

Robert B. Talisse: *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 168.)

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Scholars have been sounding the alarm for decades about the dangers of partisan polarization for the health and stability of democratic institutions. But for the philosopher Robert Talisse, the events of January 6th, 2021, were a real wakeup call. “I still can’t fully process what transpired,” Talisse shares. “When we allow politics to get inside our heads. . . we become unable to see our opposition as anything other than a unified monolith of extremity and unreasonableness” (147–48). January 6th didn’t come from nowhere, Talisse observes. We need to confront the reality that a growing number of citizens are willing to abandon their democratic principles if it means securing party victory. Talisse’s new book, *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side*, examines the dynamics that, for example, led Donald Trump’s supporters to storm the United States Capitol Building to try to stop the certification of an election that they had decisively lost. Is democracy sustainable if we perceive the other side as a threat to everything we hold dear? And, if the other side truly *does* pose a threat, is sustaining a democratic relationship with them at all advisable?

From the outset, Talisse takes pains to assure the reader that this is not another “anti-democracy book” (13). Yet, in this, the sequel to his 2019 book *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place* (Oxford University Press), Talisse maintains that having less democracy, not more, is the best strategy to ensure that we remain civic friends, not enemies. Too much democracy creates too much partisanship. And partisanship is dangerous when it saturates our daily lives, such that the type of food we eat or the places we frequent come to be seen as proxies for our political commitments. The result is a loss of any sort of neutral ground for interacting across partisan lines: “citizens regard one another as either allies or obstacles, and democracy devolves into a cold war among mutually inscrutable tribes” (17). Talisse calls this the “democrat’s dilemma.” On the one hand, democracy works only if citizens respect one another as political equals, with the same rights and standing to participate in collective decision-making. On the other hand, regarding one another as political equals sometimes conflicts with other moral requirements, such as preventing the passage of unjust laws and policies. But in the grips of a partisan fever dream, we’re unable to judge when our opponents are mistaken yet still worthy of respect versus when their views pose a genuine threat and should be combated. “Engaging civilly with those on the other side *credits* them . . . *empowers* them,” Talisse writes: “In many other contexts, we would call this behavior *complicity*” (66).

The first half of *Sustaining Democracy* explores the democrat’s dilemma in greater detail, explaining why it’s so easy for citizens to fall into its trap. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the dilemma’s origins to the weighty demands of

democratic citizenship. Though the democratic ideal is compatible with citizens who sharply disagree with one another, maintaining a democratic ethos turns out to be quite a chore—not least because everyone must habitually put aside their personal feelings and conduct themselves in ways that embody virtues like public-mindedness, reciprocity, transparency, and civility.

The second half of the book pivots to examine how partisan polarization exacerbates this tension and what to do about it. In chapter 3, Talisse surveys an ever-growing social science literature that warns about the ideological distance between opposing groups, and how this can generate a sense of unreality as each side adopts increasingly hostile attitudes towards the other. But less noticed, he suggests, is what polarization also does to our relations with friends and allies. As opposing groups circle the wagons, they apply more stringent tests of ideological purity to their members, encouraging virtue signaling and one-upmanship in a way that fuels further extremism. Chapter 4 shifts gears to problem solving. Talisse is critical of “facilitated” (i.e., deliberative) proposals that would force opponents into a room to hash things out—it “remains unclear whether these improvements persist beyond an experimental setting” (119)—but he insists that ordinary citizens still have a key role to play in solving the current crisis. Instead of more bipartisan talk, however, what we need are moments of quiet introspection away from politics, so that we can reflect on the reasonableness of those who criticize our views even if we’re not willing to compromise. “The crucial thing. . . is that although belief polarization is driven by strained relations between political opponents, the task of managing it lies within” (140).

There is much to admire about Talisse’s thoughtful and, at times, endearingly personal reflections on the partisanship of US politics. Talisse has a knack for weaving anecdotes from his own experiences reaching across the proverbial aisle with astute observations about the moral demandingness of democracy as an ideal. Readers unfamiliar with the political science on this topic will also benefit from Talisse’s impressive synthesis of empirical research from political psychology and voting behavior, which details the troubling change in mindset that occurs when our party identities morph into social and cultural ones. Seen in this light, the events of January 6th and the aftermath followed an all-too-predictable pattern, with both Republicans and Democrats leaping into battle, rather than heeding it as a warning sign of the need to pull back.

It is on this last point, however, that in my view Talisse’s analysis falls short. Talisse devotes so much space to diagnosing the ills of belief polarization that surprisingly little attention is given to the background conditions that have enabled partisan animus to become supercharged. Consider the “winner-take-all” structure of US electoral politics. The outsized influence of organized interest groups, coupled with an open primary system, gives candidates every incentive to appeal to the fringe views of their party’s most fanatical supporters. It doesn’t help that the geographic organization of constituencies

means that voters in economically stagnant regions reward divisive messaging that targets their grievances. Talisse's account is so psychologically driven that he misses the importance of institutions. Citizens in his book instead come across as oddly free-floating, as if their behavior isn't also shaped by the structural circumstances in which they find themselves.

This oversight is especially unfortunate considering the short shrift given to deliberative innovations, such as citizens' assemblies and minipublics, despite some recent high-profile studies that confirm that—with the right scaffolding—polarization can indeed be reversed, contrary to Talisse's expectations (see, e.g., James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond, and Norman Bradburn, "Is Deliberation an Antidote to Extreme Partisan Polarization? Reflections on 'America in One Room,'" *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 [2021]: 1464–81). In my view, such experiments are a more viable path forward than Talisse's recommendation that an already highly polarized electorate do its best rendition of Plato's philosopher-king, keeping politics at arm's length while searching from within for answers. If Talisse is correct, and we are now so polarized that we see political opponents as an existential threat, why would asking us to occasionally pause and self-reflect from within our established bubbles not just produce more of the same? If anything, Talisse's commitment to virtues like civility and public-mindedness should place him squarely in the deliberative democracy camp, pushing for institutional reform.

In sum, Robert Talisse's *Sustaining Democracy* is a valuable examination of the psychological drivers of political polarization. As a diagnostic exercise, Talisse's efforts are sure to be welcomed by specialist and nonspecialist audiences alike. But given the precarious state of our democracies, and the pressing need for solutions, one hopes that *Sustaining Democracy* is the second installment of an eventual trilogy.

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Peter J. Ahrens Dorf: *Homer and the Tradition of Political Philosophy: Encounters with Plato, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. x, 324.)

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Peter J. Ahrens Dorf's *Homer and the Tradition of Political Philosophy: Encounters with Plato, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche* is an exciting yet careful reading of Homer's influence on political philosophy. Ahrens Dorf's "catalogue of books," to speak Homericly, already contains a few about Greek literature