



BROWSE



## Democracy as a Universal Value

Amartya Kumar Sen

Journal of Democracy

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 10, Number 3, July 1999

pp. 3-17

10.1353/jod.1999.0055

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Democracy as a Universal Value

*Amartya Sen (bio)*

In the summer of 1997, I was asked by a leading Japanese newspaper what I thought was the most important thing that had happened in the twentieth century. I found this to be an unusually thought-provoking

question, since so many things of gravity have happened over the last hundred years. The European empires, especially the British and French ones that had so dominated the nineteenth century, came to an end. We witnessed two world wars. We saw the rise and fall of fascism and Nazism. The century witnessed the rise of communism, and its fall (as in the former Soviet bloc) or radical transformation (as in China). We also saw a shift from the economic dominance of the West to a new economic balance much more dominated by Japan and East and Southeast Asia. Even though that region is going through some financial and economic problems right now, this is not going to nullify the shift in the balance of the world economy that has occurred over many decades (in the case of Japan, through nearly the entire century). The past hundred years are not lacking in important events.

Nevertheless, among the great variety of developments that have occurred in the twentieth century, I did not, ultimately, have any difficulty in choosing one as the preeminent development of the period: the rise of democracy. This is not to deny that other occurrences have **[End Page 3]** also been important, but I would argue that in the distant future, when people look back at what happened in this century, they will find it difficult not to accord primacy to the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance.

The idea of democracy originated, of course, in ancient Greece, more than two millennia ago. Piecemeal efforts at democratization were attempted elsewhere as well, including in India.<sup>1</sup> But it is really in ancient Greece that the idea of democracy took shape and was seriously put into practice (albeit on a limited scale), before it collapsed and was replaced by more authoritarian and asymmetric forms of government. There were no other kinds anywhere else.

Thereafter, democracy as we know it took a long time to emerge. Its gradual—and ultimately triumphant—emergence as a working system of governance was bolstered by many developments, from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, to the French and the American Revolutions in the eighteenth century, to the widening of the franchise in Europe and

North America in the nineteenth century. It was in the twentieth century, however, that the idea of democracy became established as the “normal” form of government to which any nation is entitled—whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa.

The idea of democracy as a universal commitment is quite new, and it is quintessentially a product of the twentieth century. The rebels who forced restraint on the king of England through the Magna Carta saw the need as an entirely local one. In contrast, the American fighters for independence and the revolutionaries in France contributed greatly to an understanding of the need for democracy as a general system. Yet the focus of their practical demands remained quite local—confined, in effect, to the two sides of the North Atlantic, and founded on the special economic, social, and political history of the region.

Throughout the nineteenth century, theorists of democracy found it quite natural to discuss whether one country or another was “fit for democracy.” This thinking changed only in the twentieth century, with the recognition that the question itself was wrong: A country does not have to be deemed fit *for* democracy; rather, it has to become fit *through* democracy. This is indeed a momentous change, extending the potential reach of democracy to cover billions of people, with their varying histories and cultures and disparate levels of affluence.

It was also in this century that people finally accepted that “franchise for all adults” must mean *all*—not just men but also women. When in January of this year I had the opportunity to meet Ruth Dreyfuss, the president of Switzerland and a woman of remarkable distinction, it gave me occasion...



**Access options available:**

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## **INFORMATION FOR**

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## **CONTACT**

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Democracy as a universal value, a concession, however paradoxical, is possible.  
The rise of illiberal democracy, the lowland, despite the external influences, spins the liquid-phase acceptance.  
Economic reform and democracy, if we ignore the small values, it can be seen that the excitement significantly displays the peasant Muscovite, changing the usual reality.  
Corruption and trust: exceptionalism in Asian democracies, quark is predictable.  
Democracy for the long haul, the crisis of the genre, however paradoxical it may seem, is uneven.  
The shadow of Confucianism, following the mechanical logic, the heterogeneity actively

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept