

Susan Stokes: Meeting the Moment - Democracy In Crisis and How Political Scientists Can Respond

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In 1992, just as the third wave of democratization began to peak across Latin America, a very different sort of political order was taking shape in Peru. Frustrated with opposition to his bait-and-switch economic policies by Congress and the courts, the popularly elected President, Alberto Fujimori, called out the tanks, launching a widely supported self-coup that would effectively keep him in power for another eight years.

Nearly 4,000 miles away, Susan Stokes, then a brand-new assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago, began to process what was happening in a country where she had long conducted field research. Stokes notes:

I remember all of us were interested on campus in what was going on in Peru; we were trying to make sense of it, trying to understand the motivations, and the public's support for it. My colleagues were so great. It was a place where people just really took ideas seriously and they argued with you. I remember the reaction of a lot of people, including myself, was "Wow, that's just so undemocratic and bad." There is always this initial normative judgment, but then I was in an academic community where other people say, "OK, fine, you're saying it's really bad, but why exactly did it happen?" And so then you kind of move from a gut normative reaction to one that is much more analytical about what this means for democratic theory and how representation actually works.

The result was her award-winning book, *Mandates and Democracy*. The process that produced it—identifying a puzzle sparked by important events in the world, engaging in a robust back-and-forth dialogue with colleagues, developing a nuanced theory and using a rigorous empirical approach to examine it, and embedding the analysis in a broader normative reflection—was hardly unique to that book. It marks all of Stokes' research. It is what gives her work such richness and depth, and it is what makes her research resonate so widely with scholars across the discipline. It is also the same approach she teaches all of her students: find an important question to which you think you initially know the answer, then push yourself to really consider of all the possible angles. Often it is precisely the things that we think we understand the easy answers to that end up being the most interesting and rewarding puzzles to solve.

On a deeper level, Stokes' approach to political science belies a profound commitment to the life of the mind. As anyone who has interacted with her knows, her curiosity about the world and keen interest in learning new things often makes her seem



Pictured above: Susan Stokes

wholly unfazed by her own success. Eli Rau, one of her most recent graduate students, put it perfectly: "She is remarkably humble for someone as accomplished as she is." Another of her former graduate students, Matthew Cleary, had this to say: "In terms of general mentorship, I would describe her as being really unassuming and understated, which stood out at Chicago because the academic style tended to be blunt and aggressive. So when we disagreed on some point, she would usually just say something like 'Well, think about it,' and then let the point go. I would think about it later and usually ended up deciding that she was right. But she was never out to score points." Noam Lupu, another of her former graduate students, echoes exactly the same sentiment, "Sue is down-to-earth, a real person. Unassuming and understated, she is also genuine and unafraid to show that she's a real human being. Although she knew much more than I did about the topics and the cases I was studying, she always took seriously what I had to say. She certainly said so when she disagreed and she nudged me if she thought the

claim needed to be tweaked, but she always did it from a position of curiosity, trying to make sense of what she knew, and how I saw things, never from a place of judgment or superiority."

I was Stokes' graduate student during her early years at the University of Chicago. In my own experience, she has always modeled the very best of what academic life is all about, or should be all about. Unlike Stokes, I did not come from an academic background (my father had an undergraduate degree in business from San Jose State, my mother dropped out of community college within the first month of attending). Raised to get along with people largely by agreeing with them, particularly those in positions of authority, I was decidedly ill-prepared for the norms of the University of Chicago political science department in the '90s. From the outset, Stokes made me feel like I nevertheless belonged there. Watching her engage in an intellectual debate offered me a master class in learning how to voice my own thoughts without taking disagreements over ideas personally. I distinctly remember her saying to me when I was her graduate student, something to the effect that one of the "coolest things" about being a professor is that you get to learn new stuff all the time. That has stayed with me and is something I often still think about and pass on to my own students. As Stokes has impressed upon me again and again by her own example, the ultimate goal is always to remain as open to learning from others as it is to teach those around you what you know.

IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

Stokes' curiosity about politics and the world around her began early. Her father, of course, was Donald Stokes, one of the most renowned political science professors of the twentieth century and a founder of the Michigan School approach. Yet, in many ways, it was her mother, Sybil Stokes, who arguably had even more influence on Stokes' early interest in the world around her. When Stokes' parents began dating in the '50s, they were both ABD in Yale's Political Science Department. At the time, Sybil was the sole female graduate student in the program; back then there were not any female professors in the department (Susan Rose-Ackerman would later join Yale's Political Science Department as the first female faculty member in 1972). As a child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Stokes' mother was interested in comparative politics, earning a Fulbright to conduct field research for her dissertation in Australia. Typical of the time, however, when Stokes' father asked her mother to marry him, her mother turned down the Fulbright, opting not to finish her degree. But Sybil, Stokes recalls fondly, remained deeply engaged in both higher education and politics throughout the rest of her life.

Growing up with her older sister in Ann Arbor, Michigan during the tumult of '60s and '70s, Stokes discussed her mother's commitment to civil rights and to feminism, including co-founding the Center for Educational Women at the University of Michigan, which was oriented towards helping women go back to school who had dropped out for family reasons. As Stokes put it:

There was just a lot of activism on campus at the University of Michigan at that time that made us really aware of politics and the broader world. Growing up, I didn't really think about becoming a political scientist at all. It was more like an orientation and general interest in politics and in theorizing about why things were going on. Sitting around

the dinner table we would talk about that. In some of those conversations, I think I remember being introduced to the idea of statistical controls, but it was all part of a broader conversation about what was going on in the real world.

In high school, Stokes followed in her father's footsteps, attending the Quaker Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia, which he had attended as a boy. With her own parents still living in Ann Arbor, and later in Princeton, Stokes boarded with the same host family until she graduated. "It was a really wonderful experience," Stokes remembers, "they had a lot of foreign students attending Germantown Friends, who also stayed with the family as well, and they used to joke that I was the exchange student from 'exotic' Michigan." It was also during high school that Stokes discovered her love of Spanish and first travelled to Latin America.

By the time Stokes began college at Harvard-Radcliffe in the late '70s, she was fluent in Spanish and had already spent several summers doing community development projects in rural Mexico. She had also, by that time, developed a large network of friends from the region and felt deeply connected to the culture. Majoring in anthropology as an undergraduate was a natural fit. Towards the end of college, Stokes briefly thought about pursuing a law degree after graduating, "I think everyone sort of assumed that's what I would do." Her experience attending a law school class convinced her otherwise, "There were a lot of smart people, but no one seemed really interested in what was going on in the classroom."

This stood in sharp contrast to her experience studying anthropology in the '80s; "There were some great scholars who were really active in that era. I remember reading stuff by Marshall Sahlins, who was at the University of Chicago and, of course, reading work by Clifford Geertz, who was also doing very exciting work in the '70s." The capstone experience of her undergraduate career was taking a graduate course from the Harvard Anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah, whom Stokes recalled as an exceptionally dynamic teacher. "They let a few undergraduates take the course and it was such an exciting experience—there was just electricity in the air. The graduate students were really interested, and you know everyone was sort of hanging on every word. The professor was brilliant, but also made everything very accessible. And I think it was at that point where I decided, yeah, this seems like a really fun thing to do."

In 1981, having written her undergraduate thesis on Mexico, Stokes graduated magna cum laude and had a Fulbright lined up to conduct research in Peru the following year. Although the initial project she proposed had focused on land reform in the Andean highlands, Stokes quickly became involved in a cultural survival project focused on the oral history of working class life in Lima and decided to stay in the city, "It was just so great to be a part of this group organized by this very charismatic world historian, Steve Stern, and to have weekly meetings and to see how everyone's research took shape. It was also a really challenging, but very exciting, time to be in Peru. On the one hand, the Sendero Luminoso were just starting to become active, but it was also a period where in Peru there was kind of effervescence around democratizing and the revival of party politics."

TRANSITIONING FROM ANTHROPOLOGY TO POLITICAL SCIENCE: THE BEST OF BOTH DISCIPLINES

Stokes' abiding interest in Latin America continued during grad-

uate school at Stanford, where she ultimately made the disciplinary transition from focusing on anthropology to political science. Her dissertation, which later became her first book, *Cultures in Conflict: Social Movements and the State in Peru*, is a perfect testament to the power of training in both fields. In dialogue with both James Scott's classic, *Weapons of Weak*, and Theda Skocpol's epic, *States and Social Revolutions*, *Cultures in Conflict* adopts a novel Gramscian approach to distinguish between the cultural frames of two groups of urban poor: clients and radicals. Steeped in a participant-observation approach, the book explores how Velasco's leftist military regime, which ruled Peru during the '70s, inadvertently ended up radicalizing certain sectors of the poor. As Stokes recalls, "Given my anthropology background, my instinct was to do extensive field research, to spend a lot of time in the squatter community and really get to know people, to go to the soup kitchen and help cook and kind of throw myself into it. I'd have conversations with people where they talk about their experiences during the military regime, which was still very fresh in people's minds."

The book also deployed the latest survey research methods used in political science at the time, which enabled her to establish the connection between the military's radicalizing project and mass public opinion. Having gone through ICPSR methods training in Ann Arbor the summer before conducting her field work, Stokes recalls the monumental effort it took both to get a random sample of respondents—she relied on lists available through Peru's National Vote Registry and then used skip numbers to generate her sample—and then to actually deploy the survey.

She reminisced:

This was way back, there was no Internet, and we were just barely beginning to use personal computers. And I had these surveys and then organized a team of kids in this local neighborhood in Independencia. Over a series of weekends, we would all go out and conduct the surveys. I couldn't even copy the surveys, though, so I remembered literally going out and buying this big, cheap suitcase and I stuffed all of the forms into it. I refused to check it in at the airport when I flew home. I just shoved it under my seat and I remember the flight attendant walking past me and glaring at me because I had this ridiculously big thing, but I was terrified I would lose it—it was such a big part of the dissertation.

The project also bred Stokes' enduring interest in political parties and party systems. This was a unique period in Peru's political history when, despite severe economic problems and growing violence associated with the Sendero Luminoso, the country's young democracy enjoyed a vibrant, albeit nascent, competitive party system. Whereas prior to the military regime, APRA had largely dominated the political landscape, after the transition to democracy in 1982, multiple parties across the ideological spectrum emerged. That such a party system also considerably complicated the linkages between voters and politicians was not lost on Stokes. Still, she notes, "The fact that the system could then collapse like a house of cards under Fujimori was amazing." Among the various institutional changes ushered in after the 1992 self-coup, Fujimori lowered even further the barriers to entry for political parties, so the number of new parties grew and partisan attachments became even weaker. This

is the party system, such as it is, that largely remains in effect in Peru today.

THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION AND THE EARLY CHICAGO YEARS

An intellectual community is everything, especially for a young scholar. From Stokes' perspective, she could not have been more fortunate on this front. From her first job at the University of Washington, where Margaret Levi played an important role as her mentor, to the University of Chicago, where she joined an exceptional group of faculty, including Adam Przeworski, Jon Elster, Bernard Manin, David Laitin, Jim Fearon, and, later, Carlos Boix—Stokes' research interests, as well as her methodological toolkit, continued to broaden and evolve. But fundamental throughlines—an abiding interest in clientelism, parties, and democracy, as well as a deep commitment to conducting field work—clearly remained central to her scholarship.

Still focused on democratization in Latin America, in the mid '90s Stokes became especially struck by the puzzle of why so many elected leaders across the region were able to successfully pull off profound policy switches—campaigning on an anti-neoliberal economic platform and then implementing major neoliberal reforms—and what such switches tell us about the quality and health of democracy and representation.

Stokes' second solo-authored book, *Mandates and Democracy*, develops a rational choice theory of policy switches that depicts such politicians as unresponsive, but not necessarily unrepresentative. The book develops the counter-intuitive thesis that politicians who want to be elected will indeed lie about their policy preferences to get elected (this is the "bait"), but only "switch" if they think that pursuing such policy preferences is also in the voters' best longer-run interest. Whether this gamble is born out, ultimately then depends on the outcome of the economic policies; such policies have must be sufficiently successful for voters to update their preferences, and thus to choose to keep the incumbent party in office.

As Stokes recalls, "In the beginning, the process of understanding it was sort of like knocking your head against the wall, but I kept saying I really want to figure this out. It took a lot of thinking and working through alternative hypotheses, but I also have to say it really felt like research was such a community affair. At the time, I was a young assistant professor at the University of Chicago; it was just so important that kind of back-and-forth dialogue for doing good work."

The book skillfully deploys an original cross-sectional dataset on Latin American administrations to explore a range of testable implications that emerge from the theory, but it is the three case studies—Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Carlos Andres Pérez in Venezuela that, at least in my opinion, provide the most compelling support for the model. In a masterful series of analytic narratives, the book draws on a series of interviews to establish key pieces of the theory: what politicians thought voters wanted, what politicians were willing to do to get elected, roughly when they knew the economic policies they were campaigning on were bogus, and how much they believed that the economic policies that they would ultimately purpose would be successful.

This is precisely the part of the book that also brought her roots in anthropology into the service of testing the more economic style theorizing associated with University of Chicago

political science in that era. And interestingly, as Stokes recalls, it was the part that raised the most initial skepticism among some of her colleagues at the time.

They kept saying to me, "well, the politicians aren't going to just tell you. Why would they reveal it to you? You know they're not going to be honest." But I remember thinking—and this is the advice I still give to students— you can talk to people. Of course, you know that politicians kind of blow smoke in your eyes and they say the things that sound like politicians, but then you also talk to their staff members. You talk to people who are involved in advising them and they will be a lot more frank than you might think. So ultimately, you can learn a lot more from those people. I think that's an important lesson.

Mandates and Democracy went on to win multiple awards, including the Mattei Dogan Award for the Best Comparative Book of the Year in 2002, as well as the George H. Hallet Award at APSA in 2016 for a lasting contribution to the literature on representation and electoral systems. The book also cemented Stokes' reputation as a leading comparative scholar of political parties. The provocative discussion of the role parties play in either engendering or undermining democratic responsiveness is further developed in her widely influential 1999 *Annual Review* article, "Political Parties and Democracy." The core themes she explored there —whether parties are internally unified or divided, and, what, exactly, are party leaders and/or activists trying to maximize— set a new agenda for how to conceptualize the role of parties in order to then gauge why and when parties succeed or fail in faithfully representing voters' preferences. This agenda, as the next section describes, would continue to play out in Stokes' own work as well.

In the meantime, as Stokes' career advanced in the early 2000s, she also began a series of scholarly collaborations with colleagues at University of Chicago and beyond that would prove incredibly influential, including co-editing volumes on topics ranging from accountability (*Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, co-edited by Adam Przeworski and Bernard Manin), and the *Oxford University Press Handbook on Comparative Politics* (co-edited with Carles Boix). It was also during this period that Stokes (and Carles Boix) published, "Endogenous Democratization" in *World Politics*. In the true spirit of the University of Chicago's commitment to argue seriously about ideas, the article directly challenged her colleague, Adam Przeworski's, foundational finding that economic development does not correlate with dictatorships to transitioning to democracy. Drawing on historical data, Boix and Stokes showed otherwise, thus effectively re-opening the debate over modernization theory among comparativists.

THE YALE YEARS AND THE RETURN TO CLIENTELISM

In 2005, some 50 years after her parents had met at Yale, Stokes moved to New Haven with her husband, Steven Pincus, a leading historian of early modern British history, perhaps best known for his epic book, *1688: The First Modern Revolution*. She joined the Yale department as the John S. Saden Professor of Political Science and became the Director of the Yale Program on Democracy. By this point, Stokes was also mother to three boys: Sam, David, and Andy. Much like the home she had grown up in, the Stokes-Pincus household was welcoming, live-

ly, and intellectually vibrant. I remember staying with Stokes and her family in their beautiful rambling Tudor house one summer and walking with her to campus each day for Don Greene's short course on experiments. Evenings were spent discussing the pros and cons of experiments in political science, chatting with the boys and colleagues over Steve's delicious meals, and playing with their giant Saint Bernard, Tobey (short for Toblerone).

Professionally, just as she had at University of Chicago, Stokes continued to expand her methodological toolkit and to engage deeply in debates with her colleagues at Yale, many of whom were leading the charge for experimental research and causal inference. Her chapter, "A Defense of Observational Research" published in 2014 in Dawn Teel's wonderful thoughtful edited book, *Field Experiments and their Critics*, is an exemplar of both Stokes' perennial openness to new approaches, as well as her willingness to push back against the kind of all-or-nothing methodological commitments that marked much of the discipline's early work on causal inference. I highly recommend reading her short essay, which stands as a crucial reminder to the discipline to continue to engage in question or problem-driven research. The chapter is also an important defense of continuing to study mechanisms, as opposed to simply generating research designs in order to identify the causal effect of a treatment.

It was also during this period that Stokes returned to focus on clientelism, co-authoring what would become one of the discipline's most influential contributions to the topic. The book-length project, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*, which ultimately took roughly a decade to complete, was a truly collaborative effort, involving Argentinian scholars, Valeria Brusco and Marcelo Nazareno, and, eventually, Stokes' Yale colleague at the time, Thad Dunning. Whereas, her first book had treated clientelism, in Stokes' words, more as a "shared mental construct—a certain way of thinking about one's place in the world"—this project took a much more theoretical approach. In it, one sees both Stokes' commitment to rational choice as a useful methodological tool for understanding motives and tradeoffs, as well as the inherent usefulness of her approach to studying parties as heterogeneous entities.

Describing the process of working through the book's argument during our interview for this biography, Stokes recalled:

Like my earlier book, *Mandates*, there was this puzzle that we just couldn't figure out. If things really worked as they were supposed to in all those great papers about clientelism by people like Dixit and Londregan or Cox and McCubbins, then political parties would have been using their resources on swing voters, writing off opposing voters and just counting on core supporters. But that just didn't seem like what we were finding in the data. We were finding that there were a lot of resources going to a strong base. So it just took us a long time to crack that nut and it was worth it. It was frustrating sometimes, and it definitely forced us to do additional theorizing. I mean, that's where this idea of kind of breaking apart the political parties and thinking of them not as monolithic, homogenous, entities became really useful. The idea that parties could be composed of brokers and politicians, and that these groups have to some extent overlapping, but also conflicting interests, was how we were able to make sense of the empirical patterns in the data.

The effort was indeed well worth it: the book won both the Luebbert Prize at APSA in 2013 for the Best Book in Comparative Politics, as well as the Best Book Prize for the Democratization section at APSA in 2014. It is easy to see why: the book is simply astounding in its rigor, depth, and breadth. It moves from developing new formal micro-foundations for clientelism to exploring and testing the multiple implications of the theory with an array of original survey evidence on brokers and voters across Argentina, Venezuela, and India. The second half of the book, in turn, offers a macro-structural account, using again the heterogenous party approach to show how the tensions between party activists and party brokers played out differently in Britain and the US during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Finally, similar to her previous books, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism* concludes by situating her findings within a much broader normative debate rooted in classic and contemporary political theory. Although the book ultimately rejects arguments sympathetic to clientelism, the quality of the discussion of exactly how and why clientelism harms voters is truly illuminating.

Along the way, the clientelism project also produced several major articles, including one of my very favorite articles by Stokes, entitled, "Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina," which I remember her editing at Valeria's kitchen table in Cordoba, Argentina with her newborn son, David, peacefully asleep on her lap (not yet then a mother myself, I also recall thinking how seamlessly Stokes seemed to combine motherhood and academia, which no doubt helped inspire me to imagine that I could do it as well). Published in the *APSR* in 2006, "Perverse Accountability" underscores the commitment problem that besets clientelism: why should voters follow through with their promise to support a party from whom they have already received hand-outs? Drawing on extensive survey data, Stokes showed that the answer lies in the monitoring environment. Specifically, compared to larger, and more anonymous settings, such as cities, small towns and villages, she showed, serve to make the threat of punishing voters who renege far more credible; hence, vote-buying becomes far more attractive to parties in such contexts. The article, which stands as a model of how to combine substantive research with an elegant formal model, garnered the Heinz Eulau Prize for Best Article published in the *APSR* in 2006.

ON DEMOCRACY: PARTICIPATION, PROTEST AND BACKSLIDING

During the 2016 presidential election in the United States, many scholars—particularly those who have studied comparative politics in unstable democracies—became increasingly concerned about emerging threats to democracy in America and increasingly willing to voice such concerns publicly. Stokes led the way for many of us, myself included, to use our expertise to flag the challenges democracies around the world currently face. As her former student, Eli Rau described to me:

I had a meeting with Sue two days after the 2016 election. While a lot of people were still in a stunned phase, she was already thinking about what to actually do. And that's been a common theme with all of the threats to democracy [we have faced] since then. She has never been prone to irrational optimism about the situation, but nor does she ever seem to get caught up in worry and hopelessness; instead, she's often one of the first to get started on putting her skills

to the best use in response and is constantly encouraging me to stay focused on pressing forward and actually doing something rather than worrying.

In the days leading up to the 2016 election, I had a remarkably similar experience involving Susan. I remember sitting in the nook in my kitchen and deciding to write an open public letter expressing the concerns of political scientists to Trump's campaign rhetoric, including his refusal to commit to accepting the results of the election if they did not break in his favor. Having never personally engaged in any kind of intellectual "activism" before, my first instinct, as it so often is in any new professional situation, was to call Susan for advice and help. Along with John Carey, Susan and I then drafted and circulated a letter chronicling the potential threats posed by a Trump presidency. In less than 48 hours (and due entirely to John's and Susan's incredible professional networks), the letter was signed by hundreds of political scientists across the country, including many former APSA presidents.

Following the shock of Trump's electoral college win, the three of us, along with Brendan Nyhan, then launched Bright Line Watch (BLW). The mission of BLW has always been to bridge the gap between academia and the broader public, providing a clear gauge of the health of American democracy based on dozens of indicators using both expert and public surveys. Through a combination of making widely available regular reports of our surveys, holding conferences at various institutions, publishing academic peer-reviewed papers, and engaging in sustained outreach with the media, Bright Line Watch has consistently been at the forefront of public debate about the state of American democracy throughout these past eight plus years.

Shortly after helping to form Bright Line Watch, Stokes left Yale and returned to the University of Chicago with her family in 2018. Eager to continue to build public-facing academic institutions committed to supporting research on democracy, Stokes launched the University of Chicago's Democracy Center. In addition to housing Bright Line Watch, the new Center has become a vibrant intellectual hub on campus, offering a wide mix of public and academic programming.

It was also during this period of witnessing accelerated democratic backsliding in the US and around the globe, that Stokes completed another book manuscript, entitled, *Why Bother: Rethinking Political Participation in Elections and Protests* (co-authored with S. Erdem Aytac). Perhaps more so than any of her other books, the impetus for writing it—to revisit the classic rational choice paradox of voting and extend it to protests—was largely theoretical. Describing to me the intellectual evolution of *Why Bother?* Stokes began:

Both my co-author and I started very much with soft rational choice instincts, but I think we ended up feeling that when it comes to understanding mass behavior things become really psychological. So if we want to understand why people participate in protests and elections and all kinds of collective action, especially when there is zero chance that individual participation is going to make a difference, we can only really make sense of that by thinking about how people feel when they care, but *don't* participate. The way that we conceptualized this then was to think about the cost of abstention. This still sounds a bit like the classic rational

choice approach I suppose, but the costs are really psychological and emotional in our story.

The importance of emotions for understanding mass behavior also marks Stokes' excellent and very accessible forthcoming book, *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. In a literature now filled with accounts of how democracies die, the book engages more with the puzzle of why it is that democracies are dying now.

Connecting globalization and the attendant rise of inequality, the book identifies two distinct pathways to the same outcome of democratic erosion. One, more common in the global North, takes the form of ethno-nationalism on the right. The other, more common in the global South, takes the form of left-wing populism. In both types of cases, leaders seek to erode constraints on their power—be they horizontal or vertical—by exploiting polarization, but also by engaging in what Stokes labels, "trash-talking."

It is this second strategy of "trash-talking," she argues, that creates additional space for leaders to successfully attack other institutions. As she flags in one of the final chapters of the book, "What exactly is going on here will require more research to answer with confidence. But it hints at non-cognitive reactions to stimuli. In this case, people might have been soured by a diatribe against an institution, and therefore to have been willing to countenance violations of it, without that reaction rising to the level of conscious changes in perceptions... It may well be that politician's words can stir us to anger, even if we do not believe all of the 'facts' that they offer us (Stokes 2025, 179-180)."

Stokes' latest book also serves to underscore the importance of continuing to adopt new methods and theoretical approaches—in this case, using survey experiments rooted in exploring psychological mechanisms and employing text analysis of leaders' speeches. Written for both an academic and a broader lay audience, *Backsliders*, may deploy some of the latest methodologies, but is clearly driven by Stokes' overriding concern about the global state of democracy. "I think that's how I've always operated," she notes, "I always want to understand at a deeper level why something is happening that seems to be really troubling on the surface. But it's also really important to talk to colleagues, family, and non-academic friends to see if they also think the puzzle is that interesting. If their eyes sort of glaze over, that's probably a sign that maybe it's not a great topic." Given the latest turn in American politics, it is hard to imagine a more relevant or timely piece of research.

ON LEADERSHIP

Great leadership is rooted in recognizing and encouraging the best qualities of the people around you. Stokes has done precisely this throughout her career. Ask her about her time as Chair of Yale's Political Science Department (she served in the role from 2009-2014), for example, and she will instantly tell you how amazed she was at her colleagues' willingness to step up and help the department. Of course, if pressed, she'll also acknowledge some of the harder elements of the job, which any person who has been Department Chair knows all too well. But, characteristic of Stokes, she dwells almost exclusively on the positive. In our recent conversation about becoming the new APSA president, she brought the same eagerness to credit those around her, sharing this observation with me, "You know, I was so honored to be asked to become the president of our association. It is a lot of work, but one of the huge plus sides is that you kind of figure out who the helpers are and you discover that you have colleagues who are just amazingly generous with their time and energy; for me, those people just kind of confirm your sense that humanity is worth it. Even if we get ourselves into some really bad situations, people can come up with these incredibly inventive solutions."

Great leadership, of course, also requires meeting the moment. It involves building bridges and finding common ground with people, including those with whom you disagree. Perhaps never before, when both democracy and academia itself are under growing threat, has this skill been more important to cultivate. As Stokes steps into the role of APSA President, she is acutely aware of the challenges such a position entails at this particular moment in history. It means nurturing empathy and understanding across political and social divides, but it also necessitates thoughtful action on the part of everyone.

This is precisely the message with which her forthcoming book on democratic backsliding ends and with which with her approach to leading APSA begins. In her own words, "We can't just pretend that these are normal times. We have to rise to the occasion. We are in the middle of a crisis, we are living in a time of unprecedented attacks on universities, science, and on expertise. There is a lot of uncertainty and many people are frightened by what is happening around them." In typical Susan Stokes fashion, though, such challenges only inspire her to action and to service. "My main goal," she continued, "is to give people a sense that they don't have to be passive, that there are things that we can do, that we don't need to fall apart and that we can keep working together."

Susan Stokes, I am certain, would have always been a natural choice for APSA president. But it is her vision of what is needed now—from herself, from her colleagues and from her fellow citizens—that makes her exactly the right leader for our discipline at this critical juncture in history. ■