

Sustaining democracy: The moral burden of citizenship

*When debates become polarised, it can be tempting to treat political opponents as obstacles rather than fellow citizens. Yet as **Robert B. Talisse** explains, this refusal to engage with the other side not only carries negative implications for democracy, but also produces ineffective, conformist coalitions that are incapable of realising their political aims. If citizens want to achieve their goals in a democracy, they must find a way to work with their opponents.*

Democracy isn't easy. For it to thrive, a lot needs to go right. Citizens must be informed and active. Lawmakers must seek the common good. Institutions must be accessible. Policies must be fair. News outlets must be reliable. That's a tall order.

These difficulties are compounded because the task of addressing political dysfunction ultimately falls to the people. If officials are corrupt, citizens must vote them out. If policies are outdated, citizens must revise them. If news outlets are skewed, they must be corrected. Even when democracy's failures owe to institutional defects, the buck stops with the people.

So when we think of challenges facing democracy, we focus on how people fall short of what citizenship requires. We point to an ignorant, narrow-minded, and complacent electorate as the explanation for whatever goes wrong. We hold that democracy's troubles are due to a democratic *deficit* among the citizens.

The underlying assumption is that when citizens fulfil their civic duties, democracy is smooth sailing. Alas, this assumption is incorrect. Even when citizens act as they should, democracy occasions serious difficulties.

This is because there's a moral conflict at the heart of democratic citizenship. On the one hand, citizens are *responsible* for their political order. They must participate in self-government and strive for justice. On the other, citizens are *responsible to* one another. They are one another's equals, and so need to interact in ways that respect their equality. Ordinarily, this means that citizens must listen to one another, consider others' perspectives, and give critics a hearing. All of this acknowledges that one's fellow citizens do not merely *get* an equal say – they're *entitled* to one.

One upshot of political equality, though, is that we each get to make up our own mind about politics. Consequently, political disagreement is rampant in a democracy. That's where the two modes of democratic responsibility can clash. Political disagreements are often disagreements about justice. When disagreeing about justice, we tend to view our opponents as not only wrong, but *in the wrong*. We see them as not merely on the *other* side, but on the *unjust* side. In the political fray, treating one's opponents as equals thus feels like a *capitulation* to injustice. The effort to hear them out detracts from the responsibility to advance justice.

Moreover, in giving our political opponents a hearing, we can alienate our allies. They come to regard us as inauthentic, only faintly committed to the cause of justice. This weakens our political coalitions, which in turn diminishes our ability to secure justice.

To maintain effective coalitions, we need to broaden our conception of acceptable divergence among our allies. To do this, we must sustain democratic relations with our critics.

Democratic citizens hence face a dilemma. When the stakes are high, the task of securing justice counsels against duly regarding our political foes. It occurs to us that we should treat them as *obstacles* rather than as fellow citizens. We wonder why we should bother consulting them at all. It strikes us as futile to uphold civil relations with those who seek to enact injustice. Why show the other side any regard when one can instead work with allies to achieve justice? I call this the *democrat's dilemma*. It is the topic of my new book, [Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side](#).

Note that the democrat's dilemma emerges *from within* our civic responsibilities. It is not the result of our taking citizenship too lightly. Rather, it is the product of responsible political engagement. Our sincere efforts to take responsibility for our political order activates tendencies that lead us to neglect our responsibility to our fellow citizens. The moral conflict at the heart of democratic citizenship thus is inherent. It cannot be eliminated, only managed.

The management task is complicated by the widespread cognitive phenomenon of [belief polarisation](#). Interaction among likeminded people leads them to shift into more extreme commitments and attitudes. As we work with our allies to further justice, we subject ourselves to forces that render us more strident and unduly confident in our views.

Moreover, our more extreme selves are also more *conformist*. As we shift towards extremity, we also grow more insistent on homogeneity among our allies. Belief-polarised alliances eventually become fixated on [poseur-detection and in-group purity](#). They consequently grow more dependent on centralised standard-setters for the group, thereby becoming more internally hierarchical and less democratic.

In the end, belief-polarised groups expel members who deviate even slightly from dominant expectations. They shrink, splintering under pressures for unity. Belief polarisation thus transforms our political friends into political enemies, which in turn damages our ability to achieve our political ends. Consequently, the impulse to suspend democratic relations with foes so that justice can be more vigorously pursued must be resisted. The strategy backfires.

Importantly, the backfire isn't merely practical. It's also moral. The responsibility to pursue justice entails the requirement to preserve the conditions under which our efforts could succeed. Citizens therefore have a moral duty, rooted in their responsibility to advance justice, to sustain democracy – even with their political enemies.

Arguments for treating political enemies as equals often focus on their entitlement to civil treatment. I argue that this approach has limitations. My proposal is different: although belief polarisation warps inter-party relations, its more immediate danger lies with its conformity pressures within alliances. To maintain effective coalitions, we need to broaden our conception of acceptable divergence among our allies. To do this, we must sustain democratic relations with our critics.

That's easier said than done. Given existing levels of cross-partisan animosity and in-group conformity, our best bet is to create occasions for solitary political thinking, modes of political contemplation that are removed from the political divides of the moment. I realise this sounds strange. We tend to think that democratic activity is intrinsically collective and public. Yes, democracy needs active citizens. But citizens also need to be reflective, and prominent modes of political action undermine our reflective capacities. They can be regained in moments of political distance from allies and opponents alike.

For more information, see the author's new book, [Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side](#) (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image: [Vasily Kandinsky, Untitled, Art Institute of Chicago](#) (CC0 – Public Domain)
