

# So you think you live in a democracy?

**Ronald Dworkin**

*Professor of Law at Oxford and Columbia*

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[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ronald\\_dworkin/2007/03/is\\_democracy\\_possible\\_here.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ronald_dworkin/2007/03/is_democracy_possible_here.html)

Democracy doesn't mean just majority rule. There is no intrinsic value in the bare fact that more people favour one particular party or policy than another. Democracy is a value worth fighting for - it makes power legitimate - only when it means government through the majority on behalf of and for all the citizens. In a new [book](#) I argue that the conditions of genuine democracy are far from met in the US, the UK and other mature self-styled democracies.

These conditions can easily be set out in very abstract terms. Government must respect human rights, it must respect religious freedom and other forms of freedom of conscience, it must distribute its wealth so as to give everyone a fair stake in its economy and, above all, it must conduct its elections and other political procedures argumentatively so that each citizen is treated as someone worth convincing not just outvoting.

The United States fails by all these standards, and Britain does not do much better. We fail most dramatically in the character of our politics. Our politicians treat us as ignorant consumers; they entertain us with slogans and sound bites rather than arguments. In America, a very pessimistic explanation of this degraded politics is now fashionable. Americans are supposedly divided into two radically opposed cultures: the red culture that wants its religion public, drinks beer, lives in the middle, and votes Republican, and the blue culture that keeps its religion (if any) private, drinks white wine, lives on the coasts and votes Democratic. Genuine argument requires some common ground from which argument can start, and the conventional wisdom now holds that these two cultures are so fundamentally divided, in every respect, that there is no common ground. Politics is doomed to be war by other means.

I don't agree with this pessimistic conclusion. There are two very basic ethical principles that I believe are firmly part of western culture now and that are shared across the allegedly unbridgeable political divide. These hold, first, that it is objectively important that a human life, once begun, succeeds rather than fails, and, second, that each person has a non-delegable personal responsibility for identifying and pursuing success in his or her own life. If we all accept those basic principles, then we can reconstruct political argument as an argument about which political policies pursue the most attractive interpretation of these basic ethical requirements.

I think we need a distinctly liberal interpretation, which includes an understanding of human rights that makes our treatment of many terrorist suspects a violation of those rights. There are two general models of religion and politics - a choice between a

religious state that tolerates dissent and a secular state that tolerates religion - and I believe that the basic principles, properly understood, require the secular state. To this end, I have explored a scheme for judging whether the level of a community's redistribution of its wealth through taxation is legitimate - in my view taxation in the United States and in Britain is illegitimately low.

The quality of political debate in the United States and Britain could be improved by, for example, a mandatory course in contemporary political issues in all secondary schools in which the most divisive issues are discussed against the background of the best rival arguments. This is the kind of argument our countries now lack.