The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy is a groundbreaking work in democratic theory. This chapter argues that it is of continued relevance today, due both to its methodological innovations and its use of those innovative techniques to solve the fundamental problem of democratic justification. In Calculus, James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock fuse economic methods, political theory, and the normative project of showing how democratic institutions of a particular sort can be justified contractually, creating a unique form of democratic contractualism that came to be known as “Constitutional Political Economy” and the more general research program of “Public Choice Theory.” Although these pioneering techniques have been integrated into mainstream political theory, the interest of their normative project has not been similarly appreciated.

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The Calculus of Consent breaks with past theories of political science in its analysis of democratic decision-making processes. It approaches the basic problems of politics, using the technical tools developed in modern economics and game theory. Buchanan and Tullock discuss political institutions in the same manner as the economist discusses the market. They begin with the individual as he participates in the processes through which group choices are organized. Government is treated as a co-operative endeavor on the part of a number of people of differing tastes to increase their abilities to Constitutional "choice" in the Calculus is unique in that such choice presupposes a type of generational uncertainty that prevents the decision maker from predicting how the choice will influence his or her welfare in the future. Thus, constitutional choice differs from ordinary political decision making in that it is devoid of direct self-interest. James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), volume 3 in the series. Hereafter referred to as the Calculus. 2. The Main Ideas of The Calculus 2 Part I The purpose of Part I of The Calculus of Consent is to ensure that readers all embark on the same train of intellectual discovery. Buchanan and Tullock carefully outline in the first four chapters a few key parameters within which they frame their arguments. Charles Rowley, in his introductory comments, refers to these parameters as “hand grenades” (p. xi).