

# Liberal Pluralism, by William A. Galston

reviewed by [Christopher Beem](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

Widely respected for his academic work in political theory and public policy, William Galston is also a political actor. He has been deeply involved in partisan politics, serving in the presidential campaigns of John Anderson, Walter Mondale and Al Gore. In 1989 Galston became a senior adviser with the Progressive Policy Institute and the Democratic Leadership Council, arguing that the Democratic Party had to refashion itself--recapturing core issues and constituencies--if it was ever again to win the White House. That argument caught the attention of Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, which led to Galston's serving from January 1993 until May 1995 as the president's deputy assistant for domestic policy.

The form of liberalism that Galston, now professor of public affairs and director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Affairs at the University of Maryland, resisted in Democratic politics was largely born and bred in the academy, and much of his academic work reflects a similar effort. Just as Galston rejected dominant trends within the Democratic Party, he also spurned a related conception of liberal political theory--one that insisted on neutrality about the contents of the human good and that understood people's deepest commitments and beliefs as simple preferences.

In his earlier book *Liberal Purposes*, Galston argued that these notions were not constitutive of liberalism. To the contrary, he contended, liberalism is part of a long tradition of thought that goes back to Aristotle. Like Aristotelian political theory, liberalism outlines a conception of the human good and tries to foster that good in and through politics. To be sure, the liberal good is far thinner than Aristotle's, but it is nevertheless substantive and thereby orients political life.

In 21st-century America, postmodern notions of power and politics prevail, and religious groups vie with secularists in ever more strident tones. In *Liberal Pluralism*, Galston again wants to offer a more judicious conception, but this time his argument closely follows the work of philosopher Isaiah Berlin.

Writing a generation ago, Berlin argued that liberalism is better than its alternatives on the right and left because it more closely corresponds to the facts of the human condition. The human good is plural. There is no highest good, nor is there even one ordinal account of various goods. Any society that presumes otherwise will inevitably oppress some of its members. Societies can function well only when they allow individuals and groups to decide for themselves how best to live their lives.

Recalling the many meetings he chaired at the White House, Galston also proposes that there are numerous laudable ways of life and defensible points of view, and there is irreducible conflict between them. Philosophy cannot solve this problem, nor can politics impose a solution. Politics, rather, entails the careful consideration of the facts and the adjudication of these competing goods.

Some theists will surely blanch at the notion that there is no highest good, no summum bonum. Galston's account stands in sharp contrast, for example, to the idea of the harmonious natural order that is fundamental to Catholic social thought. Still, I think few will dispute Galston's claim that "the most difficult political choices are not between good and bad, but between good and good." Moreover, the fact that values are pluralistic does not mean that they are relative. Unlike many postmodern thinkers, Galston continues to advance the Aristotelian point of view that there are fundamental, nonnegotiable features of the human good, and that societies are worse or better depending on their ability to secure these goods.

Galston also follows Berlin in arguing that because values are pluralistic, human life contains multiple centers. These human associations possess an autonomy and status all their own; they are not always subordinate to politics. Galston gives this principle substantive bite, arguing that a liberal democracy must allow for non-democratic and illiberal forms of community. Other ways of life are worthy of respect even if that worthiness is not apparent to us.

Galston claims there are two broad and longstanding conceptions of liberalism. In Enlightenment liberalism, freedom is the necessary condition for human achievement and individual expression. It is the ennobling condition that allows humans to confront the exigencies of life with courage and clear-mindedness. The other, competing conception sees liberalism as a legacy of the post-Reformation period. Here, the value of liberalism centers not on its ability to unshackle the human spirit but on its ability to keep citizens from killing each other. It is a policy of mutual tolerance, in which individual expression is just one understanding of the

good life. Galston argues that Enlightenment liberalism tends toward intrusiveness. By undervaluing and even undermining any conception of the good that does not sufficiently respect freedom, it ultimately ends up compromising the very thing it supposedly celebrates.

For Galston, political practice inevitably follows political theory. Just so, his conception of liberal pluralism leads to the policy principle of "maximum feasible accommodation." The second half of his book strives to lay out the implications of this principle. Accommodation is most often necessary for those who, for reasons of faith, feel compelled to ignore, or even act contrary to, the objectives of the broader polity. Galston therefore considers a number of Supreme Court cases that deal with the ability of religious parents to remove their children from classes on evolution, for example, or from public education altogether. Galston argues that the principle of maximum accommodation means that "whenever possible," the state should find ways to accommodate believers.

Galston's general hypothesis is that "genuine civic unity rests on unforced consent." He claims that toleration is not likely to flourish as a civic virtue in children "if it is crammed down the throats of their parents." Rather, insofar as the state is willing to practice toleration, it is likely both to engender gratitude among recipients and to model the desired behavior. This presumption, combined with Galston's assessment that "the available evidence [regarding the behavior of fringe groups] does not warrant alarm," means that the state is normally obliged to be accommodating.

Late in this short book, Galston notes that "liberal pluralists are open to the possibility that the polity might offer its inhabitants a range of possibilities short of full citizenship." He goes on to consider Jeffrey Spinner's notion of "partial citizenship." Now surely institutionalizing a secondary status of citizenship would give freer reign to the Amish and others who just want to be left alone. But to allow someone to register as a permanent resident for ideological reasons introduces an element of formal inequality within the body politic—one that is quite different from the status of those with student visas or green cards.

Equality is at the root of democratic citizenship and unity, and introducing options regarding one's civic status would undermine that unity. About this disturbing possibility, Galston has nothing to say.

Berlin said famously that there is no social world without loss. In other words, there is no conceivable form of social order that does not privilege some forms of life and burden others. Rigid neutrality is a fantasy. But it is one thing to see equality before the law as an ideal that will always exceed our grasp and to address every hard case as a balancing act between the demands of the polity and those of the penitent, and it is quite another to acquiesce to all such cases by instituting another option, a status of less than full citizenship, all in the name of maximum feasible accommodation.

Galston says nothing about how a democratic society should balance the need to inculcate a sense of civic engagement with the general rule that society should pursue the maximum possible accommodation of those who want no part of the broader civic life, or who perhaps even spurn it. He apparently believes that by educating only those who choose it, a liberal democracy can sustain itself even as it accommodates those who want only to live here and be left alone. Perhaps it can, but by making maximum feasible accountability the default position Galston has set up a system of evaluation that underestimates the burdens of a democratic society.