

Critical Dialogue

Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy.

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According to a traditional account, representative government qualifies as a species of democracy because, even though the officials govern, they must represent the people's will. Provided that the legislative institutions ensure that officials are responsive to citizens' preferences, representative government involves no democratic lapse. The people rule but *indirectly*.

As usual, the devil is in the details. How can society enforce the requirement that officials be responsive to the citizens? The traditional account highlights electoral pressures: elected officials must deliver results that respond to constituents' interests or else be voted out. However, work on public ignorance and political judgment suggests that the people are systematically incompetent and profoundly uninformed about even the most elementary political matters. Even if elected representatives could be responsive to their constituents' preferences, it is not clear why they should be. Garbage in, garbage out.

A family of views concludes that real-world democracy instantiates nothing like representative government. Democracy is defined as an arrangement for delivering something else, such as stability, efficiency, or civic peace. Because it is rooted in what it regards as cold facts, this approach is known as *realism*. It is often associated with the positive view that democracy is no more than a (mostly) peaceful ongoing competition among elites for political power; for that reason, realism is thus sometimes called the *elitist* theory of democracy. Realist-elitist views stand in opposition to views of *mass* democracy, which retain the idea of democracy as representative government.

Lisa Disch writes as a "realist who has faith in mass democracy" (p. 140). More precisely, *Making Constituencies* aims to repurpose the term *realism* for non-elitist democratic theory. Although Disch is critical of the elitists' political ignorance finding (p. 53), her core argument is that elitism presupposes a standard that "sets representative democracy up to fail" (p. 35). Rather than vindicating

the electorate's competence, she calls for a fundamental rethinking of democratic representation (p. 1).

This rethinking invokes a closely related pair of conceptual shifts: what Disch calls a *mobilization* conception of political representation (p. 1) and a *constructivist* view of political constituencies (p. 4). The latter is the thesis that constituencies are not "given" (p. 21) as groups awaiting uptake but rather are the *effects* (p. 33) of political action. Constituencies are *created* (p. 15) and *constituted* (p. 131) by acts of representation. Hence, the mobilization conception of representation: various political agents endeavor to "call" a constituency "into being" (p. 4) by marshaling popular attention and framing conflict in ways that lead people to *regard themselves as a group*. Representatives thus do not *reflect* the interests or preferences of citizens; rather, they "define groups, produce interests, and forge identities" (p. 136).

One advantage of this view is that it releases defenders of mass democracy from the competence debates. Once the "bedrock norm" (p. 34) of brute political interests is surrendered, mass democracy is no longer imperiled by political ignorance. As Disch puts it, "rather than leap to indict voters for what they cannot do," we need to reexamine popular assumptions about "what voters need to be able to do" (p. 138). That is, this release clears conceptual space for alternative queries: What does the current state of our democracy bring out in citizens (p. 72)? To what extent are constituencies in line with democratic norms of equality and fair play (p. 33)? What institutional changes are possible that could mobilize citizens into more authentically democratic alliances (p. 105)?

Disch's focus on the *production* of political identities is insightful. On her view, the gravest threat to mass democracy is not ignorance or even manipulation but *sorting* (p. 139). Crucially, Disch understands sorting not only as the partitioning of social spaces into partisan enclaves and the subsequent intensification of divisiveness (p. 135), but also as a force that sediments political identities (p. 136) that have been forged within a monotone discursive environment (p. 105). Disch's prescription is a *plural* social setting that permits competing mobilizations to shape the demos, thereby allowing society to recapture the "radical democratic practice" of "building 'unsuspected' links that bring unlikely social and political actors within the realm of the 'thinkable'" (p. 124).

In emphasizing the need for plural and conflictual democratic spaces, Disch allies herself with the tradition of radical democracy associated with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (p. 122). I am sympathetic to this approach to democratic theory. Still, difficulties remain.

Disch fluctuates in her formulation of constructivism. Often, she claims that representation “makes” (pp. 1, 138) or “forms” (p. 53) constituencies, but sometimes it merely “shapes” them (pp. 21, 77). Elsewhere, representation is weaker still: it “participates in constituting” (p. 4) and has a “hand in” (p. 48) making constituencies. What representation creates also shifts. Acts of representation variously “call forth” social *identities* (p. 135), “solicit *groups* and constitute *interests*” (p. 19), and “create the *social order*” (p. 121). In yet another articulation, it is the *people*, not the acts of representation, that “shape their interests and demands” (p. 16). These are not obviously equivalent. The thesis that *something* is “not found but made” is so crucial to the book that this variation is disorienting.

Lest this register as a fussy philosopher’s complaint, observe that the variation has some unwelcome effects. Disch rejects the “interest-first” model of representation (p. 1). That model can be said to be *exclusivist* in that it holds that responsiveness is the *only* democratically appropriate model of representation. Thus, one could refute the “interest-first” view by identifying another kind of democratic representation. Disch does not pursue this kind of inclusivist strategy; rather, she advances an alternative exclusivist account of representation. She argues that representation can *never* involve responsiveness to a constituency that has developed interests independently of the act of its construction.

It is not clear to me that representation *never* involves responding to antecedent group interests, even though I am also convinced that democratic representation involves more than that. My suspicion is that Disch’s shifting between formulations of her constructivism may have driven her to an unnecessarily strong articulation of her central thesis, one that is not warranted by her arguments. At any rate, if there is some reason why it is necessary for her to present constructivism as an exclusivist account of representation, the book does not specify what it is.

A related difficulty regards Disch’s discussion of manipulation. A critic may argue that if constituencies are made rather than found, then mobilization is merely a polite term for manipulation, propaganda, gaslighting, threats, and so on. Once the idea of responsiveness is jettisoned, then it seems as if mobilization is simply power and there is no “bedrock” (p. 35) by which to evaluate its exercise.

In addressing this criticism, Disch enlists Robert Goodin’s characteristically astute 1980 book, *Manipulatory Politics*. There, Goodin argues that it is far more difficult to get a firm grasp on what manipulation is than political theorists tend to assume. Then he argues that, once an appropriately nuanced conception is devised, manipulation poses less of a

problem than is usually supposed. Disch notices the concern that a 40-year-old analysis might be obsolete (p. 98); still, she embraces Goodin’s conclusion that manipulation is a “misplaced worry” (p. 91), because citizens are not as susceptible to it as the critic suggests.

Disch sees the concern about manipulation as focusing on how mobilization can *mislead* or generate constituencies rooted in *falsehoods* about their interests. She says the advantage of Goodin’s analysis is that it can “decouple observations of manipulation from assumptions about interests” (p. 99). She thus treats the manipulation concern as tethered to *competence*.

It strikes me that the worry about manipulation targets something else. Regardless of how prevalent manipulation might be or how susceptible citizens are to it, Disch’s constructivism hollows the concept. The constructivist cannot countenance constituencies mobilized around *distorted* views of their interests or *fictional* self-conceptions. Yet this is the intuitive diagnosis that one might deploy in discussing, say, the Proud Boys.

Disch may have this kind of example in mind when she mentions *representation by misdirection*, which involves deceptive mobilization that “impoverishes individual’s political judgment” (p. 100). She thus attempts to draw attention away from “the truth or falsehood of individual beliefs” and toward “systemic conditions for public-opinion and judgment formation” (p. 105). However, this maneuver fails because one cannot make sense of impoverished judgment without eventually invoking beliefs, evidence, warrant, and other metrics of competence.

Disch could counter that her account nonetheless is preferable to the alternative I mentioned. Perhaps it is. But Disch must go further. On her account, the intuitive diagnosis is *incoherent* because it is rooted in a “foundationalist fantasy” (p. 35). The argument of the book does not support this more sweeping assessment.

Still, *Making Constituencies* is a rich exercise in radical democratic theorizing. Of particular interest is the seamless ways in which Disch weaves together empirical and conceptual work from both historical and contemporary voices. Importantly, the diverse elements that Disch deploys in building her view do not always harmonize. In this sense, *Making Constituencies* manifests the kind of plurality that she attempts to center in our thinking about democracy.

Response to Robert B. Talisse’s Review of *Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy*

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— Lisa Jane Disch

I am grateful to have found in Robert Talisse a reader who can state the central claims of my book with such precision. He has crafted my elevator pitch: *Making*

Constituencies proposes a mobilization conception of political representation and a constructivist view of political constituencies to release defenders of mass democracy from the competence debates.

Professor Talisse and I both believe in mass democracy—a rare position among political scientists. Because of what we share, I find our differing accounts of sorting most provocative. I believe it is difficult to remain confident about mass democracy in the face of the social identity theory of sorting to which Professor Talisse subscribes, a theory that explains aggressively held political commitments as a psychological propensity. I politicize sorting. Following Morris Fiorina and others, I explain it as a feedback loop. Voters, taking their cues from party elites who are more sharply divided ideologically than they are, become more fiercely partisan in response to elite messaging. Elites, in turn, respond to this divisiveness (which they have helped create) by treating the public to ever sharper portraits of divisions. If sorting is a representation of the electorate, it can be battled by competing representations. If it is rooted in human psychology, isn't it immovable?

I appreciate Professor Talisse's critique of my "exclusivist" argument for the constructivist approach to representation because it gives me an opportunity to return to a question I struggled with in writing the book: How can I speak about the dynamism of democratic representation without swinging the pendulum from a constituent-driven process to an elite-driven one? Professor Talisse asks why I did not counter the exclusivist position of interest-first representation, which "holds that responsiveness is the *only* democratically appropriate model of representation," with an "inclusivist" strategy. Rather than propose that "representation can *never* involve responsiveness to a constituency that has developed interests independently of the act of its construction," I might instead have presented the constructivist approach as merely "identifying another kind of democratic representation." I find it difficult to imagine that representation could involve "responsiveness to a constituency that has developed interests independently of the act of its construction," because I do not believe that either constituencies or interests can exist "independently" of acts of representation.

Mass politics involves competition among representatives of many kinds—elected officials, advocacy groups, influential media figures, and even celebrities—to frame the terms of a conflict and thereby influence the considerations that people bring to bear on it. Certainly, elected representatives respond to interests and constituencies that are constituted by acts of representation that they themselves had no hand in making; making constituencies does not mean scripting them. Constituencies and their interests are not elite pawns. They are made, shaped, formed in ways that I tried to specify throughout the book through various empirical illustrations of the "constituency effects" of public policy and issue framings. If my terminology

fluctuates, that fluctuation marks the difficulty of speaking about a dynamic process that so many normative accounts expect to be linear.

It is a pleasure to respond to such a thoughtful and generous reader.

Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side.

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It has become commonplace for politically engaged individuals on both the Right and the Left to maintain an aggressive relationship with their political commitments. Politically active individuals pursue their policy preferences with the fervor of a moral crusade, denouncing rather than disagreeing with those who hold an opposing view. Losing a policy battle or an election makes them want to blow up the system. And, as Robert Talisse emphasizes, their anger burns hotter for allies whom they perceive to have betrayed them than it does for opponents.

In this exquisitely accessible, well-written book, Talisse counsels democrats to examine our "relationship with our political commitments," own up to the dynamics that push us to extremes, and adopt what he terms the "moral stance" of citizenship (pp. 151, 3). That stance takes us beyond voting, paying taxes, or even shoveling sidewalks to confront the challenge peculiar to a polarized time: "upholding the kind of political relations appropriate among democratic citizens amid political struggles involving opponents whose views strike us as misguided, ignorant, and even repugnant" (p. 5).

This challenge of "*sustaining democracy*" emerges from what Talisse terms the "polarization dynamic," which feeds a specifically (small-d) "*democrat's dilemma*" (pp. 5, 151, 4; emphasis in original). The more deeply engaged we are in politics, and the more committed we are to advocating for policies that will advance justice as we define it, the more exposed we will be to "forces that systematically distort our conception of our political opposition" (p. 4). When we invest our time and energy advocating for urgent policy changes that express "our commitments about justice," it is almost inevitable that we will begin to moralize the dispute (p. 64). We are "bound to regard our political adversaries as not merely incorrect or misinformed about politics, but politically *misguided*. We must see those on the other side as not only wrong, but also *in the wrong*" (p. 64; emphasis in original).

Democracy calls on us to participate. It also calls on us to treat our opponents with civility, which means both to give them "an equal political say" and to accept their victories as "legitimate" (p. 64). But whenever the commitments and

emotions that fuel our participation also try our capacity for civility, the imperative to sustain democracy pulls us “in opposing moral directions ... between the clashing imperatives of seeking justice and treating others as equal” (p. 47). Putting it simply, the more politically engaged you are, the more likely you are to be exposed to “belief polarization” (p. 13). Putting it starkly, “democratic citizenship could be *self-defeating*” (p. 9).

I knew I would enjoy reading this book. From the start, Talisse’s writing engaged me like a conversation with an observant friend. Yet I did not expect its argument to take hold in my daily life. Talisse’s insightful account of political debate prompted me to reflect on my attachment to the Millian exchange of reasons and to put Talissean civility in its place. Practicing that aspect of his argument deepened my appreciation for his unconventional account of reasonableness. It also heightened my skepticism toward the account of group polarization that lends urgency to his “democrat’s dilemma.”

Sustaining Democracy is unusual for partnering normative theorizing with realism. Talisse proposes a normative conception of democracy as a “moral proposal and aspiration” toward “a vision of politics as self-government among equals” (p. 10; emphasis in original). Rather than ground this normative ideal on a belief in shared humanity, or to invoke Aristotelian friendship as prerequisite to its realization as I expected, Talisse premises it on a realist account of politics. He emphasizes that “partisan hostility and conflict are inextricable from the democratic endeavor” and holds practicing self-government with “equals” to mean engaging with our “political enemies,” being “subjected to political decisions and policies [we] do not support,” and subjecting others to outcomes they fought against (pp. 98, 35).

After affirming its status as a “moral proposal and aspiration,” Talisse also identifies democracy with “the proposition that you can be forced to accede to rules that you reject,” provided you “retain your status as an equal” (p. 29). Satisfying that provision requires that there be “a kind of coercive force that’s not mere *bullying*” (p. 29). Talisse notes that this distinction between bullying and coercion “might strike you as puzzling. It *should*” (p. 29). He shores it up with “civility,” a virtue of citizenship that Talisse defines consistently with his normative realist vision (p. 33). Far from an “imperative to avoid conflict or seek appeasement,” it involves “recognizing the possibility of good-faith political disagreement,” acknowledging that our own “political commitments can be reasonably criticized,” and resisting the temptation to attribute such criticism to our opponents’ “ignorance, irrationality, and pigheadedness” (pp. 34, 55, 54, 127).

Talisse’s civility is not Mill’s deliberation. It does not involve conceding that “our commitments might be incorrect” (p. 127). It need not involve an exchange of astute arguments. Seeking to improve political relations rather than to find truth, good-faith disagreement aims not

to adjudicate among different positions: we are to discover and take seriously what opponents think is wrong with our positions and arguments, regardless of how unconvincing we find theirs. We are not to temper our views by conceding that our opponent might be right; rather, we are supposed to become less dismissive of our opponents’ objections to our positions. As Talisse observes, “Even misplaced and failed objections can be instructive [insofar as they] show us the ways in which our views can be misunderstood or misconstrued” (p. 127).

Although I like to think that I am pretty good at reasoned argument (don’t we all?), I must acknowledge that I am impatient with people who trade in conspiracy theories, false analogies, and stock narratives; who refuse to let evidence modify their views; who personalize political conflict; and who prize scoring political points above policy making. Talisse considers all such individuals “reasonable” and worthy of respect, provided that they do not “advocate some form of political hierarchy of subordinates and superiors” that would withdraw any citizen’s right to vote, hold office, or “participate as political equals” in any way (p. 57). Civility requires that we acknowledge (not validate) the implausible and unpersuasive objections of our enemies and learn from them how we can be misunderstood and misrepresented.

Talisse’s “civility” helped me see the limits of modeling political exchange as I do, through a Millian frame of persuasion. By adopting that frame, I make myself the arbiter of reasonableness. I build a case to establish my preferred policies as evidence-based and thoughtful and show up those of my opponent as capricious, tradition-bound, and possibly self-serving. Without hurling stereotypes or insults, I still manage to model an us/them distinction—between the party of reason and that of unreason—that fuels polarization. I bully the opposition with the force of argument rather than insult.

Clearly, Talisse has taught me a great deal about the democratic practices that I had viewed as “responsible” and about how they betray the democratic ideal of living together as equals (p. 146). Yet I remain wary of Talisse’s “account of the threat that polarization poses to democracy” (p. 73). He grounds that threat in a foundationalist account of humans’ “social and cognitive interdependence” that is bound to exaggerate the self-defeating dynamics of mass democracy (p. 86).

Specifically, he sets up that threat by making use of empirical research on group polarization that strikes me as one-sided. Talisse distinguishes between political polarization, the distance between parties or groups on an ideological spectrum, and “belief” polarization, which he defines as the “phenomenon in which interactions among like-minded people tend to result in each person adopting more radical versions of their shared views” on matters of taste, value, or even fact (pp. 79, 83). He is more interested in the second type, which he treats as more fundamental

than the first, being both a contributor to political polarization and a feature of humans' cognitive process. As Talisse rightly observes, "Thinking is a group activity" (p. 85). Not only do people think *in* groups, taking both cues and information from group membership, but they also practice thinking as a mode of belonging: they align their beliefs with their group affinities and enmities (pp. 85, 88). Talisse considers thinking as a mode of belonging to pose a greater problem for democracy and to be a greater contributor to belief polarization, which he contends "is driven more by group affinity and thus *affect* than by information or evidence" (p. 88).

Talisse's emphasis on the cognitive mechanisms of belief polarization follows a common trend in studies of belief (or "group") polarization: focusing on its "intrapersonal" mechanisms and underestimating the role that modes of communication and social context play in mobilizing affect. I draw these observations from a recent review of the empirical literature by John T. Jost, Delia S. Baldassarri, and James N. Druckman (see "Social and Psychological Mechanisms of Political Polarization," *Nature Reviews Psychology*, forthcoming). These authors emphasize the role of political elites in polarizing constituencies. When political elites present themselves or media portray them as bitterly opposed to one another and unwilling to compromise, constituents express higher levels of antagonism toward and distrust of the "other side." Conversely, when the same elites are represented as cooperative and collegial, constituents in turn become more favorable toward bipartisan cooperation.

Representation matters in belief polarization. Talisse clearly wants to promote rather than erode mass democracy (p. 38). Wouldn't he strengthen his own position by laying some responsibility for belief polarization on political elites, rather than attributing it so forcefully to a psychological tendency?

Response to Lisa Jane Disch's Review of *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side*

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— Robert B. Talisse

It is a great pleasure to read Professor Disch's generous review of *Sustaining Democracy*. Before delving into it, I had not fully appreciated the contrast Disch draws between my contestatory view of civility and the standard Millian account. I wish I could go back and use that framing more thoroughly in the text.

Professor Disch is right to question my diagnostic story, which fixes on the cognitive phenomenon of belief

polarization. I argue that essential modes of democratic participation expose citizens to cognitive forces that systematically distort their conceptions of their political foes and allies alike. With respect to foes, citizens become more likely to attribute to them implausible opinions and extreme dispositions; they thereby grow more dismissive and distrusting of non-allies. Meanwhile, those same forces drive citizens to demand escalating degrees of conformity among their allies, leading their coalitions to fracture. Insofar as citizens take themselves to be obliged to advance justice as they best understand it, they have a moral reason to sustain healthy political relations with their allies. *Sustaining Democracy* argues that to sustain healthy alliances, citizens must seek to sustain civil relations with their reasonable political opponents.

My account thus locates certain prevailing dysfunctions within the habits and dispositions of the citizenry. This gives the appearance of letting elites off the hook. Indeed, I argue that when the citizens are belief-polarized, we should *expect* elites to escalate partisan animus, lionize intransigence, and exaggerate divides. A belief-polarized citizenry will reward such behavior. In the book's nomenclature: a belief-polarized citizenry incentivizes *political polarization* among elites.

Disch thinks I should have placed some of the blame on elites. I did not intend to present the dysfunctions associated with polarization as unidirectional. My view is that belief and political polarization form a self-perpetuating *dynamic*: the escalating divisions among the citizens wrought by belief polarization incentivize politicians to mirror and exacerbate those divides; in turn, that produces further belief polarization, which then further incentivizes political polarization. And on it goes.

As I see it, it does not matter where this diagnosis starts. And I agree with Disch that elites bear a significant degree of liability for our dysfunctions. However, I tried to address *Sustaining Democracy* to my fellow citizens, and my pragmatist leanings point me toward diagnostic lenses that suggest viable rehabilitative steps. Elites benefit too much from the polarized status quo for us to expect them to initiate change. Additionally, many citizens are already devoted to viewing their opponents as depraved and divested from democracy; pleas to "heal divides" hence are likely inert. What remains is the endeavor to restore the democratic *ethos* among our allies. This, I argue, is ultimately a matter of recovering that *ethos* within ourselves. Disch and I both advocate for mass democracy. Yet, to build on Deweyan insight, as I see it, democracy is not only a task *before us* but it is also a task within each of us.