society has held research conferences every spring and always with the same objective: to facilitate the exchange of research and ideas across social science disciplines in order to better understand collective action, or non-market decision making.

Buchanan was the first president of the Society, followed by Tullock, then William Riker, and next Vincent Ostrom. Table 1 lists all 26 presidents of the Society's first 50 years. At the 1967 meeting, William Mitchell and James S. Coleman proposed the new name, which “won by a small plurality over ‘social choice’, ‘the new political economy’, and ‘the economics of politics’” (Mitchell 1988, p. 117). Some readers may note irony in the Public Choice Society holding an election to settle on its name. Also in 1967, the Society presidency was changed from a one- to a two-year term. An informal norm quickly emerged by which each sitting president would name the succeeding president, traditionally in rotation among disciplines.

As Buchanan's account hints, the histories of the Society and the journal are intertwined. For example, when the journal was officially renamed in 1968, Tullock's Editorial Note revealed:

**Table 1** Presidents of the Public Choice Society's first 50 years

Name of President	Primary field	Year(s) as President
James M. Buchanan*	Economics	1964
Gordon Tullock*	Law, Economics	1965
William H. Riker*	Political Science	1966
Vincent A. Ostrom*	Political Science	1967–1969
Otto A. Davis*	Economics	1970–1972
Mancur Olson*	Economics	1972–1974
James S. Coleman*	Sociology	1974–1976
Charles R. Plott	Economics	1976–1978
Gerald H. Kramer	Political Science	1978–1980
John O. Ledyard	Economics	1980–1982
Elinor Ostrom*	Political Science	1982–1984
Dennis C. Mueller	Economics	1984–1986
Peter Ordeshook	Political Science	1986–1988
Vernon L. Smith	Economics	1988–1990
John A. Ferejohn	Political Science	1990–1992
Melvin J. Hinich*	Political Science	1992–1994
Robert D. Tollison	Economics	1994–1996
Michael C. Munger	Political Science	1996–1998
William A. Niskanen*	Economics	1998–2000
Bernard N. Grofman	Political Science	2000–2002
Geoffrey Brennan	Economics	2002–2004
Steven J. Brams	Political Science	2004–2006
Randall G. Holcombe	Economics	2006–2008
Nicholas R. Miller	Political Science	2008–2010
Lawrence W. Kenny	Economics	2010–2012
Edward J. Lopez	Economics	2012–2014

\* Deceased

With this issue *Papers on Non-Market Decision Making* becomes *Public Choice* and at the same time its general institutional and financial backing is considerably strengthened. The newly founded Public Choice Society will act as sponsor of the journal, and I am happy to say that the National Science Foundation has made a grant to cover its financial support for 3 years. We are still a struggling journal, but our struggles will be a little bit less desperate in the future. (Tullock 1968, p. 1)

Readers might also note irony in the Public Choice Society depending on federal funds, at least initially. In any case, the ensuing years would demonstrate the magnitude of Tullock's understatement. First-rate scholars from a number of disciplines and across the globe

**Table 2** Plenary Sessions at the 50th anniversary conference of the Public Choice Society

**Plenary Session 1:** Virginia political economy with a special tribute to James M. Buchanan

Session Chair: Niclas Berggren

Presenters

- Peter J. Boettke, "The Past, Present, and Future of Virginia Political Economy"
- Geoffrey Brennan, "James M. Buchanan and Virginia Political Economy"
- Richard E. Wagner, "Virginia Political Economy, Rationally Reconstructed"
- Keith Dougherty, "The Value of Formalism: Re-examining the External Costs of Legislative Decisions"

**Plenary Session 2:** The Bloomington School of political economy with special tributes to Vincent and Elinor Ostrom

Session Chair: Michael C. Munger

Presenters

- Roberta Herzberg, "Appreciating the Artisanry of Lin and Vincent Ostrom: The Many Levels of the Bloomington School's Institutional Analysis"
- James Walker, "The Bloomington Workshop: Multiple Methods, Interdisciplinary Research, and Collective Action"
- Paul Dragos Aligica, "Public Administration, Public Choice and the Ostroms: The Achievement, the Failure, and the Promise"
- Eli Dourado, "Public Choice Perspectives on Intellectual Property"

**Plenary Session 3:** Experimental economics: roots and branches of public choice

Session Chair: Vernon L. Smith

Presenters

- Charles Plott, "Public Choice: An Experimental Economics and Political Science Guiding Hand"
- Daniel Houser, "Gordon Tullock and Experimental Economics"
- Bart J. Wilson, "The Emergence of Property as a Convention in the Laboratory"
- Ryan Oprea, "Dynamic Forces and Individual Choices in Experiments"

**Plenary Session 4:** The future of social choice and the past Presidents of the Public Choice Society

Session Chair Bernard Grofman

Presenters

- Christian List, "Six Decades of Arrow's Theorem: What Lessons Can We Learn?"
- Iain McLean, "The Strange History of Social Choice: And the Contribution of the Public Choice Society to its Fifth Revival"
- Norman Schofield, "The Enlightenment and Social Choice Theory"
- Maxwell Stearns, "Constitutional Law in Social Choice Perspective"

would gravitate to the Society. Sister societies would form in Europe and Japan, and the journal would soon become one of the highest ranked in the social sciences. The interaction of public choice scholars, through the journal and the society, would fundamentally impact participants' home disciplines. Research agendas that were forged through this interaction would rediscover or spawn entirely new fields of scholarship, with now familiar monikers like Virginia political economy, social choice, experimental economics, positive political economy, and the Bloomington School, which challenged and offered viable alternatives to conventional work in public administration and collective action. Generations of scholars came to count on the Society's yearly gatherings to exchange ideas, catch up with friends, and discover new lines of research.

The 50th anniversary conference maintained these traditions and set the stage for the Society's next 50 years. Held March 7–10, 2013, in New Orleans at the historic Monteleone Hotel, the Society returned to perhaps its most favored and beloved stop over the years. With 64 concurrent sessions and four plenary sessions, the conference featured 263 presentations and drew over 250 attendees. The Saturday awards luncheon memorialized Jim Buchanan with a screening of the short documentary, "Daring to Be Different: Reflections on the Life and Work of James Buchanan," (George Mason University Libraries 2012). The luncheon also paid tribute to Elinor and Vincent Ostrom, with remarks by James Walker and Roberta Herzberg plus a screening of Barbara Allen's short documentary, "The Artisanry and Science of Institutional Design" (Allen 2012). Special concurrent sessions recognized the 20th anniversary of *Democracy in Decision* by Geoff Brennan and Loren Lomasky (1993) and two recent books that document the history of public choice thought, *The Clash of Economic Ideas* by Larry White (2012) and *Madmen, Intellectuals, and Academic Scribblers* by Wayne Leighton and Edward Lopez (2013). Importantly, over a fifth of the attendees were students.

Aside from those highlights, the true heart and soul of the 50th anniversary conference were its four plenary sessions, which are here listed in Table 2. Each session presented four papers within four of the main pillars of public choice: Virginia political economy, Bloomington political economy, experimental economics, and Social Choice. The 16 presenters were invited to speak on a topic of their choice, with the stated hope that they would emphasize the role of the Public Choice Society in the development of their field while also conveying its vibrancy as an ongoing research program. Thus, each of the plenary sessions took on a reflective stance while pushing steadily forward.

These plenary presentations form the basis of the symposium before you. Unfortunately, four of the 16 papers never found their way into the final mix. Yet by James Walker's entrepreneurial suggestion, Michael Fotos's excellent piece is included here although it was not on a plenary session. My goal in assembling these 13 papers is to pay homage to the Society's first 50 years while also demonstrating the breadth and vibrancy of modern public choice scholarship. Paraphrasing Tullock's (1966) Preface to volume 1 of *Papers on Non-Market Decision Making*, whether I am to be thanked or criticized I will leave to the reader.

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