

# Public choice and political science: a view from Europe

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**Abstract** What is the status of rational choice theory in contemporary European political science? Compared with a quarter-century ago, the rational choice approach is still far from being the paradigm of work in the discipline, but looking at both anecdotal evidence and information derived from journal citations and textbook contents, it seems that the number of political scientists working wholly or partly within the approach has grown markedly, and that its contribution to the mainstream of the field is strong.

**Keywords** Public choice · Political science · Comparative politics · History of thought · Paradigms

## 1 Introduction

Is public choice more of a paradigm, a school or a sect in political science?

The question is not mine, and it is not new. It was asked as long ago as a quarter of a century—in an article in *Scandinavian Political Studies* written by my former colleague, Danish political science professor Peter Nannestad of the University of Aarhus (Nannestad 1993). Nannestad’s question was not meant as a hostile one. He was—and is—himself a proponent of the use of rational choice theory in political science. He posed the question about the status of the rational choice approach in political science then because he observed two not entirely identical situations in the early 1990s.

But before considering those, we may initially confront a terminological issue: In his article, Nannestad used the terms “rational choice” and “public choice” more or less interchangeably, taking his cue from Dennis Mueller’s well-known formulation, that public choice is “simply the application of economics to political science” (Nannestad 1993, p.

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128; cf. Mueller 2003, p. 1). I will do more or less the same here, i.e., seeing someone as a rational choice theorist, irrespective of his formal field (e.g., economics, political science, sociology, law) and no matter what he may call himself, if he in his approach to questions subscribes to the triple pillars that Buchanan (2003) has described as the “hard core” of public choice: (1) methodological individualism; (2) a rational choice principle; (3) politics as exchange. Those three principles are sufficiently general, broad and unspecific to be compatible with most of what Bernard Grofman in a somewhat different formulation has identified as the credo of a ‘reasonable choice’ modeler” (Wuffle 1999). But this is also a somewhat broader concept than what many associate with public choice—e.g., in the United States or among many economists generally where ‘public choice’ often is linked closely and specifically to the Virginia School of Buchanan and Tullock.<sup>1</sup> For those using the term “public choice” more narrowly, the conclusions made here may not ring true to the same extent.

## 2 North America versus Europe

The difference that Nannestad identified in 1993 was that rational choice in political science was seen very differently in North America and in Europe.

In the former rational choice theory had achieved a very influential, perhaps even dominant position. Nannestad noted how Theodore J. Lowi (1931–2017) shortly before had concluded in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association, that “public choice has become probably the hottest thing going on in political science today” (Lowi 1992, p. 4) and achieved the status of one of three “hegemonic subdisciplines” of political science (Lowi 1992, p. 1).

Not long after Nannestad’s article, Robert Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann conducted a survey of the articles contained in *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Goodin and Klingemann 1996a, p. 20), which confirmed that rational choice analysis in a few years had achieved an extremely prominent position in the discipline:

[Political scientists] *need a theoretical framework which can straddle and integrate all these levels of analysis. Therein arguably lies the great power of rational choice analysis and new institutionalism; and that, in turn, may go some way toward explaining the predominance of those intellectual agendas across contemporary political science as a whole.*

They referred to “the rational choice revolution”, which has “been remarkably successful, not so much in pushing out the old behavioral orthodoxy, as in carving out a predominant role for itself alongside it” (Goodin and Klingemann 1996a, p. 24). Even the strongest critics of the approach in the 1990s, such as Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, who lambasted the approach’s theoretical and empirical applications, acknowledged its great influence on the discipline.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Against such a narrow use of the term ‘public choice’, see e.g., Mitchell (1988, 1999), Riker (1988) and Ordeshook (1990).

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Green and Shapiro (1994, p. ix), who spoke of “an explosion of rational choice scholarship” with “great strides” having “been made in the theoretical elaboration of rational actor models. Formidable analytical challenges have attracted a number of first-class minds; rational choice theories have grown in complexity and sophistication as a result. Moreover, “[r]ational choice] is well represented in the principal journals and conferences of the discipline, and its proponents are highly sought by all major American

The other observation by Nannestad was that this prominence of rational choice analysis in US political science did not seem to hold for its European counterpart, and to be even less true in Scandinavian political science, where it was very far from central or even prominent. In his 1993 article Nannestad quoted British political scientist Patrick Dunleavy:

*[It] is still very common outside the United States for political scientists who do not themselves use public choice methodology to dismiss it as of marginal interest for the discipline as a whole.... Public choice theory is widely seen by political scientists, as simply another obtuse specialism produced by overdeveloping particular techniques without putting equal effort into showing how they can add to our substantive knowledge about central topics in political life. Public choice may be a legitimate field to work in 'if you like that kind of thing', but it is still not regarded as a basic intellectual position which has to be regularly or seriously considered in describing the behavior of political systems and structures. (Dunleavy 1991, p. 3)*

Nannestad himself observed when looking at political science in Scandinavian countries:

*At first sight we find very little, almost nothing ... [R]ational choice appears to be close to non-existing in these [Scandinavian] countries.... As in most of the rest of Europe, rational choice theory is far from being as well-established an approach in Scandinavian political science as it appears to be in the United States. (Nannestad 1993, p. 133)*

But digging somewhat deeper and surveying the work actually being done by Scandinavian political scientists, Nannestad concluded with a bit more nuance: That while the numbers of political scientists applying rational choice insights were quite small, the mentality was not that of a sect:

*[C]ontrary to first impressions, rational choice theory is actually used, by some Scandinavian scholars, at least, as their theoretical point of departure for attacking a wide range of empirical and theoretical problems in political science. But it is also obvious that, taken by sheer numbers, this group is a relatively insignificant one.... Unsurprisingly, then, rational choice theory cannot claim status as a paradigm in Scandinavian political science. It is not even a serious contender for that position. Rather, it seems to linger at the borderline between a school and a sect. The size of the group applying rational choice theory in its work could easily make one think of a sect, but in general the group's attitude seems not sectarian: most scholars using rational choice theory appear to have a pragmatic, instrumental attitude towards it and show little of missionary zeal. Rational choice theory is used because (and when) it is deemed useful. There are few, if any, 'true believers', do dogmas are universally adhered to, etc. And, most importantly, the bulk of problems analyzed by Scandinavian political scientists within the rational choice framework are mainstream political science problems rather than the obscure (to all others) specialism of interest to just this one small group. (Nannestad 1993, p. 136f; emphasis added)*

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Footnote 2 (continued)

political science departments.... The advent of rational choice theory has recast much of the intellectual landscape in the discipline of political science" (Green and Shapiro 1994, p. 2f).

These observations by Nannestad dealt specifically with Scandinavian political science, but my impression is that they probably were characteristic of much of European political science in general, as it looked in the early 1990s.

So, what is the situation today? My contention is that the picture of rational choice theory in contemporary European political science, compared with about three decades ago, is unchanged on some points, but also significantly different on others. On the one hand, I think that we can say with certainty that rational choice theory still is not ‘the’ paradigm of European political science. Not even in those subfields where it could be most obvious: Comparative politics and the study of national politics, including parties, voter behavior, public administration and public policy. Political science in Europe is and continues to be very pluralistic and heterogeneous when it comes to approaches, theories and methods, and rational choice theory is only one out of many methodologies.

But, on the other hand, it is at the same time the case that the numbers of European political scientists working wholly or partly within a rational choice framework has increased most dramatically in recent decades. While the numbers may once have been what Nannestad called “relatively insignificant”, the number of scholars conducting research in the rational choice tradition today is far from insignificant, and the influence is not waning.

In the following, I shall attempt to add observations in support of that contention, including examples that I think will illustrate differences between the situation at the time of Nannestad’s article and today.

### 3 From the 1980s to the 2010s

Let me begin by giving you some almost entirely anecdotal and navel-gazing evidence from my own backyard and personal experience: Danish political science.

When I entered university as a first-year undergraduate political science student in 1985–1986, the number of political scientists in Denmark teaching and actively and explicitly using rational choice theory could no doubt be counted on one hand. At the University of Aarhus a couple of fingers or at most three might be enough—at the University of Copenhagen even on one finger might be sufficient.<sup>3</sup> In addition to those professors, a few other Danish political scientists, who certainly were influenced by rational choice analyses, but who probably never would have seen themselves as explicit parts of such a tradition, could have been included.<sup>4</sup> Today, I would say that the comparable number of Danish political science faculty members doing work that wholly or partly takes its departure in concepts and theories of rational choice surely is well into the double digits—possibly more than a score, depending on exactly whom you count. And not only at the two old, large universities (Copenhagen, Aarhus), but also including smaller clusters of academics at, e.g., the University of Southern Denmark and the Copenhagen Business School.

That growth is visible in various ways. Since 1999, an annual Danish Public Choice Workshop has convened, usually attracting somewhere between 15 and 25 participants, drawn from economics and political science.<sup>5</sup> If you disregard the economists and count

<sup>3</sup> Cf. those identified by Nannestad (1993, pp. 34f): himself, Ole P. Kristensen and Gunnar Sjöblom.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nannestad’s characterization (1993, pp. 135, 144, note 27) of the works of Mogens N. Pedersen and Erik Damgaard.

<sup>5</sup> In this and other connections an influential source, including for political scientists, has been Martin Paldam, professor of economics at the University of Aarhus and long-time collaborator with several political

only the Danish political scientists who have presented papers at these workshops over the last two decades you would probably get at least 25 individuals or so.

We can also consider Danish connections with our flagship journal, *Public Choice*—which officially is indexed by Thomson’s Web of Science as both an economics journal and a political science journal. In 1985, no Danish political scientist had ever published in *Public Choice*. That is radically different now. In my own department nowadays no less than seven faculty members or younger associates have done so—and none of them were around in 1985. In Aarhus, the comparable number is probably about the same. All in all, at least eight “full” professors of political science in Denmark have published in the journal over the last decade and a half.

The trend likewise is visible when it comes to reviewers used by *Public Choice*. We do not have numbers for the 1980s and 1990s with which to compare, but it is probable that only one or two Danish political scientists had ever been used as reviewers by the mid-1980s. Today, there are 87 academics with addresses in Denmark who are registered as authors, reviewers, or both in *Public Choice*’s Editorial Manager system. Of these 87 individuals, at least 42 are political scientists. Of course, not all of them are rational choice theorists; many surely are not, but rather field experts working in different traditions. But the numbers certainly suggest a strong integration of *Public Choice* into the mainstream of Danish political science.

Those anecdotal observations can, of course, not automatically be generalized to Europe as a whole, but there are reasons to believe that the trend has been the same elsewhere. It is, for example, clear that there today are several important clusters of rational choice scholars that were not around in, say, 1985. Institutions such as Trinity College (Dublin), the London School of Economics, Nuffield College at Oxford University, King’s College in London, the universities of Mannheim, Konstanz, Essex and Aarhus today all have either significant groups of scholars applying rational choice analysis or perhaps even programs where the approach plays an integrated part.

But while the number of European political scientists with an interest in rational choice has increased, that is not necessarily reflected in an equally expanding involvement in ‘capital letter’ Public Choice circles. The younger cousin of this organization (the Public Choice Society), the European Public Choice Society, has existed since 1972, and is still going very strong. However, it tends—much more so than the (US) Public Choice Society—to be dominated almost completely by economists,<sup>6</sup> and this is probably self-reinforcing. Accordingly, and for most of the time, European political scientists seem to prefer to attend their own field conferences, either national ones or those of the European Consortium for Political Research, the European Political Science Association, or even state-side conferences (e.g., those of the American Political Science Association or the Midwest Political Science Association).

The former of those organizations, ECPR, has since its inception in 1970 traditionally been the largest and most important forum for European political science; moreover, the same year that Nannestad’s article was published (1993), a new so-called standing group

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Footnote 5 (continued)

scientists. On Paldam, the Danish Public Choice Workshop, etc., see Aidt et al. (2013) and Kurrild-Klitgaard (2015, p. 417).

<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is clearly reflected in the fact that almost every second president of the Public Choice Society has been a political scientist (12 of 28, from 1964 through 2018), while no such scholar ever has held the same position in the European Public Choice Society (zero of 29, 1972–2018).

of members was formed within ECPR dealing specifically with rational choice theory. The group, originally called the Rational Choice Politics group, is now named the Standing Group for Analytical Politics and Public Choice; as of March 2018, it counts 87 members.<sup>7</sup> The relatively new European Political Science Association (founded in 2010) has from its inception had a very strong presence of rational choice-inclined political scientists in its leadership. Currently, the latter includes two non-European political scientists, James Alt and John Aldrich, whose work in the rational choice tradition is well-known and influential.

#### 4 Rational choice classics in articles of European political scientists

Let me now turn from the anecdotal to the more general. One possible way of studying the actual “use” of rational choice theory by European political scientists could be to see how frequently they cite the great works of the relevant intellectual tradition.

However, it is not an easy thing to do in practice: even though recent decades have witnessed still better, more extensive bibliographic databases, it is not necessarily unproblematic to identify who exactly should be counted as a European political scientist. Europeans publish in American journals and teach at American universities, and vice versa, political scientists publish in economists’ journals, and vice versa—and the numbers of co-authors continue to go up, along with the number of co-authored articles and more and more interbreeding across both frontiers and fields and institutions. If anything, you could say that the rational choice tradition, with its strong interdisciplinary character, has made such analysis more difficult!

For the present purposes I wanted to look at Scopus data with an eye to how often the “great classics” in the public choice tradition are cited by non-economists from Europe. So, which ones should be included? I wanted to choose a set of giants and initially chose Anthony Downs, James Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, Mancur Olson, William Riker, William Niskanen and Elinor Ostrom. Others could have been included, but surely those scholars must count as among the truly great names. With the sole exception of Downs, they all also have been presidents of the Public Choice Society. Such a set is also highly correlated with the rational choice theorists appearing in Goodin and Klingemann’s survey of profiles in *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Goodin and Klingemann 1996b), with a status as either “powerhouses” or “highly visible integrators” in political science.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> From the standing group’s website (<http://standinggroups.ecpr.eu/appc>). The group’s self-description: “Analytical politics combines systematic theoretical thinking and rigorous empirical testing. One major source of inspiration is the literature on collective choice problems, which examines the relationship between individual and collective interests. Another line of interest is generated by studies that link developments in a formal theory with sound empirical research strategy.” The founding chair (1993–1996) was Josep Colomer.

<sup>8</sup> Mancur Olson, Anthony Downs, Elinor Ostrom and William Riker (pp. 40f). Kenneth Shepsle, Barry Weingast and Peter Ordeshook also were included on that list, but have been omitted here owing to belonging to a younger generation; Buchanan, Tullock and Niskanen were not included by Goodin and Klingemann. For another set of public choice names/works and some citation numbers, see Congleton (2018).

Rather than looking at all of their works, I wanted to consider only their most cited contributions to the literature.<sup>9</sup> However, that turned out not to be easy given that some books simply are not indexed with citation counts by Scopus—among them, rather remarkably, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs 1957) and *Bureaucracy and Representative Government* (Niskanen 1971).

On the other hand, in a few cases I also admitted some additional texts into the list. In the case of Riker, I included his most cited book, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (Riker 1962), but also his most cited article, with another strong profile, Peter Ordeshook, who has defined almost an entirely different subfield of political science (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). The same goes for Tullock, who appears both with *The Calculus of Consent*, co-authored with Buchanan, and with his own extremely influential article on rent-seeking (Tullock 1967).

Finally, I thought it would make sense, for purposes of comparison and perspective, to include a well-known and much used work in the public choice tradition, which is cited a lot (in various incarnations), even though it is not in itself a genuine “classic”, namely Dennis Mueller’s literature survey and textbook *Public Choice*, of which three ever more voluminous editions have appeared. I included the last (Mueller 2003).

What I did next was to see how often the works were cited by authors originating in Europe,<sup>10</sup> who are not economists.<sup>11</sup> In order to see if there have been any changes in how much the works are cited, I looked at the last 15 years, split into three 5-year periods (2003–2007; 2008–2012; 2013–2017). What we then get is the “picture” seen in Table 1. It is clear that the classics indeed are quite widely cited in general, and some of them continue to be very strongly cited by European academics, first and foremost Olson’s *Logic*, but with Ostrom also establishing herself as an important modern classic.

Overall, there seems to be a trend for the classics to hold their ground, even 50–60 years after the initial publication of some of them: They are more cited in the last 5-year period than in the first. The only work that does not seem to have at least doubled from the first to the third period is Mueller’s *Public Choice III*—a book that is different from the others in terms of specifically not being a stand-alone classic, but rather a more automatically ‘ageing’ work owing to its literature-survey character.

I should add that a small problem exists that we might be cautious of, when making such comparisons over time, namely, that Scopus, like other bibliographic databases, tends to accumulate more publications over time—and, therefore, that when considering time series, one should be conscious of the fact that rising numbers of citations for any work may in reality be explained better by more sources entering databases over time rather than by increases in the work’s popularity as a scholarly reference. However, when taking this time-series property into account we probably are safe to say that nothing in the data suggests a decline in interest in rational choice classics among European non-economists.

<sup>9</sup> For a list of “founding books of the public choice movement”, see Grofman’s (1993) suggestions, which similarly includes Downs (1957), Buchanan and Tullock ([1962] 2004), and Olson ([1965] 1971), but in addition to these also Arrow ([1951] 1963) and Black ([1958] 1998). An expanded “canon” by Grofman also includes, inter alia, Riker (1962) and Niskanen (1971) (Grofman 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Europe is defined as west of the Ural Mountains and excluding the Middle East, with the exception of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to identify political scientists specifically, so the group includes all scholars excluding those from “Economics, Econometrics and Finance” and “Business, Management and Accounting”. In reality, that classification makes the group somewhat larger than merely political scientists.

**Table 1** Scopus citations, rational choice classics, European non-economists

“Classics” and a few others	Total number of Scopus citations (global, all fields, etc.)	“Trend” in number of citations in works of European non-economists, 5-year periods
Downs: <i>An Economic Theory of Democracy</i> (1957)	N/A	N/A
Buchanan and Tullock: <i>The Calculus of Consent</i> (1962)	2231	2013–2017: 80 2008–2012: 93 2003–2007: 44
Riker: <i>The Theory of Political Coalitions</i> (1962)	1360	2013–2017: 94 2008–2012: 99 2003–2007: 52
Olson: <i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> (1965)	10,708	2013–2017: 833 2008–2012: 658 2003–2007: 374
Tullock: “The welfare costs of tariffs, monopolies and theft” (1967)	1227	2013–2017: 37 2008–2012: 25 2003–2007: 18
Riker and Ordeshook: “A theory of the calculus of voting” (1968)	1022	2013–2017: 118 2008–2012: 77 2003–2007: 55
Niskanen: <i>Bureaucracy and Representative Government</i> (1971)	N/A	N/A
Ostrom: <i>Governing the Commons</i> (1990)	1979	2013–2017: 345 2008–2012: 121 2003–2007: 58
Mueller: <i>Public Choice III</i> (2003)	955	2013–2017: 60 2008–2012: 95 2003–2007: 43



## 5 Rational choice in contemporary textbooks

Another way of considering the topic at hand could be to look at political science textbooks and see how well rational choice theory is represented in them. For that purpose, I have surveyed a set of popular textbooks from the field of comparative politics, all published within the last decade:

- Bara and Pennington (Eds.) (2009). *Comparative politics: Explaining democratic systems*.
- Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009). *Theories of the democratic state*.
- Gallagher et al. (2011). *Representative government in modern Europe* (5th ed.).
- Caramani (Ed.) (2014). *Comparative politics* (3rd ed.).

What unites the textbooks is that they all originate wholly or predominantly in Europe, all are from the last decade, all are from respectable publishers, and all are used widely. Beyond that, significant differences emerge. Some are written as monographs (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009; Gallagher et al. 2011), while others are multi-author anthologies (Bara and Pennington; Caramani). Some are heavy on empirics and descriptions, while relatively light on theory (e.g., Caramani; Gallagher, Laver & Mair); others are more or less exactly the opposite (Bara and Pennington 2009; Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009).

What is more important for the present purposes, while they all have at least one co-author who is friendly disposed towards rational choice theory, they also have one or more others who are not necessarily so. In other words, they are not as such treatises of rational choice theory or systematic applications of it to comparative politics (as opposed to, e.g., McLean 1987; Dunleavy 1991; Mueller 1997, 2003; Shepsle and Bonchek 1997; Shugart and Razzolini 2001; Colomer 2011; Munger and Munger 2015; Holcombe 2016; Congleton et al. 2018).

The overall picture that emerges from an inspection of the textbooks with regard to rational choice content is relatively clear. If the books have theory sections, they always include considerable treatments of rational choice theory. Only as one of several, but not simply as *en passant* treatments.

Furthermore, if the books contain treatments of the great works of modern politics, they include references to virtually all the “classics” identified here or their authors more generally.

All four textbooks also include wide-ranging coverage of the contributions to the field of comparative politics by rational choice theorists. There is, however, considerable variation in the relative weight given to the “great names” and to later and recent contributions. Finally, three of the four textbooks have extensive treatments of core concepts developed in rational choice theory. The fourth (Gallagher et al. 2011) does not; however, that omission is not because of a lack of attention, but because its focus is heavily on empirical studies rather than theory as such.

Many textbooks in political science and many with a European point of departure, geographically or analytically, have been published. A different selection method might have produced more or less different pictures. But it does seem clear that rational choice analysis is a very visible force in European political science as it is being taught and has gained considerable strength over recent decades. Compare, for example, the four textbooks with, e.g., the book *Comparative European Politics: The Story of A Profession* (Daalder 1997), which is an anthology with semi-biographical, semi-history-of-thought essays by the major

**Table 2** Rational choice in European textbooks in comparative politics

RC-concepts in index, etc.	RC-authors
<i>Comparative politics: explaining democratic systems</i> (Bara and Pennington 2009)	
Chicago School of political economy; collective goods and collective action; methodological individualism; paradox of voting; Public choice theory; rational choice theories; self-interest; veto-players; Virginia school	<p>“Classics”: James Buchanan; Anthony Downs; William Niskanen; Mancur Olson; William Riker; Gordon Tullock</p> <p><i>Others</i>: E.g., Gary Becker; Andre Blais; Geoffrey Brennan; James Coleman; Patrick Dunleavy; Thrainn Eggertsson; Jon Elster; Russell Hardin; Iain McLean; David Mayhew; Mark Lichbach; Douglass North; Todd Sandler; Kenneth Shepsle; Matthew Shugart; Ludger Schuknecht; Vito Tanzi; George Tsebelis; Arthur Seldon; Barry Weingast; Donald Wittman</p>
<i>Theories of the Democratic State</i> (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009)	
Collective action problems; individualism; median voter; public choice theory; rational choice; social choice theory; voting cycles	<p>“Classics”: James Buchanan; Anthony Downs; William Niskanen; Mancur Olson; Elinor Ostrom; William Riker; Gordon Tullock</p> <p><i>Others</i>: E.g., Robert Axelrod; Steven Brams; Geoffrey Brennan; Josep Colomer; Patrick Dunleavy; Morris Fiorina; Peter Fishburn; Bernard Grofman; Simon Hix; Norman Schofield; Kenneth Shepsle; Michael Taylor; Viktor Vanberg</p>
<i>Representative Government in Modern Europe</i> , 5th ed. (Gallagher et al. 2011)	
–	<p>“Classics”: William Niskanen</p> <p><i>Others</i>: E.g., André Blais; Thomas Bräuninger; Josep Colomer; Roger Congleton; Gary W. Cox; Christophe Crombez; Marc Debus; Keith Dowding; Patrick Dunleavy; Herbert Döring; Jon Elster; Lars Feld; Mark Hallerberg; Simon Hix; John Huber; Thomas König; Michael Laver; Arthur Lupia; Iain McLean; David Mayhew; Edward N. Muller; Bjørn Erik Rasch; Thomas Saalfeld; Kenneth Shepsle; Matthew Shugart; Gunnar Sjöblom; Kaare Strøm; George Tsebelis; Georg Vanberg; Stefan Voigt</p>
<i>Comparative Politics</i> (3rd ed.) (Caramani 2014)	
Collective action; collective action paradox; median voter; principal-agent relationship; rational choice; rational choice models; vote maximization	<p>“Classics”: James M. Buchanan; Anthony Downs; William Niskanen; Mancur Olson; Elinor Ostrom; William Riker</p> <p><i>Others</i>: E.g., John Aldrich; Robert Bates; André Blais; Thomas Bräuninger; Josep Colomer; Gary W. Cox; Christophe Crombez; Marc Debus; Patrick Dunleavy; Herbert Döring; James D. Fearon; Benny Geys; Russell Hardin; Simon Hix; Thomas König; Michael Laver; Mark Lichbach; Arthur Lupia; Iain McLean; Lanny Martin; Dennis Mueller; Edward Muller; Michael Munger; Samuel Popkin; Thomas Saalfeld; Norman Schofield; Kenneth Shepsle; Matthew Shugart; Kaare Strøm; George Tsebelis; Georg Vanberg</p>

political scientists at the time, with a few prominent US names (Robert Dahl, Sidney Verba and Ted Gurr), with the vast majority—quite naturally, given the title—being European. The index lists approximately 700–750 names, many with numerous references. Among them are three references to Olson, one to Downs, plus solitary mentions of a few others (e.g., Patrick Dunleavy, John Ferejohn, Bernard Grofman, Douglas Hibbs)—and none (zero) for Buchanan, Tullock, Riker, Niskanen and Ostrom. Arguably, the textbook picture looks remarkably different only 20 years later (see Table 2).

## 6 Conclusion

So, what is the takeaway message here? What *is* the current status of rational choice theory in European political science? What we have considered briefly here is mostly anecdotal or fragmented evidence, but let me nonetheless suggest this:

First of all, rational choice theory is certainly still not “the” paradigm of European political science. It continues to be only one out of many competing approaches. Nannestad’s conclusion on this point stands.

However, Nannestad’s characterization from 1993, at least for Scandinavia—that rational choice theorists’ numbers are so “relatively insignificant” that they are bordering on a sect—does not seem to hold up. There are grounds for believing that rational choice theory never has been more widely accepted in European political science than it is now, and that there never have been more political scientists working wholly or partly within the tradition. But not only relatively speaking: Rational choice insights also permeate the mainstream of European political science, both in terms of the influence from “the classics” and in the form of new work being done.

However, the influence of rational choice has not least been in the form of being coopted and integrated in bits and pieces into mainstream European political science analysis. As such it more often than not is without an explicit, capital letter “Public Choice” or “Rational Choice” to it. There is also very little explicit Virginia, Chicago, Bloomington or Rochester heritage to it (cf. Mitchell 1988), and even less of an ambition to make public choice identical to the field as such. Many of the European political scientists doing rational choice-type analyses will as happily cite, say, the “political economists” (e.g., Persson and Tabellini 2000, 2003) or may also draw upon, say, behavioral analyses, historical institutionalism, or some mix thereof. Most would probably call themselves “rational choicers” or “public choicers” only rarely, but rather seem happy to simply call themselves “political scientists”. In that respect Nannestad’s diagnosis from 1993 seems to hold, too.

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