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Political Theory 2010 38: 268

DOI: 10.1177/0090591709354874

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Political Theory
38(2) 268–275
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DOI: 10.1177/0090591709354874
<http://ptx.sagepub.com>



Jeffrey Edward Green¹

In judging the worth of a work of political theory, much depends on whether the interpreter approaches the work in a strictly critical spirit or in a spirit of generosity. The clear conclusion to come out of Gerry Mackie's recent essay on Schumpeter, "Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy," demonstrates what can happen when the critical spirit runs rampant—for this conclusion is nothing other than: *don't read Schumpeter*. Schumpeter's democratic theory, Mackie tells us, is "insufficient," "implausible," "false," and "intellectually and morally incoherent."¹ I agree with the first of these claims—Schumpeter's theory is indeed insufficient and in need of elaboration—and it is also true that Schumpeter is guilty of numerous errors, but I want to resist the wholesale rejection of Schumpeter's democratic thought and address what I consider to be three virtues of Schumpeter's account that Mackie does not cover.

First, *the problem to which Schumpeter's theory attends—the crisis of representation—is real, even if Schumpeter presents this problem in hyperbolic terms*. Mackie argues that "the most puzzling feature of Schumpeter's rendition of democracy is his assertion that the electorate does not control the elected official."² While the assertion that the electorate has absolutely no control over its leaders seems extreme, I find no more persuasive the opposite contention—one that Mackie seems to endorse—that contemporary mass democracies unproblematically achieve representation by having leaders be both responsive and accountable to the electorate. In truth, the issues of responsiveness and accountability are at the heart of ongoing debates in democratic theory. There is intense debate, for example, about the power of public

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opinion in a democracy: how to measure it (scientific polling vs. deliberative polling), how often it actually makes an impact on government officials (even the most confident researchers now acknowledge that the power of opinion is constrained by issue salience), whether the current trend is toward more or less responsiveness (much research suggests the latter), and whether leaders in the twenty-first century have become experts at a kind of “crafted talk” which responds to constituents not by following their preferences but by only appearing to do so.³ There is debate, too, about how well elections (which tend to be binary, rare, reactive, and oriented around leadership selection) can articulate and enforce substantive decisions about policy. Mackie cites Bernard Manin’s theory of retrospective voting as conclusive positive evidence in this regard, but others have challenged the theory and there are different versions of retrospective voting, besides Manin’s, that are less sunny about the prospect of retrospective verdicts on an administration’s conduct being translatable into a prospective determination of laws and policies.⁴ Much would seem to depend on how well policies can be mapped on a single liberal–conservative continuum. The more this continuum is valid, the more likely occasional, binary, electoral decisions can be unpacked into substantive laws and policies; the less it is so, the more electoral decisions become divorced from policy consequences. Here, too, the literature is, characteristically, divided.⁵ Anyone working in democratic theory today cannot help but notice the antinomial structure of existing research—a problem that is only exacerbated by the difficulty, as old as the concept of representation itself, that there is no agreed standard of what constitutes adequate representation.

Schumpeter is of course a partisan in this dispute. He offers a shotgun shot of arguments about why representation does not work. Some of these arguments work better than others and Mackie is certainly right to challenge Schumpeter in a number of areas. (Mackie’s splendid study, *Democracy Defended*, for example, has persuasively shown that worries about the possibility of rationally aggregating individual preferences into a collective preference have been overstated as threats to the integrity of the democratic process.⁶) Yet there is one aspect of Schumpeter’s critique of representation that does seem both prescient and supported by subsequent research and that Mackie does not address. When Schumpeter takes aim at the “effective volition” of the ordinary citizen, he does not only indict the citizen’s competence and intelligence, but much more reasonably draws attention to the very real sense in which most citizens on most issues lack opinions, preferences, interests, and values waiting to be represented. For representation to work, government must not only be responsive and accountable to input from citizens, but this input must be present in the first place. Yet for most, politics

approaches us from without. Not asked to make legislative decisions, few of us have really thought out precisely what we would do if so empowered. "One has one's phrases, of course, and one's wishes and daydreams and grumbles; especially, one has one's likes and dislikes. But ordinarily they do not amount to what we call a will—a psychic counterpart of purposeful responsible action."⁷ If other aspects of Schumpeter's critique of a "classical doctrine" of democracy end up taking aim at a straw-man, here I believe Schumpeter makes a bold departure from the otherwise diverse democratic authors who preceded him—Rousseau, Publius, Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Tocqueville, Bryce, and others—who all in one way or another assumed the ordinary citizen to be a volitional being and, as such, the bearer of well-defined interests and preferences. Schumpeter's skepticism in this regard not only captures the phenomenology of everyday political life—which is defined much less by decision than the passive spectatorship of others who decide—but has been supported by influential subsequent studies, whether Converse's discovery of the prevalence of "nonattitudes" in the electorate or more recent insights from Zaller and others into the fundamental importance of ambiguity in citizens' opinions and the way in which reported opinions are constructed on the spot in conjunction with the questioner.⁸

Representation is in crisis not necessarily because it doesn't work at all, but because the degree, extent, and mechanics of its workability are subject to intense and seemingly unending dispute. If we remain foggy about just what representation requires and how well any current government satisfies it, we lack a clear criterion for measuring popular empowerment in any given instance. Schumpeter's effort to provide a nonrepresentational account of democracy offers citizens a way to bypass this confusion. Furthermore, representation is in crisis because, even if it exists, it refers to only a bare fraction of our political lives. Most of us most of the time are not articulating inputs that a government might translate into laws and policies. Here, too, Schumpeter's nonrepresentational theory of democracy has a role to play, offering a democratic theory capable of speaking to ordinary citizens in the course of their everyday lives. All of this depends, of course, on Schumpeter's theory containing a moral dimension.

Second, *Schumpeter's theory of competitive elites is, despite all claims to the contrary, a normative theory; it is so, because competition is a moral ideal that progressive reformers can attempt to maximize.* There are alternative democratic ideals besides representation and Schumpeter's great achievement was to discover one of these: the ideal of competition—specifically, the "competitive struggle" elites undergo as part of maintaining power in a democratic society. This notion of competition might seem familiar, but it

actually contains novel elements. Although subsequent economic theories of democracy cite Schumpeter as their progenitor, in fact there is an important discontinuity between economic modes of competition (which assume that consumers—or voters—have some prior, well-defined interests that firms—or candidates—compete to satisfy) and the existential form Schumpeter's theory highlights.⁹ Schumpeter, after all, was altogether skeptical about the stability and even the existence of the electorate's demands for specific policy outcomes. What the "competitive struggle" indicated for Schumpeter, therefore, was that those who hope to win and maintain power in a democracy must, as a condition of democracy itself, regularly undergo the risk and uncertainty of having their positions challenged in open and public contestations.

Mackie remains unimpressed by the notion of competition, writing blithely "If it is Schumpeterian to acknowledge that competitive election is a necessary condition of representative democracy, then we are all Schumpeterians."¹⁰ But this is to overlook that competition itself can be maximized—both within the electoral system and outside it. First of all, not all elections are equally competitive: some place leaders under stress and contestation in a deeper way and for a longer time. Moreover, competition can be applied to various other practices—like debates, press conferences, public addresses, trials, and investigations—that a progressive Schumpeterian would want to see extended and reformed with an eye toward making the experience of power-holding in democracy less immunized from risk.

It is true that Schumpeter's own presentation of the notion of "competitive struggle" obscured its moral status. For one thing, Schumpeter argued in one memorable passage that democracy properly understood was merely a method of leadership selection—that it therefore had only a descriptive function, not a prescriptive (moral) one too.¹¹ For another, Schumpeter explicitly argued against extending the existential competition endured by leaders as a result of the electoral process beyond election time, claiming that once leaders had won an election they should be left free to govern up until their next electoral challenge.¹² These are mistakes in my view, but they speak more to Schumpeter's self-understanding of his theory, rather than the genuine ethical potential of the theory itself. No matter what Schumpeter might claim, there is the fundamental fact that the central dynamic he thematizes—existential competition—is neither a binary nor a simple term: there are degrees of competitiveness and multiple domains within the political sphere in which it might be applied. That Schumpeter did not think such an extension of competition was advisable did not mean that it would not be possible—indeed the very force of Schumpeter's argument requires that it is possible. Furthermore, while Mackie is right to criticize Schumpeter for his hyperpositivism (for his

pretension to be providing a nonnormative account of democracy), the very logic of this critique suggests an implicit ethical dimension to Schumpeter's thought. The descriptive-prescriptive distinction is now widely considered to be suspect because we recognize that it is impossible to cleanly separate a domain of fact from one of value.¹³ But if this is the case, then we should expect Schumpeter's apparent positivism to conceal real moral concerns. Mackie interprets Schumpeter's implicit values uncharitably—in terms of reactionary Toryism and a penchant for authoritarianism—but there is a rich and progressive ethical universe implied in the very “method” Schumpeter's democratic theory mistakenly celebrates as a positivistic achievement: the institutionalized risks and challenges that a democratic society, unique among political regimes, routinely compels its powerholders to undergo.

Third, *Schumpeter is a keen observer of democratic theory's tendency toward self-deception—specifically, its strange capacity to remain blind in theory to pathologies and disappointments that are obvious features of the actual experience of democratic life.* What is not often appreciated about Schumpeter is how unoriginal and obvious he thought his criticisms of democracy were: he admitted “most students of politics have by now come to accept the criticisms leveled at the classical doctrine”—that is, most in his view already acknowledged in his view the problematic character of such notions as the common good and the popular will, the lack of effective volition in large portions of the electorate, and the fundamental difference between electoral decisions (in which ordinary citizens could participate) and legislative decisions about issues and policies (in which they could not). Yet what fascinated Schumpeter was how the obvious could still be denied. It is worth pointing out in this regard Schumpeter's opening lines to the democratic theory section of *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*: “Nothing is so treacherous as the obvious.” Politicians and political scientists were at once fully cognizant of the irrationality and fundamental falsity of interpreting democracy in terms of the People's ability to legislate laws and policies, yet strangely could find no other way to talk publicly about the meaning of democratic government. “The more untenable it [the classical doctrine] was being proved to be, the more completely it dominated the official phraseology and the rhetoric of the politician.” Likewise, Schumpeter could ask: “But how is it possible that a doctrine so patently contrary to fact should have survived to this day and continued to hold its place in the hearts of the people and in the official language of governments?”¹⁴

One need not accept Schumpeter's critique of the classical doctrine in its entirety to accept the truth of his insight about democracy's profound inability to confront the genuine sense in which the People—and the everyday citizens

who comprise it—do *not* author the laws under which they live. Mackie himself illustrates this tendency. It is never entirely clear, for example, whether Mackie's defense of traditional democratic concepts—like responsiveness, accountability, the common good, the popular will, and representation—is an insistence that such notions adequately characterize contemporary political reality or whether, more modestly, they are the ideals which ought to guide a rigorous process of democratic reform. Declarations like—“In a proper democracy, voters mostly control parliaments, and parliaments mostly control leaders, through public opinion between elections, and ultimately through retrospective voting in recurrent elections”—leave the most essential question unanswered: are democracies actually functioning as they should?¹⁵ This is, as I've suggested, a highly complex question, but even Mackie's treatment of important subissues, like retrospective voting, are infused with an optimism that exceeds the evidence. Even though retrospective voting is a theory that strictly speaking ought to include the pessimistic acknowledgment that the electorate is confined to the limited articulacy of binary verdicts on an administration's past performance (and thus lacks the prospective, legislative capacity assumed by democratic idealists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), Mackie presents it as consistent with the very prospective function it would seem to negate. Indeed, Mackie concludes his treatment of retrospective voting with the addendum: “Voters also control officials prospectively, through the selection of one candidate over another”—thereby declaring without evidence the functionality of democracy's most basic, yet truthfully most uncertain, promise.¹⁶

Schumpeter has his own explanations for democratic theory's penchant for self-deception, including the suggestion that democracy has replaced faith in God, so that the need for democracy to be immaculate in its workability takes on an extra-rational, compulsive aspect. Whether or not this is so, what seems especially true is the insight that democratic theory is dispositionally challenged in its ability to confront the obvious—nonparticipation, nondecision, hierarchy, nonpreference, spectatorial passivity—as foundational features of everyday political life in today's democracies. Schumpeter's democratic theory does attend to these unfortunate realities and the fact that it does so is the crucial reason that his contribution, despite its bravado and various mistakes, has a legitimate place in the canon of democratic thought.

Notes

1. Gerry Mackie, “Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy,” *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 2, 4, 13, 23.
2. Gerry Mackie, “Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy,” *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 44.

3. For an overview of the difficult question of how responsive leaders are to public opinion, see Paul Burstein, "The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and Agenda" *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (2003): 29-40; for the claim that responsiveness is on the decline as politicians increasingly engage in "crafted talk," see Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
4. V.O. Key, the originator of the theory, had a slightly darker view, claiming that it would be "a mischievous error to assume, because a candidate wins, that a majority of the electorate shares his views on public questions, approves his past actions, or has specific expectations about his future conduct" (*The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1966]). For a critique of retrospective voting, see Adam Przeworski, "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense," in *Democracy's Value*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 36-38.
5. For a recent discussion of standard methods of gauging ideology on a conservatism-liberalism scale, see Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 254-57. For skepticism regarding the measurement and applicability of the liberal-conservative continuum—especially with regard to ordinary, unsophisticated citizens—see William Haltom, "Liberal-Conservative Continua: A Comparison of Measures," *Western Political Quarterly* 43 (June 1990): 387-401; Adam J. Schiffer, "I'm Not That Liberal: Explaining Conservative Democratic Alignment," *Political Behavior* 22 (December 2000): 293-310.
6. Gerry Mackie, *Democracy Defended* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
7. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942), 261.
8. Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (London: Free Press of Glencoe), 1964; John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
9. Anthony Downs, a pioneer of the economic model of democracy, credits Schumpeter's influence: "Schumpeter's profound analysis of democracy forms the inspiration and foundation of our whole thesis, and our debt and gratitude to him are great indeed" (*An Economic Theory of Democracy* [New York: Harper, 1967], 29fn11). This credit is inappropriate because, as I am explaining here, Schumpeter's account undercuts the definition of the People as consumers with exogenous demands.

10. Gerry Mackie, "Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy," *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 149.
11. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 242.
12. *Ibid.*, 295.
13. See, e.g., Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
14. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*, 235, 249, 264-65, 269.
15. Gerry Mackie, "Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy," *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 129.
16. Gerry Mackie, "Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy," *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 145.

Bio

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