



## Democracy and Disagreement

By Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson

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**Democracy and Disagreement** By Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson

The din and deadlock of public life in America--where insults are traded, slogans proclaimed, and self-serving deals made and unmade--reveal the deep disagreement that pervades our democracy. The disagreement is not only political but also moral, as citizens and their representatives increasingly take extreme and intransigent positions. A better kind of public discussion is needed, and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson provide an eloquent argument for "deliberative democracy" today. They develop a principled framework for opponents to come together on moral and political issues.

Gutmann and Thompson show how a deliberative democracy can address some of our most difficult controversies--from abortion and affirmative action to health care and welfare--and can allow diverse groups separated by class, race, religion, and gender to reason together. Their work goes beyond that of most political theorists and social scientists by exploring both the principles for reasonable argument and their application to actual cases. Not only do the authors suggest how deliberative democracy can work, they also show why improving our collective capacity for moral argument is better than referring all disagreements to procedural politics or judicial institutions. *Democracy and Disagreement* presents a compelling approach to how we might resolve some of our most trying moral disagreements and live with those that will inevitably persist, on terms that all of us can respect.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Well-situated at the nexus of several trends in political theory and academic publishing, *Democracy and Disagreement* addresses contemporary theories of "deliberative democracy" in a highly accessible style intended to bring this important topic to the attention of a wider audience. "Deliberative democracy" is a term used (often rather loosely) to describe a mode of decision-making which privileges participation in debate or dialogue (as opposed to mere polling or casting ballots) as the desirable means for arriving at public judgment. Like another book published this year by a professor of political theory, *Democracy's Discontent*, by Michael Sandel, the intended audience of Gutmann and Thompson's book is the thoughtful general reader who is concerned with reducing the divisiveness of contemporary political debate. For that reason, *Democracy and Disagreement* leaves behind many academic points of disagreement between liberals, communitarians, and civic republicans, and takes on topics like welfare reform, affirmative action, and health care rationing. The result is an intelligent book, unlikely to completely satisfy academic audiences, but one that generally succeeds at bringing the topic of "deliberative democracy" to the attention of lay readers through clear and lucid prose and well-chosen examples of practical policy issues.

#### From Library Journal

Any reader familiar with the previous work of Professors Gutmann and Thompson (coeditors of *Ethics & Politics*, Nelson-Hall, 1990) will be pleased to see they have continued to collaborate on matters central to the vitality and resiliency of our republic. The authors contend that "we suffer from a deliberative deficit not only in our democratic politics but also in our democratic theory." Thus, they seek to revitalize American politics by asking the rest of us to rethink American political thought. It's a daunting task, one whose successful completion is perhaps beyond guarantee. Nonetheless, Gutmann and Thompson, in their focus on "deliberative democracy," offer a detailed diagnosis and persuasive prognosis of public debate and civic virtue in contemporary America. Presenting an alternative theory to the prevailing utilitarian perspective, the authors propose a model for public policymaking that must be taken seriously by citizens and public officials alike. Especially recommended for scholarly libraries. —Stephen Shaw, Northwest Nazarene Coll., Nampa, Id.

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#### From Kirkus Reviews

An imaginative program for recasting the conduct of American political dialogue. Gutmann (Politics/Princeton Univ.) and Thompson (Political Philosophy/Harvard Univ.), authors of *Ethics in Congress* (1995), propound a theory called ``deliberative democracy.'' With this, they say, moral arguments over issues such as whether the government should fund abortion or enforce affirmative action can acquire a depth beyond the usual sound-bite level. Such an enriched process of deliberation, they maintain, would force citizens to truly take into account the moral claims of others, in place of a self-righteous denunciation of other points of view. The authors propose a program of town meetings and other public forums where moral issues can be discussed, and offer abundant real-world examples that show how their theory might apply. They consider at length, for instance, an actual Tennessee case in which a group of fundamentalist Christians refused to allow their children to use assigned textbooks that encouraged tolerance of other ways of life. After considering all sides of the story and examining the respective moral claims involved, the authors conclude that ``there is a public interest in educating good citizens, and no citizen can fairly claim that what constitutes good citizenship is whatever happens to conform to his or her particular religion.'' This is classic utilitarianism, but the what's-best-for-most model doesn't always prevail. As the authors remark, ``Aggregating what citizens want individually . . . does not necessarily produce the same result as asking citizens to consider together what they want collectively.'' They examine the ethics of surrogate motherhood,

children's rights, preferential hiring, and other ticklish issues, offering deeply considered commentaries. All this makes for fascinating, engaged reading--but always with the caveat that the authors' vision of a thoughtfully conversational politics is the unlikeliest of pipe dreams. -- *Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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#### **Joseph Robison:**

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