

Theda Skocpol *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), pp. 366. \$18.87 ISBN 0-8061-3532-8 pb

Theda Skocpol once again dares to occupy highly contested ground that intersects a number of important contemporary dialogues. *Diminished Democracy*, part of the Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture series, challenges conventional conservative wisdom that pits ‘good’ local institutions against ‘bad’ collectivizing national programs, while simultaneously chiding liberals for succumbing to precisely the kind of managerial elitism that would alienate liberalism from its core working-class constituencies. Given the provocative and ambitious nature of the project, even a partial success must be judged as an important contribution, and a worthy addition to Skocpol’s well-deserved reputation in the fields of sociology and political science.

Skocpol’s thesis is that America’s democratic promise lay in the many cross-class, mass-based national groups that formed in local chapters throughout the early republic, and acted as vital intermediary institutions linking local to national politics. This book challenges core assumptions guiding the *liberal-communitarian* debate with political theorists, the *liberal-conservative ideological* debate (potentially on a number of levels), and the *general debate* concerning the nature of interest groups within democratic theory. Skocpol also addresses the relative utility of interest groups as a vehicle for participatory politics.

Skocpol’s analysis also offers an instructive contrast to her fellow Harvard colleague Robert Putnam and left-leaning communitarian

thinkers like Michael Sandel, who have argued that the revitalization of civic life should take place primarily at the local level. Skocpol contends that scholars like Putnam “misdiagnose the civic challenges America faces today, for they have forgotten that national community, active government, and democratic mobilization are all vital to creating and sustaining a vibrant civil society”(p.12). These mass groups facilitated upward mobility for working-class Americans, and agitated for important redistributive programs that raised millions of Americans from the working class into the burgeoning middle class. Additionally, national associations like the Loyal Order of the Moose brought political elites into close contact with working- and middle-class members in ways that contemporary politicians can only superficially and, for Skocpol, inadequately emulate. She cites the (somewhat) apocryphal example of Warren G. Harding being inducted into the Loyal Order of the Moose by his chauffeur to illustrate the degree to which the powerful were compelled to pay heed to the needs of their less fortunate brothers as a result of these memberships.

Much of the narrative Skocpol develops is archival and historical in nature. She painstakingly amasses evidence to support her thesis of the generally beneficial role these groups played, while looking clear-eyed at the frequent chauvinism and bigotry that often drove these groups' policies. Certainly, Skocpol is not advocating a nostalgic return to a time when groups could with impunity segregate and discriminate against ethnic minorities, Catholics, and women. However, she notes that many ethnic minorities, rather than attacking the segregationist policies of these national groups, often created parallel groups and counter-mobilized in eminently democratic fashion. For example, Irish-Americans created the Ancient Order of the Hibernians, and African-Americans began chartering Masonic chapters as early as 1775 in the northern states (p. 35). Her somewhat paradoxical conclusion is that the counter-mobilizing impulses of Americans led to more overall participation in these organizations than may be possible in these more enlightened times, when groups face serious formal and informal pressures to be inclusive in ways that many Americans find discomforting.

Skocpol advances a number of reasons why the tumultuous events of the 1960's eroded faith in these larger groups, which succumbed to a professionally managed elite style of politics. The reforms of the Progressive Era, which she characterizes as 'Neo-Mugwump reforms'

had the unfortunate byproduct of inhibiting the kinds of mobilizing politics that insured high voter turnout (but also created an avenue for corruption by political machines, as Skocpol rightly notes). Likewise, Vietnam's lack of unpopularity inhibited veterans' mobilizations that normally punctuated American politics between wars. Similarly, the civil rights and feminist movements – even as they opened avenues for political participation on behalf of disenfranchised groups – created powerful disincentives for membership in the somewhat parochial national groups like the Knights of Columbus. Interestingly, Skocpol offers evidence that professional memberships have not been seriously eroded over time, and suggests that elites remain relatively mobilized, which she suggests as contradictory evidence to Putnam's *Bowling Alone* thesis: social capital has eroded, but not necessarily among elites, who are more naturally attuned to networking than members of the lower socioeconomic strata (pp. 214-215).

Skocpol's remedy to these problems is primarily political rather than institutional. Recommending that many regulations distinguishing between partisan and non-partisan activities be torn down, she believes that elites must eventually return to the kinds of mobilization-driven politics that insure high voter turnout. Her conclusion is that political discourse that is segregated by class is every bit as sterile and superficial as a discourse in which people may be arbitrarily excluded on the basis of their race, religion, or gender.

A book so ambitious can hardly be flawless. In some cases, the evidence provided does not always appear to fully support the claims Skocpol makes, particularly in earlier chapters on how the United States became a civic nation. Largely, this problem is simply a reflection of the paucity of evidence available, rather than an indictment of Skocpol's methods, which in some instances are quite novel and innovative. Overall, the flaws in this book are far outweighed by its virtues. *Diminished Democracy* should be required reading for democratic theorists, and is highly recommended for anyone worried about the future of democracy in the United States.

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