The State of Democratic Theory
Ian Shapiro
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Ian Shapiro, a political science professor at Yale, is one of the leaders of an emerging literature that combines insights from political theory and empirical scholarship. In *The State of Democratic Theory,* he deploys both to good effect. The book also couples impressive analytical sophistication with clarity of exposition that makes it accessible to lay readers.

In the first part of the book, Shapiro criticizes the two most influential theories of democracy: deliberative democracy and what he calls "aggregative" democracy. As an alternative normative theory of democracy,

Shapiro proposes "nondomination," defined as structuring political institutions to ensure that the "basic interests" of all members of the polity are protected from threat. In chapter 3, Shapiro reconsiders Joseph Schumpeter's theory of democracy, as competition for votes, from the standpoint of the principle of nondomination, and argues that Schumpeterian democracy is the best institutional framework for realizing that principle.

The last part of the book addresses empirical issues. Chapter 4 surveys the evidence on the difficulties involved in establishing and maintaining democracy. Shapiro concludes that democracy is most secure in wealthy states and that negotiated transitions from dictatorship to democracy may be less successful than those imposed by force.

In chapter 5, Shapiro addresses the important question—especially for scholars identified with the political left—of why democratic governments produce relatively little redistribution of income to the poor. Shapiro surveys a wide range of theories that purport to explain this outcome, and provides recommendations for reforming democratic institutions to make redistribution more feasible.

Shapiro's critique of deliberative democracy, the currently in-vogue theory that requires democratic institutions to demand a high level of sophisticated and disinterested discourse from citizens, is compelling. He points out that there is no evidence supporting the claim that more deliberation will lead to better public policy outcomes or to reductions in social conflict. Even more significant, requiring high standards of deliberation may actually exacerbate conflicts by bringing them more into the open and harm the interests of politically weak groups who are less able than others to participate in deliberation. The call for deliberation also ignores differences in political power that affect both political processes and policy outcomes far more than deliberation can.

Another important insight of Shapiro's book is his argument that negotiated, internally generated transitions to democracy may often be less successful than ones produced by coercion or by external imposition. As Shapiro points out, "the principals who negotiate settlements may have little reason to create institutions friendly to democracy's health if this conflicts with their immediate political interests" (p. 85). Shapiro argues that that is precisely what occurred in his native South Africa, where a negotiated transition to democracy entrenched the power of African National Congress elites. A related danger is that permitting leaders of the preexisting dictatorial regime a say in the formation of the new political system may allow them to entrench their position of power and privilege at the expense of long-term democratic development. A dramatic example that Shapiro does not consider is that of Russia, where the key role of former Communist Party elites in the creation of the new political system enabled them to entrench themselves and has resulted in a situation in which the current president is a former high-ranking KGB official intent on constraining political opposition by centralizing power and imposing government control on the media.

At the very least, Shapiro's argument should lead us to look more

favorably on transitions to democracy achieved through the relatively complete destruction of the previous political system, whether by internal opposition forces (as in some states in Eastern Europe) or by external imposition (as in Germany and Japan). These issues are of transcendant importance to the current debate over the U.S. effort to create a democracy in Iraq, and the more general issue of how to facilitate democratic transitions in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Shapiro's third particularly important contribution is his discussion of the relationship between democracy and redistribution of wealth to the poor. As he points out, the empirical evidence shows that democratic governments provide far less redistribution than some theories predict, and not much more than nondemocratic regimes. Shapiro explores a wide range of explanations for this fact in chapter 5.

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming of Shapiro's book is its failure to spell out his theory of nondomination, which he considers to be the best normative foundation for democracy. Shapiro makes a brief attempt at defining "domination" when he claims that it occurs when a person's "basic interests are threatened." Basic interests, in turn, are defined "in reference to the obvious essentials that [people] need to develop into and survive as independent agents in the world as it is likely to exist for their lifetimes" (p. 45).

Unfortunately, that formulation is far too vague to be particularly useful. There is extensive disagreement over the question of what it means to be an "independent agent" and what one needs to "develop into" one and "survive" in that state. For instance, Shapiro assumes without argument that "an employer who can fire an employee in a world where there is no unemployment compensation has [the] power" to threaten the employee's "basic interests" (p. 45). Yet the validity of this assumption is far from obvious, especially if there is a competitive labor market with numerous alternative employers. Shapiro suggests that he need not "resolve these issues [of defining basic interests] here," but *some* degree of resolution is essential if we are to understand what Shapiro's theory entails and what its institutional implications are for democracy.

A second critical omission in Shapiro's theory is his neglect of the problem of voter ignorance. Decades of research have shown that the vast majority of American citizens have very little political knowledge and are often ignorant even of basic facts, such as the functions of the various branches of government and the key differences between opposing political parties and ideologies. Recent research has also been more pessimistic than earlier scholarship about the possibility that such deep ignorance can be overcome by various information "shortcuts."

Shapiro's almost total neglect of this problem is surprising in light of his interest in the theory of deliberative democracy—which requires extensive political knowledge on the part of voters—and in the special problem of political participation by the poor and disadvantaged. Shapiro's theory of democracy and those theories he criticizes assume that democratic elections enable voters to hold political leaders accountable

at least to some substantial degree. This ability is called into serious question if most voters are ignorant of the vast majority of what government does and therefore find it difficult to reward elected leaders for "good" policies and punish them for "bad" ones.

Shapiro's argument is undercut not only by the low average level of political knowledge, but also by vast differences in knowledge levels among groups. Research shows that the poor, African-Americans, and women have significantly lower levels of political knowledge than middle-class white males. This conclusion holds even when numerous other variables are controlled for. The gap in political knowledge may be a more powerful explanation for the failure of democratic political systems to redistribute income to the disadvantaged than some of the arguments Shapiro presents. If people know little or nothing about what government is doing, they may have little ability to use their voting power to force elected officials to serve their interests or to punish them for neglect of those interests.

The final major shortcoming in Shapiro's analysis is his overly quick dismissal of the case for strict limits on the scope of government power in democratic states. This dismissal is ironic in light of the fact that his book implicitly questions the central rationale for relatively unconstrained government put forward by thinkers on the political left: the claim that a large and powerful state can achieve extensive redistribution to the poor. If such redistribution is relatively unlikely, the case for limited government looks stronger. It is particularly strengthened if, as Shapiro argues, wealthy and powerful interests have built-in advantages in the political process and can often use it to achieve their own ends at the expense of the poor. As Shapiro puts it, "There are few good reasons to suppose that the bottom quintile [in income distribution] is well positioned in terms of resources, organization, or political muscle to avoid being crowded out of the expenditure side of the [government] budget by other interest groups" (p. 140). Indeed, it is striking that many of the largest expenditure programs in advanced democracies—notably farm subsidies and programs benefiting the elderly—tend to benefit the relatively affluent.

To be sure, Shapiro holds out the hope that reforms can be instituted to reduce the political disadvantages of the poor. He puts special hope in the introduction of campaign finance "reform" measures that seek to limit the influence of money on politics (pp. 59–61, 108–9). Yet even if we accept the debatable proposition that campaign finance laws can reduce or eliminate the influence of unequal private wealth on elections, the result is unlikely to be a more egalitarian political system. Reducing the influence of money would not reduce inequality as much as it would accentuate it by increasing the importance of nonmonetary political resources, such as campaign skills, free media access, and name recognition. As scholars such as Bradley Smith have pointed out, most such resources are far more unequally distributed—and more heavily concentrated in the hands of the affluent—than is wealth in the form of money.

Equally unpromising is Shapiro's hope that political inequality can be reduced through coalitions between the poor and affluent interest groups. Shapiro fails to explain why these interest groups would have an incentive to ally with the poor, given that the poor have relatively little political influence. Even if such a coalition were created, the poor may not be able to force their allies to keep their part of the bargain. Their lack of political information may make it difficult for them to ensure that new policies adopted by the coalition really do help the needy.

For related reasons, Shapiro and other scholars sympathetic to the plight of the poor in democratic political systems may wish to reconsider their opposition to strict limits on government power. Indeed, Shapiro may in part do so when he argues that courts and other nonmajoritarian "second-guessing" institutions should use their powers to overrule legislation that institutionalizes "domination" by powerful interests over the poor and perhaps other politically weak groups. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the significance of this conclusion is unclear given Shapiro's failure to fully define what he means by "domination." Moreover, Shapiro's insistence that courts should enforce a prohibition on domination seems to contradict his insistence that we should not place substantial limits on the powers of elected officials and that "courts should never act imperially or impose results on recalcitrant legislatures or [attempt] to protect society from majority rule" (pp. 66–67).

Despite such reservations, Shapiro's book is an impressive addition to the literature on the theory and practice of democracy. Few other recent works so effectively combine theoretical and empirical arguments. Even the shortcomings in Shapiro's analysis may be valuable to the extent that they highlight areas in need of further investigation. Prominent among the latter are the problem of political ignorance and the role of limits on government power in democratic theory.

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