



To What Extent is Democracy a Universal Value?

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Abstract: This essay explores whether democracy can be considered a universal value across cultures or merely a product of Western civilization. Starting from Samuel P. Huntington's claim that democracy emerged from a uniquely Western historical and cultural context, it contrasts his view with Amartya Sen's argument that democracy has universal value because it promotes freedom, participation, accountability, and public discussion. By building on philosophical frameworks of Christine Korsgaard and John Rawls, it argues that democracy should not be understood as a rigid institutional structure, ready to be imposed across all societies. Instead, it approaches democracy more as a flexible political framework that can be adapted to different cultural contexts and justified through shared public reason. Therefore, democracy is universal not as a single uniform system, but as a political order whose basic principles can be endorsed by citizens with diverse identities and beliefs. Its legitimacy depends on participation, mutual justification, and the ability of people to question and shape their own governance.

Keywords: *European Union; space security; strategic autonomy; alliance dependence; norm diffusion*

Introduction

The discussion on the universality of democracy is one of the most important in the field of political studies. Its premise rests on the 20th century waves of democratization, the most recent one starting in 1974 in Portugal and spreading throughout various parts of Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, parts of Africa and parts of Asia in the 1980s and the 1990s. Many of these movements brought major transformations. While some of them consolidated, others have experienced various forms of backsliding.

As a result, the idea of democracy has simultaneously gained widespread support and been subjected to scrutiny. Faced with the deepening crisis of democracy in countries once considered its symbol, especially in Europe and the rest of the cultural West, we are forced to examine the universality of democracy, not only as a political system, but perhaps, as an ethical value.¹

This essay argues that democracy can be universally valid, not as a fixed cultural product, but as a flexible political framework that must be adapted to local norms and legitimized through the shared public reason of its citizens, in order to sustain flourishing without coercive uniformity.

Democracy solely as a product of Western civilization? Huntington vs Sen

At one pole of this debate stands Samuel P. Huntington, author of many acclaimed books, such as *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). In his essay “The West: Unique, Not Universal,” he challenges the then-popular thesis that modernization (led by the West) leads to the universalization of global values, including the universalization of democracy. To support his thesis, he points to the distinct historical environment and circumstances that led to the birth of Western liberal democracy: shaped by the legacy of ancient Greco-Roman thought, Western Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), the separation of church and state, the rule of law, civil society, the existence of representative bodies, and individualism. It is precisely on these grounds that Huntington rejects

¹ David Waldner and Ellen Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 93–113, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>; Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 27–41, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0050>.

democratic universality, warning that such an assumption would be erroneous and dangerous.²

Huntington's view, although based on empirical observations, rests on assumptions that have faced frequent criticism ever since the publication of his essay in 1996.³ One of the most prominent critics is Amartya Sen. In his essay "Democracy as a Universal Value" (1999), Sen argues that while not every society has achieved democratic practice, its underlying premises, political freedom, accountability, open discussion, and participation, provide arguments for legitimacy that are applicable across cultures. Universality does not imply identical institutions everywhere. Sen's enthusiasm should not be confused with advocacy for Western imperialism: the universal value of democracy rests on its instrumental benefits (more inclusive governance and responsive politics) and its intrinsic value (freedom and participation), not on elements of Western culture.⁴

In this light, the debates about universality of democracy become debates about whether a given political arrangement could be integrated into people's self-understanding as a legitimate governing norm – one that they can endorse as laws for themselves.

Framework for universality: Rawls and Korsgaard

The debate between Huntington and Sen raises the question of whether it is possible to adapt democracy to culturally varying identities while avoiding coercive universalism. Philosophically, this debate reflects the tension Christine Korsgaard identifies in her book *The Sources of Normativity*. Sen's functional argument appeals to our universal, "reflective humanity", which must value its own capacity for reason.⁵ Huntington's cultural argument, however, highlights the empirical power of our particular "practical identities".⁶ This creates the central question: how to establish a stable political system on a universal norm (humanity) in a world driven by particular identities (culture)? This is the question John Rawls's framework answers.

Rawls provides the institutional and structural answer to this problem. His solution hinges on the crucial distinction between a "comprehensive doctrine" and a "political conception". A

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The West: Unique, Not Universal," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 6 (1996): 28–30, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/west-unique-not-universal>.

³ Fouad Ajami, "The Summoning," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 4 (1993): 2–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045708>; Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 4, 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>.

⁴ Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 6–12, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracy-as-a-universal-value/>.

⁵ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Morality and Identity," in *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511554476>.

⁶ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy," in *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511554476>.

comprehensive doctrine (religious, philosophical, or moral) covers all aspects of life.⁷ Huntington's fear of 'westernization', through the Rawlsian lens, can be read as fear of one such comprehensive doctrine being imposed on others.⁸ Rawls avoids this by arguing that a stable democracy must be established *not* on a shared comprehensive doctrine, but on a “political conception” of justice.⁹

This political conception is a “freestanding” framework that deals only with the basic structure of society (the “Right”), not with ultimate questions of the meaning of life (the “Good”). This is what makes an “overlapping consensus” possible. Citizens are not asked to abandon their deep cultural or religious beliefs (their “doctrines” or, in Korsgaard’s terms, their “practical identities”). Instead, they can endorse the neutral “political conception” from *within* their own comprehensive doctrines, for their own reasons.¹⁰

This is also where Rawls’s framework provides the mechanism for Sen’s “constructive role”.¹¹ For Sen, democracy's value is that public discussion (his “constructive role”) forms a society's values. For Huntington, this very process creates a “democracy paradox”: the specific mechanism of elections, in his view, does not lead to liberal consensus but instead unleashes and brings to power nativist and anti-Western political movements.¹² Rawls’s concept of “public reason” solves this. Public reason is the procedural discipline that allows the “constructive role” to function without descending into a “clash of civilizations”. It requires citizens to frame their arguments in terms of the “political conception” they share, rather than appealing to their irreconcilable “comprehensive doctrines”. It is the institutional form of Sen's “government by discussion,” or rather, as he frames it: “public discussion,” made functional for a pluralistic world.¹³

This framework directly answers the problem of “universalism” through what Rawls calls the “priority of right over the good”. This principle states that the “Right” (the shared, neutral political principles) sets the limits, while the “Good” (the diverse cultural and personal values) points to the

⁷ John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7, no. 1 (1987): 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/764257>; John Rawls, “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (1988): 252–253, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265400>.

⁸ Michel Seymour, “John Rawls against the Clash of Civilizations,” in *Cosmopolitanism and Its Discontents: Rethinking Politics in the Age of Brexit and Trump*, ed. Lee Ward (Lexington Books, 2020), 145–162.

⁹ John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7, no. 1 (1987): 1–3, 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/764257>.

¹⁰ Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 1–3, 16–18.

¹¹ Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 9–11, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracy-as-a-universal-value/>.

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, “The West: Unique, Not Universal,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 6 (1996): 37, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/west-unique-not-universal>.

¹³ Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 9–11, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracy-as-a-universal-value/>.

purpose. As long as a culture or way of life respects the basic rights and liberties of all (the “Right”), it is free to flourish within those boundaries.¹⁴ Thus, in their respective frameworks, democracy is achieved not by imposition, but through mutual endorsement and shared reasoning, regardless of one’s political, cultural, religious, geographical, or any other background.

Conclusion

To explain the extent to which democracy can be considered a universal value, this essay juxtaposes diverging and yet complementary perspectives. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that universality of democracy is achieved not where it is merely imposed or considered traditional, but where citizens, regardless of their culture and contexts, can participate in public reasoning, identify with its basic principles and see their agency reflected in shared institutions.

Understood in such a manner, democracy is not a rigid template that can be seamlessly replicated in different contexts without adjustments, but rather a continuous, justified and flexible project. Its legitimacy depends on whether people can question, endorse, or improve their own governance.

¹⁴ John Rawls, “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (1988): 252–253, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265400>.

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