

Telos PRIMOPLANAc

William A. Galston holds the Ezra Zilkha Chair in the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies Program, where he serves as a Senior Fellow. He is also College Park Professor at the University of Maryland. Prior to January 2006 he was *Saul Stern Professor* at the School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, where he also served as Director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, and founding Director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). From 1993 until 1995 Galston served as Deputy Assistant to President Clinton for Domestic Policy. He worked as an advisor to many presidential candidates. Galston is the author of eight books and more than 100 articles in the fields of political theory, public policy, and American politics. His current research focuses on designing a new social contract and the implications of political polarisation. A winner of the American Political Science Association's *Hubert H. Humphrey Award*, he was elected as Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2004.

Editorial

Is political polarisation good or bad? Can greater or lesser distance between political parties affect the quality of democracy? Bill Galston, an academic and advisor to the Clinton administration, merges the rigour of a political enquiry with his current passion and commitment as a proud nonpartisan in order to question the *sorry state* of America's current political system. Indeed, because the grassroots movement, *No Labels*, which Galston helped promoting and brings together Democrats, Republicans and Independents, has no intention of founding a third party. Something much more precious and urgent is at stake: the demand for, or better still, the revival of a discussion forum without ideological and personalistic standpoints. *No Labelers* complain that American Institutions are paralysed by the *professionals of partisan groups* who use enthusiasm and fear to build consensus, to the detriment of any serious effort to implement the Government's agenda. Healthcare, education, tax system, financial rules: all topics which the Democrats and Republicans are interested in exploiting only in order to fuel ideological disputes, for or against taxes, the welfare State, and market discipline. But the divisive violence and impetus of this frontal juxtaposition is the measure of how impractical these proposals are. The effects are devastating, if it's true that financial markets have raised questions even about the credibility of the US sovereign debt. The *No Labelers* want to fix this deterioration in the American public arena not by proposing compromise, but rather a radical change in attitude: to shift the focus of the political debate, in Congress and the media, be it the press or television, from an *a priori* opposition to factual analysis. All proposals, from whatever side they come from, should be focused only on achieving the common good. Galston explains that this is a cultural revolution sponsored by the force and optimism of a massive grassroots movement, worthy of what is traditionally the best in American democracy. It doesn't involve looking right or left, but straight ahead. A challenge which here in Italy we would do well to focus on.

Mariella Palazzolo

William Galston. Not left. Not right. But forward.

Telos: We are deeply interested in the *No Labels* movement. Could you explain how it started, what its aims are and your role within it?

William Galston: *No Labels* is a result of the sharp increase in political polarisation that has taken place in the United States over the past four decades. More than a year ago, individuals who have played important roles in both political parties - Nancy Jacobson, a veteran fund raiser for the Democratic Party and Mark McKinnon, a well-known Republican political strategist, among others - began informal discussions. After some months, it became clear that there was substantial support for a new organisation that could serve as the arena for conversations across party lines that do not occur anywhere else. *No Labels* could also help enforce norms of civility in political dialogue, norms that had collapsed under the weight of cable television, talk radio, and extremists in both parties. And finally, it has the ambition to give voice to the tens of millions of moderate and independent voters who have been deprived of representation by the current rules of electoral competition.

As a political theorist and student of American political institutions, I have been able to offer the movement a broader historical perspective than it might otherwise have enjoyed. In that capacity, I have spoken to citizens' groups around the Country, helping them to situate their hopes within the tradition of American civic movements.

Do you think a bottom-up initiative can be successful in influencing a major political change such as that you stand for? Can *No Labels* action obtain practical results in shaping the behaviour of individual congressmen?

Throughout American history, bottom-up movements have effected enormous political changes. Consider the anti-slavery movement and the push for women's voting rights during the 19th century, or the labour and environmental movements during the 20th. The Progressive Movement, which began during the late 19th century and dominated the first two decades of the 20th, brought about very substantial changes in political institutions and behaviour.

So there is ample precedent for the kind of effort that *No Labels* represents. And to make sure that elected representatives are aware of the views of our members, we plan to spend 2011 organising grassroots citizens' committees in all 50 States and 435 congressional districts.



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As a researcher, your work is focused, among others, on the issue of political polarisation. Indeed, the outcome of the mid-term elections appears to have propitiated an increased cooperation between the Obama Administration and the new Republican majority in the House. Is this, in your opinion, a first step towards a less ideological political debate? Or else?

The post-election cooperation phase between the Obama administration and the new Republican majority was a welcome respite from unending fight, but it is not necessarily a harbinger of things to come. The ideological differences between our two major political parties are very substantial, and they may need to confront each other before moving toward a compromise, as they did in 1995 and 1996 (*when, after the November 1994 mid-term elections, the Clinton Administration had to live with a Republican majority*).

What are, in your view, the economic roots of political polarisation?

During the past four decades, economic inequality has grown substantially in the United States. While this trend is not the sole source of political polarisation, it has certainly contributed to it. Moreover, globalisation has put pressure on the U.S. manufacturing sector, reducing employment among manufacturing workers and diminishing their confidence in the ability of the public sector to intervene on their behalf. As a consequence, a substantial portion of the working class has shifted its political allegiance from the Democratic to the Republican Party. Globalisation has also weakened the tie that once existed between corporations and particular locations within the United States. At one time, corporate leaders took into account the effects of their decisions on local communities. Today, they are much less likely to do so. And finally, many educated professionals are more likely to feel ties with similar individuals in other countries than with lower-income fellow citizens. So there is more separation of interest and sentiment among the economic classes than there was four decades ago.

The bitter political conflict we experience in Italy is less rooted in cultural/ideological divergences than centred on a single political figure. How do you see the Italian political situation from your American perspective?

It is very difficult for Americans to understand how Silvio Berlusconi has survived in office for so long. In our country, his unique combination of economic interests, as well as of legal and personal difficulties would have been more than sufficient to terminate his political career. In an Anglo-Saxon country, it would be really hard to imagine that a tycoon such as Rupert Murdoch may ever become Prime Minister. An American can only conclude that there are deep cultural differences between Italy and the United States. More generally, it is perhaps the case that many Italians do not believe that Government is very important and that whether it does its jobs well or badly will have a major impact on their lives. And no doubt the diminished standing of the political parties that dominated Italian politics during the post-war decades created a vacuum that Berlusconi filled.

Titbits

"Every man has a right to his own opinion, but no man has a right to be wrong in his facts". This maxim by the Democratic Senator Daniel P. Moynihan is what the No Labels initiative is all about: throwing out easy-sell ideas and talking once again about real problems in a spirit of collaboration and common sense. This idea also inspired Bill Galston's academic work and his political passion. *Yes, political passion, not one-party passion: care for the common good, not cynical manipulation and evocation of emotions.* Political polarisation has been on his mind for years, and if the truth be told, Galston is in good company: one name for all - the Nobel prize-winner Paul Krugman.

It appears that many eminent members of the intellectual *élite* in America feel the need to find a solution to the unprecedented political crisis in their country and remind us of the risks of a political-institutional paralysis. Galston describes the growing polarisation as reflected in the behaviour of the electorate and studies the historical, social, and economic reasons behind this state of affairs. However, ethics appears to be the basis on which his considerations rest, inspired by an old warning pronounced by the Fourth President of the United States, James Madison: that more than any other kind of Government, virtue and faith in human nature is a pre-requisite for a Republic. The American two-party system appears to be heading in the opposite direction; but Galston, like all the other *No Labelers*, is ready to look straight ahead.