

2022

Book Review: Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life by Scott Aiken and Robert Talisse

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Recommended Citation

Kliewer, Brandon W. (2022) "Book Review: Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life by Scott Aiken and Robert Talisse," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Leadership Studies*: Vol. 1, Article 6. Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/ijls/vol1/iss1/6>

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Book Review NA

BOOK REVIEW

Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life by Scott Aiken and Robert Talisse

by Brandon W. Kliewer, Kansas State University

More leadership activity alone will not save democracy. Scott Aiken and Robert Talisse say from the start of their book, *Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life*, that “democracy can’t be fixed.”¹ The very practices that make leadership and democracy possible—political equality and freedom of conscience, expression, and association—are also the very elements that make the type of polarization that undermines democracy possible. Aiken and Talisse argue that only by considering the merits of political argumentation will a path to overcome the perils of polarization become possible. Aiken and Talisse provide leadership studies with a plainspoken and pragmatist philosophical account of civility and the role leadership activity could potentially have in setting appropriate context for political argumentation. This review offers readers background on the authors and their entry point into the issue, an explanation of the structure and organization of the book’s

main argument, discussion of the book’s strengths and weaknesses as compared to stated objectives, and suggestions about its implications for leadership studies.

Aiken and Talisse, philosophers at Vanderbilt University, are both interested in argumentation, deliberation, and what political adversaries owe each other, as well as how that obligation should and can function within a democracy. Instead of accepting the typical call to fix democracy by creating more opportunities for democracy, Aiken and Talisse offer an approach to addressing the challenges polarization poses to democracy by accounting for a form of political equality and civility that centers the merits of opposing political arguments. The first five chapters of the book masterfully move through foundational concepts of democratic theory often assumed in leadership studies texts, but not always carefully detailed or understood.

Aiken and Talisse’s engagement with the concept of civility is one example of how the book illuminates foundational concepts in democratic theory for a leadership studies audience. They define civility as a “set of dispositions that enable citizens to manifest their commitment

to the political equality of their political opponents amidst political disagreement over matters in which they are invested.”² The analysis of civility, connected to notions of political equality, provides a theoretical grounding for how much of *civic leadership for a common good* is taught and studied. As a result of this focused theoretical framing, the reader is offered a series of strategies to diagnose and intervene in the conditions that produce productive argumentation that accounts for considerations in democratic theory and Aiken and Talisse’s philosophical analysis.

Understanding civic leadership activity in relation to foundational concepts of democratic theory will be of particular interest to courses and scholars committed to exploring leadership through a collective and constructionist (communication) lens. Instead of empty calls for leadership that advances the common good, Aiken and Talisse offer a substantive and detailed account of civility that can serve as a North Star to civic leadership practice.

The arc of the book goes deep into the circumstances required to improve the conditions of

¹ Scott F. Aiken and Robert B. Talisse, *Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020), 1.

² Aiken and Talisse, *Political Argument in a Polarized Age*, 17.

POLITICAL ARGUMENT IN A POLARIZED AGE

REASON AND
DEMOCRATIC LIFE

SCOTT F. AIKIN • ROBERT B. TALISSE

political argumentation. The leadership studies reader will appreciate the ways in which philosophical analysis offers novel entry points into considering questions of civic leadership activity and, maybe more importantly, offers an intellectual grounding for civic leadership practice.

Aiken and Talisse offer the most to readers in this regard in chapter 4, “Our Polarization Problem,” and chapter 8, “Deep Disagreement.” Chapter 4 outlines the ways polarization operates to create tensions within democratic practice. Discussion in chapter 8 has implications for the role leadership activity has in holding internal elements of deliberative civic engagement and deep disagreement in productive tension. The examples in both chapters are detailed in such a way to allow readers to see where leadership activity fits within Aiken and Talisse’s philosophical account of polarization and deep disagreement. The analysis gives a solid intellectual grounding to consider questions of leadership in the context of political argumentation and polarization.

The latter portion of the book continues to hold relevance to leadership studies, but is more closely devoted to addressing details internal to philosophy. Chapter 9, “Civility as a Reciprocal Virtue”; chapter 10, “Repairing Argumentative Culture”; and chapter 11, “Democracy at Dusk,” all overlap with concerns in the leadership studies literature. Whether attending to reciprocity

as a pathway to public moral virtue or which dialogic conditions are required to accept a partner mode of political argumentation, leadership studies readers will see overlap with collective, constructionist, dialogic, relational, and sociomaterial questions that are frequently addressed in contemporary leadership studies literature.

At their best, Aiken and Talisse offer important insights at the intersection of civility, political polarization, and civic leadership. Leadership studies readers will not only appreciate the focused analysis, but will also find the intellectual grounding extremely useful when they consider their own leadership questions and practice. Some nonphilosophically trained readers might drop off when Aiken and Talisse get into what might feel like, to a nonphilosopher, internal debates specific to the discipline of philosophy.

Leadership studies students, developers, and scholars looking for easy answers to “save democracy,” shallow calls to “exercise leadership for the common good,” or hope to champion “be nice to others” and “golden rule—treat others as you would like to be treated” notions of civility should look elsewhere. Aiken and Talisse’s analysis of civility and the state of political argumentation has real value in this contemporary political moment for those committed to adding depth and complexity to the interdisciplinary field of leadership studies.