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Book Reviews

Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should

Work by John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002. 284 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$22.00.

This provocative book challenges the political analysts, scholars, and critics who have argued that Americans' alienation and ill feelings toward politics will be remedied by increasing their participation in politics. According to John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, this problem has little to do with the public's lack of participation in politics, but rather with the selfish interests of politicians and their main organized group or other elite backers who distract them from attending to the larger public's interests. The public finds political participation unappealing and would rather have the nation's needs and wants served with limited citizen involvement by leaders who make effective decisions for the public good. So strong are these feelings that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse find compelling circumstantial evidence, based on modest survey data and focus group findings, that close to half the public report that they would prefer that the nation's decisions and actions be guided by the unobtrusive hand of *unelected* experts and business leaders instead of by politicians or the *populus* more directly. The public would prefer "stealth democracy": decisions and policies that serve the good of the nation with essentially invisible or nonexistent input from its citizens.

These empirical findings and conclusions both challenge and provide an important corrective to the positions of those who argue that the solution to Americans' political malaise is the expansion of opportunities for the public to participate directly in political debate and decision making—through town hall meetings, juries, and forums (such as those involving the consensus style results of Navaho democracy)—or the enhancement of its "social capital" and communitarian political voice through involvement in voluntary groups, policy juries, and deliberative opinion polls, as argued by Robert Putnam, Amitai Etzioni, and James Fishkin. Based on their survey and focus group results and their review of the findings and conclusions of research on town hall meetings and citizens' perceptions, attitudes, and actual experiences in political participation, the authors' research shows that the public prefers to avoid political interaction and conflict, *not* engage it. People want outlets for participation in order to keep politicians and government policies in line, and they support having direct ballot initiatives and referenda, but they would rather not be involved in any political fuss.

Stealth Democracy provides a down-to-earth analysis of current discontent with government and politics that joins rational choice and social psychologically based theories of social and political behavior. Economic man would prefer to “free ride” and not participate in politics if there are any costs; the nature of conflict and the sociology and social psychology of dealing with that conflict raise the costs of participation without any increase in benefits. The idea of stealth democracy that serves the public’s interest rather than private or politicians’ interests also implies that *all* of the public benefits are approximately equal. In contrast, any solutions that would increase group-based or other forms of participation are unlikely to improve the public’s attitude toward government and politics and could well have their own upper status or other biases.

Contrary to what cursory readers and critics may think, stealth democracy through government by experts and business leaders is not something that the authors expect to occur. It is the end result of an engaging thought experiment that ultimately takes the book back to asking how we might learn to live with the nation’s representative and essentially majoritarian government, in which the public cannot fully distinguish self-interested elites from objective elites. How do we learn to live with it? The authors point toward educating and teaching the citizenry as early on in life as possible that people have diverse interests and that we, individually and as a nation, have to develop thicker skins, get used to conflicts that arise, and appreciate that we have political processes to deal with them. These processes are messy and at times seem like the worst possible—except for all the others. The book is vague on how this kind of civic education would work, leaving readers to look forward to the authors following up on this in their next work.

Stealth Democracy considers and acknowledges the possible usefulness of political reforms to do something about corruption and the role of money in politics through campaign reform that might mitigate the partisan polarization and conflict that antagonize the public. One possibility that the authors of the book do not consider is the way in which more extensive efforts at political mobilization by political parties or by public-spirited groups might conceivably change public attitudes toward participation. Another is what Lawrence Jacobs and this reviewer propose in the conclusion of *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* through what might be called “transparent democracy”: Opinion poll results would be reported and debated in a way consistent with what George Gallup originally had in mind, forcing political leaders and others to directly and transparently engage public opinion in real time. In this way, the public could see how politicians and policy makers are addressing its concerns—not requiring that public opinion be followed, but forcing leaders to explain their disagreements with the citizenry. The public would see itself represented—granted passively, but this may be preferable to the active participation that the public, in *Stealth Democracy*, apparently abhors—and this representation would not have the biases that occur through actual political activity. This transparency might lead to changes in the behavior

of elites and the messiness and conflict in politics. Proposals for new efforts at political mobilization and for more transparent democracy are not necessarily incompatible with Hibbings and Theiss-Morse's conclusions and recommendations. While they too may play out in ways that people will not like, they may contribute to a real-world education about democratic government that might alter the nature of democratic politics itself.

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The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century by Charles A. Kupchan. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. 368 pp. \$27.95.

During a moment when Americans brag, and others worry, about another American Century in which U.S. unilateralism will have its way, Charles A. Kupchan vigorously and with impressive scholarship disagrees. He throws not a dose, but 368 pages of well-crafted prose on the idea of a lengthy *pax Americana*.

A former member of the first Clinton administration's National Security Council who now teaches at Georgetown University, Kupchan believes that two unstoppable forces dictate that "America's unipolar moment is unlikely to last the decade" (p. 62). One force is an inevitable diffusion of power—in this case a rising, united Europe. China, he believes, will later—perhaps much later—add to that multipolarity in world power. The second more interesting and persuasive force that will help end U.S. "hyperpowerdom" (as some French prefer to call it) is the American people. Kupchan emphasizes that, not only are they historically ill-prepared to support such global power and the sacrifices it will entail, but also that America's rush into the digital age—a new era that is creating social alienation, policy polarization, and political disinterest—will lead Americans to be increasingly less involved in world affairs.

Conventional wisdom would respond that the September 11 attacks have dramatically reversed Americans' disinterest in foreign affairs and, for one of the few times in the nation's history, created a strong consensus on which U.S. officials can confidently base policies. Kupchan systematically disagrees. A policy fueled mostly by anti-terrorism, he argues, is a policy without any overarching strategy (such as containment was the strategy of 1947 to 1991). It will result largely in a unilateral lashing out in many directions. He attacks international relations experts for their abstractions, jargon, and mathematical modeling that steadily grow more distant from the real world; instead, these analysts should be developing new, workable forms of realist thought. Kupchan's fears are echoed by thoughtful Bush administration officials who wonder how they are supposed to plan, given the absence of the usual realist landmarks (especially the lack of a balance of power.)