

How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition

By Robert A. Dahl

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In this provocative book, one of our most eminent political scientists poses the question, “Why should Americans uphold their constitution?” The vast majority of Americans venerate the Constitution and the democratic principles it embodies, but many also worry that the United States has fallen behind other nations on crucial issues, including economic equality, racial integration, and women’s rights. Robert Dahl explores this vital tension between the Americans’ belief in the legitimacy of their constitution and their belief in the principles of democracy.

Dahl starts with the assumption that the legitimacy of the American Constitution derives *solely* from its utility as an instrument of democratic governance. Dahl demonstrates that, due to the context in which it was conceived, our constitution came to incorporate significant antidemocratic elements. Because the Framers of the Constitution had no relevant example of a democratic political system on which to model the American government, many defining aspects of our political system were implemented as a result of short-sightedness or last-minute compromise. Dahl highlights those elements of the American system that are most unusual and potentially antidemocratic: the federal system, the bicameral legislature, judicial review, presidentialism, and the electoral college system. The political system that emerged from the world’s first great democratic experiment is unique—no other well-established democracy has copied it. How does the American constitutional system function in comparison to other democratic systems? How could our political system be altered to achieve more democratic ends? To what extent did the Framers of the Constitution build features into our political system that militate against significant democratic reform?

Refusing to accept the status of the American Constitution as a sacred text, Dahl challenges us all to think critically about the origins of our political system and to consider the opportunities for creating a more democratic society.

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
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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this slim, accessible volume, Yale political science professor emeritus Dahl (*On Democracy*) takes a critical look at our Constitution and why we continue to uphold it, though it is "a document produced more than two centuries ago by a group of fifty-five mortal men, actually signed by only thirty-nine, and adopted in only thirteen states." As an instrument for truly democratic government, Dahl argues, it fails. With insufficient models to guide them and a distrust of unfettered democracy, the Framers allowed several "undemocratic elements" in: slavery was accepted and suffrage effectively limited to white men. But Dahl saves his most potent criticism for two provisions that have remained unchanged: the electoral college and the Senate, both of which tie votes to geography rather than population, thereby skewing political power toward coalitions of smaller states whose interests may not necessarily coincide with the nation's as a whole. And as the 2000 presidential election illustrated, the electoral college can frustrate the will of the majority. Perhaps the most enlightening aspect of Dahl's critique is his comparison of our system with those of other stable democracies. In his view, countries with proportional representation which typically results in multi-party states and coalition governments offer a purer form of democratic equality, while our structure frequently supports, for example, policies beneficial to the most powerful lobbyists, rather than the greatest number of citizens. This book originated as a series of lectures at Yale and, as a result, the argument is abbreviated and clear. While Dahl concedes that he has occasionally oversimplified, his intention is not to write a political treatise but to encourage American citizens to change, if not the Constitution, then at least "the way we think about it" and at that, he should have success.

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Review

"Robert A Dahl ... is about as covered in honors as a scholar can be.... He knows what he is talking about. And he thinks that the Constitution has something the matter with it."

From the Publisher

Robert A. Dahl is Sterling Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Yale University and past president of the American Political Science Association. He is the author of numerous books, including *Who Governs?*, *Democracy and Its Critics*, and *On Democracy*, all published by Yale University Press.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dorothy Wright:

This *How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition* book is simply not ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you obtain by reading this book is usually information inside this book incredible fresh, you will get information which is getting deeper an individual read a lot of information you will get. This kind of *How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition* without we realize teach the one who reading through it become critical in pondering and analyzing. Don't end up being worry *How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition* can bring when you are and not make your tote space or bookshelves' become full because you can have it with your lovely laptop even telephone. This *How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition* having fine

arrangement in word in addition to layout, so you will not experience uninterested in reading.

Lisa Chaffee:

A lot of people always spent their own free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them household or their friend. Are you aware? Many a lot of people spent many people free time just watching TV, or maybe playing video games all day long. If you would like try to find a new activity here is look different you can read some sort of book. It is really fun for yourself. If you enjoy the book you read you can spent the whole day to reading a reserve. The book How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition it is very good to read. There are a lot of those who recommended this book. These were enjoying reading this book. In case you did not have enough space to develop this book you can buy the e-book. You can m0ore effortlessly to read this book out of your smart phone. The price is not to fund but this book possesses high quality.

Scott Lowe:

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Dana Richardson:

In this period globalization it is important to someone to receive information. The information will make a professional understand the condition of the world. The condition of the world makes the information simpler to share. You can find a lot of references to get information example: internet, magazine, book, and soon. You can view that now, a lot of publisher which print many kinds of book. Often the book that recommended to your account is How Democratic is the American Constitution? Second Edition this book consist a lot of the information from the condition of this world now. This specific book was represented how do the world has grown up. The vocabulary styles that writer require to explain it is easy to understand. Often the writer made some analysis when he makes this book. That is why this book suited all of you.

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