

Historical Background: Japan, 1870s-1920s

In Japan in 1868, a group of young samurai successfully challenged and replaced the Tokugawa shogunate (*bakufu*) with a government based in part on Western ideas. These samurai used the newly crowned fifteen-year-old emperor, commonly known as the Meiji emperor, to legitimize this new government. This period of great change in Japan's government and economy after 1868 is referred to as the Meiji Period, the Meiji Revolution, or the Meiji Restoration. The emperor was the face of the new government. As such, he represented to the average Japanese the state of Japan to whom they now owed their loyalty. The young samurai of 1868 became the oligarchs of the new Japanese government. This means their small group held the real power in the government. The people of Japan became imperial subjects, not citizens.

The Meiji government very selectively adopted aspects of Western industrialization, economy, and political systems. They chose features that could best help them achieve their goal to strengthen Japan's international position. The oligarchs' intention was never to create a representative government or a democratic society. However, with the influx of Western ideas, a few groups in Japan began to ask for political rights. In the 1880s, the discussion focused around the need for a constitution. Under increasing pressure, the oligarchs did write a constitution patterned after the German constitution. Germany, too, had an emperor at that time.

In 1889, the Meiji Emperor bestowed this constitution upon the people of Japan. The constitution did not have to be ratified by the people or their representatives. It was presented as a gift to the people from the emperor. The constitution created a bicameral parliament. But the right to vote was given only to a very small, very elite minority. All decisions of the parliament could be vetoed by the emperor. The power within the government remained with the oligarchs, who were appointed to important posts by the emperor. The constitution recognized the emperor as the source of ultimate authority in Japan's government. The people of Japan became citizens of an imperial state.

The 1889 constitution resolved the pressure for a constitutional government. By the second decade of the 20th century, however, new political parties were calling for a government that was more responsive to the needs of the Japanese people. Extension of voting rights was a centerpiece of these calls for greater representation. Over the course of the 1910s and 1920s, a variety of new political parties emerged, both liberal and conservative.