



Robert A. Dahl

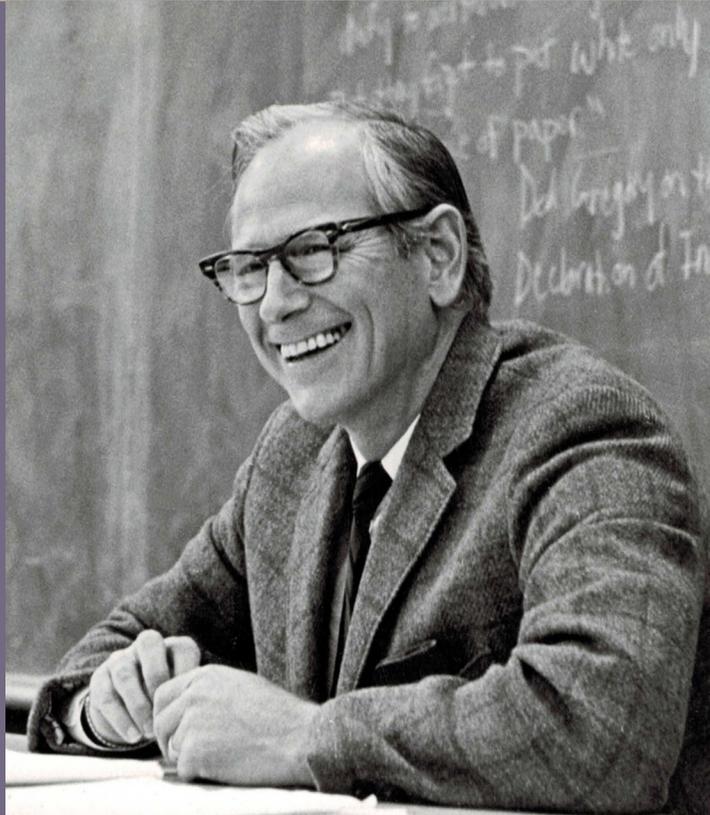
1915–2014

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
David Mayhew*

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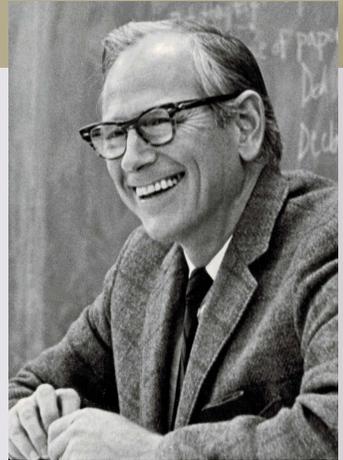
ROBERT ALAN DAHL

December 17, 1915 –February 5, 2014

Elected to the NAS, 1972

Robert A. Dahl was widely appreciated as the world's leading student of the theory and practice of democracy. With others, he ushered Yale University's Political Science Department into intellectual leadership of the discipline in the post-World War II period. The "behavioral revolution" of the 1950s and '60s carried his stamp. Comparative politics as well as American politics also bore his imprint. He was a longtime member of the NAS.

Dahl earned a B.A. from the University of Washington in 1936 and a Ph.D. from Yale in 1940. He then took a position with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, followed by work in two agencies dealing with wartime industrial output. After serving in active combat in World War II, he returned to Yale and remained there for the rest of his career, rising through the ranks to professor and then Sterling Professor of political science.



Robert A. Dahl

By David Mayhew

Robert Alan Dahl was born in Inwood, Iowa, on December 17, 1915, the son of a physician. When too many patients couldn't pay their medical bills during the Depression, Dahl's father took a position as doctor for a railroad in Skagway, Alaska Territory, and moved the family there. During summers young Dahl worked on the railroad and as a longshoreman. For a sense of what made Dahl tick, not to be missed is his memoir of early days spent in the Alaska panhandle, *After the Gold Rush: Growing Up in Skagway* (2005).

Dahl earned a B.A. from the University of Washington and a Ph.D. from Yale, during which time he also established a remarkable record of participation in U.S. government agencies in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He worked at various times in 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 for him.

As the war raged on, however, he gave up his draft deferment and enlisted in the army infantry. Lieutenant Robert Dahl led a platoon of the 71st Regiment of the 44th Division. His platoon took part in a major offensive beginning in November 1944. They shot and were shot at and they took casualties and prisoners. They fought at the Maginot Line. They crossed the Rhine on March 27, 1945, then sped southeast in ragtag fashion through many dicey settings and crossed the Danube on April 28, ending up in the Austrian Tyrol. Then it was over. Dahl earned a Bronze Star with oak cluster. After the war he was assigned to an Army unit charged with de-Nazifying the German banking system. Then, back to New Haven.

Thinking about Democracy

Both philosophy and science stand out in Dahl's genius as a scholar of politics. Writing as his colleague in the Yale Political Science Department and a long-time friend, 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 method or 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 the rest. 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*, coauthored with Charles E. Lindblom (1953)
- 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)

- Is “democracy” related in any way to “size”? How large should a political system be in order to facilitate rational control by its citizens?—*Size and Democracy*, coauthored with Edward R. Tufte (1973)

Second, once past the questions we quickly run into the 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 existing 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 such others as 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? On another conceptual front, Dahl bore into the terms “power” and “influence.” Is there a payoff in giving those well-worn ideas strict definitions and exposing them to serious empirical grounding?

Besides pluralism and power, Dahl picked up and ran with the basic term “democracy.” In practice, what would be the optimal meaning of “democracy”? 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, he

strongly felt, was the sort of thing political scientists should be doing. A commonplace idea now, it was not so going into 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, made an appearance. It was a style of argument.

Emphasizing research

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 that 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 materials 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-methods 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, ten had got that way before national independence, four after independence but under foreign occupation, twelve 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. That was a count of zero. As of 1956, of the 77 instances in which the U.S. Supreme Court had ever held a congressional statute unconstitutional, there wasn't any case in which a persistent law-making majority hadn't achieved its purposes anyway, eventually. As of 1973, across the world's 33 representative democracies there wasn't any significant relationship between election turnout and geographic size, population size, or population density.

In a career nutshell, Dahl dwelt in his earlier years on the American political system. Those years brought his *Preface to Democratic Theory* and his *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 coauthored *Size and Democracy* (1973). He summed up his work in *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989), which won the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Book Award in 1990. In 2002, he wrote *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* His answer to this question was: not very. Dahl never did like the Constitution. For him it had too many undemocratic intricacies such as the Electoral College and the Wyoming-equals-California aspect of the Senate.

Graduate students came from around the world to study with Dahl. You couldn't walk through the corridors without meeting somebody from Denmark or Italy. He was also a shaper of Yale more generally. In 1975 he joined with the historian C. Vann Woodward and others in issuing the Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, commonly known as the "Woodward Report," a resounding statement that freedom of expression, whatever else goes on in a university, should rank first.

The honors heaped on Dahl were boundless. He served as president of the American Political Science Association. 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, as he was both a philosopher and a scientist, both the American Philosophical Society and the National Academy of Sciences made him a member. 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.

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