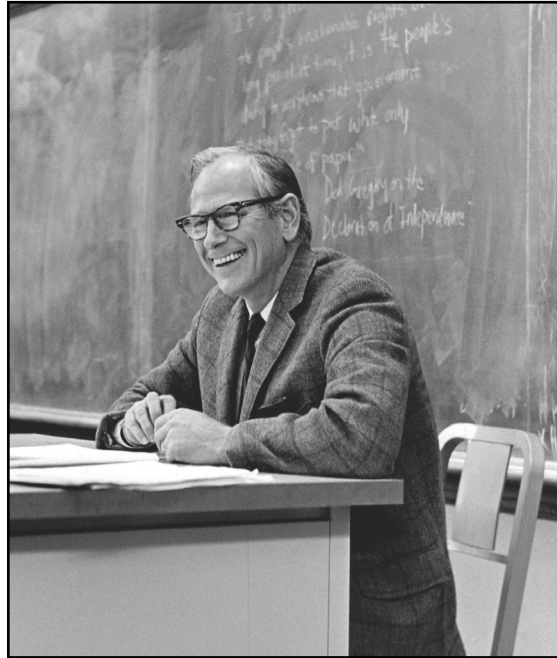

ROBERT A. DAHL



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Robert A. Dahl, widely appreciated as the world's leading student of democracy, passed away in New Haven, Connecticut in February 2014. I write as one of those appreciators as well as Dahl's colleague in the Yale Political Science Department and a longtime friend.

Dahl's connection to Yale University was enduring and strong. He earned his Ph.D. at Yale in the 1930s. After World War II, he returned to Yale and rose through the ranks to professor and then Sterling Professor. With others, he ushered the university's Political Science Department into intellectual leadership of the discipline. The "behavioral revolution" of the 1950s and 1960s bore his stamp, and comparative politics as well as American politics bore his imprint. Graduate students came from around the world to study with him; you couldn't walk through the corridors without meeting somebody from Denmark or Italy. He was a shaper of Yale more generally, as well. In 1975, he joined with C. Vann Woodward and others in issuing the Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, commonly known as the "Woodward Report," the resounding statement that freedom of expression—no matter what else goes on in the university community—should rank as the paramount obligation of the university.

The honors heaped on Dahl were boundless. He served as president of the American Political Science Association, and in 1995 he was the initial recipient of the Johan Skytte Prize, an award given by Uppsala University in Sweden to the scholar who has made the most valuable contribution to political science. Fittingly, both the American Philosophical Society and the National Academy of Sciences made Dahl a member. He was both a philosopher and a scientist; the former role was basic. I always saw him as a political theorist at heart. He began his thinking and writing that way in the 1930s, puzzling about the ins and outs of socialism. Then he moved on to the topic of democracy, defining it, measuring it, tracing its historical causes and trajectories, and sizing it up across the world's countries. But science was the other half of him, and he pioneered in rendering the American discipline of political science more scientific.

Both philosophy and science stand out in Dahl's genius as a scholar of politics. I see three leading ingredients of that genius. They entail *questions*, *concepts*, and the *use of evidence*. First, Dahl was a great poser of scholarly questions. You can't miss them. Often they appear in the first paragraph of his works. They are clearly stated and obviously the product of reflection. They are broad questions that we all might want to hear an answer to, not narrow ones prosecuting a theory or a method or a paradigm. Their signature content is a blend of classical political theory with the empirical complexities of the modern world.

The political theory side is key. You can't read far into his works without encountering Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Mill, Marx, Tocqueville, and others. For Dahl, political theory was a necessary *source* of good questions to pursue research about.

Here are some of the questions that lead off Dahl's books:

What are the conditions under which numerous individuals can maximize the attainment of their goals through the use of social mechanisms? (*Politics, Economics and Welfare*, 1953, coauthored with Charles E. Lindblom)

How does popular sovereignty function in America? (*A Preface to Democratic Theory*, 1956)

In a political system where nearly every adult may vote but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually governs? (*Who Governs?*, 1961)

Given a regime in which the opponents of the government cannot openly and legally organize into political parties in order to oppose the government in free and fair elections, what conditions favor or impede a transformation into a regime in which they can? (*Polyarchy*, 1971)

Second, once past the questions, we quickly run into an employment of *concepts* in Dahl's works. Nothing is more inherent to his trademark. By concepts I mean intellectual inventions of a certain sort—or at least tailorings or developments of already existent ideas. At the creative edges of political science in the 1950s through the 1970s, concepts were a major way of addressing political reality. They could be used to organize, characterize, and explain as well as to appraise. Thus Dahl, with others including David B. Truman, developed "pluralism" as the signature label for a kind of polity built on a jangling messiness among interests as its decision process, yet the concept had a normative connotation, too: What's wrong with that sort of politics, and who could expect anything better?

Besides pluralism, Dahl picked up and ran with the better-known term, "democracy." In practice, what does it make sense to have "democracy" mean? In this vein, which has an inductive cast, Dahl in his *Preface to Democratic Theory* surveyed U.S. political history with an eye for practices that in a common-sense way probably stack up as "democratic." But Dahl also spent much of his career honing "democracy" as an ideal type. What should the concept mean in theory? Often, he supplied a list of criteria that an ideal democratic process would

satisfy. Those came to include equality in voting, effective participation, enlightened understanding, final control over the agenda, and inclusion. It is fair to say that Dahl across the years grew both sterner in his theoretical criteria for democracy, and more disappointed in how the U.S. system was meeting those criteria.

Third, Dahl pioneered in pressing political science toward *the use of evidence* in a way warranting the designation “scientific.” This was Dahl’s “behavioral revolution” side. American political science after World War II acquired a feisty new generation of scholars short on patience. The discipline seemed to need a reset. There had been too much history, philosophy, and description. To find out what was actually true or not—that was the better way to go. It meant becoming more scientific. It meant searching for testable propositions. Dahl became an evangelist for the idea of hypothesis testing. That was the sort of thing political scientists should be doing. A commonplace idea now, it was not commonplace at the start of the 1950s. To read Dahl’s early works is to encounter blizzards of suggestions for hypotheses that might be tested. Axioms, assumptions, definitions, conditions, and propositions, not to mention logical symbols, make an appearance. It is a style of argument.

Dahl was a formidable empirical researcher himself. That is shown in his masterwork, *Who Governs?*, centering on the city of New Haven in the 1950s. The book draws on 46 lengthy interviews with participants in significant city decisions. (Dahl’s graduate students did a lot of the interviewing.) For the project, Dahl supervised three sample surveys. He had seminar students prepare detailed events studies. He used aggregate voting data. He drew on various historical material going back over a century including standard histories, the U.S. Census, city directories, and other documents and records. The result was a model of multi-method research.

In empirical terms, perhaps the leading theme in Dahl’s work is: Get hold of a dataset and use it. If possible, count things. This is standard advice in political science today, but it wasn’t always. Often Dahl crafted his own datasets; sometimes he drew on other people’s. In all cases, it is fair to say, the questions he wanted to tackle preceded his datasets rather than vice versa.

Count things, he said. Here are some representative instances from his works: Of the world’s 29 polyarchies (that is, democracies, more or less) as of 1971, 10 became that way before independence, four after independence but under foreign occupation, 12 autonomously after independence, and three were anomalous cases. Also as of 1971, in the 120 years since the *Communist Manifesto* was published, no country had developed according to the Marxist model of conflict. As of 1956,

of the 77 instances in which the Supreme Court had ever held a congressional statute unconstitutional, there wasn't any case in which a persistent law-making majority eventually hadn't achieved its purposes anyway. As of 1973, across the world's 33 representative democracies there wasn't a significant relationship between election turnout and geographic size, population size, or population density.

In a nutshell, in his earlier years Dahl dwelt on the American political system. Those years brought his *Preface to Democratic Theory* and *Who Governs?* Then he moved into a phase of comparative politics that brought his *Polyarchy*, his edited *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (1966), and his *Size and Democracy* (coauthored with Edward Tufte, 1973). He summed up his work in *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989), which won the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Book Award in 1990. In 2001, he published *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* His answer to this question was: not very. Dahl never did like the Constitution. It has too many undemocratic intricacies.

For a sense of what made Dahl tick, his memoir of early days spent in the Alaska panhandle, *After the Gold Rush: Growing Up in Skagway* (2005), is not to be missed. Also not to be overlooked is his remarkable record of participation in U.S. government agencies during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and in the U.S. Army. He worked at various times for the National Labor Relations Board, the Department of Agriculture, the Office of Price Administration, and the War Production Board. For a taste of real political life at the administrative level, this must have been awesome experience.

As for the Army, Dahl told me about his experience in post-D Day Europe and gave me some fascinating documents, including a map. Lieutenant Dahl led a platoon of the 71st Infantry Regiment of the 44th Infantry Division. This platoon took part in a major offensive beginning in November 1944. They were shot and shot at and they took casualties and prisoners. They fought at the Maginot Line. They crossed the Rhine on March 27, 1945, and then sped southeast in ragtag fashion through many dicey settings and crossed the Danube on April 28, ending up in the Austrian Tyrol. And then it was over. Dahl earned a Bronze Star with an oak leaf cluster. After the war, he was assigned to an Army unit charged with de-Nazifying the German banking system. Then, back to New Haven.

Elected 1960

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