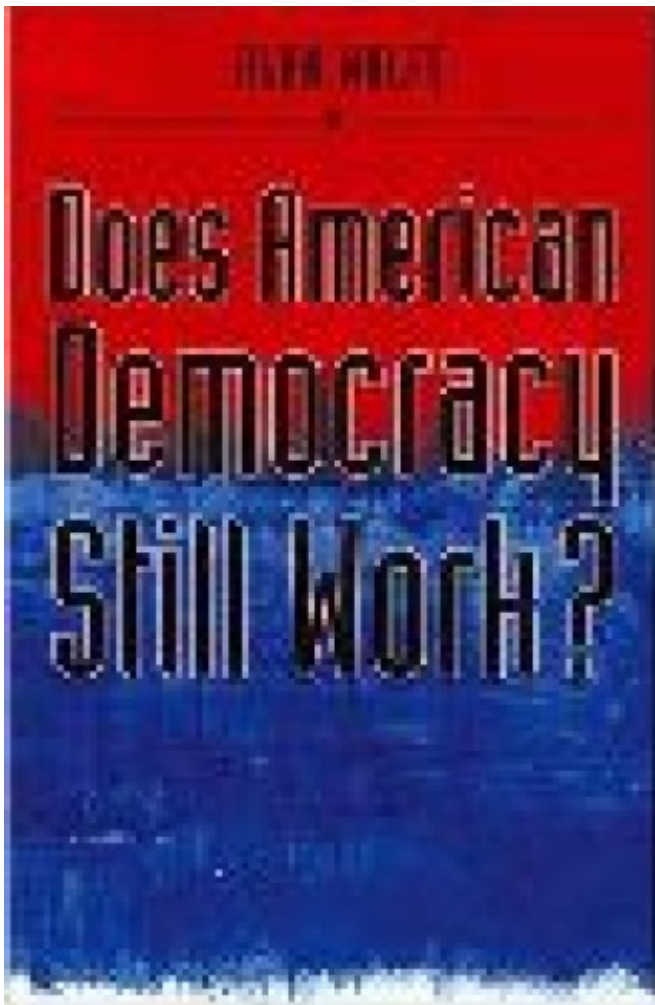


Does American Democracy Still Work?

reviewed by [Barbara Brown Zikmund](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Does American Democracy Still Work?

Alan Wolfe

Yale University Press

Alan Wolfe has previously written about the capacity of the American people to correct political imbalances and sustain consensus on many issues (*One Nation, After All*, 1998). In *Does American Democracy Still Work?* Wolfe does not express such optimism. He is worried that American democracy is in trouble. From his vantage point as a professor of political science at Boston College, he warns that the United States is experiencing a dangerous “new politics of democracy.”

What’s new? First, as Wolfe documents, the major divisions in American politics between the left and the right have changed. Party divisions no longer revolve around economics, but focus on moral and religious issues—the source of the so-called culture wars. Second, Wolfe notes, the side that has been gaining increasing power during the past 40 years—the right—is now making its case in the language of populism.

Moralism and populism are not new in American politics. What is new is the way in which they are being effectively combined to support conservative politics. Initially liberals used moralistic tactics to support abortion and prevent certain presidential appointments. Now conservatives make moral and religious issues central.

Furthermore, conservatives have mastered the rhetoric and techniques of populism, historically associated with liberal movements, to serve conservative goals. This is ironic. “For conservatives these days, democratic sentiment has become the ultimate trump card for a political ideology that originated as a check on democratic sentiment.”

How did this happen? Unfortunately, Wolfe never really defines *democracy*. In his distress over the ways in which conservatives are using and misusing democratic populism to undermine what he believes are the classic strengths of the American political system, he has used rhetoric that often expresses little more than disgruntled liberalism.

Yet this book is not just another diatribe against Republican politics. In a readable style it presents a balanced summary of a number of recent scholarly studies on American politics and explains how both Democrats and Republicans cultivate this new politics. Wolfe is honest. The liberals got lazy and the conservatives “outhustled” them. “Crafted talk,” deliberately designed to obfuscate and ward off potential objections, is being tolerated by ordinary citizens, who resist taking political responsibility and withdraw into cynicism. All political institutions, parties,

leaders and voters are responsible, and all need to think about the long-term consequences of this new political climate.

Wolfe's book looks at five problematic areas: the shift from centrist, bipartisan consensual politics to polarized partisan politics; the framing of political questions and information in ways that reduce the accountability of government; the transformation of political parties and interest groups, which initially emerged to empower citizens, into special organizations that now manage and manipulate voters; the demise of disinterested leaders who could (sometimes) rise above political loyalties on behalf of the whole rather than calculating their decisions to protect and maintain power and ideology; and the weakening of the capacity of democracy to promote true social justice because of glorification of the populist idea that in a democracy people should get what they want.

On this last point, although I like what Wolfe says because I agree with him, I do not think that his argument is strong enough. Wolfe writes, quoting philosopher Richard Arneson, that democracies are not "intrinsically just." Majority rule can degenerate into mob rule, which is rarely dispassionate, balanced or impartial. In fact, left to themselves the majority of the people want personal gratification and assurance that their way is right. For this reason, raw democracy rarely leads to justice.

Those of us who preach and teach about the Christian faith know this. Human nature is flawed. The gospel brings good news, but it also confronts the human community with the reality of sin. The Bible reminds us that God's justice is never simply of our doing. It certainly is never achievable through populist desires or decisions. Biblical religion insists that the route to true justice requires confession, repentance and even divine grace.

Wolfe is correct that the new politics of democracy now promoted by Republicans (and many Democrats) endangers the basic principles of social justice embedded in the American political system. He laments that, "at least morally speaking," the Republicans "will leave behind a society far more coarse, indifferent, corrupt and ugly than the one they inherited from the liberals they so frequently denounce for their immorality."

The problem with this critique is that Wolfe never really grounds his vision of social justice in anything other than his personal opinion. What if someone were to ask him why a democratic government should protect the innocent, uphold justice and

guarantee fairness? He appears to have no objective answer.

Nevertheless, this book is helpful. Wolfe names our problems, tracks social and political changes, documents results and suggests future scenarios. He laments the cynicism and culpability of leaders and ordinary citizens. The book is filled with delightful quotations that ought to find their way into sermons, such as: "Real democracy demands not only that the people be praised, but that they be challenged; flattery is the great enemy of good democracy everywhere, a cheap political trick that in the guise of complimenting ordinary people expresses nothing but contempt for their intelligence."

In his conclusion Wolfe reflects about the political instability that goes with our new conservative democracy. He expresses hope that the American public will tire of recent patterns of "vituperation, polarization and endless domestic warfare" and return to "their traditional ideological centrism" by electing leaders "capable of bringing people together rather than tearing them apart." Wolfe wrote this book before the elections of November 2006, and only time will tell if his hope has been fulfilled.