

CONFERENCE

COMPROMISE AND DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT

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“Compromise as a normative ideal for pluralistic politics”

In this paper, I argue that building compromises should not be despised as a ‘second best’ mode of political decision making but, on the contrary, appreciated as a particularly valuable mode of decision making that is able to realise two fundamental political values: self-determination and stability. Much of liberal political theory has been dominated by the idea that both values require citizens to make use of public reason and, by doing so, arrive at decisions equally justifiable to all. Only collectively binding decisions of a kind that everybody can reasonably consent to, liberals argue, are able to realise each citizen’s moral right to self-determination and safeguard the stability of the political order as citizens are likely to withdraw their compliance if they have to live under rules they consider unreasonable. My thesis is that under conditions of deep pluralism, this way of thinking about legitimate politics loses its persuasiveness. In a first part, I point out that in contemporary societies, more often than not, citizens disagree deeply about the meaning and weight of public reasons. Against the background of such deep disagreement, the regulative ideal of impartial justification – contrary to liberal theorists’ intentions – tends to hinder groups of citizens from effectively making use of their right to self-determination and, as a consequence, is poorly equipped to safeguard political stability. In a second part, I defend compromising as a normatively rich account of political decision making. First, I argue that the nature of a compromise as composite agreement puts it in a much better position to realise both citizens’ equal right to self-determination and political stability under enduring conditions of disagreement. Second, I give an account of a political process whose features enable citizens to arrive at fair compromises. I draw on James Tully’s theory which, due to its focus on deliberation, has mistakenly been called a deliberative democratic theory. Far from rearticulating the deliberative orientation towards “the force of the better argument”, Tully offers an account of a pluralistic dialogue in which the rule of reciprocity requires all participants to cooperate and accept other citizens’ perspectives as parts of the composite agreement. Thus, I argue, the pluralistic dialogue presents a fruitful starting point to think in more detail about the procedural preconditions of compromises. In the third and last part, I point to a serious downside of Tully’s pluralistic dialogue. In cases of power asymmetries, it does not show how the weaker participants can effectively make use of their right to self-determination if the powerful participants refuse to listen and cooperate. I take this to be a serious downside and present some preliminary thoughts on how it can be overcome.