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► **To cite this version:**

Julien Grandjean, Cameron M. Weber. Democratic Uncertainty: From Boulding's Images to Downs's Ideology. 2024. hal-04521326

**HAL Id: hal-04521326**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04521326>**

Preprint submitted on 26 Mar 2024

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## « Democratic Uncertainty: From Boulding's Images to Downs's Ideology »

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Document de Travail n° 2024 – 14

*Mars 2024*

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# Democratic Uncertainty: From Boulding's Images to Downs's Ideology

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**DRAFT:** March 19, 2024

## Abstract

*Reading Boulding's The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society (1956) in light of recent work in public choice homo politicus theory sheds light on today's partisan politics. Complex depersonalized societies and limited time in the democratic process means that voters make non-logical decisions based on expressive images as simple as "good" and "bad" (Brennan 2008). We find that this work by Boulding can be related to Downs (1957). In his well-known An Economic Theory of Democracy, Downs develops the importance of political ideology in electoral processes. But what is ideology if not expressive images? In this paper, we relate these two works, written at the same time, about the same subject but without referencing each other. Both Boulding and Downs build models which place an emphasis on the role of mental ideas to overcome imperfect information in representative democracy. Additionally, both theorists find that this uncertainty is what can make democracy a fragile form of governance.*

Keywords: Anthony Downs, Kenneth Boulding, Political ideology, Images, Democracy

JEL Codes: B2, B31, D72, D81

*Organization is anything that is not chaos, anything, in other words, that is improbable. It consists of structures.*  
– Kenneth Boulding, 1956

*Uncertainty is so basic to human life that it influences the structure of almost every social institution. The government in a democracy is no exception to this rule.*  
– Anthony Downs, 1957

## **1. Introduction**

The present days offer numerous reasons to be concerned about the sustainability of democracy. Many scholars, may they be economists, political scientists, sociologists or even historians keep on producing articles and books about the crisis of the democracy. When it comes to the study of the functioning of modern democracies in order to understand the tendencies towards perceived crisis, some authors are unavoidable. Walter Lippmann is “one of the brightest and most influential of the many intellectuals” (Regalzi, 2012) that tried to diagnose democratic crisis. His works gave birth to a literature in which he remains one of the most cited authors” (Oustinoff, 2019, 48) nearly half a century after his death and a more than a century after the publication of *Public Opinion*, that is still a “citation classic” (Newman, 2009, 7).

The complexity of the world and the need for individuals to rely on such simplifications as images is stressed in Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922). In his essay Lippmann explains that reality in the modern nation-state is too complex for individuals to understand and act thoughtfully since “not only do we have to picture more space than we can see with our eyes, and more time than we can feel, but we have to describe and judge more people, more actions, more things than we can ever count” (Lippmann, [1922] 1965, 95). Hence, for Lippmann, people rely on stereotypes, which are some kind of simplified images of the surrounding world. Indeed, “for the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities, is exhausting, and among busy affairs practically out of the question” (*Ibid.*, 59). Of course, the complexity of the world and the particularity of each individual implies that “there are many variables in each man’s impressions of the invisible world” (*Ibid.*, 125).

Lippmann is the American pendant to the German sociologists that started to study the emerging nation-state hegemonic form of governance. Max Weber, in 1919, gave the canonical definition of the nation-state as a form of monopoly on legitimate legal coercion given geographic boundary at a time when different forms of governance are emerging along the continuum from democracy to authoritarianism (Wagner, 2007) with for example the Bolshevik revolution and war socialism. Weber paved the way for some other scholars to establish a German philosophical and sociological tradition. One of the most cited authors of this tradition is Karl Mannheim (Villas Boâs, cited by Blanco, 2009, 394). Some years after Lippmann's seminal book, Karl Mannheim develops his theory, yet without referring to Lippmann. In *Ideologie und Utopie* (1929) Mannheim explains that reality cannot be fully understood since it is dynamic and that, in a single society and at the same time, the perception of the reality can differ from one individual to another due to the mental structure of each individual (Mannheim, [1929] 1956, 106-107).

These analyses inspired Kenneth Boulding especially in the context of the cold war and the different social systems between the West and the Soviet sphere. After having spent a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, which he describes as a "retreat house for intellect" (Boulding, 1956, preface), Boulding wrote an "uninterrupted composition" (*Ibid.*). Entitled *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, the monograph is described as "an exercise in abstraction" (Larrabee, 1956, 1255), "a general theory of the empirical work" (Boulding, 1956, 163) which takes the form of a new science named *eiconics*, rooted in the sociology of knowledge (*Ibid.*, 150), "in a fashion at once so persuasive and so disarmingly modest and tentative" (Clark, 1957, 263). Boulding is interested in evolutionary management and systems theory, especially in how and why information and knowledge flows between and amongst layers of organization. *Eiconics* is built upon a theory of images as shortcuts which can help explain the development of social institutions in complex societies. The whole essay is built upon the central idea – common to Lippmann and Mannheim<sup>1</sup> – that "the human organization can only bear a certain degree of complexity. When the complexity becomes intolerable, it retreats into symbolic images" (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 111)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Boulding (1956, 150)

<sup>2</sup> Complexity is catalyzed by the division of labor.

One year later, in 1957, both Lippmann and Mannheim are cited in Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy*<sup>3</sup>. If this work is much more known than Boulding's, it can be explained by the fact that Downs's work is considered as "a kind of master theory" (Hacker & Pierson, 2014, 644) for generations of political scientists. Indeed, "Downs provided a basic conceptual approach to American politics that would influence almost half a century of leading political scientists" (*Ibid.*). The influence of Lippmann and Mannheim is visible by the fact that Downs uses political ideology at the center of his theory to explain how democracy works and can stand against autocracy, at a time where "ideology plays no role in neoclassical economic theory" (North, 1992, 485).

Although contemporaneously uncited Boulding (1956) and Downs (1957) propose a reinterpretation of Lippmann and Mannheim to better understand the functioning of democratic societies<sup>4</sup>. They can be found as complementary and when used together can help us to further understand modern democracy. Because both authors use different methods and assumptions, their differing treatments provide compelling theories that supply convergent and complementary explanations of the way democracy functions and holds wrapped with uncertainty by appealing to people's feelings or reason.

## 2. Connections and different assumptions

If Boulding is idiosyncratic in the economics literature of the time as he does not use the language of welfare economics and is rarely cited, and if Downs is idiomatic of the language of welfare economics and is cited through today, the two authors start from the common assumption of the division of labor in modern economies<sup>5</sup>. This division creates depersonalized relationships since everyone in modern complex societies specialize and cannot know everything or be a stakeholder in every issue. In this context, representative

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<sup>3</sup> Mannheim is notably cited in a footnote when Downs uses the concept of ideology for the first time in his work (Downs, 1957, 119).

<sup>4</sup> Downs cites Boulding's 1952 "Welfare economics" for the Survey of Contemporary Economics edited by Bernard F. Haley, but not *The Image*.

<sup>5</sup> Both refer to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* who famously begins his treatise with the division of labor

democracy seems to be necessary for everyone to understand all the issues raised within the democratic process.

Contrary to Boulding, Downs's goal is not to propose a theory of the functioning of the whole society but to understand how democratic processes work in a society. More precisely, Downs notes that if "government has not been successfully integrated with private decision-makers in a general equilibrium theory" (*Ibid.*, 3), his goal is to "provide such a behavior rule for democratic government and to trace its implications" (*Ibid.*).

In this context, for many, Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* holds its importance from the voting paradox or the median voter theorem (e.g. Riker & Ordeshook, 1968; Strom, 1975; Block & Roomkin, 1982; Coughlin, 2004; Dodd, 2015) or from the rationale ignorance of voters (Butler, 2012), while Downs, on his side, believes that "the way information costs are treated in [his] book is perhaps its most important contribution to economic literature" (Downs, 1993, 199). What is interesting is that, in his own book, a year earlier, Boulding thinks that "economists have badly neglected the impact of information [...] on economic behavior and processes", adding that "it is the behavior of commodities not the behavior of men which is the prime focus of interest in economic studies" (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 82)<sup>6</sup>. Downs's study is a perfect contradiction to this statement and comes in the wake of Boulding.

### *On non-logical behaviour in democratic politics*

Another connection lies in the fact that, for Boulding and Downs, human beings act rationally however this rational behavior becomes non-logical in that the results of choice do not necessarily result in observable ends in representative democracy<sup>7</sup>. But this common ground turns out to reveal a first major difference in the methodology and assumptions of the two authors. This difference lies in the definition given to a rational behavior. Indeed, comparing the definitions of rationality between Boulding and Downs

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<sup>6</sup> In his review of *The Image*, G. L. S. Shackle balances Boulding's assertion. He agreed with the fact that economists were not really interested in people's behavior. Indeed, for him, it is "the central economic mechanism, the market, that absolves [economists] from studying it from the psychologist's viewpoint" (1958, 363) since the market in itself "is a communication system". Thus, even if they do not study people's behavior, economists take account of information though indirectly.

<sup>7</sup> Downs has a caveat for rational behavior: there must be enough consensus in democratic aims (Downs 1957, 160-62). See Chirat & Hedoin (2023) for a discussion of "the democratic minimal consensus".

provides insights into their models of democratic action. In Downs we find the well-ordered and unchanging preferences of neo-classical economics. This definition allows Downs to introduce a thesis of political behavior into the accepted models of economic rational choice.<sup>8</sup>

A rational man is one who behaves as follows: (1) he can always make a decision when confronted with a range of alternatives; (2) he ranks all alternatives facing him in order of his preference in such a way that each is either preferred to, indifferent to, or inferior to each other; (3) his preference ranking is transitive; (4) he always chooses from among the possible alternatives that which ranks highest in his preference ordering; and (5) he always makes the same decision each time he is confronted with the same alternatives. All rational decision-makers in our model – including political parties, interest groups, and governments – exhibit the same qualities. (Downs, *op. cit.*, 6).

For Boulding, rationality, and thus action, is in part socially contingent and manifest at the moment of choice and changes over time through discussion since people change their “scales of valuation in response to messages received much as [they] change [their] image of the world” (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 12). This is opposed to Downs’ vision because rational action is not based on well-ordered and unchanging preferences. Introspection helps to form values, and this leads to preference-creation and non-logical action in representative democracy.

Because of the extended time image and the extended relationship images, man is capable of “rational behavior,” that is to say, his response is not to an immediate stimulus but to an image of the future filtered through an elaborate value system [...] In rational behavior man contemplates the world of potentialities, evaluates them according to his value system, and chooses the “best” (Boulding 1956, 25-26).

### *On self-interest*

A second major difference appears when we consider the direction where politicians, voters or political parties guide their rational behavior.

In his study, Downs states that political parties or politicians are interested in winning elections for their own well-being and not with the idea of promoting a better society (Downs, 1957, 96). Thus, they act rationally to maximize their own well-being. This

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<sup>8</sup> “Economists must develop models which unify politics and economics, as we have done in this study” (Downs, 1957, 294).



abandonment of a benevolent social welfare function is a huge difference with his predecessors like Duncan Black or Kenneth Arrow. This also is a major difference with Boulding, for whom voters or politicians are not necessarily selfish and may place the social well-being before their own fate since one “may say A is better than B for [him] but worse for the country, or it is better for the country but worse for the world at large” (Boulding, *op. cit.*,12).

The vision of Downs has a major impact on his analysis since it can conduce a democracy to become an autocracy. In order to explain how democracy works with selfishness of the politicians or political parties, Downs produces a first model in which information is perfect, and people exactly know what they want and then who to vote for. A major problem appears when the leading party knows with certainty that they will not be reelected. In this case there is no mechanism that prevents him from becoming autocratic. In fact, when a politician knows that he will not be rewarded for pleasing the majority, there is no reason for him to do so. Thus, he can decide to promote his own interests or the ones of his followers or closest allies. This first model turns out to explain that democracy is fragile and can easily become an autocracy<sup>9</sup>.

In a second model, Downs shifts from perfect information to uncertainty “in order to prevent [his] thesis from being totally unrealistic” (Downs, 1993, 198)<sup>10</sup>. This uncertainty takes different forms. Voters “may be uncertain about how other citizens plan to vote”, “may be [...] unaware of certain actions being carried out by the government” or “may not know the repercussions upon their own utility incomes of some proposed (or undertaken) government action” (Downs, 1957, 80). In fact, “voters do not know in great detail what the decisions of the government are (*Ibid.*, 98). On the other side, political parties “may not know how much influence any one voter has over other voters”, “may not know what policies opposition parties will adopt on any given issue” or “may not know what objective consequences a given government act will have” (*Ibid.*). Hence, uncertainty is introduced into Downs’s model in part because he believes politicians act selfishly.

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<sup>9</sup> See Grandjean, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Downs’s book is in fact the published version of his PhD dissertation (see, Almond 1990).

## *On majority rule*

A third major difference lies in the view the two authors have of one of the main democratic institutions in the modern nation-state, the majority rule. In *The Image*, Boulding explains that majority rule “does not constitute an essential part of the democratic process” since “there may be different conventions of what constitutes approval” (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 100), majority rule only being “one of these” (*Ibid.*). We do not find a real analysis of voting rules in Downs’s book since he takes these as given<sup>11</sup>. But in a 1961 paper targeting Gordon Tullock’s relaxation of the importance of using majority rule<sup>12</sup>, Downs advocates for the fundamental aspect of (simple) majority voting rule in a democracy. For him, in a democracy, every voter should be equal in front of the ballot and simple majority rule is the only one that can ensure this fact. It is not the case when another rule such as qualified majority is in use<sup>13</sup> and “all rules other than majority rule have the same defect” (Downs, 1961, 192).

Both authors depart in their methodological perspectives but, despite their main differences, Boulding and Downs share a lot of conclusions regarding ideas and fears in their respective analyses of the democratic process and their two analyses can be thought of as complementary.

### **3. Parallel developments**

As we said earlier both theorists are inspired by Lippmann and/or Mannheim and use mental ideas as the bridge between imperfect information and non-logical political behavior since the complexity of representative democracy itself creates imperfect information in the form of simplified shortcuts to reality in the political decision-making process.

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<sup>11</sup> Remember that Downs’s goal is to produce a positive analysis of democracy and takes the rules as granted.

<sup>12</sup> Tullock – like Buchanan, and Wicksell before him – praises for the use of unanimity rule (see Grandjean, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Downs gives an example: “if a majority of two-thirds is required for passage, then opposition by 34 per cent of the voters can prevent the other 66 per cent from carrying out their desires. In effect, the opinion of each member of the 34 per cent minority is weighted the same as the opinion of 1,94 members of the 66 per cent majority” (Downs, 1961, 192).

For Boulding, the lack of adequate information to make means-ends calculus in representative democracy requires a shortcut for information which is necessary to gain the knowledge to act or vote. This shortcut is an image of the future, in fact as we shall see, a system of spontaneously developing images which change individual preferences over time through sensation. For Downs, the mental idea which provides the necessary information for action under uncertainty is that of political ideology as a historically given distribution which is changed exogenously (1957, 115).

### **3.1. From Boulding's system...**

In his essay, Boulding depicts a complex system of images and values that structures societies, may they be a democracy or an autocracy.

Since, as the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker raises in her review of the book, "Boulding regards [values] as the most important element in determining the effect of messages received by the individual" (Powdermaker, 1957, 718), our entry-point for Boulding's system is the value structure. It is based on precognitive subconscious images<sup>14</sup>, by nature subjective to the individual, and through which external stimuli, in the form of "symbolic messages" (Boulding, *op. cit.*, *passim*), are filtered into "relational images". Relational images allow rational people to understand and navigate an increasingly complex and depersonalized world, a world of imperfect information caused by, as we said earlier, the specialization of every person in modern societies which prevent them from being well informed on everything.

In this context, images are simplified shortcuts to reality and knowledge that lead people to think that they might be able to have a widest knowing of all the issues even if they are being given simple soundbites. In addition to relational images, people also develop what Boulding calls "role images". The role image is a kind of label that people attribute to different functions within the society. A role image can be attributed to the President, to the CEO of a company, to a pupil, a family, a parent or even to an artist (i.e., the representation, the image every person has in mind when they think of what a president, a parent, or a family or artist should look like and act).

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<sup>14</sup> These are the stereotypes in Lippmann's thought.

Such private images can however become public. Indeed, once shared, people's personal images of the surrounding society can become "public images" if they are shared by many individuals. Even if the shared image is not perceived by different individuals in the exact same way, it can be seen in a very similar way. In other words, "a public image is a product of a universe of discourse, that is, a process of sharing messages and experiences" (*Ibid.*, 132). When different people share a public image, they can be seen as a group called a "subculture" (*Ibid.*, 133). We can find intellectual, professional, religious, class or even, perhaps especially, folk subcultures. Everyone lives in at least one but probably more subcultures.

In complex societies such as ours, we are to find "individuals possessing many roles and sharing in many different subcultures and universes of discourses" (*Ibid.*, 134-135). But the same individual can share some images with his friends, others with his family and yet others at work or in other contexts (*Ibid.*, 135), depending on her role in these subcultures. Social institutions themselves are partly within the subjective system of images and partly exterior to the system as institutions also exist externally from the individual and objectively in the social order.

#### *On the development of power*

Role and public images can help explain evolving power relationships in the field of images which then manifest themselves in social institutions. Social institutions, creating social hierarchy, change with lag-time as individual subjective relational images evolve in the feedback loop of non-logical action. People change their habits, their preferences, as conditions require. People are free to change their minds about what the State should be allowed to do as the image processed and sold by the State does not equate to what is realized in the individual voter's lives.

Hence, since images and value structures can evolve over time, the whole system of values and images can be unstable. Boulding tries to show how and why such an instability creates dynamics into the system of governance in a democratic nation-state.

In reality, the individual value structure is only partially formed. Value patterns are maintained and altered by symbolic messages through the feedback loop occurring over time. “Every time a message hits [someone], his image is likely to be changed in some degree by it, and as his image is changed his behavior patterns will be changed likewise” (*Ibid.*, 7) since “behavior depends on the image” (*Ibid.*, 6). That is to say that an individual’s value structure can evolve or harden with time. An interesting question is then to know to what degree an individual’s value structure is immune to mutation. In Boulding’s thought, it is a question of truth.

In fact, images people have of the surrounding society are not necessarily true<sup>15</sup>. What Boulding means “by the truth of the image is its correspondence with some reality in the world outside it” (*Ibid.*, 165). The same problems already occurred in Lippmann’s theory since stereotypes can also be built on lies, especially since “lies can be beautifully coherent and consistent” (*Ibid.*), which makes them, and the images built upon them persist. The fact is that “lies are frequently more stable and have a better survival value than the truth” (*Ibid.*, 168).

[T]he internal stability of the image is not merely a result of its logical consistency but also a result of nonlogical factors. The image of racial superiority, for instance, is logically absurd, is inconsistent with the basic religious images held by Western peoples, and receives extremely little support from the scientific subculture. It nevertheless exhibits deplorable persistence because, perhaps, it is able to repair the rather tattered value image of the individual holding it. It might almost be said, indeed, that the most stable images are those which are least susceptible to feedback. The transempirical images which we do not even pretend to confirm by experience are perhaps the most stable of all (*Ibid.*, 168).

If images built on lies are often persistent, they can however evolve, as it is the case for every type of image, may they be based on truth or not. Individuals with their own subjective value structures interact interpersonally within the field of value, and value structures change with the external feedback mechanism of new truth – or value – seeking in the form of new symbolic messages. Boulding recognizes the importance of competing messages for creating time-tested social institutions because competing messages reduce solipsism. In this sense, censorship is not part of a democratic process<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> This point is particularly true in post-modern or post-factual societies, where images are not created in politics to clarify the truth, but to simplify complexity for votes. This is done most commonly through images creating emotions of fear and hope in hope to agitate voter behaviour.

<sup>16</sup> Free speech (competing messages) is probably the most significant institution in democracy as opposed to authoritarianism. The importance of free speech is illustrated with the feedback loop. See Weber et al.

It is only with symbolic messages from competing subcultures that individuals are able to ascertain the truth of their values over time. Each one of our subcultures (families, jobs, artistic endeavors, political commitments, etc.) are time-consuming and thus are competing. When new symbolic messages conflict with subjective value structures, value structures are subject to mutation to avoid cognitive dissonance.<sup>17</sup>

At still another level, we may argue that what we mean by truth, or at least the progress toward truth, is an orderly development of the image, especially of the public and transcribed image through its confirmation by feedback messages. This in a sense is the philosophy of science. Truth ever eludes our grasp, but we are always moving asymptotically toward it. Out of our image we predict the messages which will return to us as result of our acts. If this prediction is fulfilled the image is confirmed, if it is not fulfilled the image must be changed (*Ibid.*, 169).

Boulding goes so far in his subjective system of images to propose that imperfect information in depersonalized modernism prevents uncovering facts. “What this means is that for any individual organisms or organization, there are no such things as ‘facts’. There are only messages filtered through a changeable value system” (*Ibid.*, 14). In this context, the State’s interest lies in promulgating its authority through the manipulation of images and therefore of the truth. Indeed, if we believe, like Aristotle, that political speeches are about persuasion and that, in this regard, politics is the art of persuasion, then it also is “the art of perceiving the weak spots in the images of others and of prying them apart with well-constructed symbolic messages” (*Ibid.*, 134). An interesting example is “the development of nationalism, especially democratic nationalism in the last few hundred years” (*Ibid.*, 61)<sup>18</sup>. It is value-sensation which brings shape to the system of images, and this means those who control the symbolic messages have a dominant role in shaping society’s institutions. If Walter Lippmann stressed the importance of the media (mainly newspapers) in the spread of information and stereotypes in *Public Opinion* (*op.*

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(2024) for a case study about attempts at suppression of speech during the covid era in the United States using Boulding’s *The Image* as a lens.

<sup>17</sup> Psychoanalysis is also “in the air” in the mid-1950s. “In the work of some later heretics, such as Jung, the psychoanalytic school seems to be going too far in the direction of awarding images a status which is almost independent of the organism that supports them and creates them” (Boulding, 1956, 153).

<sup>18</sup> Nationalism is inherent in the nation-state and is foundational to the system of images in modernism. Public institutions reinforce public images of a necessary and powerful State. School is such a public institution and, for Boulding, “one of the main purposes of national education is to distort the image of time and space in the interests of a nation” since it is, for example, “the history teachers above all who create the image of the Englishman, the German, the American, or the Japanese. This also is an important source of war” (*Ibid.*, 68).

*cit.*) and in *The Phantom Public* (1925), Boulding is more nuanced. Of course, “an enormous number of aspects of life and experience can be recorded directly”, but “there are still large parts of the image, however, which can be transcribed in symbolic form” (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 65). Indeed, “we have no direct means to transcribing sensations, emotions, or feelings except through the crowded channels of symbolic representation” (*Ibid.*). Feelings, which are constitutive of the behavior, must be addressed otherwise. Hence, the existence of images “enables us perhaps to integrate the rational with the irrational<sup>19</sup>” (*Ibid.*, 54). Peoples are guided by their feelings since “all behavior [is] governed by the image and its value system” (*Ibid.*).

We attempt to represent the system of images in illustration 1.

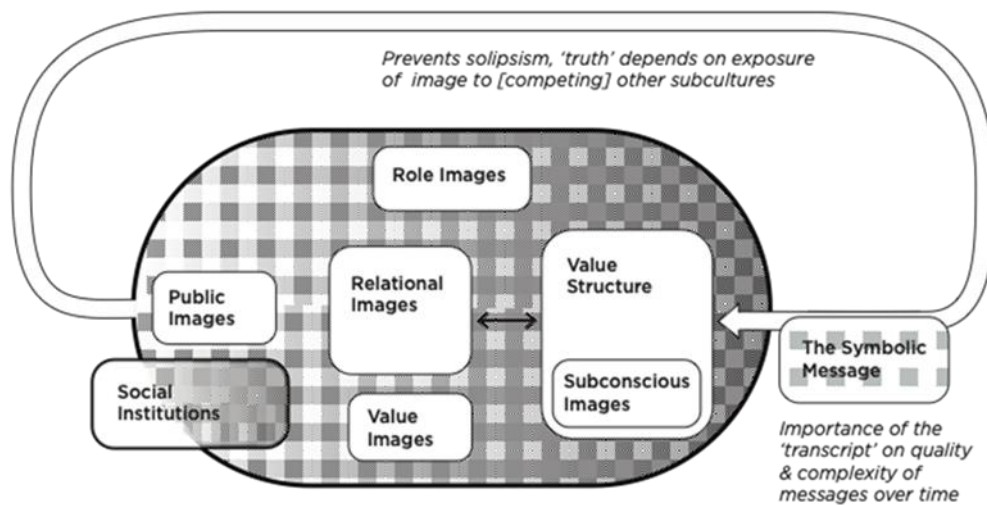


Illustration 1: Heuristic on Boulding's System of Images

<sup>19</sup> “Rational behavior is that which is governed by the part of the image which is accessible to consciousness” (Boulding, 1956, 54) while “what is usually called irrational behavior, in fact, follows the same principles” (*Ibid.*).

In his essay, Boulding devotes an entire chapter to “the image in the political process” (*Ibid.*, 97). He explains that there is a major difference between individual decisions, based on private images, and public decisions, based on public images. In the second case, the decision is affecting not only the individual who took it but the whole society. In this context, the individual who is in charge and must take decisions that will affect plenty of other people holds a powerful role in the society. Thus, “the political process may be abstracted from the general processes of social life by concentrating on the processes by which ‘public’ decisions are made” (*Ibid.*, 98).

This analysis echoes Downs’s work since Downs also introduces a kind of mental image, a subset of possible images – political ideology – in order to explain democratic political processes.

### **3.2. ...to Downs’s explanations**

As we have seen earlier, Downs introduces the presence of uncertainty into his model in order to eliminate the autocratic threat. In the first version of the uncertainty model contained in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, voters cannot differentiate between the numerous propositions offered by the political parties during elections. The only means for them to see through the different alternatives proposed is to look for information and to pay for it. But since elections results do not only rely on an individual’s own vote, it would be irrational for them to pay to be informed because the expected return would be negative. In other words, it would be rational for the voters to remain ignorant: that is where we can talk of “rationally ignorant” (Downs, 1993, 198-199) voters. Of course, this result is not satisfying, and Downs had to develop his model not to remain in this dead end.

In a context of uncertainty and blindness for the voters, political parties need to develop a useful tool that will permit voters to get some information at no cost. If a party tries to understand what the majority wants but that, at the same time, people cannot differentiate between the concurrent parties to elect the one that is the closest to their preferences, this last party will have tried to please the majority for nothing since any party could be elected.



The tool used by the different parties in order to remain easily identifiable is political ideology. This may be counterintuitive since political parties are not interested in promoting a better society as we explained earlier. In Downs's theory, ideology is in fact not a simple image of what a political party would like to apply at the society, but a real weapon used to win elections, a means to power.

Our basic hypothesis states that political parties are interested in gaining office *per se*, not in promoting a better or an ideal society. But if this is true, how can we explain the appearance of political ideologies? Why does nearly every democratic party ostensibly derive its policies from some specific philosophy of governing?

Our answer is that uncertainty allows parties to develop ideologies as weapons in the struggle for office. In this role, ideologies are assigned specific functions that shape their nature and development.

We define an ideology as a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing such a society. [...] We also treat ideologies as means to power. However, in our model, political parties are not agents of specific social groups or classes; rather, they are autonomous teams seeking office *per se* and using group support to attain that end (Downs 1957, 96-97).

How can a simple image, a mental picture, can become a real political weapon? As we already noted, voters cannot find out what government actions are, except at a significant cost and "even if they did know, they could not always predict where a given decision would lead" (*Ibid.*, 98). "Under these conditions, many a voter finds party ideologies useful because they remove the necessity of his relating every issue to his own philosophy" (*Ibid.*). Political ideology is in fact used as "shortcut or cost-saving device" (Popkin, 1993, 24), such as symbolic messages, i.e., a way to obtain information about every single party while saving on information costs. Instead of comparing programs, propositions or political promises, voters will be able to compare political ideologies and to draw an ideology referential.

Ideology is also useful to political parties, since it enables them to differentiate from each other while pleasing a wide range of voters. Since parties do not have to differentiate precisely on given ideas, creating possible tensions in the electorate, they can develop a wide ideology pleasing a lot of voters, still being clearly identifiable. Finally, "ideologies help parties cope with uncertainty [...] by short cutting the process of calculating what policies will gain the most votes" (Downs, *op. cit.*, 101).

As noted above, ideologies are means of attaining the maximum number of voters during the elections. In order to fit the voters' wishes, the espoused ideologies have to evolve through time. Downs (1957) uses Hotelling's spatial model to expose the way ideologies are developed (Grandjean, 2023). In fact, Downs explains that ideologies reflect images and follow the distribution of voter preferences. To illustrate this idea, he starts by drawing a linear scale "in the usual left-to-right fashion" (Downs, *op. cit.*, 115) where he can represent the distribution of the voters' preferences<sup>20</sup>.

In the case of a two-party democracy, two possibilities can occur. First, if the distribution of the voters' preferences is normal, the two parties will produce and maintain very close ideologies that will only differ on certain precise points to still be identifiable at the margin. Second, if the distribution is bimodal with clearly separated modes, each party will develop an identifiable ideology which correspond to one of the two modes. The more the distribution relies on two extreme modes, the wider the scope of the ideology developed by each party will be.

In the case of multiparty democracy, it is to assume that the distribution of voters' preferences is multimodal, and each existing party will develop their own ideology based on the part of the voters that they target. Each party will maintain the developed ideology and if a change occurs in the distribution, creating a new mode and the possibility for a new ideology to emerge, then a new party would arise. On the contrary, if a mode disappears, the related party and its ideology would become useless and would vanish. If ideologies are made and maintained in broad lines, they can however evolve at the margin through time.

#### **4. Complementarities on the fragility of democracy**

In Boulding, political images are the representations of some roles that, at times, are transcribed into a form of legal text. He takes the example of the American president, whose image originated from the "founding fathers" of the country and was transcribed

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<sup>20</sup> We note a weakness in the simple Left-Right dichotomy in that, for the case in the United States with an essentially two-party political duopoly, independent voters can be socially liberal (Left) and fiscally conservative (Right).

into the American Constitution. Hence “political images are created and distributed among the individuals of a society” (*Ibid.*, 103). However, political images can change over time. The image people have today of the American presidency might be different from what it may have been in the minds of the founding fathers and thus in the Constitution.

Political images do not only represent the roles assigned to individuals under specialization of labor. They “also include what might be called symbolic or personalized images of institutions themselves” (*Ibid.*, 109). In this context, not only politicians but also political parties carry an image, such as for Downs’s political ideology. Boulding takes the example of the Republican Party in the United States, which is perceived as a slow, rather old, and conservative but hard working, honest and patient elephant (*Ibid.*, 110). On the other side, the Democratic Party is seen as a clever, active, sensitive but also a little vulgar, absurd, and lacking confidence like a donkey (*Ibid.*). Part of these institutions, politicians and candidates all also carry their own symbolic images. For example, the leader of a far-right party can be seen differently from the leader of a socialist one. On the same time, the leader of the far-right party can bear a slightly different image from the one of his party and from the ones of the other politicians composing the same party. Once again, the image an individual has of a particular candidate during an election might differ from the image another individual has of the same candidate.

Boulding uses the system of images and the concept of political images to describe the differences in collective decision-making between authoritarian and democratic forms of governance. In an autocracy, higher roles in the society take decisions that are transmitted to lower roles, who are “expected to execute the orders without any talk-back” (*Ibid.*, p. 99). In this context, information is strictly controlled from above. In a democratic organization, “authority [...] is supposed to proceed from below. The higher roles are supposed to act on behalf of and to be responsible to the lower roles” (*Ibid.*). Decisions are the culminating point of discussions since higher roles communicate their ideas and hypotheses to lower roles, who can react and give feedback so the decisions are constructed upon feedbacks until their approval, which can be reached through “different conventions” such as majority voting. These conventions among other institutions such as the rules of order or the parliamentary procedure “establish what might be called an

image of conventional leadership” (*Ibid.*, 102)<sup>21</sup>. But this image, which depicts how a perfect democracy should work, is sometimes far from reality.

In the wake of Schumpeter (1942), who redefined the disciplinary boundary of economics to include the study of democratic functioning (Grandjean, 2023), both Boulding and Downs find that democracy is fragile<sup>22</sup>.

For Boulding, imperfect information and uncertainty mean “that both democratic and authoritarian forms [of government] are inherently unstable and that the general political dynamic consists of an oscillation between the two” (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 102)<sup>23</sup>. On the one hand, authorities propagate images signaling the necessity for increased State power but on the other hand, because authoritarians tend to surround themselves with “yes men” (*Ibid.*, 100), there is not an adequate feedback mechanism which allows for these authorities to determine how well the State’s messages are being received by those not in power. In this context, “it is the object of what might be called the paraphernalia of democratic organizations: the elections, the rules of order, the parliamentary procedure, etc.” to make sure that democratic functions just like in the image of perfect conventional leadership described above. But when these procedures “break down, there is a certain tendency for organizations to slip back into authoritarian forms” (*Ibid.*, 102).

To the contrary, for Downs, democratic fragility would come, as we said earlier, from the absence of uncertainty. But if uncertainty saves the democratic principle, it tends to create political instability, moderated by the use of political ideology. But Downs also wrestles with the need for politicians and political parties to make sure that their messages are being correctly received. Instead of making it rely on political and democratic institutions, the author explains that the government “is forced to employ intermediaries between

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<sup>21</sup> That is what Boulding calls “the paraphernalia of democratic organizations” (*Ibid.*, 102).

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Downs credits Schumpeter for inspiration. “Schumpeter’s profound analysis of democracy forms the inspiration and foundation for our whole thesis, and our debt and gratitude to him are great indeed.” (1957, fn11). Boulding does not mention Schumpeter.

<sup>23</sup> Authoritarian regimes are unstable because the competing symbolic messages are censored, increasingly isolating the regime from the value images formed by the rest of society. Democracy is unstable because the state has the incentive to propagate images calling for more discretionary state power, reaching the limits of legitimacy (Weber 1919). This in turn leads to authoritarianism, which as stated is unstable due to censorship of the necessary feedback messages.

itself and its constituents” (Downs, *op. cit.*, 89). In other words, the government would need representatives of the people to know what the people’s wishes are and to be sure that its messages are well received<sup>24</sup>. Hence Downs fills a gap in Boulding’s analysis. In addition, another way to limit political instability is for the politicians to rely on “persuaders” (*Ibid.*, 83) among the voters to spread their messages, and to develop a behavior based on “reliability, integrity and responsibility” (*Ibid.*, 103)<sup>25</sup>.

The way the political leader is chosen (i.e., the electoral process) is part of his role and, in order to be chosen, a politician or candidate must correspond to the image the voters want him to represent. That is a common point with Downs. Boulding gives the impression that images are in perpetual movement since we can understand that politicians and political parties create and manipulate images reflecting the institutions they govern or would like to govern, and since these institutions create and manipulate images as well. But unlike Boulding, for Downs, images, ideologies cannot move relentlessly. In order to plainly play their role of information shortcuts, ideologies must remain coherent and reliable. Voters must be able to attribute an ideological image to each party without having to spend too much time on the process. As Downs notes, “in order to be rational short cuts, ideologies must be integrated with policies closely enough to form accurate indicators of what each party is likely to do in the future” (*Ibid.*, 102). Ideologies then evolve very slowly following the evolution of the policies to remain effective signals and only a slight adjustment of the ideology necessary to gain votes could occur. Moreover, a party’s ideology “must be consistent with either (1) its actions in prior election periods, or (2) its statements in the preceding campaign [...], or both” (*Ibid.*, 103). Ideology thus pushes political parties and politicians to be and remain reliable and responsible if they want voters to believe in them and use their ideology as a real information source. In other words, ideologies and political parties must eventually be in quasi (but not complete) immobility. Boulding is complementary to Downs on another point. If Downs gives a clue about the slow movement of political ideologies, he does not explain why voters’ voting preferences (ideologies) might change over time. Boulding helps to describe how voters’ ideologies, based on the value image, are formed, and changed since “the instability of voting

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<sup>24</sup> The presence of intermediaries between the voters and the government addresses an issue raised by Boulding: the absence of “any adequate information system from the bottom up” (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 101).

<sup>25</sup> Boulding evokes an “art of persuasion” (*Ibid.*, 134) without really developing it.

behavior is a result of the complexity of the detailed image which is summarized in the symbol" (Boulding, *op. cit.*, 111).

Hence, once combined, the analyses of Boulding and Downs can help explain the sustainability of democracy by its institutions (the paraphernalia) combined to political strategies. With both these analyses, we understand how the voters' feelings (through the surrounding images) and intellect (by the use of political ideology) are mobilized in the democratic process.

Finally, democratic functioning can be summarized using a metaphor developed by Boulding in his second chapter, and that fits Downs's analysis. In this chapter, Boulding describes the functioning of a thermostat to define the notion of feedback and we think that this description is a perfect summary where the receptor is the electorate, the control represents the intermediaries, or the institutions and the effector is the government.

"Consider for a moment how a thermostat operates. It consists essentially of three parts: a receptor (the thermometer on the wall), a control (at the furnace), and an effector (the furnace and the pipes which lead from it). The receptor has the property that it can detect a divergence, positive or negative, between the temperature recorded in its thermometer and some "ideal" temperature at which the thermostat is set. A channel of communication (which in this simple case need be capable only of one bit of information, that is, it can say either yes or no) feeds from the receptor to a control mechanism. If the message says "minus", that is to say, if the recorded temperature is less than the ideal, the control interprets this and sends out heat. If the message from the receptor is "plus", that is, if the recorded temperature is greater than the ideal, the message is interpreted by the control and another message goes out of the furnace saying, "turn off the heat". If these messages to the furnace are effective and if, when the furnace receives the "turn on" message, heat is sent up into the house, the "minus" message from the receptor results in an increase in temperature which eventually cancels the message. The same operation in reverse will cancel the "plus" message. This is what is meant by a "feedback" (Boulding, *Ibid.* 20-21).

## **5. Conclusion**

Boulding and Downs's visions are built upon precedent works such as Lippmann's. However, Boulding's work deviates from that of his predecessors in the sense that it primarily addresses the importance of individuals' feelings and mental perceptions in society. Anthony Downs remains in the wake of his predecessors in that he is interested in the way voters' intellect can explain their behavior and the functioning of democracy.

Both authors are then interested in quite the same questions about the functioning of democracy, its complexity, and the role of uncertainty. On the one hand, with his development, Boulding highlighted the role of the images spread in every part and at every level of the society. His analysis provides an understanding of the importance of the democratic structure (i.e., its institutions) and the impact of political discourses and images on the voter's feelings (*via* the value-sensation which brings shape to the whole system of images). On the other hand, Downs focuses on the role of political strategies and, among them, political ideology. He shows how this ideology permits the sustainability of democracy and how ideology impacts the voter's intellect under uncertainty.

Both develop their own tools with their particularities, and some major differences appear in the method and assumptions. Some of them are of major importance: their vision of human behavior in a society, the definition they give to rationality, and the importance they give to majority rule in a democracy. But as important as they are, these disparities lie in the two authors' methods and not in their conclusions, which are similar. As a matter of fact, despite their differences, the two analysis can be thought of as complementary.

Even if both works underly issues and present fragilities in democracy as leading towards authoritarianism, their complementarity allows us to reduce in large part these weaknesses and provides answers to numerous questions. Hence, for example, Downs does not explain how and why voters' preferences can change over time, but Boulding does; Boulding raises the question of the functioning of bottom-up information system, which is addressed in Downs. Downs takes voting rules and other social institutions as they are while Boulding illustrates how these institutions can change through competing images and values over time. Both authors share the idea of the importance of mental images – for Boulding the value image, for Downs political ideology – to reduce knowledge uncertainty in the non-logical action of the democratic process.

The reading of the two books together provides a powerful tool for those who want to understand many of the aspects of democratic life in the modern nation-state.

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