

## AMERICAN POLITICS

**Respect and Loathing in American Democracy: Polarization Moralization, and the Undermining of Equality.**

By Jeff Spinner-Halev and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024. 280p. \$99.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

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The extensive recent literature on polarization has focused on affective polarization: polarization in partisans' feelings toward political parties. In the United States, it is abundantly clear that partisans on both sides have come to increasingly dislike the opposition party over the last several decades. In *Respect and Loathing in American Democracy*, Jeff Spinner-Halev and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse study a distinct but closely related topic—disrespect. While liking out-partisans might be too much to ask for, respecting them perhaps is not, or perhaps at least should not be.

*Respect* starts by noting it was motivated by a friend of one of the authors saying after the 2016 election: “I believe in equality and the importance of respecting my fellow citizens, but I cannot respect anyone who voted for Donald Trump” (p. x). *Respect's* authors, a political theorist and a political psychologist, note that “From that line, the liberal respect paradox that we study here was born.” This paradox, a term proposed in this book, is summed up in the next line: “To believe in equality yet insist that 45 percent of fellow Americans cannot be respected is a remarkable statement” (p. x).

A book about respect requires a careful definition of the term, and Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse in fact propose definitions for two variants, which they call *recognition respect* and *civil respect*. Recognition respect is a new term for what psychologists call *unconditional respect*. It entails “acceptance of the idea that all human beings have intrinsic worth as moral agents” (p. 25). The authors report survey data showing Democrats were more likely to say they hold this value than Republicans, though the magnitudes of these differences were not large. However, Democrats were not more likely than Republicans to say that out-partisans “should be given respect simply because they are fellow human beings” (p. 34). (In addition to the multiple surveys that the book draws upon, the authors conducted several focus groups and sprinkled in quotes from participants throughout the book, providing useful illustrations of some of the reasoning underlying the opinion data.)

The second type of respect, civic respect, “means listening to and taking seriously the ideas of one’s fellow citizens” (p. 51), building upon the existing concept of *mutual respect* in political theory. The full definition of

civic respect is laid out over multiple pages and comprises three parts: 1) listening to those with different views; 2) avoiding political stereotyping; and 3) not assuming those who hold different views are uninformed or misinformed. The authors present data indicating that partisans are equally highly likely to agree with the definition of civic respect but considerably less likely to give out-partisans this type of respect, again to about an equal degree.

*Respect* next analyzes causes of disrespect. The authors propose that Democrats and Republicans tend to hold different worldviews, with Democrats focused on social justice and Republicans emphasizing national solidarity. Partisans on both sides moralize their worldview, meaning they see it as a moral conviction and not simply an opinion. The authors then present additional empirical results showing that for both sides, stronger belief in their side’s worldview is associated with a lack of both types of respect for out-partisans. Moreover, on both sides, partisans who more strongly believe that citizens have a responsibility to contribute to the goals implied by their worldview have less recognition respect for out-partisans and are more judgmental. (Judgmentalism is also associated with less recognition respect.) In the final chapters, the authors more explicitly argue in favor of both types of respect (noting limits to when civic respect should be granted) and specifically make the case for *egalitarian pluralism*: “to privilege egalitarianism but to recognize that there may be times when equality should defer to other values” (p. 158).

I both like, and respect, *Respect*. My summary does not do justice to the richness of empirical results the book reports, and the interdisciplinary collaboration allows the book to make a unique contribution to the literature on undue polarization. The text is filled with empathy and wisdom, and I think it accomplishes the Herculean task of being written in a way that both liberals and conservatives will consider largely fair and reasonable, despite *not* dodging discussion of specific substantive issues. The distinction between recognition and civic respect is certainly useful, though I found these particular terms opaque—perhaps “humanity respect” and “opinion respect” would be clearer. I am always glad to see more talk of the vices of judgmentalism and virtues of pluralism.

The liberal respect paradox is a compelling hypothesis, but the evidence presented that liberals value respect more than conservatives is not obviously convincing. For instance, when asked about agreement with the statement, “All people should be given respect because they are fellow human beings,” the mean responses on a 0–1 scale were 0.74 for Democrats and 0.68 for Republicans (32). The survey question on civic respect as an ideal, in turn, asks about agreement with a definition of civic respect, and not whether respondents personally hold this as a value. *Respect* even includes evidence (not emphasized by the authors) that Democrats do give Republicans more civic respect

than Republicans give to Democrats—for instance, 54% of Republicans agreed with the statement, “There is no good reason to vote for the opposing party,” while only 46% of Democrats agreed with this. References to the large literature on selective exposure and partisan differences, or lack thereof, in willingness to listen to opposing viewpoints, would be very useful for gaining a more general understanding of partisan differences in civic respect.

On the other hand, results from the Bob experiment (in which participants were asked how much they respect a citizen named Bob with either prototypically liberal or conservative views) imply that Democrats do offer considerably less respect to Republicans than vice versa. Moreover, when Trump voters were asked if they agree that Clinton voters are “condescending,” “immoral,” “intolerant,” or “dishonest,” the option closest to disrespectful—condescending—was most popular. Ultimately, I think it is very plausible that Democrats are relatively far from their civic ideals and falter when it comes to giving both types of respect to out-partisans, but also that both Democrats and Republicans hold both types of respect as an ideal and struggle to behave accordingly.

The book’s biggest shortcoming, to my mind, is a lack of careful discussion of the differences between disrespect and dislike, and relatedly, a lack of discussion of alternative explanations for disrespect. Given the literature’s focus on affective polarization noted above, I would like more clarity on exactly what is added by studying respect. Dislike is driven by identity-based rivalries and beliefs about poor character traits: we are more likely to dislike someone when we think they are, for example, foolish, closed-minded, or self-serving. Are there any such traits that lead to dislike and not (civic) disrespect, or vice versa? How prevalent, if at all, are partisans who dislike the out-party but respect them? The authors note early on that respect is “both a belief and a practice” (TK) but perhaps as a belief, it is quite similar to the beliefs that drive dislike. If that is the case, the book’s contribution would be more clear with greater emphasis on respect as a practice.

The explanation for disrespect offered by the authors based on differences in worldviews is well said and offers a

useful contribution unto itself. One strand of research not present here that I suggest the authors and readers check out is behavioral economist Ben Enke’s recent excellent research on universalism versus communitarianism as a driver of left versus right political views. But the authors’ theory—that partisans see the out-party’s worldview as morally wrong—does not explain disrespect as a separate phenomenon from dislike, and the authors also do not discuss why their explanation outperforms competing theories (for disrespect alone or for dislike-driven disrespect). One alternative that jumps to mind is partisan identity. Strengthened partisan identity has been emphasized in the literature as the key cause of growth in affective polarization; it is possible that Democrats with stronger social justice views have stronger partisan identities, and this is what also causes a lack of recognition respect for Republicans. Moreover, the connection between the authors’ explanation for disrespect, focusing on moralization, and the definitions of recognition and civic respect, which fail to mention morality, is unclear.

Finally, I can’t help but view the book through the lens that I have used in my work on this topic—on how affective polarization is often exacerbated by misperceptions resulting from cognitive biases—and I think applying these ideas would help clarify the book’s claims that we are too judgmental and do not provide as much civic respect to out-partisans as we should. *Respect* reports very neat new data showing Democrats and Republicans mostly support the other side’s worldview—and that both sides vastly underestimate the other side’s support for their own side’s worldview, implying that there is indeed undue civil disrespect.

The authors’ tone in the end is mixed: somewhat hopeful about but also weary of the widespread deep antipathy across the political divide. Reading *Respect*, I couldn’t help but think of an assertive individual commanding, “YOU GIVE [X] RESPECT!”—and having this command actually be followed. Changes in beliefs are difficult; perhaps making changes in the practice of respect is a more feasible path forward for progress in American politics.