

Why politics matters: Making democracy work

Gerry Stoker

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'Politics is designed to disappoint'. That is one of the main arguments of Gerry Stoker's book 'Why politics matters: Making democracy work'. The book explores our current democracy and reasons for disenchantment. Stoker explains why people find politics such a pain in the neck, and he does so with a mission: persuading citizens that politics is crucially important to their freedom and wellbeing.

His argument is a simple one. Political cynicism is the result of a 'number of misunderstandings of the political process that have taken hold in the discourse of democracies' (p10). Citizens fail to understand that messy compromises, the collective imposition of decisions and complex communication are key aspects of politics, not aberrations or exceptions. Our current view of politics has defined these aspects away. Many citizens, he says, hold a naïve view of politics: they tend to 'assume that most other people agree with them (or would do if only the issue was explained to them properly' (p2). Competing interests, incompatibilities of views, and limited resources have no place in this conception of democracy. For many citizens, the ultimate society is one where there is no more need for politics, because everyone would follow the right path and everyone would agree. They fail to appreciate that there may be different views of what the 'good life' means.

Political scientists and other analysts are to blame as well, by constantly promoting a myth about democracy: 'We (the citizen) tell them (the politicians) what we want, and they deliver it, and if they succeed we reward them with our support again; if they fail, we kick them out' (p67). Citizens increasingly approach politics from what they have got used to in a consumer society. Most political activity and participation is even an extension of the individual's activity as a consumer, aimed at personal benefit. This consumerist view is built on the idea that citizens know what they want, that politicians can easily find out these demands and preferences, and that society has ways of decision-making that can deal with many different and conflicting strong and weak preferences.

The book has three main parts. In the first part, Stoker explores the extent of dissatisfaction, and in doing so, summarises many insights in a concise way. He finds that many explanations actually fail to explain political disenchantment: the behaviour and performance of politicians, the rise of critical citizens (cf. Pippa Norris' approach), the decline of social cohesion, and a number of factors going beyond politics' control such as globalisation and scientific and technological change. He then explores some major evolutions in political practice, such as the role of the media, the rise of populism, and the professionalization of political activism. In the last part, he looks for solutions. He is

quite sceptical of many now-popular solutions, such as making voting compulsory or lowering the voting age, increasing the number of sunshine laws, or other ‘gimmicks’ to stimulate voting. Many of the ‘solutions’ debated in the UK exist in other countries, but do not necessarily have an impact on citizens’ engagement in these countries.

When I was asked to review this book, my first impression after browsing the table of contents and the blurbs was ‘Oh god, yet another social-capital-and-participatory-democracy-is-good book’. I was glad to be disappointed. Stoker is placing himself, and his view of democracy, in the ‘realist camp’ (p12), by describing democracy as an ‘operating system of decision making rather than some far-off goal’ (p12). Many books by aspiring politicians, journalists, and activists seek for ultimate solutions for political cynicism by repairing what they consider broken (dishonest politicians, promises that are not kept etc.), and by promoting all kinds of ‘true’ participatory, bottom-up forms of democracy. This book doesn’t. It doesn’t have unrealistic assumptions about politics; it admits that politicians do indeed often lie and that the nature of politics makes it normal that people cannot always be satisfied. Yet, while building this argument that seems so different from that of the well-meaning democracy mongers, Stoker’s recommendations sound very familiar: He wants to convey the message that politics matters, and that getting it right matters (p1). People need to get involved in politics. But he recommends this for entirely different reasons than is done from the more idealistic approaches to participatory politics.

Professor Stoker’s book makes a very powerful argument. Many will not be happy to hear it, but it is very illuminating of the true meaning and functioning of politics. The argument may sound blatantly obvious to many political scientists, politicians, policy makers and citizens, but the widespread political cynicism and dissatisfaction proves it is not. This is a book from an experienced and prolific writer. Professor Stoker describes his book as a guide to understanding politics. It certainly succeeds in doing so, and is written in a very accessible and engaging style. This book won the Political Studies Association Book of the Year Prize 2006, should you not yet been convinced.

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