UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO

Reading Political Institutions as a Game.

The Intellectual Legacy of George Tsebelis

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It is with great pleasure, and also with a bit of apprehension, that I am going to illustrate the contribution of Professor George Tsebelis to Political Science, and to the social sciences more broadly. The pleasure and the apprehension do not come only from his extraordinary scientific standing, which today the University of Milan celebrates with the Honoray Degree in Economics and Political Science. They also come from the fact that George is a dear friend of mine. Will I be up to the task ?

George Tsebelis's academic and scientific career is truly remarkable. It grew inside Political Science, but touched also on Economics and Constitutional Law. This career has always been fed by three key elements. First, strong logical and conceptual rigor. Second, the ability to spot the real details that matter when explaining events. Third, great passion and endless curiosity for politics. This passion led a young and brilliant Greek engineer, in the mid-1970s, to earn also a degree in political studies in Paris. At the same time, the need for clarity, simplicity, and even "beauty" (typical of mathematics) pushed later, the same student towards a doctorate in mathematical statistics on Greek electoral geography. At that time in Europe an acceptable compromise between mathematical formalization—towards which Tsebelis would always remain attached—empirical research in the social sciences, and passion for politics t

In Paris, Tsebelis discovered also the great european scholars of comparative politics of the age—Sartori, Duverger, Lijphart—whom he would never stop engaging with critically. He also read the European press every day, especially the Italian press, looking for political dynamics and complex events. Italian politics at the time offered plenty of such material. One can imagine for instance his reaction when, as a engineer passionate about politics, he came across Aldo Moro's famous "parallel convergences."

But Tsebelis's attention to political events was never just descriptive. It always aims to build and maintain a solid and lasting theory. The foundation of that theory, however, would not be laid in France.

Like all giants, Tsebelis too had to climb on the shoulders of other giants. He found those shoulders in the United States. First at Washington University in St. Louis, where he moved in the early 1980s to complete his second PhD, this time in Political Science. Then at Stanford, Duke University, and finally UCLA, where he taught for 20 years until 2007, rapidly ascending the academic ladder.

In the U.S. he entered a very fertile intellectual environment. Washington University in St. Louis had become the home of some of the first students of William Riker, the founder of rational choice in Political Science. There, Tsebelis met colleagues who shared his need for clarity and rigor, and who tried to explain political decisions with the tools of game theory.

But there was an important difference. While colleagues such as Shepsle and Weingast - far from being isolated -applied the approach to the U.S. system, Tsebelis was almost a lone pioneer in applying it to comparative politics—a field that until then had ignored or even rejected rational choice theory.

His efforts produced several articles and then his first major book: *Nested Games. Rational Choice in Comparative Politics* (1990). Before briefly summarizing its content, I want to recall two articles from that period which did not flow into the book but had great impact, even outside Political Science. They are *The Abuse of Probability in Political Analysis: The Robinson Crusoe Fallacy* (1989) and *Penalty Has No Impact on Crime: A Game Theoretic Analysis*. The first one was also my first Tsebelis' reading

In these works, Tsebelis challenged the traditional economic analysis of crime. He introduced a game-theoretic approach that considered not only the pay-offs of criminals, but also the interaction with the police, and the "pay-offs" of the police. In the equilibrium of a simple 2x2 game, what matters is not the severity of the penalty, but the probability that it will be applied by the police.

This claim is still very relevant today, especially in the current Italian legal context. The listeners here will not miss this point.

It is also easy to see how these conclusions could extend to many other areas where "policeman" and "law-breaker" take on different identities but keep the same relationship as for instance international sanctions and industry regulation.

It is no accident that the great multidisciplinary scholar, Anatol Rapoport, was among those who reacted most strongly to this innovative and challenging proposal and maybe it is no accident that since 2007, the chair that Tsebelis holds at the University of Michigan has been named after him.

As I said, *Nested Games* laid the foundations for Tsebelis's later work. The opening chapter contains one of the most convincing, smart, and complete defenses ever written of the rational approach to the study of politics (and not only politics). In the following chapters, Tsebelis clearly defines his object of interest: political institutions, understood as games in extensive form. Political institutions are the rules that govern interaction among political actors. They are "games" chosen to solve cooperation and coordination problems. These games can include, among the moves available to actors, the choice to change the rules themselves. The choice to change the game

With this toolbox, Tsebelis examines some puzzles from European politics at the time. These were surprising cases that seemed to contradict the idea that political actors are rational.

He shows that these political actors are not inconsistent or easy victims of emotions. Instead, they are skilled "players" involved in multiple games at the same time, with different strategies. For example, a political actor can use a cooperative strategy in a legislative game and a tough strategy in an electoral game. The analysis explains when one strategy wins over another. He used this framework to explain why, for instance, in the 1978 French elections, the left lost despite winning the first round; why activists in the British Labour Party replaced moderate representatives with radicals; and why Belgian elites sometimes provoked conflict instead of compromise.

This was a creative use of game theory in comparative politics. But it was not yet true cross-national comparison. Tsebelis looked closely at individual cases, reconstructing the games in which actors were involved. These models could inspire studies in other countries, but they were not yet a general explanation of a phenomenon across countries. Not yet.

Starting from 1992, a long journey of theoretical thinking and research begins. It starts with studying two-chamber systems, goes through studying the European legislative process, and culminates in the general study of policy change in democracies.

Bicameralism (1997), written with Jeannette Money, is a "bridge" book. It analyzes about fifty countries. It shows that bicameralism is not one thing but many. Behind the single word "bicameralism" there are multiple games. No bicameral system is identical to another and the authors report this variety with great accuracy. But one lesson is clear: the interaction between the two chambers is key to understanding what happens inside each of them.

To handle this variety while keeping a unified theoretical framework, Tsebelis and Money use a two-step strategy. First, with cooperative game theory and social choice, he defines the political space where no legislative status quo could be changed with the consent of both chambers. This is the *Core*, the set of possible equilibrium outcomes. Second, with non-cooperative game theory, he showed how institutional details—like the type of procedure used to solve the conflict between the chambers, or the length of their terms—decide which chamber prevails. In other words, where in the political space the final outcome will be located. The models are then tested with statistics and illustrated with detailed examples.

This work, as I mentioned, is a bridge toward Tsebelis's most ambitious research program. The key question of this program is simple: why are some political systems more open to the policy change, while others resist it? This is the research question behind Tsebelis's most cited articles and his masterpiece, most famous book "Veto Players. How Political Institutions Work (2002)."

The first step of the analytical strategy used in Bicameralism is the same as the one employed to address this research question. If one does not claim to know exactly where the new status quo will be located when change occurs, the answer once again lies in the *Core*. What matters is the size of the policy area that cannot be altered due to the opposition of at least one political or institutional actor with veto power. In Bicameralism, the veto players are the two chambers. More generally, however, veto players can be a variety of different actors.

The basic idea, as Tsebelis himself acknowledges, was not entirely new. U.S. scholars (Hammond and Miller) had tried to apply it to the U.S. political-constitutional system. Tsebelis gave it solid theoretical foundations and extended it to all democracies. And by doing it he revolutionizes comparative analysis of political institutions.

In the book "Veto Players" and in the much-cited and award-winning article that comes before it, Tsebelis analyzes different political systems in a new way. He does not base his analysis on the political regime (presidential or parliamentary). He does not look at the party system (two-party or multi-party). He does not consider the strength or internal unity of parties (strong and weak). He does not focus on the number of chambers (one-chamber and two-chamber). Instead, he looks at the actors whose agreement is necessary for changing the status quo (veto players). These actors are, so to speak, created by Constitutions and political dynamics.

What matters is the number of veto players and how far apart they are ideologically.. Many veto players, far apart ideologically, mean little policy change. Legislation in such systems is incremental. Bureaucrats and judges become more powerful because they act without fear of being overridden by new laws. Many veto players, far apart ideologically limit also the importance of agenda setting power. Succeeding in promoting and protecting one's proposals or not succeeding does not significantly differentiate the outcome of the decision-making process. Where agenda setting power given to governments by constitutional rules is weak, governments tend to position themselves at the center of the political space as partial compensation of their institutional weakness. This positioning, however, limits government alternation and in turn increases policy stability.

Tsebelis's analysis, supported by advanced statistical tests, reminds us how important institutional arrangements are. But it also shows the importance of political preferences. Even when institutional arrangements tend to reduce the number of veto players and concentrate agenda setting power, extreme differences in political positions of veto players, the so called polarization, can still lead to deadlock and government instability as we have recently seen in France, personally with some dismay

The importance of Veto Players also goes beyond the disciplinary boundaries, which have always been porous, between Political Science and Economics. Fundamental aspects of economic policy—and perhaps even the balance between fiscal and monetary policy—can be investigated using the same analytical framework. Budget structure and public debt are at least partly a function of decisions made within the political system. Many veto players with large ideological distances among them tend to perpetuate past decisions, to preserve the same level of debt and the same distribution of public spending across budget items. On the other hand, many veto players in disagreement with each other can also make central banks more credible, because their independence is safer from legislative interference.

The veto players framework produced many empirical studies in Political Science and Political Economy. At the same time, Tsebelis himself used it to study the European Union. The EU does not fit easily into traditional classifications, so veto player theory is a natural tool for it.

But remember *Nested Games*: institutions are games where one possible move is to change the game itself. In democracies, the legislative game includes the move of changing the constitution. *Veto Players* explained when important legislative changes are possible. But what about constitutional change itself?

That is the question of Tsebelis's most recent book, *Changing the Rules. Constitutional Amendments in Democracies* (2025) . It was published a few months ago and collects and reworks some articles of the last 10 years.

The research question may seem similar to the previous one. After all, it seems to be a matter of moving to a higher level in the hierarchy of norms, from the laws to the Constitution. However, identifying the constitutional *Core* is difficult. This is the political space within which no constitutional status quo could be changed with the agreement of all constitutional veto players. Constitutional amendment rules are often very complex. They are not only different from country to country. Different procedures can coexist in the same political system. These rules define how rigid constitutions are and the nature of constitutional veto players.

Despite these difficulties, Tsebelis argues through a formal model and proves through a statistical analysis of 104 democracies something important. First, constitutional rigidity, properly defined, once you separate small constitutional amendments from truly relevant ones, is (via heteroscedastic relationships) negatively linked to the number of constitutional amendments approved over time. Second, it is (via heteroscedastic relationships) positively linked to the independence of constitutional courts. Unlike the results of other recent researches, high levels of constitutional rigidity correspond to a smaller number of constituional amendments. Political institutions matter and their effect cannot be obscured by supposed cultural variables. When the frequency of constitutional amendments is higher than what we might expect, based on constitutional rigidity, it is because the Constitution is too long. It deals with too many topics and creates over time a greater demand for change in generations that come after the one during which the constitution itself was written. A case of time-inconsistency of preferences that, as economists remind us, leads to nothing good.

In this account of George Tsebelis's intellectual legacy, much has been left out. This includes the vast list of prizes and recognitions obtained during his professional life by our "graduating student." Nevertheless the works we have recalled already show why his contribution can be considered a classic of Political Science, and of the Social Sciences more broadly.

A classic, as Italo Calvino suggested in a memorable essay on "literary classics," you recognize immediately because it has always existed. The idea that is at the basis, for example, of Veto Players, as Tsebelis himself very clearly admits, has always existed. But, still following Calvino's lesson, a classic although part of a family tree is never a simple repetition or just a deeper study. A classic never completely finishes saying what it has to say. When you read and reread it, it shows itself to be new, unexpected, and original.

While rereading pieces of George's work to prepare this report of mine, this was exactly what I was experiencing.

A "scientific" classic, I allow myself to add, defines not only the territory of what we have managed to understand and explain. It also defines the vast spaces of what remains still to be known.

Nothing influences more the research agenda of new generations of scholars than new unanswered questions. These are the puzzles left as inheritance by "classics." Tsebelis's work does not escape this rule. But we are also certain that George will accompany us for a long time yet with his rigor, his insight, and his passion. He will help us to rescue from the darkness of ignorance still unexplored territories of political and social action.