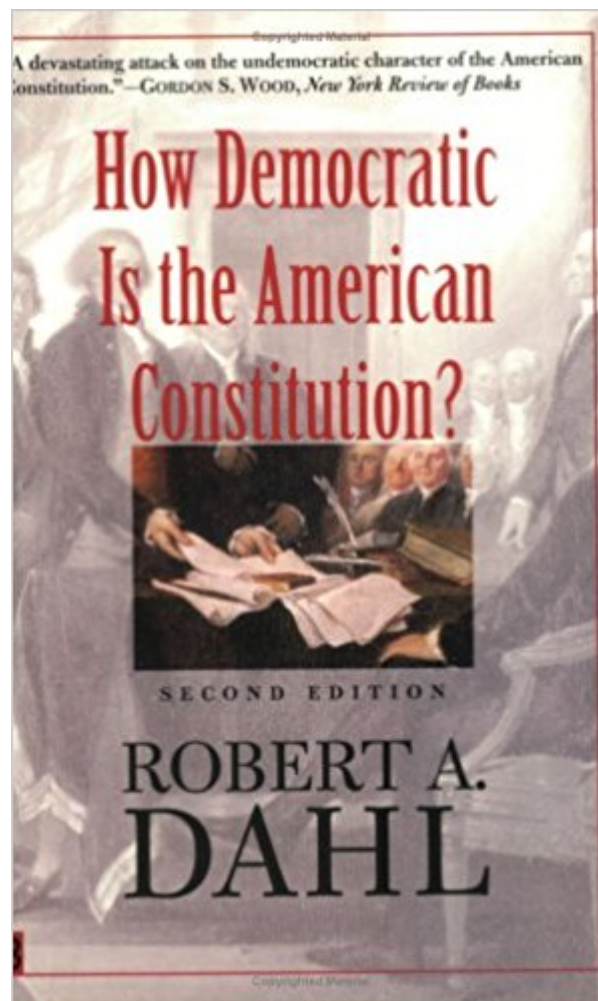




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# How Democratic Is The American Constitution? Second Edition



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"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."—Hendrik Hertzberg, *New Yorker* "Some may find it a startling question, as most Americans have an unwavering faith in the Constitution and its principles. But the author argues that we should not be

afraid to examine it and to consider other options for achieving a more democratic society." **Washington Post Book World (Best Seller List/Washington is Also Reading)** "Some may find it a startling question . . . [b]ut the author argues . . . we should not be afraid to examine it. . . ." **Washington Post Book World (Best Seller List/Washington is Also Reading)** "This is a lively and challenging volume for those who still think of the Constitution as sacred text. Highly recommended at all levels." **Choice** "Dahl probably is the US's leading scholar of democratic theory. . . . This is a lively and challenging volume for those who still think of the Constitution as sacred text. Highly recommended at all levels." **Choice**

Great product for the money

thank you

I bought this as a gift for my daughter and she loves it! She has a great interest in politics; pros and cons; so this is perfect for her to read.

first, this book is quite brief. less than 200 pages, large font and margins. i can see why he is recognized as a distinguished professor at yale. he is brilliant and engaging. he covered all of the essential topics and this book is a sound, middle-of-the-road text. there were just a few statements he made that i re-re-read, asking myself, "did he really say THAT?" i wish that he had covered more topics and gone into greater depth on those that he did address. perhaps he has done so in other texts? overall, this is an excellent book that is somewhat interesting.

Robert Dahl brings his obvious great experience to bear on this difficult subject. Without his guidance it would be difficult to understand this complex question.

Very clean, smooth pages (no wrinkles in paper) and helped me through my government class.

Amazing book that everyone should read.

No matter what you may think of Dahl's views in this book, certainly it can be agreed upon that he provides an interesting and refreshing look at the U.S. Constitution. He brings up a few aspects of the Constitution that he believes are not so democratic in nature. These include the equal

Representation amongst states in the U.S. Senate, the Electoral College system, and the broad judicial review powers that exist today that often trump the other two branches. Dahl's stated goal isn't necessarily to demand change, but rather, to provide a different perspective to make the citizenry view their Constitution as a tool of democratic principles. He doesn't believe citizens should simply view the document as something perfectly written and infallible. He reminds readers that the writers of the Constitution were only human themselves, and were subject to the same political compromises and considerations as politicians today. Overall a very good read.

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