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Too Much of a Good Thing?: A Review of Overdoing Democracy

Abstract

"Cultivating civic friendship doesn't start with transforming society; it begins on an individual level."

Posting about the book *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/too-much-of-a-good-thing-a-review-of-overdoing-democracy/>

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in things

June 8, 2021

Too Much of a Good Thing?: A Review of *Overdoing Democracy*

Donald Roth

Title: *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place*

Author: Robert B. Talisse

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Sometimes a joke can capture a cultural sentiment as well as any other social commentary, so I'll begin my review of Robert Talisse's *Overdoing Democracy* with one that demonstrates his thesis:

How do you know if an unmasked adult is vaccinated or not?

Just ask who they think won the last presidential election.

This gets at the heart of Talisse's diagnosis: politics have so thoroughly permeated American society that it is eroding the very capacities that make democracy possible. Everything is political, and all politics are marked by a partisan polarization that increasingly has us living in different, mutually incompatible worlds.

Talisse differs from many other treatments of this issue in that he doesn't trace the current problem to an interference of extrinsic factors with the fundamental good of democracy. Instead, he argues that the engines driving the dysfunction of our democracy are the result of an imbalance of factors that are inherent to it. As a result, he argues that we should be doing *less*, not *more*, when it comes to our political engagement, and this argument is compelling.

Democracy is Civil War by Other Means

Talisse begins his argument by pointing out that democracy is more than just a system of governance by the majority. It also requires a sense of citizenship open to reasoning together, and its legitimacy is upheld when the political losers sense that the winners remain committed to this open dialogue.

In other words, the democratic ideal is a society where citizens “rule themselves as equals” because they also “reason together as equals.”¹ This means that democracy aspires to be ruled by reason, but, in reality, it is ruled by the majority, and this creates a certain inherent tension. I'm a lawyer by training, and my friends and family would readily attest that I have a substantial appetite for reasoned² argument; however, even I can confess that feeling like I'm arguing all the time is *exhausting*.

As a parent, when I get sick of arguing with my kids, “because I told you so” might become the last word on the matter. At this point, the argument is over, and discipline will follow continued intransigence. Talisse describes how democracy can follow a similar path, as the ideal of collective reasoning builds to a sort of cold war between partisan camps. Finally, this can escalate to a crescendo, where democracy is abandoned in favor of violence.

Democracy is not only a governmental system—it's a means of conflict resolution. While democracy can resolve conflict while respecting the equality of persons, its mechanisms merely open the door to moving on from that conflict. The parties involved have to decide whether they are willing to do so. This is why Talisse quotes Alasdair MacIntyre, who called modern politics “civil war carried on by other means.”³

Political Quicksand

The real genius of Talisse's argument is his precisely-argued thesis that the mechanisms that shift democracy from ideal society to civil war are not entirely external to it. While there are external factors, Talisse points to two tendencies of democracy itself that can undermine citizens' capacity to engage democratically: political saturation and belief polarization.

Talisse demonstrates how political saturation can occur by describing how democracy must expand its scope in pursuit of its source of legitimacy. He starts with the simplest form of democracy, which he calls the “schoolyard model”: three friends choose what movie to go to based on popular vote. He shows that this model of engagement falls short in that it doesn’t account for how strong a preference any friend might have. The democratic ideal demands more than an equal vote, it requires an equal voice *and* an equal hearing. That is, the resolution most valued by everyone is one where not only are the three friends given equal votes, they are given equal opportunity to be heard, and all three friends remain cognitively open to being persuaded by one another’s arguments. It doesn’t take much translation from this to see how much public discourse in our broader society is a struggle to vote, participate, *and* feel heard on matters of personal importance.

Talisse pairs this potential with the fact that, due to advances in technology (and other factors), more and more of our lives are interpreted as being up to us. That is, we view ourselves as having an ever-increasing degree of choice over things around us. Thus, since democracy is a mechanism for choice, more choice means more things potentially subject to democratic or political input.

What do we do in the face of a world where we both (a) have significant choice and (b) face the exhausting potential of having all of those choices up for political debate? We use the power of (a) to seek environments where general agreement avoids the exhaustion of (b).

The result is the pervasive social sorting that has taken place along political lines. Talisse notes numerous studies that show that Americans increasingly live day-to-day lives in homogenous environments. This isn’t just geographic; it shows up in choices of where we shop, what restaurants we frequent, and many, many more things. Talisse tends to absolutize what is simply a tendency (not *all* Walmart shoppers are conservative, but it is true that a strong majority are); however, his point stands. Even if we haven’t completely sorted into different ecosystems, we certainly seem headed that way. Thus, political saturation results in social sorting.

Talisse then points to the real danger of this sorted, saturated society: these homogenous groups are especially susceptible to a phenomenon that Talisse calls belief polarization. This is the observed effect that a likeminded group will tend to intensify in their belief in a point of common agreement. We’ve all likely heard of this in terms of an “echo chamber” or “groupthink” making conservatives or progressives into more ardent or radicalized versions of themselves; however, psychological research (which usually describes this concept as “group polarization”) finds that this tendency toward amplification of beliefs occurs in almost all likeminded groups.

Thus, Talisse describes this expansion of democracy as a sort of quicksand, saturating our lives with political significance, then, through our socially sorted lives, pulling us toward more and more extreme difference and mutual antipathy.

Cultivating Virtue in the Face of Trial

We're all aware of the symptoms of polarization, sorting, and a sense that things are getting worse; however, if Talisse's diagnosis of some of the most significant mechanisms at play in our current environment are correct, then it becomes clear that our most commonly prescribed antidote to this phenomenon is inadequate.

When we view democracy as an absolute good, then the only prescription is more of it. If the problem is the echo chamber, then leaving them should be adequate medicine to reverse polarization. If our groups are too homogenous, then engaging in more heterogenous deliberation about our choices should fix our problem, right?

While dialoging across ideological lines has been shown to lessen polarization, Talisse points out that this seems to only work with people who come into these sorts of activities with a preexisting "appreciation for civil political disagreement and a desire to cooperate across political divides."⁴ Of course, if the divide between the ideal of rule by reason and the reality of rule by majority is too sharp, there will be problems, but the effect of bipartisan dialogue is limited because democracy isn't sustained as much by better reasoning as it is by our capacity to handle losing.

Talisse argues that the virtues that help us endure loss are tied to our trust that the victors remain committed to the democratic ideal. This trust requires that the victors demonstrate virtues of reasonableness and sympathy (sense of kinship), while losers must cultivate the sort of ingenuity, patience, and prudence that result in persistence. Talisse calls this whole complex of virtues a disposition toward "civic friendship."

Talisse compares this to a commitment to religious toleration. Christians can simultaneously believe that there is no salvation outside of Christ, that this salvation is of ultimate importance, that we must do what we can to bring others to Christ, *and* that political force is the wrong way to bring about necessary conversion (not just because it's ineffective). Attending to "civic friendship" is similar to cultivating tolerance, a virtue that is much celebrated in name but seriously debated in definition today. Given this challenge, I think Talisse's term may be a better framing.

Removing the Log from Our Own Eye

Talisse's argument has a deep resonance with the Kuyperian concept of ***sphere sovereignty***, the idea that the various domains of society have their proper scope and that serious damage is done to human flourishing when any sphere crowds out another in an area where they have mutual jurisdiction (not to mention invading where there is no proper jurisdiction). Talisse's fundamental thesis is that if we inhabit worlds that are *too* political, this dimension will crowd out the proper flourishing of the attributes and affiliations that allow society to flourish.

This leads to the more hopeful aspect of Talisse's thesis: cultivating civic friendship doesn't start with transforming society; it begins on an individual level. To start, we must recognize that we are subject to the very impulses that we lament in others. We need to become aware that the strength of our antipathy toward "them" might be a sign of how much we have become polarized ourselves.

Rather than prescribing certain activities, Talisse leaves it open to his readers to identify and participate in activities that intentionally politically desaturate our environment. If we pick an activity and find ourselves surrounded by cues that the people around us share our views, then we should seek out a different activity. If people predominantly disagree with us, then we should make it clear that we don't want to talk politics in this arena. If that's impossible, then we move on again. The practice is to seek out sorts of "Thanksgiving" spaces where politics are one thing conspicuously not on the table.

I'll close where I began. When we entered the pandemic, my family came to strong disagreement with the choices of my church regarding the value of masks. We made the decision to wear masks even though we were nearly the only people to do so. Almost overnight, it became difficult to interact at church without noticing the many more and less overt signs that people disagreed with us. As America polarized along political lines over this issue, our actions were transformed into a political statement, whether we wanted them to be or not. Our commitment began to impose a cost on our mental and spiritual well-being as it crowded out those aspects of what I believe should be one of our most important nonpolitical interactions.

Eventually, once I had been vaccinated, but before official guidelines had changed, we stopped wearing masks. We hadn't changed our opinion, but we had to politically desaturate our interactions in that environment. Across America, too many people left or joined churches over their mask policies, breaking fellowship over political, rather than confessional issues. While I'm not condemning the specifics of any individual person's decision in this area, the shape of the larger trend should be reason for all of us to look to ourselves and our churches to critically examine how we might respond to the social sorting that has occurred.

Ultimately, Talisse's thesis is compelling to me, and this short, carefully reasoned book is worth picking up. It remains up to us to attend to our own virtue formation, and this book provides a worthy prescription as to one of the aspects that we should consider.

FOOTNOTES

1. p. 59
2. My wife might object to this adjective.
3. p. 124
4. p. 137