

Democracy in Japan Why Should Americans Care?

By George R. Packard

Many Americans today view Japan through partial or misleading images: World War II; group culture; conformity; homogeneity; economic stagnation; and for younger people, *manga* and *anime*, and now, sadly, the images of earthquakes and tsunami disasters. Seldom do we consider that Japan has managed its own kind of vibrant democratic government ever since it achieved independence in 1952. When we think about Japanese democracy at all, we tend to see it as a kind of gift from America, imposed by General Douglas MacArthur on a defeated population. We tend to view it ethnocentrically as legitimate because it is an offshoot of American democracy.

The question of how, why, and even whether democracy has flourished in Japan has fascinated and confounded scholars and observers ever since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when more than two centuries of the Tokugawa Shogunate came to an end.

The fact is that Japan, like India and Indonesia, eagerly grasped democracy and took ownership based on its own cultural proclivities. Clearly, democracy has universal appeal that transcends narrow historical and cultural boundaries. This is why Chinese students who had no personal experience with democracy risked their lives to stage protests at Tienanmen Square in 1989. It is why Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar continues to foster the hopes of so many Burmese. Asians, no less than Europeans and Americans who share the Judeo-Christian tradition, find the idea of popular sovereignty, the rule of law, human rights, and self-government tremendously appealing.

The importance of the US-Japan partnership cannot be overstated. The US-Japan Security Treaty has kept the peace in East Asia since the end of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula in 1953. But even more important than this military alliance are the values that underlie it. In each of our societies, there is a deep belief in education as the key to creating intelligent citizen-voters, in human dignity, and in stable government. While neither democracy is without flaws, the fact that Japan has been successful in adapting it to its own culture has given hope to others in Asia. The essay that follows places Japanese democracy in historical context and weighs both its strengths and weaknesses.

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“The Japanese do not have in their political heritage any experience with the concepts and practices of democracy,” wrote the eminent historian of Japan and former ambassador Edwin O. Reischauer in 1977.

At the height of feudalism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was a degree of mutuality and bargaining in feudal relations,

and in the late feudalism of the Tokugawa period, there was a well-established and highly complex system of interrelationships between lord and follower, but throughout, the Japanese ideally saw the feudal bond as committing the inferior to absolute obedience and loyalty and granting the superior unlimited authority. There were no inalienable rights, no concepts that might have underlain a Magna Carta, and no experience of any sort with representative bodies. In these terms, one could scarcely imagine a system less congenial to democratic ideas and institutions than the Japanese polity on the eve of the opening to the West.¹

Even so, in the turbulent decade of the 1870s, as the new Meiji oligarchs sought to strengthen their hold on power, numerous new local societies demanded a national assembly, freedom, and popular rights. Political parties emerged from these movements under the leadership of former samurai who had been left out of the new Meiji government. The parties came to dominate parliamentary politics in the 1920s. Something about democracy clearly appealed to a significant number of Japanese citizens.

Reischauer identified several features of the nation’s heritage that would foster later democratic developments: a strong Confucian sense of the ethical basis for government, high standards of honesty and efficiency in political administration, a long tradition of group rather than personalized leadership, a willingness to share power, a strong belief in formal education and widespread literacy, a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit, and a shared commitment to political unity.

Democracy grew naturally in Japan, and, though it faltered in the 1930s, its strong postwar revival has been basically a continuity from prewar days, particularly the 1920s, and not an incomprehensible or uncongenial borrowing from abroad.²

The Meiji oligarchs, aware of these popular demands and eager to escape the unequal treaty system that had been imposed upon them by Western powers, decided to adopt the trappings of constitutional government in order to achieve the status of an “advanced” nation. In 1889, the Meiji emperor presented his people with a constitution with these words:

We now establish the Imperial House Law and the Constitution. These laws come to only an exposition of grand precepts for the conduct of the government, bequeathed by the Imperial Founder of Our House and by our other Imperial Ancestors.³

This certainly did not constitute a grassroots movement led by Japanese freedom fighters, and it was deeply flawed. The emperor was accountable to no one, and in time, Japan’s military leaders were able to bypass the elected Diet (parliament) and control the emperor as they pursued their aggressive policies in Asia. Meiji leaders saw themselves as restoring the emperor’s powers rather than leading a revolution.

And yet, during the brief period of “Taishō Democracy,” a term Japanese historians use to cover the period 1905–1932, which encompassed the reign of the Taishō Emperor (1912–1926), the Japanese people gained substantial experience with elections, party government, parliamentary rule, universal manhood suffrage, and freedom of political expression. From 1918–1932, prime ministers were also political party leaders. Efforts to limit the powers of the emperor and to bring the military under party control, however, were doomed to failure. The worldwide depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, the Chinese civil war, and the expansion of the Soviet Union’s power in Asia led to the rise of ultranationalism and a military takeover in Japan, ending its brief fling with democratic government.

The question of whether the Japanese people were capable of governing themselves in a democratic and peaceful manner arose in the final stages of the Pacific War in acute form as the American government began planning

the occupation of Japan with victory in sight. A powerful group, headed by Secretary of State James F. Byrnes and Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, thought that Japan still suffered from its feudal and militaristic heritage and that any occupation should be severely punitive and should in essence complete the social revolution that had been partial at best in the prewar period. The emperor, in their view, should be forced to abdicate, and, many thought, should be tried as a war criminal.

A second group led by former Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew, who became acting secretary of state in 1945, with the support of the few Japan experts in the government, argued that the emperor was “vital to Japan’s cohesion and a potential ally in reforming his country’s social and political institutions.”⁴ In their view, the Japanese people were perfectly capable of managing democratic government once the military was disbanded, and the emperor was “humanized” and placed under parliamentary control.

General MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan, settled the argument by favoring the Grew faction and by retaining and humanizing the emperor. MacArthur set about immediately to dismantle Japan’s armed forces and establish freedom of thought, religion, assembly, and speech. He declared that five fundamental reforms would be instituted: *enfranchisement of women, encouragement of labor unions, introduction of liberal principles into education, reform of the judicial system, and democratization of economic institutions.*

MacArthur’s most dramatic act was to insist that the Japanese government accept a constitution written in one week in 1946 by American occupiers who were largely unacquainted with Japanese culture, politics, and history. That constitution, which went into effect on May 3, 1947, declared that sovereignty resides with the people; renounced war and arms; and emphasized fundamental human rights, including the equality of women. The fascinating account by historian Ray Moore and political scientist Donald Robinson, *Partners for Democracy: Crafting the New Japanese State under MacArthur*, makes clear that Japan’s old elite resisted many of these reforms and tried to preserve elements of the old imperial rule, including the concept of *kokutai*, or national polity. The only support for the new constitution came from the Japanese people—the voters—who embraced it eagerly and have resisted to this day all efforts by conservatives to change even one comma.

How could this have happened in a land with a deep-rooted tradition of inequality, hierarchy, and subservience to higher authority? The first answer is that by 1945, the Japanese people were completely disillusioned with their military leaders and the system of government that led them into terrible suffering, war, disaster, and abject surrender. In their postwar economic misery, most Japanese were ready to experiment with something new, and their prewar experience with parliamentary democracy gave them confidence that it could work.



MacArthur and Hirohito in 1945. Source: <http://bataanson.blogspot.com/2010/11/macarthur-and-hirohito-in-1945-hirohito.html>.

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A second factor was MacArthur himself. In the leadership void following surrender, MacArthur stepped up as a powerful and compelling authority figure who could be trusted—and who could not be resisted. It is hard to imagine how any other American general could have played this role as well.

Moore and Robinson list five yardsticks that were useful in predicting and measuring the successful transition of Third World or post-communist countries to democracy:

1. Economic prosperity: The achievement of a middle class that has successfully overcome the basic needs of public order, food, and shelter. Japan, in the wake of wartime devastation and lack of natural resources, had low prospects in this regard.
2. Literacy: A big plus for Japan.
3. Ethnic homogeneity: Again, Japan’s prospects were bright.
4. Attractive models: England and America, victors in World War II, became attractive models for constitutional democracy in Japan.
5. Benign international circumstances: The American Occupation and then the US-Japan Security Treaty afforded time and freedom from security threats to recover economically and experiment successfully with democratic institutions.

Thus, on four of these five criteria, Japan was ready to accept democracy.⁵

In fact, Japanese voters have embraced democracy with nearly religious fervor. Since the end of the Occupation in 1952, they have regularly and peacefully elected representatives to the Diet and accepted parliamentary rule. Despite efforts by left-wing socialists and communists to steer the nation toward a Soviet model, and by right-wingers and nationalists to rebuild their military and restore police powers, the electorate has steadfastly upheld liberal democratic principles. Japanese also vote in larger percentages of the population than do Americans. In the US presidential election of 2008, 61.6 percent of eligible voters turned out to vote, the highest turnout since 1968.⁶ In the 2009 Lower House elections in Japan, 69.3 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots.⁷

Because postwar democracy in Japan was imposed in the glare of intense scrutiny, where everything was open and new, Japanese governance has come to be considered a kind of social science laboratory for scholars and journalists, both foreign and domestic. If one understands the Japanese language, there are almost no secrets that cannot be discovered, researched, and studied. Perhaps no other population has so thoroughly assessed its own positions on issues through utilization of opinion polling. The defects of Japan’s democracy, unsurprisingly given this context, have been widely noted.

Until recently, the most common criticism centered around single-party rule—the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which, together

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with entrenched bureaucrats and big business, formed the “iron triangle” that dominated the political landscape for most of the postwar period. Nevertheless, one can argue that this much-maligned arrangement was brilliantly successful in bringing dramatic economic growth and prosperity to the nation from 1952 to 1990. Then, the economic bubble burst, and Japan has experienced stagnation and plummeting morale ever since. A series of scandals has weakened public trust in what was once viewed as an incorruptible bureaucracy.⁸

The nearest approach to a crisis in Japan's postwar democracy came in 1960 at the time of the revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Angered by Prime Minister Kishi's move to force the revised treaty through the House of Representatives on May 19, 1960, thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of Tokyo to protest against what they perceived as high-handed tactics and a treaty they feared could lead Japan into war. The demonstrators were able to block the planned visit of President Eisenhower to Tokyo and, after a female student was killed in a skirmish with police at the gates of the Diet Building, Kishi was forced to resign. The treaty, which had the support of a majority in both Houses of the Diet, was ratified, and order was quickly restored. The treaty remains in effect to this day.

But the protest movement gave birth to the term “tyranny of the majority,” meaning that any Japanese government, no matter how large its majority, must be mindful of the rights of the minority. This concept has contemporary relevance for US democratic politics in the debate in Congress over the filibuster rule: How large must a Senate majority be to overrule a determined minority? In Japan, the majority party is on notice that it cannot trample on the rights of the minority with impunity.

Another criticism of Japan's democracy is that rural areas, which traditionally send conservative politicians to the Diet, are over-represented; because of a peculiarity of districting rules, the votes of rural citizens carry far more weight than do those of their urban counterparts. The Tokyo bureaucrats, in league with rural Diet members, ensure that pork-barrel projects—roads, bridges, railroads—will go to their rural political base. This means that Japan's traditional rice-growing farmers will be protected against foreign competition, as will inefficient mom-and-pop stores in the hinterlands. This preponderance of influence wielded by Japan's rural politicians has prevented Japan from entering into free-trade agreements. Japanese urban consumers pay a high price for protecting inefficient rice and other agricultural producers. A great deal of land that could be used for modern housing is dedicated to rice paddies.

A third and more recent criticism is that the political system has somehow failed to produce strong leaders who can lead a reform movement. Since the 2005 election when LDP Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō won a decisive victory, five different prime ministers have been elected. None has seemed able to cope with Japan's economic problems.

There was a ray of hope in 2009 when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won a smashing victory over the LDP, which had ruled the nation almost

continuously in the postwar period. Yukio Hatoyama, grandson of Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichirō, became prime minister, creating public optimism that a genuine two-party system might emerge. But Hatoyama was ineffective, making promises he could not keep and angering his American ally with his waffling on the question of moving a US Marine Air Base from Futenma in Okinawa to a new location. He stepped down in 2010 to be succeeded by current Prime Minister Naoto Kan. It is not clear yet whether Kan will be able to succeed where his predecessors failed.

There have been other criticisms of Japanese democracy:

- The judicial system is neither an effective check on the Diet nor a welcoming venue for citizens to bring grievances against the government, although recent reforms, most notably the *saiban-in*, or lay-judge, system, have been implemented in an attempt to introduce more citizen participation into the traditionally rarefied air of the courts.
- The bureaucracy has usurped the power of elected officials to frame legislation; Diet officials lack staff and expertise to exert full control.
- Civil society is weak. Tax and other laws are not conducive to the growth of non-governmental and charitable organizations that should play a key role in protecting the weakest members of society.
- Although women have equal rights under the constitution, they still have a long way to go in achieving equality in the workplace, government, and home.
- Many members of the Diet owe their seats to family members who previously held the seat, leading to political dynasties and excluding talented newcomers.
- The mass media too often lean toward protecting government officials rather than informing the public.
- Police too often appear to force confessions during the long, twenty-three-day period between arrest and arraignment.
- There is a high tolerance for the activities of small right-wing and ultranationalist minorities who can park sound trucks outside private homes and keep targeted occupants awake all night with blaring loudspeakers.
- There is also a high tolerance for *yakuza*, or mobsters, that engage in loan-sharking, extortion, and various other unsavory activities, including drug trafficking and political assassination.
- The education system favors rote learning over creative thinking.

All of these criticisms have some basis in fact, and they have been well documented. The question must be, in assessing Japan's democracy, to which other country are we comparing it? Where is the ideal example of democratic governance?

If we compare Japan to America, we should be humble. Japan has no massive military/industrial complex that can be a significant factor in pushing it toward war. In elections, it has strong rules limiting paid political advertising, especially on television. It exercises strict control over political spending, while in American elections, there are now no limits on the amount of money that can be spent supporting or attacking candidates and no requirement to disclose who is spending that money. Japan has nothing like the K Street lobbyists of Washington, DC, who work tirelessly to add “earmarks” to legislation and protect their clients. Japan has strict gun control laws that prohibit private ownership of handguns.

A new generation of political leaders is emerging in Japan today. They are acutely aware of the weaknesses of Japanese democracy and are likely to promote reforms over the next decade. What can be said with certainty is that there is no group or movement on the horizon that poses any realistic

threat to Japan's democratic form of government. This alone is an extraordinary success. The Japanese people have spoken, and, as Richard Samuels has said,

*Japan is a robust democracy, and democracies tend to self-correct for policy excesses. Although much maligned by analysts and participants alike, the Japanese political process has never been more transparent and has never engaged the public more fully than it does today.*⁹ ■

RESOURCES

For additional background on Japan's democracy, readers may wish to consult the following works:

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NOTES

1. Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 237–38.
2. *Ibid.*, 243.
3. *Japan, An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd, 1993), 232–33.
4. Ray A. Moore and Donald L. Robinson, *Partners for Democracy: Crafting the New Japanese State under MacArthur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6. Theirs is the preeminent account of the Occupation, and I have relied heavily on their work in this report.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. Michael McDonald, "2008 General Election Turnout Rates," United States Election Project, last modified October 6, 2010, http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2008G.html.
7. The *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, August 31, 2009, reported that the turnout rate for the Lower House elections of August 29, 2009, was 69.28 percent, based on figures provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (*Somusho*) of the Government of Japan.
8. See, for example, Roger W. Bowen's *Japan's Dysfunctional Democracy* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).
9. Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 195–196.

GEORGE R. PACKARD is President of the US-Japan Foundation and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. He is a graduate of Princeton and got his PhD at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He served as special assistant to Ambassador Edwin O. Reischauer in Tokyo (1963–1965), managing editor of the *Philadelphia Bulletin* (1968–1975), Dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (1979–1993), and President of the International University of Japan (1994–1998). He is author of *Protest in Tokyo: The Security Treaty Crisis of 1960* (Princeton, 1966) and *Edwin O. Reischauer and the American Discovery of Japan* (Columbia, 2010). He lives with his wife, Lavinia, and their Labrador retriever, Lizzie, in Washington, DC.

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