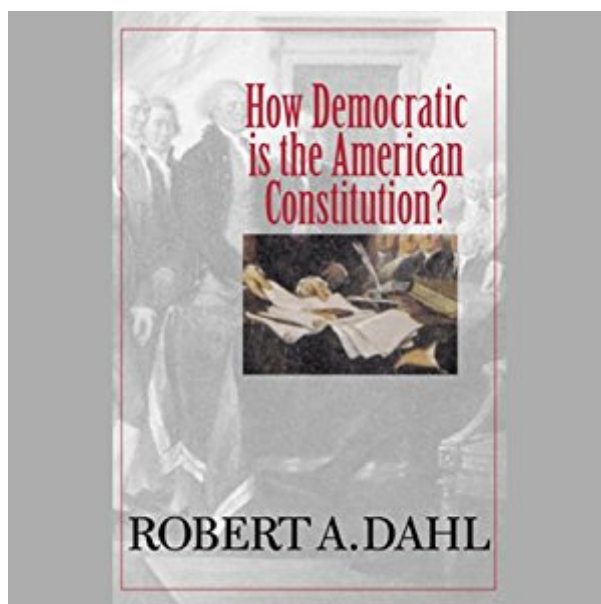


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# How Democratic Is The American Constitution?



## Synopsis

In this volume, an eminent political scientist questions the extent to which the American Constitution furthers democratic goals. Robert Dahl reveals the Constitution's potentially antidemocratic elements and explains why they are there, compares the American constitutional system to other democratic systems, and explores how Americans might alter their political system to achieve greater equality among citizens. In a new chapter for this second edition, he shows how increasing differences in state populations revealed by the Census of 2000 have further increased the veto power over constitutional amendments held by a tiny minority of Americans. He then explores the prospects for changing some important political practices that are not prescribed by the written Constitution, though most Americans may assume them to be so. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 4 hours and 58 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Polity Audio LLC

Audible.com Release Date: March 24, 2010

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B003DWIBBW

Best Sellers Rank: #144 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Law #176 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > Political History & Theory #226 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Political Science > Constitutions

## Customer Reviews

Some other reviewers have criticized this book with the non-sequitur that the US is "a republic, not a democracy." A republic is simply a representative democracy. The Founders feared a system in which a majority of the population could empower their representatives to do whatever the majority so pleases. To prevent such a nightmare they proposed limits on government power. Although they feared the unchecked will of the majority, they all agreed that the "will of the people" was a better source of power than any alternative. Anybody who recites from rote the "Republic, not a democracy" mantra to ward off any discussion of perfecting our form of government is forgetting that

the preamble to the Constitution speaks of a "more perfect union", not "a perfect union." That said, the question Dahl raises is why no other government in the world is quite like ours. He makes it clear that the Framers had good ideas, but suggests that other nations have improved on the excellent baseline model established by the Framers. That is a very reasonable proposition. Ironically, much of the innovation seen in other nations consists of solutions to problems that our Framers thought they had solved. The Framers feared "faction", because blind partisanship is clearly a bad thing. Ironically, a failure to foresee and allow for the inevitable formation of parties has only exacerbated the effects of "faction." Dahl addresses the lack of proportional representation (PR), where each party gets seats in (at least one house of) the legislature in proportion to its share of the vote. The lack of PR leads to a two-party system. When you only have two parties, the inevitable result is rancor and polarization. Conversely, multi-party systems require coalitions, compromise, and negotiation.

I think the book is a good one, as far as it goes. But, I think that the author, like virtually every author on the subject, is essentially arguing trivia that has little relevance to the real world. They intellectualize on a subject that our Government does not take seriously. The truth is that what the Constitution says or the form it takes simply has no consequence since the people who run our government simply ignore those provisions it does not like, enforces those provisions that enhance their power, and the Supreme Court can make its words mean anything they want by interpreting it to mean whatever they want it to mean. Let me give a few examples. Example:1 Perhaps the most glaring example is the ruling that money equals speech. This ruling gives Constitutional protection thru the Free Speech Amendment for Corporations and the super rich to bribe any government official they want. Could anything be more obscene than to use the Bill of Rights to permit what would normally be a criminal action. I don't think so. When one adds that to the recent ruling that Corporations are persons under law, there is no hope for the common man to have any reasonable chance to have a seat at the tables when laws are being enacted that are critical to their own well being. Both of those interpretations are so absurd on the face of them that one simply cannot take any intellectual arguments about the Constitution seriously. And while our government scrupulously enforces those rulings, they simply ignore others. Example:2 You may not know it but our government violates the Constitution on several subjects. The first is that the Constitution states that our government is to give an accounting for all expenditures.

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