

The Two Directions of American Democracy

By Matt Gritter

Since the 2000 election, democracy in the United States has gone in two radically different directions. The type of democracy where a president is appointed by the Supreme Court, where major pieces of legislation are decided behind closed doors and civil liberties are continuously eroded has flourished on the national level. Yet in spite of these obstacles, individuals are using new methods of organizing to get involved, methods that could lead to a very different sort of democracy, where technology and communication give people the tools to influence and gain access to the political process.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, quickly led to major public policy changes in several areas. These policy changes were striking in that they were composed and implemented largely without discussion or debate. Even the largely staged theatrics of congressional debate were tossed aside. The Patriot Act, which gives the United States government unprecedented powers of surveillance, was passed nearly unanimously, with the support of long time advocates for civil liberties, including the late Senator Paul Wellstone.

Indeed, the 2002 mid-term campaign of the Democratic Party was striking for its lack of deviance from Bush administration policies. Vaguely Orwellian words like “terror” and “homeland security” largely quitted any possibility of true objective discourse and thus allowed the Bush administration to continue its conservative agenda. That agenda included packing the federal court system with judges such as Charles Pickering, who gained notoriety by his long-time opposition to civil rights legislation. In addition, yearly tax cuts that ballooned the federal deficit were given to the wealthy and to multinational corporations, some of whom were officially headquartered in nations like Bermuda to further reduce their tax burden. Efforts to create a new energy policy generated controversy because Vice President Dick Cheney refused to release uncensored records of meetings with oil company executives who largely shaped the proposal. The legislative process became more and more of a façade and 600-page pieces of legislation were passed with a minimum of debate or opportunity for dissent.

As the national government ruled

