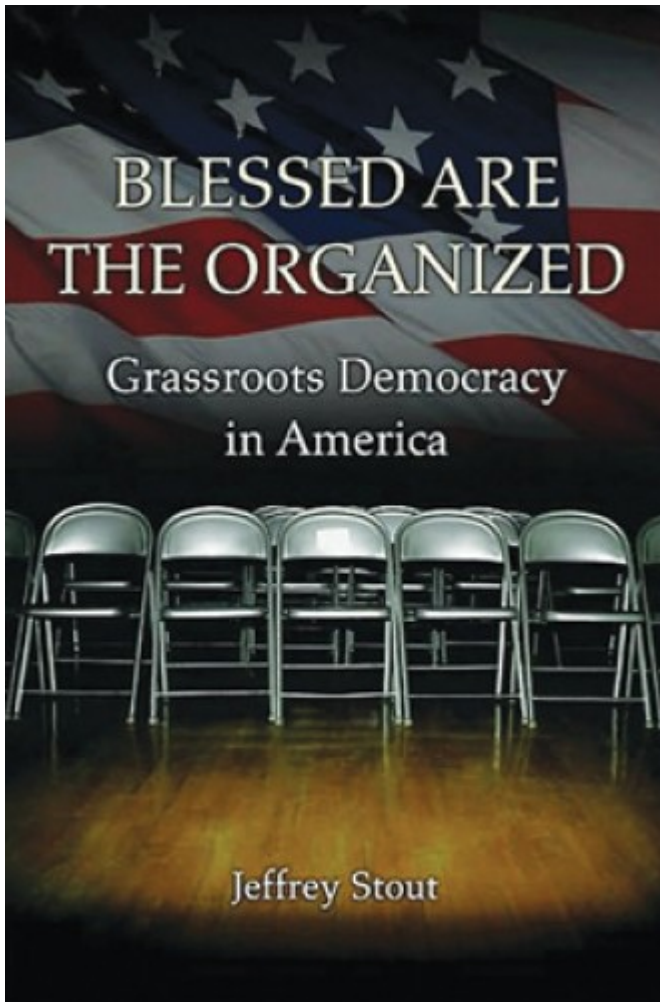


Grassroots power

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Blessed Are the Organized

By Jeffrey Stout

Princeton University Press

Jeffrey Stout is on a mission to save America. The tradition of grassroots democracy, epitomized in the abolitionist and civil rights movements of the 19th and 20th

centuries, needs a makeover for the 21st. There is only one solution: to promote broad-based local organizing and find ways to extend the gospel of accountability to a national level.

Stout is familiar with the world of lifestyle liberals. A Prius in the garage, message-board T-shirts, backpacks and hiking boots: these social signifiers are the badges of those who develop "little cultural basis for cultivating or exercising power" and remain "skittish about building institutions capable of articulating and enforcing absolute prohibitions." Thus they "rest content with symbolic gestures and loose connections when other forms of action and gathering might do more good."

Stout draws on Paul Lichterman's study of well-intentioned church and civic groups in a middle-American town. While many groups espouse prophetic ministry and social justice, the only groups that have a positive effect outside their own circle are the ones whose activities are directed toward forming alliances, remaining flexible and developing healthy self-criticism. This is how to convert convictions and gestures into power. In short, Stout is telling liberals it's time to grow up.

Slavery holds a crucial place in Stout's imagination. Abraham Lincoln, he says, revised the basic ideal of liberty. Formerly liberty had meant freedom from constraint, interference or influence, but a society with such a view permits the dominant to act with impunity. Thus Lincoln invoked a truer notion, that of liberty for all: that is, an inclusive conception of citizenship combined with security against domination. Such deliverance from the exercise of arbitrary power requires a society of laws that are framed and administered justly and underwritten by the just and prudent use of coercive force. The trouble is, the nation-state seems incapable of framing, administering and enforcing laws justly. So it is up to citizens to cultivate and exercise such power, in a democratic spirit, themselves. That is what this book is about.

Two words pervade Stout's argument. The first is *power*. Stout insists on the need to analyze, assess and exercise power. He describes power as "the capacity that an individual, group, or institution has to produce effects that people would have reason to care about." As an example he cites post-Katrina New Orleans, in which corporate "disaster capitalists" (bosses, developers and bankers) have ruthlessly redrawn the city's map to suit themselves, creating a nightmare image of postdemocratic America.

Of all the forms of power in evidence today, the one Stout despises the most is the domination of those who earn in excess of \$10 million per year. This elite group dominates everyone else, due to the decline in organizational strength of ordinary citizens, the political exclusion of illegal immigrants and those living in the gray economy, and the increased ability in an age of mass media to turn economic power into political power. Needless to say, this group sees democracy simply in terms of elections and citizens' rights—a poor shadow of Lincoln's notion.

The second pervasive term is *accountability*. This really is Stout's gospel. "Power minus accountability equals domination," he unequivocally asserts. His complaint is that "voting often provides too little accountability, too late." Thus the electoral process morphs into a vehicle for domination. The task is to create what Stout calls "enduring publics of accountability." This means reinstating face-to-face relationships on every level: one-on-one, in house meetings and in public assemblies, where institutional and corporate leaders can be challenged to pledge allegiance to the goals of a broadly based aggregate of organizations.

This is grassroots democracy. Not single-issue organizing, which fades upon achieving its goal; not community organizing, which tends to be limited by class, race, ethnic, religious and geographic boundaries; not fugitive democracy, whose overly bleak estimation of the status quo dismantles hope and reduces activism to ephemeral and symbolic struggles against impregnable organizations. Instead, Stout's discussion is illuminated by broad-based organizing in the tradition of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation, embodied today in the work of Ernesto Cortés and countless local movements.

Stout is in a hurry. He has little or no time to dally over the wider scholarly discussion of broad-based organizing. His real campaign is about democracy. His account trims and tidies organizing to fit his larger agenda rather than being an account of organizing in its own terms. The result is that he seems to be more in awe of organizing than organizers would be themselves.

Religion is important to this discussion in two senses. First, Stout makes no attempt to hide the fact that if you took affiliated congregations out of the Industrial Areas Foundation, there wouldn't be a whole lot left to organize. Churches are the backbone of the movement, and Catholic social teaching lies in the background of the involvement of many nuns and priests. In one telling contrast, Stout describes a

meeting in Houston for Katrina refugees. The famous preacher Bishop T. D. Jakes addressed the gathering and insisted that God would provide material abundance and that everything would be all right if they had faith. But another pastor took the microphone and said that God helps those who help (that is, organize) themselves, insisting that the evacuees exercise their powers, rights and responsibilities—otherwise their fate would be settled not by God but by governmental, corporate and philanthropic officials. Stout has a highly instrumental view of religion: "Pastoral work is essentially a way of exercising influence. That is its point." He is looking for churches to recognize their political potential for activating grassroots democratic action.

Second, as is perhaps fitting for a religion professor, Stout has an elemental, somewhat generic sense of the holy. This operates more negatively than positively. Thus he repeatedly refers to the "horrendous"—that which literally makes us shudder—as an indication that something sacred has been violated. Most particularly, in a kind of fusion of Immanuel Kant and Rudolf Otto, he appeals to his own golden rule about human beings: "Whatever violates their dignity, or does them a grave injustice, or arbitrarily exercises power over them should not be done."

These dimensions aside, and for all the extensive anecdotal and illustrative ethnographic accounts of IAF-style activity, Stout offers no significant theological analysis of broad-based organizing, in either form or content. On a formal level, for example, he never recognizes that for himself and others like him such organizing equates with church. By writing this book, Stout is setting out his stall as the theologian of the very immanent, very horizontal church of the latter-day grassroots democrats. This church has a gospel—accountability. It has liturgy—Stout acknowledges that accountability sessions (e.g., large IAF gatherings where corporate and civic leaders are publicly challenged) are liturgies in themselves. It has commandments—Stout cites "Never do for others what they can do for themselves" and "No permanent allies, no permanent enemies" among Alinsky's many rules for radicals. It also has house meetings—as earnest and dynamic as any start-up congregation or small-group Bible study. This church picks up the embers of the civil rights struggle and infuses the prophetic drive of those previously drawn to liberation theology.

Does Stout's church have a god? One might say his god is democracy. But surely democracy is an ethic rather than a theology. It's precisely here that one can see the conversation that Stout provokes but does not provide. Broad-based organizing is a

method, not a goal; it is a procedural ethic rather than a telos. In Stout's reading, churches—and indeed human relationships in general—are useful as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. For Stout, the transcendent is at best a motivating force for the immanent, at worst the opium of a dominated people. Organizing can clearly galvanize and empower people by the way it sees that everything is politics; but Stout doesn't always recall that politics is not everything.

The things that Stout opposes are significant. The methods he advocates are invigorating and in need of upholding and propagating. He succeeds in his aim of making our current dangers visible without disabling the hope of reforming them. His challenge to the churches is to recognize their power, to see through empty and premature overtures of reconciliation, to hold politicians and other leaders accountable and to let loose the organizing vitality of their people.

But the unanswered question at the heart of the book is whether democracy is an ethic, a telos, an eschaton in itself—or simply, as Churchill called it, the worst form of government except all the others.