

Book Review

Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself, by Frances Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018, 336 pp.

Democracy, especially direct democracy, has a long history, from the maxim of ruling and being ruled in turn as espoused by ancient Greeks, to the aphorism of Rousseau's taking men as they are and laws as they might be (Rousseauian's General Will). Representative democracy, on the contrary, has a relatively short history. Schumpeterian competitive democracy, sometimes called minimalist democracy, for instance, concerns the basis of party power struggle to win votes, while participatory democracy concerns the basis of bringing power closer to the people, thus respecting individual rights.

Over the past five decades, in their criticism of corrupt leaders, movements in the democratic world have been emphasising the expansion of the rights and power of the majority as a remedy to policy and institutional failures. Leaders are increasingly pressured to listen to public opinion, engage in participatory politics, and investigate concerns of civil society organisations. For the sake of building a representative government, they subscribe to the philosophy that the government is evil at best. Therefore, to them, the more power there is in the hand of voters, the more human potential there is to be explored within the society.

With the Internet, ideas that are kin to direct democracy, particularly Rousseauian's General Will, evolved and people are looking to rid themselves of political parties and government mercenaries to get what they want, propagating the idea of 'do-it-yourself' politics. The recent mantra of popular democracy, the 'right of the majority', refers to the voice of public opinion and the need for a representative government are suppressing another ethos of democracy, namely 'the rule of the majority' which advocates the importance for leaders to lead public opinion and have an accountable government.

Against this backdrop, Frances Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro alert to the dangers these popular movements pose to democratic institutions that have evolved over centuries. In their book, *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself* published by Yale University Press (2018), they argue that what the people think to be a remedy; giving more rights to people to overcome corruption, turns out to become a problem. It is a prognosis of a misdiagnosis. The higher the demand for voters to exercise their rights, the more alienated they become.

In the US, for instance, the authors asserted that citizens have many reasons to be angry. These include income inequality, stagnant wage,

undeserving groups created by the government, huge expenditure towards anti-terrorist campaigns in the Middle East, as well as the alarming rate of crime and other social problems. The authors observed that anger and frustration are accompanied by the increase in rights, as well as channels for people's direct participation.

Primers (party members choosing leaders to contest in next level elections), membership meetings, and plebiscite or referendums, allow the people to get across to the centre. These are among the rights and channels for political participation demanded by the people. In their attempt to highlight these demands to make the government more representative, they make it hard for the government to come up with programmes and policies. Referendums, for instance, give people rights to decide over specific issues, such as the case of Brexit.

The question is, are the people well informed of the implications on government programmes and policies that they are to decide on? If they are given rights to decide on matters concerning taxation, they would opt to not pay taxes. In doing so, are they aware that they will then no longer be able to enjoy the benefits of healthcare and education? The authors' point here is that giving too much power to uninformed people such as through referendums may be bad for a country.

In writing this contrarian book, the authors, as they have admitted, had to swim against a strong tide against academic works and general opinions that supports bringing power to the people for the betterment of a country. Hence, what is the authors' prognosis for the problems that have led to people's anger and frustration? The authors strongly argue that a good government is an accountable government, in which effective policies are carried out, not a representative government for its own sake. To achieve this, the idea of competitive political parties is bad, and it is only through having two strong, and big parties or a two strong predictable coalition parties system would policies be best formulated.

Instead of looking at politics as a sign of using or abusing power, the authors point us to politics as a sign of a make or break policy. Why is a two strong and big parties system the best system for a country? The authors, guided by, if not obsessed by minimalist democracy popularised by Schumpeter, say that *"With only two parties in the game, political competition tends to be based on economic interests that are easy for voters to comprehend; and comprehension aids electoral accountability"*. Furthermore, they give more privilege to Single Member Districts (SMDs) over Proportional Representation (PR) while other academic works look to give more opportunity to parties to be in the parliament.

After discussing critical problems of popular democracy and discussing the logic for a two strong and big party system against other systems, the authors invite readers to understand the dynamics of politics facing the

different political parties of different countries in many parts of the world. They divided their discussions following the minimalist democracy paradigm into party sizes which branches into “two large” and “multiple varied”, as well as party strengths, divided into “strong” and “weak”.

The book has both competitive Schumpeterian as well as democratised Burkean impulses. Political parties are seen as companies. However, the former woos for voters’ interest, whereas the latter looks to please the consumers’ liking. While the former promises the best programmes and policies, the latter promises the best goods and services.

A capitalist economy, Schumpeter asserted, is a dynamic process which enables a company’s innovation to increase market shares and enjoy temporary monopolistic profits. In the pre-elections involving two strong big parties or two strong predictable coalition parties, winner-wins-all politics is implied, creating politics of temporary monopoly. The ruling government has a strong incentive to produce the best programmes and policies, realising that marginal loss of votes would lead them to surrender power to the government-in-waiting.

In the Simple Majority District (SMD) system, the government-in-waiting would have a strong incentive to propose better relative programmes, realising that capturing marginal vote would mean enjoying a temporary monopoly. Instead of busy responding to donors’ agendas or voters’ demands, two strong and big parties in the SMD system force Schumpeterian party competition to create programmatic opposition culture, in which the winning party is the party with the program that wins voters’ interest. It seems that the minimalist democracy of the Schumpeterian impulse, the perspective acting as a guide for the author, brought something interesting on to the table.

The authors asserted that focusing on the strength of political parties is a far superior method compared to giving more power to the people. Through programmes, parties can bundle or aggregate issues, while bringing power to the people would unbundle these issues. Referendums are a terrible idea because of this. Attempts to democratise governments through decentralising power such as through referendums may cause the government to commit unnecessary struggles to come up with excellent programmes and policies to be representative for its own sake, but failing to be accountable.

While a competitive Schumpeterian impulse is notable in the title of the book (*Responsible Parties*), a democratised Burkean leverage is visible in the phrase “Saving Democracy from Itself”. While change is welcomed, radical changes are destructive. Hence, while bringing power to the people may be useful for a better democracy, it may disturb the purpose of having a government itself, let alone ensuring growth and maintaining stability. The authors argue that if people increasingly become angry and frustrated, and the government cannot be fully accountable for the people’s demand when

policies serve the advantage of the elites, bringing more power to the people would only ruin them.

In a nutshell, the book argues that the instruments for more democracy are illusory and warns against the damage of primaries, caucuses, referendums and direct election of leaders to democracy and that they must be pushed back for the better. This an excellent book to be read not only by students of political science and public policy but politicians and public administrators as well. However, it does not mean that it carries no flaw. The book underestimates the huge potential that popular or participatory democracy would bring to society. The book is problem-driven and should be accessible to many parts of society as the authors compromised many aspects of theoretical and methodological technicalities to get their ideas across.

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