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The calculus of consent: some Swedish connections

Niclas Berggren

Abstract Inspiration for *The Calculus of Consent* came from Knut Wicksell, whose basic normative premise for fiscal politics, consent, is central to the book. More recently, Swedish scholars have been inspired by the book, not only for research, but also for advocacy of institutional reforms in Sweden (and with some success). Some personal recollections and predictions about the book's future importance close the paper.

Keywords Wicksell, constitutions, institutional change, reforms

JEL Classification A11, B31, D72

1 Introduction

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Calculus of Consent* (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; henceforth denoted *CofC*), I will dwell on some ways in which it relates to Sweden. At first, it may seem strange to connect a monumental work by two American scholars to a small country in northern Europe, but there are several noteworthy connections. Some date back to the 19th century, and constitute inspiration for *CofC*; some are of more recent origin, and are instances of research and reform advice having been inspired by *CofC*.

2 Inspiration from Sweden: The Wicksell connection

Knut Wicksell was a Professor of Economics at Lund University, with a reputation for being a contrarian.¹ In this, I would argue that he has a lot in common with the two authors of *CofC*.

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¹ For more on Wicksell's life, not least his rebellious side, see Gårdlund (1996) and Swedberg (1999).

Among other things, he challenged the Swedish monarchy and the Lutheran state church. Buchanan also has an anti-establishment streak, notable in his dislike of authoritarianism, privileges, and the arrogance of certain elites on the American east coast.² Likewise, Tullock has always questioned established truths, both in the academic world and in the realm of social conventions. Their inspiration from Wicksell was not, however, primarily personal but intellectual. The name “Wicksell” occurs 13 times in *CofC* and 41 times in Buchanan’s Nobel lecture (Buchanan 1987). Why did they cite him so frequently? I would say that this statement, written by Wicksell around 1920 and not published until much later (Wicksell 1987: 39), explains it:

My claim is only that at least the degree of justice that characterizes free exchange, namely, that no one has to pay more for a thing than he thinks it is worth, also be applied in the fiscal realm, and I have tried to show that this is really doable. (Own translation.)

Inspired by an old Swedish tradition not to tax farmers against their will, Wicksell started with the premise that collective decision-making needs to be based on consent, and then proceeded to suggest practical ways to implement such consent institutionally. He realized the practical difficulties involved and advocated a qualified-majority rule, which finds its correspondence in the derivation of the optimal rule for collective decision-making in chapter 6 of *CofC*. Buchanan, more than Tullock, has continued throughout his career to stress the contractarian-constitutional perspective that especially Wicksell inspired him to take.³

3 Inspiration for Sweden: The academic connections

It is not only the case that Swedish thought inspired Buchanan and Tullock: *CofC* has inspired Swedes. Most notably, this was made clear in 1986, when Buchanan was awarded The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. As the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (1986) put it:

² This comes through in his autobiography (Buchanan 1992) and in a recent interview (Horn 2009).

³ For more on the Buchanan–Wicksell connection, see Sandelin (1988) and Wagner (1988).

Buchanan's foremost achievement is that he has consistently and tenaciously emphasized the significance of fundamental rules and applied the concept of the political system as an exchange process for the achievement of mutual advantages.

The importance of *CofC* for the prize (and the connection to Wicksell) is obvious.

More Swedish scholars than those on the Economic Sciences Prize Committee in the mid-1980s have found *CofC* valuable. At least 50 Swedish academics have cited this book in their published research. Table A1 in the Appendix provides a list of their 62 works, along with brief descriptions of how each refers to *CofC*.

The influence has not been purely academic. Some scholars have used *CofC*-related insights to argue for institutional reforms in connection with the Economic Commission (Lindbeck et al. 1994) and the Working Committee on Constitutional Reform (Grundlagsutredningen 2008). The former was a commission of leading scholars whom the government asked to evaluate the Swedish economic and political system; the latter was a parliamentary committee, which was advised by scholars.

Swedenborg (1999), one of the members of the Economic Commission, relates how the perspective of *CofC* was deemed highly relevant for explaining the severe economic crisis of the early 1990s:

[O]ne of the Commission's main conclusions, which I strongly supported, was that Sweden's economic problems in an important way were the result of failings in Sweden's political institutions. These failings had caused policy decisions to be overly driven by short-run and special interest considerations at the expense of the long-run general interest.

The implication of this conclusion was that in order to generate superior economic outcomes in the future, constitutional reform was needed. The commission proposed 113 reforms, and some of these, including the term length for MPs, the fiscal institutions of Parliament, and the rules for the central bank, were subsequently changed.

More recently, the *CofC* approach was presented to the Working Committee on Constitutional Reform (Berggren and Karlson 2005). Some of the proposals of the Committee resulted in a 2010 constitutional reform that implemented several changes consonant with *CofC*. It strengthened division of power through a constitutional protection of the independence of courts and easier-to-use judicial review; it improved access to documents for

the Parliamentary Committee on the Constitution, which scrutinizes the government; it clarified protection of citizens' right to compensation in cases of eminent domain; it strengthened the element of personal voting; and it eased recourse to municipal referenda. Whether the *CofC* "caused" these institutional changes is, of course, not easily proven (for theories of institutional change, see Kingston and Caballero 2009). But at the very least, many of the reform proposals, some of them implemented, tended to be in line with the approach of this book.

4 Inspiration for a Swede: A personal statement

On a more personal note, my main professional inspiration has been James Buchanan.⁴ It started in 1990, when I was a student at the Stockholm School of Economics and studied institutional economics with Johan Myhrman. Part of the required reading was *The reason of rules* (Brennan and Buchanan 1985), in which the analysis of *CofC* is developed. It was an eye-opener for me. It made me write my undergraduate thesis on a public-choice related topic: how interest-group influence provided the best explanation for the decreased generality of the Swedish value-added tax, through a reduced rate on food. It made me pursue PhD studies at the same School, one year of which was spent at George Mason University, where I among other things took a course in economic philosophy with James Buchanan and Viktor Vanberg. It was a fantastic experience, and the term paper became my very first publication – in this journal (Berggren 1996). It proposes that there should be a plurality of "sub-constitutions" between which citizens can choose. Instead of having everybody agree to one unified constitution, there is choice between (central elements of) constitutions. This piece was a chapter in my dissertation (Berggren 1997), and the institutional theme has continued to characterize much of my research.

Two topics central to the *CofC* that I have written about are the generality principle and the optimal decision-making rule. In Berggren (1999), I try to show that the generality principle of *CofC* (and Buchanan and Congleton 1998) can be justified on the basis of preference utilitarianism, in addition to contractarianism, thus, I hope, broadening its appeal. In Berggren (2000), I argue that if one wishes to avoid drastically higher public expenditures

⁴ That is why I keep his collected works, published by the Liberty Fund, as the only books in my dining room, to lead dinner conversations on to meaningful themes. *CofC* is, of course, one of the volumes.

when implementing generality, fiscal constraints such as expenditure ceilings are needed. In Berggren and Karlson (2003), we take the *CofC* derivation of the optimal decision-making rule as a starting point, making the case for adding, to the external and transaction cost curves, a revenue curve capturing the quality of decisions. This has the effect of making optimal a more stringent qualified-majority rule, or more division of power. In short, *CofC* has been and remains an invaluable source of inspiration for me.

5 Concluding remarks

Will the *CofC* continue to inspire Swedes (and others)? I hope so, but I am not sure how widespread the inspiration will be, for two reasons that are alluded to by Persson and Tabellini (2003: 5). First, economics has developed towards mathematical modeling and advanced empirical testing, neither of which is really present in *CofC*. However, just as economists find Adam Smith stimulating, they should be able to use modern methods with *CofC* as a starting point (see, e.g., Blume et al. 2009). Second, economists nowadays are wary of being (perceived as) normative. Compare this to Buchanan's comment in his Nobel lecture (Buchanan 1987: 243):

Like Wicksell, my purpose was ultimately normative rather than antiseptically scientific. I sought to make economic sense out of the relationship between the individual and the state before proceeding to advance policy nostrums.

However, this kind of normativity is of a special kind that, I suggest, should not be dismissed too readily by modern economists. It does not, as most clearly expressed in Buchanan (1959), give the economist an elitist role of supreme policy advisor: it rather features the economist in a more humble role, as an assessor of the potential for consent. Only if he perceives such consent to be forthcoming – as an indication of the Pareto criterion being met – does he advocate policy reform. Irrespective of whether one agrees with this normative approach or not, one could and should, in my opinion, still find the positive analysis in *CofC* worthy of attention. To me and many other Swedes, it has been very valuable indeed.

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Appendix

Table A1 Publications with at least one Swedish author citing *CofC*

Andersson (1991) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is cited as an example of political economics.
Andersson (1997) ^d	The definition of an externality is taken from <i>CofC</i> .
Andersson et al. (2010) ^b	<i>CofC</i> suggests how externalities can be internalized by unified land ownership, which is related to the MTR in Hong Kong.
Axelsson et al. (1987) ^b	<i>CofC</i> 's arguments for privatization of the public services are mentioned.
Berg and Holler (1986) ^b	Decision costs of different voting rules are related to <i>CofC</i> .

Berggren (1996) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is cited to point out that unanimity as a decision rule is oftentimes not feasible and that more choice options both entail costs and benefits.
Berggren (1999) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is suggested as further reading regarding how constitutions should be designed.
Berggren (2006) ^b	A resemblance between <i>CofC</i> and Hans Kelsen's idea that the legal validity of a norm is ascertained by whether or not it has come into being in accordance with another, higher norm, is described.
Berggren (2012) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is mentioned as pointing out that if voters and politicians behave with bounded rationality, we should expect private decisions to be superior to public ones.
Berggren and Karlson (2003) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is cited with regard to how to arrive at an optimal decision rule and with regard to the effects of a bicameral legislature.
Berggren and Kurrild-Klitgaard (2004) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is used for an argument that a qualified-majority rule could be preferable to a simple-majority rule.
Bergman and Lane (1990) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is used to argue that a unanimity rule does not work in practice.
Blomberg and Petersson (2010) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is mentioned as proffering economic arguments for restricting politicians.
Boréus (1997) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is used to exemplify how neoclassical economics is applied to the politics.
Bornefalk (2000) ^a	<i>CofC</i> is related to constitutional reforms to facilitate redistribution.
Bornefalk (2001) ^b	Similarities and differences with Wicksell's work are discussed.
Bucht (2006) ^a	<i>CofC</i> is suggested reading to learn more about public choice.
Congleton and Swedenborg (2006) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is mentioned as a work which explains why different voting rules are applied.
Ellingsen (1998) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is cited in connection with a suggestion that governments impose costs on some people.

Engelbrekt (2007) ^b	The influence of small interest groups and politicians as economic men are discussed with <i>CofC</i> as one basis.
Eriksson (2011) ^b	As public choice and rational agents are discussed, <i>CofC</i> is mentioned.
Feng et al. (2011) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is said to exemplify constitutional economics.
Gustafsson and Stafford (1994) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is used to highlight that the amount of goods provided by the public sector depends on variation in consumption preferences.
Henrekson (1992) ^a	In a discussion of how small interest groups try to win political favors, <i>CofC</i> is cited.
Henrekson and Lybeck (1988) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is referred to with regard to the influence of small interest groups in politics.
Hermann et al. (2001) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is used as an example of studies on voting rules.
Hägg (1997) ^b	As the tendency of democracies to be weak against special interests is discussed, <i>CofC</i> is mentioned.
Isaksson and Lindskog (2009) ^b	To back up the claim that a poor person may see redistribution as going against her interests and that a rich person may see it as favoring her interests, the authors refer to <i>CofC</i> .
Jakobsson and Dragun (1996) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is used to discuss the tyranny of majoritarian decisions and compensation issues in connection with the Endangered Species Act.
Jordahl and Liang (2010) ^b	The paper deals with the common-pool problem in politics and relates it <i>CofC</i> .
Karlson (1993) ^a	<i>CofC</i> is mentioned as a basis for advocating institutional measures that protect a majority of voters against opportunism.
Karlsson and Andersson (2009) ^b	<i>CofC</i> serves as an example of a pioneering work in public choice.
Lane (1988) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is cited to show that Buchanan is prepared to relax the unanimity rule in favor of the majority vote.
Lane and Maeland (2007) ^b	In a discussion of a group's decision-making capacity, <i>CofC</i> is referred to in order to explain the probability of

	breaking the <i>status quo</i> .
Lebeck (2002) ^e	<i>CofC</i> is used for arguing that cultural, economic and social conditions affect how constitutions work.
Lewin (1991) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is cited as a forerunner in the economic analysis of politics, with special notice of the individualist and exchange perspectives.
Lewin (1998) ^b	Similarities between <i>CofC</i> and Hobbes's work are noted; it is also referred to in order to highlight how modern democracies work.
Lewin (2007) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is used to illustrate how man pursues his self-interest in politics, rather than the public interest.
Lindbeck (1985) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is used to note that competition among small interest groups is an important determinant of the amount of lobbying.
Lindbeck and Niepelt (2006) ^b	In a discussion of different fiscal policy failures and how to correct them, <i>CofC</i> is used as a reference.
Lindberg (2008) ^a	<i>CofC</i> is used to show that politicians can vote against their own policy beliefs in order to gain support.
Lundström (1998) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is compared to a study by Sartori.
Mattson (1995) ^d	In a discussion of how the cost of decision-making is related to the number of people involved, <i>CofC</i> is referred to.
Mattson and Strøm (1995) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is mentioned in a discussion of decision-making costs.
Moberg (1998) ^d	It is remarked that <i>CofC</i> introduced the term transaction cost in constitutional analysis.
Moberg (2002) ^d	An example is taken from <i>CofC</i> in order to illustrate the problems of governing a nation.
Persson (1996) ^c	After an explanation of what public choice theory is, <i>CofC</i> is mentioned as a founding work.
Persson and Tabellini (2000) ^d	Public choice theory is said to originate from <i>CofC</i> .
Persson and Tabellini	<i>CofC</i> is used to highlight the core of the public choice

(2002) ^d	tradition.
Persson and Tabellini (2003) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is mentioned as a part of the traditional literature on public choice and constitutional economics.
Rabinowicz et al. (1986) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is suggested reading for a better understanding of self-interest coalition models.
Springdal (2000) ^a	In a discussion of over-expansion of state budgets, <i>CofC</i> is referred to in order to argue that there will be excessive public employment.
Sterner (2003) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is suggested as further reading on public choice.
Swedberg (1990) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is used as an example of how economics expanded into new research areas in the 1960s and 1970s.
Söderberg (2008) ^b	The conclusion in public choice theory that public actors do not necessarily seek an optimal solution for the society as a whole is backed up by <i>CofC</i> .
Söderberg (2009) ^b	The risk that bureaucrats do not necessarily act in the best interest of the public is argued for with the use of <i>CofC</i> .
Söderholm (2001) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is presented as an example of traditional political theories of democracy.
Udehn (1996) ^d	As the entire book is a critique of public choice theory from a sociological point of view, <i>CofC</i> is mentioned many times, especially in connection to a critique of methodological individualism.
Udehn (2001) ^d	<i>CofC</i> is used to highlight the individualistic approach in Buchanan's work and to argue for a strong correlation between methodological and political individualism.
Wärneryd (1993) ^b	The analysis does not find clear support for the prediction from <i>CofC</i> that a thicker veil of uncertainty entails more cooperation.
Wärneryd (2005) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is said to have pioneered constitutional economics.
Wihlborg (2005) ^b	<i>CofC</i> is described as having paved the way among economists for an analysis of political processes.

Notes: By “publications” is meant journals, PhD dissertations and books and book chapters published by international publishing houses. The list is a result of a Google Scholar search in December, 2011. There is no guarantee that it is complete. ^a PhD dissertation. ^b Publication in

journal with peer review. ^c Publication in journal without peer review. ^d Book/book chapter. ^e
Book review in journal with peer review.