Review - Reforming Democracies

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KATHLEEN BRUHN, MAY 20 2013

Reforming Democracies: Six Facts about Politics that Demand a New Agenda
By: Douglas Chalmers
Columbia University Press, 2013.

In his long and distinguished career, Douglas Chalmers has focused primarily on the institutions of representative democracy, particularly political parties and civil society associations, and how they might better serve democratic ends. His latest book, *Reforming Democracies,* takes quite a different approach. Rather than coming up with new ideas for reforming the same old targets—electoral law, political parties, legislatures and the like—Chalmers suggests that we need to look in different places to improve democracy, a political system in which "the laws and policies promote the interests of the people" (p. 12). While elections and legislatures are important, they are just part of the story for Chalmers.

His ultimate goal is to argue that proponents of democracy need a reform agenda focused on an entirely different set of processes than scholars have traditionally covered. As Chalmers reminds us, our understanding of representative democracy comes from the anti-monarchical revolutions of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe and the mechanisms used to establish control of executive power, including electoral systems, judicial review, legislative

rules, party systems, and the like (p. 9). The problem of executive over-reach remains, but is not the only problem.

The book is not based on original empirical research. It does not recommend any specific reforms. It is not meant to correct the defects of any democracy in particular, but to highlight the failures of representation that confront all contemporary democracies, whether they are presidential or parliamentary, federalist or unitary, developed or developing. Since the costs of these failures of representation include reckless executives, corruption, and deadlock, there are potentially significant payoffs for successfully engaging in the reform agenda that Chalmers calls for.

Thus, the book gives us an aerial view of the canyons, crevices and holes in our theorizing about democratic institutions, from the perspective of a scholar who has spent fifty years or more wandering among the boulders and through the landscape of actually existing democracies. Chalmers lays out "six facts about politics…[that] expose six false but common assumptions about the process of democratic representation…[They] are common knowledge, but the common practice is to ignore them, to…simplify the analysis….[His] argument in this book is that we can no longer afford to treat these facts as troublesome details" (pp. 123-124).

The first two facts emphasize the impact of globalization on our conceptualization of democracy. Traditional conceptualizations define democracy in terms of decision-making within the boundaries of a nation-state. Decisions are made by and for the benefit of the citizens of a state (with current citizens determining who is or may become a citizen), and are binding within the territory over which that state maintains sovereign control. And yet, according to Fact One, many non-citizens also live within those boundaries. Information about their preferences and activities is necessary to make just and effective decisions even if the welfare of the citizens (rather than the non-citizens) remains the primary goal. The "real" citizens need the compliance of non-citizens for their own welfare; for example, it is useful for citizens if non-citizens know traffic laws. Similarly, if citizens want to design an effective immigration policy to maximize their own welfare, they will need to know a lot about immigrants: who they are, what they want, how they might respond to different kinds of policies, and so forth. It thus becomes important that immigrants be somehow represented in policy-making, in order to gather information from and about them. As Chalmers says, whether or not immigrants are citizens is a political decision. Whether or not immigrants are stakeholders is an empirical one. To ensure that policies promote the interests of the core citizens, democratic reformers must take into account the undeniable fact that millions of non-citizen stakeholders live among us.

Fact Two addresses a similar issue to fact one: nation-states act outside their national borders in ways that affect the citizens of other states. Both sides require information about the preferences, needs, and possible reactions of the other; again, what is needed is a more systematic and democratic process of representation to ensure that all stakeholders are heard, for the benefit of all.

The book proceeds in a similar fashion to raise four additional facts that require new norms to make sure that interests are heard in non-traditional venues and in non-traditional ways. Fact Three suggests that modern organizations emerge, collapse, and form alliances more quickly than previous models of political parties and civil society predict, partly due to technologies like the internet which make organizational formation and networking much cheaper and easier. New democratic institutions, therefore, should be more flexible to take the fluidity of associational life into account.

Fact Four is the flip side of Fact Three: personal ties and networks, perhaps the oldest form of human association, have not become obsolete in the modern world and despite tendencies to classify them as negative holdovers of the past (e.g. 'clientelism, or 'nepotism') these personal ties can have positive effects on democracy. Personal ties are flexible. They can break through the rigid walls created by bureaucracy and bring together people based on common interests and mutual trust.

Fact Five says that ideas matter. It matters how facts are interpreted, and how theories are formed to predict the effects of policy. Democracy is not merely about setting up fair rules to fight over whose interests will prevail; we also have to know what precisely to do to achieve our interests, and this is the role of ideas. Chalmers does not count himself within the "democratic deliberation" school, those who think that simply increasing the number of participants in decision-making will lead to a better and more democratic result. Deliberation for him involves networks of experts,

scholars, stakeholders, and managers, engaged in debates over the possible effects of policies. The democratic questions here involve convening those networks in such a way that they serve the people rather than a narrow group.

Finally, Fact Six notes that decisions about policies and laws are not just made in legislatures. In fact, by the time a law makes it to the floor of the Congress, it is already a done deal (or a cooked goose). We must therefore pay attention to what happens in agencies, backrooms, and conference halls.

Many of these facts point at least vaguely to networks and to informal norms as the mechanisms to be reformed and regulated according to democratic principles. How are such mechanisms to be reformed? What sort of norms should be put into place? How would they be enforced? What results might such reforms have? Chalmers neither answers nor intends to answer such questions. Political philosophy may ultimately have more to say about them than empirical political science. Certainly, the book generates no testable hypotheses or predictions.

The empirical social scientist, therefore, may find this book somewhat frustrating. Chalmers tells us where to look, but not what to look for. There are new actors involved—in particular, quasi-citizens (non-citizen stakeholders)—in new locations—in particular, decision networks—but you will scour in vain for a classic list of independent or dependent variables. Although the goal of the book is framed in causal terms, as an agenda to make reforms lead to better democratic outcomes, we are no closer at the end of the book to understanding how to define or measure either 'reforms' or 'better democratic outcomes.' That, however, is precisely the challenge that *Reforming Democracies* puts before us. The challenge may be best confronted by those who have cross-trained in multiple disciplines. Political science may be helpful as background but could also hamper the kind of creative thinking necessary to stop thinking about democracy in terms of elections and voting and parties. Interdisciplinary work in anthropology and political science, on the other hand, might lead one to consider how personal ties work in the political sphere. Sociology and communications might help one understand social network analysis in the internet age. Within political science itself, those scholars whose work crosses the boundaries of the traditional subfields, international relations and comparative politics for example, are also in a better position to understand the interplay of domestic and international norm formation. As Chalmers notes in the conclusion to his book, "There is much to do" (p. 141).

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