

Government Should Educate Public for Stronger Democracy

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VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY, ROBERT TALISSE

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Description

The U.S. government should take action to strengthen democracy by educating the public to be better citizens, argues Vanderbilt University philosopher Robert Talisse in his new book.

Newswise — The U.S. government should take action to strengthen democracy by educating the public to be better citizens, argues Vanderbilt University philosopher Robert Talisse in his new book.

In *Democracy After Liberalism* (Routledge), Talisse promotes civic republicanism as an interpretation of American democracy that runs counter to the dominant liberal interpretation. In this philosophical context, the terms "liberalism" and "republicanism" do not represent political philosophies within democracy, but the overall framework of the democratic system.

"In political philosophy, liberalism holds that the state exists solely to protect your liberty to do whatever you want, so long as you're not infringing on other people's liberty"; in this way, "liberalism defines freedom as noninterference, as being left alone" Talisse said. "By contrast, civic republicanism holds that freedom means being a full citizen in a self-governing community." "On the civic republican view, there is no freedom outside of democratic participation."

Talisse argues that democratic participation is essentially "deliberation," the process of exchanging, evaluating, and criticizing reasons. Hence he argues that the government should be proactive in helping Americans to get better at weighing different viewpoints and arriving at a conclusion.

"Our political culture on the surface looks like it's moving in this direction anyway, if you note the proliferation of talk radio and television news shows based on political debate," Talisse said. "We employ the rhetoric of deliberation -- we uphold the value of "no spin zones" and of "fair and balanced" reporting -- but our practice doesn't match it. Politics has become a matter of sticking to our guns rather than looking for the best argument."

Talisse endorses government action to actively engage citizens in innovative ways such as a proposed national day of deliberation before a major election, where experts would present various arguments on current issues to voters.

"You might discover that the Democrats have the better argument on an issue, and Republicans are right about something else," he said. "The key is that you're using reason instead of following the marching orders of a political party."

"This book is ultimately a call for democracy to live up to its own self-image." Talisse is an assistant professor of philosophy at Vanderbilt.