

## Interview professor Ian Shapiro

**Interviewer:** Professor, welcome at TrustTalk. You are a professor of political science at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. And during your tenure, your publications have focused on democracy, justice and the methods of social inquiry. In what sense is trust a topic of interest to you?

**Ian Shapiro:** Trust is a topic of interest to me because it is essential for the maintenance of democratic politics and institutions and it supplies the basis for all cooperative activity that humans engage in.

**Interviewer:** So public trust in democratic processes seems to be seriously eroded by people in power who question election results. The latest example is Myanmar. But the US, long considered in the West to be a beacon of solid democracy, saw its election process under heavy stress. What impact does this have on trust in democracy?

**Ian Shapiro:** Well, I would put the question the other way around, I think the question is, is why are these political leaders able to do that? I think what we've known since Thomas Hobbes's time, that the enemy of cooperation is fear and insecurity. So Thomas Hobbes argued that people have a profound fear of death and the fear of being killed. Not surprising, he lived in the English civil war and it had the quality of what game theorists would subsequently refer to as a prisoner's dilemma in that everybody is afraid that somebody else might kill them. So the natural thing to do is try and kill them first. And so that is the prisoner's dilemma Hobbes struggles with. We've known since the 1980s with the work of people like Robert Axelrod, that one of the central ways out of that prisoner's dilemma is to build trust. But it's easier said than done. And so in my own view, if you want to understand why there are such high levels of mistrust, the underlying question to ask is, why is there so much fear and insecurity in the world? That's what these politicians and political entrepreneurs are exploiting.

**Interviewer:** In a recent interview, a colleague of yours from UC Berkeley, Henry Brady, said: "I'm worried the republic, he meant of course the American republic, is as frayed as it's ever been since probably the mid 19th century in the period just before, during and after the civil war. Are you as pessimistic?"

**Ian Shapiro:** Yes, I do think that the stress on American political institutions in the last five years is comparable to that period, the mid 19th century. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So that doesn't sound very optimistic then.

**Ian Shapiro:** Well, I think far too many people are focusing on the symptoms of the problem and not the problem itself, and my own view that the underlying problem is economic. It is the disappearance of long term employment insecurity. It is the stagnation and decline of middle class incomes. It is the downward mobility of many middle class people. All of this creates fear that what was thought to be the American dream is no longer available. And again, what we know from behavioural psychology and behavioural economics is that when people expect or perceive that they're going to experience losses, this is a much more potent motivator of human action. I'm thinking of people like Kahneman and Tversky. This is a much more potent motivator of human action than the possibility of gains. And so I think the widespread expectation of losses is what these political entrepreneurs exploit. So I think that Trump was brilliant, even if it was blind staggering luck rather than well thought out. But, you know, Make America Great Again is a slogan which carries the implication, something is been taken away from you and I'm going to get it back

**Interviewer:** I think that's a theme, right. You also have in your recent book "The Wolf at the Door", we're going to talk about that a little later. Before we go into that, many international surveys like the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, they reveal an epidemic of misinformation. I think they call it "infodemic" and widespread mistrust of societal institutions and leaders around the world. How are you as a political scientist look at this?

**Ian Shapiro:** Well, I think it is very wise to look at this as a much more global phenomenon, not just focus on the U.S. because many of these dynamics are going on elsewhere in the world. And much of my more recent work, again, with Frances Rosenbluth has focused on actually European countries where we've been looking at. The growth, the increase in party fragmentation in multiparty systems and over the past 50 years, we've seen, particularly on the left, fragmentation of left parties so you know, take the German example, but many, many others that the SPD has been haemorrhaging support to the Linker, to the Greens, now to the AfD<sup>1</sup>. And that is, again, I think, related to economic factors. It is the failure of left-of-center parties to be able to protect their traditional constituencies. So this is reflected as in the US, with the decline of industrial jobs, with globalization, with jobs going to technology. And so the traditional left-of-center parties are protecting shrinking labour aristocracies, less well, less powerful, and they've got fewer members. And so the people they used to support are haemorrhaging to these fringe parties. And that is the story all over the globe. You could repeat that story for The Netherlands, you could repeat it for Austria, you could repeat it for France,

**Interviewer:** It's a global thing

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative für Deutschland, political party Germany

**Ian Shapiro:** Yeah, and it's related, I think, to the decline of industrial jobs, the collapse of unions, and therefore the inability of the traditional social democratic mainstream parties to deliver the sorts of protections that they do, traditionally did. And so you've got the same distrust. Again, political entrepreneurs exploiting this insecurity as a way of getting past to power.

**Interviewer:** Right. Your former colleague, Russell Hardin, in his contribution to Mark Warren's book "Democracy and Trust", raised questions about the role of trust in democracy on the grounds of what he called "mistaken inference and the complexities of modern governance". Can a citizen ever be knowledgeable enough to trust governments responsibly, or is trusting government merely an exercise in self-deception?

**Ian Shapiro:** Well, I think Russell was partly right, but I would put it a little differently. I tend to be a consequentialist about these matters. I agree completely that this sort of deliberative democracy ideal, that everybody's going to be a policy expert and should have people understand the details of public policy is a fantasy and it always has been. I think that, again, I would turn the question around and say, why is it that people mistrust political institutions and political parties? And the answer is that they have failed to deliver for those people. If we had continual growth of incomes, if we had you know, we've gone from a world in which 50 years ago you finished your education, you got a job, you worked for a company for 30 years, and then you retired. People finishing their education now should expect to change jobs 12 to 15 times. Now, that's fine, if you're on the high end of the information revolution and you sort of pop through some start ups and build up a lot of individual wealth. But for most middle and lower middle class people, that's not what it is.

**Ian Shapiro:** It is bouncing down the socioeconomic scale into ever more insecure employment. Those are the people that see no reason to trust. It's the failure of the political system and the educational system and the economic system to deliver security that is breeding the mistrust. And the answer is not to wring our hands about how to get people more involved in political parties. The answer is to think about what kinds of policies would actually just never things that would reduce their economic insecurity, and then they would start to have faith in the institutions that deliver those policies. So I tend to be a consequentialist about trust.

**Interviewer:** you just mentioned to your colleague, Frances McCall Rosenbluth in your book that you wrote with him: "Responsible Parties, Saving Democracy From Itself", you write about political polarization. You argue, I think that the transfer of political power to what you call the grassroots has eroded trust in politicians, in parties and democratic institutions, culminating in the rise of divisive,

populist politics. First of all, what caused the power to be transferred to "the grassroots" and what are "the grassroots"?

**Ian Shapiro:** So that's different in two party systems and multiparty systems. In two party systems, it is largely resulted from the weakening of parties. So in the American case, for instance, it's the interaction between safe seats and primaries. Because we have an increasing number of safe seats over the last six decades, which means the only election that matters is the primary. But the truth about primaries is that only the political activists turn out in the primaries and they're on the extremes of the party. So the political junkies way to the left of the median Democratic voter on the Democratic side and way to the right of the median Republican voter on the Republican side. But they select the candidates in the primaries. And so that pulls the parties apart and then the people that they pick. For instance, find it very difficult to cooperate when they get elected, because if they do, they will get knocked off in the next primary. And so this is what enables hostile takeovers of weak parties in the US. It's a worse problem for the Republicans because they have many more safe seats.

**Interviewer:** and that is what's causing the polarization?

**Ian Shapiro:** that is a huge cause of the polarization, because it means that you get candidates selected who are on the extremes of the party, so Trump was selected as a presidential candidate by less than five percent of the US electorate. If you look at say, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who is in the 14th District in New York, she was picked by 11 percent in an 11 percent turnout in the 2018 primary or you know, you look at these Tea Party people on the Republican side, they also they're picked by the activists on the extremes of the Republican Party in the primaries and caucuses. And the general election is irrelevant because it's a safe seat. That is a big part. In the European it's a different dynamic. It's the fragmentation. Much more than the weak parties, so there the failure, the inability of the mainstream parties to deliver, enables fringe candidates and fringe parties to mobilize that fear and that anger and that distrust. And that's how you get polarization in those systems. So everybody's terrified of, you know, that Alternative für Deutschland, say, in Germany or the equivalent in Holland and Austria and so forth.

**Interviewer:** we talked about that in our interview a little earlier, your newly published book, *The Wolf at the Door*. You wrote it with Michael Graetz in a sense, follows up on your book in 2018 and it's more about economic insecurity, producing, among others, today's populism. Firstly, you are a political scientist, right, and not an economist. So I guess you are of the school of Adam Smith, the father of contemporary economic science, who learned us that the economy cannot be studied independently from sociological, political and cultural factors?

**Ian Shapiro:** Yes, I absolutely agree with that, and I should say my co-author on the responsible parties, Frances, actually, she, not he I should say, she's a political economist. That's part of the reason we work together.

**Ian Shapiro:** And Michael Graetz is a tax lawyer. He's been in an earlier career, he was in the Treasury. So, yeah, I think our division of disciplines, you know, certainly didn't even exist when Adam Smith wrote. But you have to start with the problem and then take it where it leads you into economics, into behavioural psychology, into political economy.

**Interviewer:** To address the economic insecurity you and Michael describe in "The Wolf at the Door", policymakers should, according to another colleague of your Francis Fukuyama, be able to create lasting solutions with a concerted effort to address the public's distrust of government efficacy and integrity. What is the recipe you advocate in your book?

**Ian Shapiro:** Well, this book, "The Wolf at the Door" is very much concerned, not just with what would be good policies, although a lot of the book is about that, but how you might put together the coalitions to achieve those policies in practice. So it's politics and policy together because otherwise, what's the point in having great policies that are not going to be achieved? And what we argue, and this is a connection to what we were discussing earlier, is that unless business gets behind these policies, the prognosis is not good. And this is in the US case, for example, if you go back to the New Deal, in fact, there was somewhat surprising to many people, there was a considerable amount of business support for the New Deal. And the reason was it was partly they were sort of proto-Keynesians. But it was also because the business elites, the Averell Harrimans of this world, were looking at very high levels of unemployment and economic desperation among millions of American workers. There was a significant communist influence in the AFL-CIO. There was a competing model out there in the Soviet Union vying for the hearts and minds of American workers, and so the business, not all, but significant numbers of business elites, thought we better make sure that we don't get to a world where the workers believe that they have nothing to lose but their chains. And that was partly why they supported things like Social Security, for example, and the other elements of the New Deal, significant numbers of elites.

**Ian Shapiro:** I think that what Michael and I argue in "The Wolf at the Door" is that after the collapse of communism, there was a kind of complacency among the analogues of those people, because there was no longer, capitalism is the only game in town, you can move to the suburbs and build more prisons. These people, they're not important. And you know what has been learned since 2016 is that that complacency has come back to bite because desperate people do desperate things and desperate people can be mobilized by politicians who are actually going to do things that business is not going to like. They're going

to stop immigration. They're going to push for trade wars, they are going to push protectionism. They're going to attack the elites as corrupt. They're going to mobilize people against the interests of business. And so it is significant and because labour is now so weak politically, the idea that organized labour is going to create pressure for these changes of the sort that was done in the New Deal and the Great Society in the US with the creation of social democratic parties in Europe, labour doesn't have the muscle, the political muscle.

**Ian Shapiro:** And so part a big part of the audience for our book is business leaders. Tocqueville talked about self-interest rightly understood, to convince business elites that if they don't see that it's in their interest to get behind the sorts of policies we talk about for building middle class wages, aggressive retraining of displaced workers, fund it at a much orders of magnitude bigger scale than exists in the US. If they don't do that, nobody should think Trump is an aberration. Trump is a harbinger of things to come. So that a lot of, I mean, we talk about other ways it's important to put together coalitions and so forth, but a lot of the pressure has got to come from business. And I think similar things are true in Europe because the underlying challenges are the same.

**Interviewer:** So to conclude our interview, professor, what are, in your view, the greatest challenges for political scientists in trust for this decennium?

**Ian Shapiro:** I think you have to think about it as a political economist, and I think coming up with policies that will erode the sources of mistrust which have to do, I think, with the longer term employment security, building a social wage, retraining programs. We talk about other things like health insurance, which is still not there for millions and millions of these people and millions more who have it are going to lose it, as they bounce down the socioeconomic scale. Those are the kinds of policies that are going to make a dent in the economic insecurity that is fuelling the mistrust, that is driving the populism and extremist politics. So, no, I don't want to be too much of a materialist about it, but I don't think it's rocket science. I think that that's that is the core of the matter.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much, Professor Shapiro. I've enjoyed listening to you. And thank you for your insights and wish you all well.

**Ian Shapiro:** You're most welcome.