

as the West's duty to help Ukraine with its reforms, and offers views on future developments, making the book undoubtedly worthwhile reading.

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**Robert B. Talisse:**

**OVERDOING DEMOCRACY:  
WHY WE MUST PUT POLITICS  
IN ITS PLACE.**

New York: Oxford University Press.  
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One problem of contemporary democratic societies is an increased political saturation of the social environment caused by our commitment to the democratic ideal itself. This commitment paradoxically leads us to the polarization dynamic and growing divisions in society, which might be cured only by putting politics in its space and adhering to the principle of civic friendship.

This is a main thesis of Robert B. Talisse, a political philosopher, who has devoted much of his recent work to the study of disagreement in democratic societies. In *Overdoing Democracy*, he cautiously traces every step of his elaboration, diagnosis, and prescriptions back to this statement. The book contributes to an ongoing debate about the contemporary crisis of democracy and provides a fresh perspective to the research on pernicious polarization. Although it primarily revolves around questions important for democratic theory,

the author presents one fitting explanation for rise of phenomena like sorting and political polarization, one of the most salient research topics for contemporary political science. Nevertheless, his explanatory mechanism, even if internally consistent, requires further empirical testing.

In the growing literature describing the nature of polarization, its causes, and effects, political science and normative political theory are engaged in two separate debates. The inherent value of *Overdoing Democracy* is that it integrates findings in the area of political polarization with democratic theory. Most intriguing in this work is that while many researchers concentrate on the effects of polarization on democracy, Talisse focuses on how following the democratic ideal stimulates political polarization and sorting. Also rather provocative is that author deals with issues which are still subject to ongoing empirical inquiry. Especially the relationship between sorting and belief polarization is understudied and even the question of whether polarization is taking place in American society is still the subject of fervent discussion by many scholars.

The publication is structured into three main parts. The first introduces the main thesis, and the second goes through the problematics of sorting and polarization, connecting them with the author's argument. After finishing his diagnosis of contemporary defects in democratic societies, the author discusses possible solutions while rejecting efforts to improve deliberation as inefficient at this stage of the disease. For researchers on political polarization, the middle part is most crucial. The author introduces the problematic of the expanding reach of politics, which goes hand-in-hand with the seeming deepening of democracy. The reach of politics is a key concept in his theory because it explains how democratic projects which are more and more demanding for each citizen can undermine

themselves. The problem, in his view, lies in our efforts to fulfil the democratic ideal of a self-governing community of equals. This ideal in its most advanced, deliberative form requires a level of engagement that results in political saturation of the social environment. In real-life democratic settings, participation often enters into tension with the ideal of equality. This occurs in a polarized and sorted society when citizens perceive the opposed side as a threat.

Even though Talisse's explanatory mechanism is inspiring, it appears to be tailored specifically to understanding the case of the United States. There are many reasons to be sceptical of its robustness or even validity. The key aspect is the dimensionality of political conflict. Pernicious or severe polarization is characterized by a dynamic whereby the in-group (us) is delineated from the out-group (them) and the many natural differences align into only one dimension of conflict. This tension between polarization and pluralism is omitted entirely by Talisse. In a multidimensional environment, the consequences could be different. As the author mentions, the problem with sorting and belief polarization is that we stop perceiving our fellow citizens as equals. There is reason to believe that this works only in the context of unidimensional conflicts. In a setting with multiple divisions and many groups, mutual respect is required because any majorities in society can't be forged without coalitions. In a more consensual environment, majorities could also change and with them the opposing side. Even though the author describes how political saturation could induce sorting and polarization, there's no discussion whether we should expect growing overlap in attitudes and more ideological (closed and affective) thinking.

Also, as has been observed in the case of United States, mass polarization has been preceded by a long process of elite polarization.

The author doesn't concentrate on the roots of polarization very much, but elite polarization could be an answer to the question of how the social environment got saturated by politics in the first place. Talisse diagnoses the United States in its as-is condition – already polarized. Thus we can have our doubts about the proposed mechanism; it doesn't have to be "overdone democracy" that got the country into its polarized state. In any case, these observations take nothing away from the author's recommendation to restrain from promoting democratic action and concentrate on non-political cooperative activities instead when a country gets into the situation he's describing.

In any case, the author's analysis is consistent with findings on political engagement. A high level of engagement amplifies the magnitude of political polarization very significantly. Even though there is still uncertainty about the polarization of the American public in general, when we look at the highest stratum of the population by engagement, polarization is undeniable. This link between polarization and participation, which is a central to Talisse's idea of political saturation, needs to be unravelled and has implications for scientific theory and normative theory of democracy as well. This is probably the central contribution of *Overdoing Democracy* to both fields. Although the book's argument itself has its shortcomings and some thoughts are not conclusively argued, the book and the author's subsequent publications have the potential to change the direction of the contemporary debate on polarization. Most importantly, the book redirects the attention of scholars back to the issue of political engagement and the question of when polarization becomes pathological for democracy. The reach of politics and the level of its infiltration into our everyday lives could be important insights for the future.

In conclusion, *Overdoing Democracy* is much more inspiring for theory-building political science than for normative political theory. Its value lies in its provocative thesis, which could encourage new paths of inquiry connecting research on political polarization and democratic innovation. However, for innovation, we would have to first reject the author's scepticism about a possible institutional solution. For political science, the book presents a new perspective which could be adopted in future research and which gives new reasons to focus on the nature of political engagement. However, the book's main argument has its limitations due to its exclusive consideration of the case of the United States, especially when

it comes to the nature of political conflict and the number of its dimensions, respectively. When multiple dimensions of conflict fail to become ideological and align together, the described pathological effects are not inevitable. The author also omits the question of the roots of polarization and the role of political elites. In any case, the author elaborates and expands his original idea in his new publication, *Sustaining Democracy – What We Owe to the Other Side*, which is an opportunity for the author to develop the argument and work out some of the problems mentioned above.

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