Majority Rule versus Consensus: The Political Thought of John C. Calhoun

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Description

John C. Calhoun may be best known for his stature in the U.S. Senate and his controversial defense of slavery, but he is also a key figure in American political thought. The staunchest advocate of the consensus model of government as an alternative to majority rule, he proposed government not by one, by few, or by many, but by all: each key group enjoying veto rights over collective decisions.

Some consider consensus preferable to majority rule in deeply divided societies, and consensus theory has been advocated in such contemporary works as Lani Guinier's The Tyranny of the Majority. James Read's book, the first historically informed, theoretically sophisticated critique of Calhoun's political thought, goes beyond other studies to ask key questions about the feasibility of consensus. Read critically examines Calhoun's arguments, considering both their antebellum context—including Calhoun's spirited defense of slavery—and modern-day attempts to apply consensus models in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and South Africa.

Read sheds new light on the crisis leading up to the Civil War by exploring Calhoun's conviction that his uncompromising defense of slavery would help preserve the Union. He also juxtaposes Calhoun's thought with that of Jefferson and Madison, whose legacies Calhoun invoked to support his claim that states had the right to nullify federal law, and he contrasts Madison's ultimate faith in majority rule with Calhoun's ultimate rejection of it.

Read argues that, although Calhoun's critique of majority rule deserves careful attention, his remedy is unworkable and in the end unjust. Read demonstrates that governments ruled by consensus tend to be ineffective, that they are better at preventing common action than achieving common goods, and that they privilege strategically placed minorities rather than producing genuine consensus.

Majority Rule versus Consensus is a provocative work that sheds new light on the promise and limitations of democracy, showing that, despite the failure of Calhoun's remedy, his diagnosis of the potential injustice of majority rule must be taken seriously. It discourages uncritical celebrations of democracy in favor of reflection on how committed democrats can better address the problems that Calhoun attempted to solve.

This book is part of the American Political Thought series.

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