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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pluralism vs. Moralism

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In his final published essay, which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* shortly after his death in 1997, Isaiah Berlin reflected on the major themes of his life's work.[1] Under the heading "Pluralism," he wrote that "there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and ... these values differ." He argued that a belief in pluralism enables people to understand why others might endorse values different from their own. He also stressed that a belief in pluralism does not make one a relativist: "I do not say 'I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps.'" Pluralism as Berlin understands it is a key premise of *Respect and Loathing in American Democracy*.[2] Like Berlin, Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse believe there are plural values that people might endorse, including plural values that are reasonable in the Rawlsian sense that one can hold them while respecting others who do not. Examples are liberal values, such as individual liberty and human rights, and democratic values, such as popular sovereignty and political equality.

The pluralist position is comprised of at least three sets of analytically distinct claims. Pluralists believe that are there are plural values that people might reasonably endorse (claim one), but also that there are plural reasonable ways to interpret those values (claim two) and plural reasonable ways to rank and prioritize them (claim three). Imagine two American citizens who deeply value individual liberty. One understands liberty as freedom from government intervention and thinks that permitting protests in privately owned shopping malls is an important violation of mall owners' property rights. The other understands liberty as freedom from interference, whether by the state or non-state actors, and thinks that prohibiting such protests is an important violation of protesters'

[1] Isaiah Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," New York Review of Books 45, no. 8 (May 14, 1998): 53–60.
[2] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 57.

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first amendment rights. The former prioritizes property rights, while the latter prioritizes first amendment rights. Yet neither withholds respect from the other, for example by refusing to acknowledge the other as a fellow citizen who has standing to express her view.

Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse suggest that this type of respect, which they call civic respect, is undermined when people reject pluralism and embrace monism: when they "believe that society should be organized around one value or virtue or a particular religion" (156). Monism threatens democracy, on their view, because it undermines the civic respect on which democracy depends. Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse argue that democratic citizens practice civic respect when they engage one another with a view to understanding each other's values, beliefs, concerns, and reasons. They withhold such respect when they stereotype those with whom they disagree or dismiss them peremptorily, for example by assuming that they are misinformed, unintelligent, and/or ill-intentioned.

Marshaling survey, focus group, and experimental evidence, Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse make the case that, although most Americans—especially liberals and people on the left— agree in principle that it is important to respect their fellow citizens, most do a poor job realizing that ideal, especially when it comes to members of the opposite party. They write that Americans tend to stereotype out-party members; about half of Clinton voters say Trump voters are intolerant, racist, and sexist, while just under half of Trump voters say Clinton voters are intolerant and condescending (65–66). A majority from each party agrees or strongly agrees that people's political views and vote choices say "something deeply about" or say "a lot about" who they are as a person (64). A majority think the US "would be better off if the opposing party won few elections," and about half think that "there is no good reason to vote for the opposing party" (63).

To the extent that partisans in a two-party democracy regard and treat members of the opposing party as people whose claims, views, and reasons they need not hear, understand, and engage, the democratic project is undermined. That said, democrats can respect those with whom they disagree while remaining deeply committed to their own aims, ends and values, and while believing that that their opponents' aims, ends, and values are profoundly misguided. Reflecting in the current context on Berlin's claim that one can be a pluralist without being a relativist, I think of racial justice activists, reproductive rights activists, and climate justice activists on the left, and gun rights activists, anti-abortion activists, and religious freedom activists on the right: deeply engaged and partisan citizens, who likely would answer many of Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse's questions the "wrong" way.

For Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse the worry is that citizens such as these "moralize" their values. They regard them not as one set of values among many, but as politically significant moral truths: an attitude which, the authors claim, makes it difficult for them to respect those who espouse conflicting values. Perhaps it is unsurprising, if someone regards her core political values as important moral truths, that she might also regard voting for candidates or parties that embrace competing values as an action that says "a lot about" a

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person. Perhaps it is unsurprising, if the American parties divide sharply over matters that implicate someone's core values, that that person might think the US "would be better off if the opposing party won few elections." These attitudes are regrettable in the eyes of those who deeply value civic respect, understood as openness to the claims, values, and reasons advanced by one's political opponents. Hence what Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse call "the liberal paradox": people on the American left tend to endorse the value of respect more so than people on the right, but they also tend to moralize other values—such as racial justice, gender equality, and climate justice—in ways that make it hard for them to be open to many of their political opponents' beliefs and values.

One possible response to this paradox is to simply accept it: "That's just how the pluralism cookie crumbles." If there are multiple reasonable values, some of which conflict (pluralist claim one), and if there are multiple reasonable ways to prioritize those values (pluralist claim three), then prioritizing racial justice or climate justice over civic respect is a reasonable choice, even for people who value respect. Berlin emphasized that a belief in pluralism is not incompatible with "detest[ing]" values that conflict with one's own, or regarding them as "damaging to the only form of life that [one is] able to live or tolerate, for [one] self and others."[3] His example was Nazism, but for some, climate change denialism or opposition to reproductive rights may play a similar role. Just like other values, respect is a value that people can prioritize and rank-order in multiple reasonable ways.

At the same time, pluralist claim two suggests that civic respect is a value that people can interpret in multiple reasonable ways. Are there interpretations that are more compatible than Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse's with a strong principled commitment to substantive values such as racial justice or climate justice—even with a commitment so strong that conflicting values might seem morally repugnant? Might democratic citizens hear, engage, and try to understand members of opposing parties, and yet believe that those parties' ideologies include beliefs, values, and ideas that are morally reprehensible? Might democrats respect out-party members not only as human beings, but also as fellow citizens with standing to express their preferences, opinions, and views, and yet believe that, were the out-party's values to shape their political society, the results would be deeply unjust?

Wendy Brown helpfully distinguishes "moral struggles" from "projects animated by political moralism," where the former oppose social structures and institutions, while the latter oppose individuals and groups, whom they imagine to personify evil.[4] Might a left-liberal in the contemporary United States engage in moral struggle—against structural racism, or gender inequality, or the capitalist formations that prioritize economic growth over sustainability—without waging that struggle in a moralizing way? Engaging in such moral struggle may entail expressing civic respect for one's political opponents by deliberating with them in the ways the authors recommend, including listening to them with a view to understanding their values, beliefs, concerns, and reasons.

[3] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 57.

[4] Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 25–26.

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Yet it may also involve expressing strong moral and ethical disagreement with their positions, clearly and unequivocally articulating one's own views and reasons, and participating in civil disobedience with a view to challenging the institutions and other structures that sustain unjust inequalities. Such forms of democratic contestation themselves can express respect for political adversaries whom one regards as moral agents and political equals. *Respect and Loathing in American Democracy* prompts readers to consider what such non-moralizing moral struggle might look like, and what changes to democratic institutions and practices might encourage and support it.

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