

Booklist

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The Shortest History of Democracy: Four Thousand Years of Self-Government—A Retelling for Our Times.

By John Keane

2022. 240p. illus. The Experiment, paper, \$15.95 (9781615198962); e-book, \$65 (9781615198979). 321.809

Polling confirms that Americans on both sides of our quarrelsome political divide are anxious that democracy itself, the essential foundation of America, is in serious trouble. To the rescue comes this wonderfully comforting and beautifully written long-view historical narrative. Keane starts with the beginnings of assembly democracy in 2500 BCE Syria-Mesopotamia. Next he describes the birth of electoral democracy, as triggered by the Islamic custom of wakil circa 600 CE. Bringing his narrative into the present, he examines the age of monitory democracy, "a variety of democracy defined by the growth of scores of power-monitoring institutions unknown to earlier democrats." With heartening humor, he explains that democracy always has been a fragile and "sticky" ideal whose history has principally been recorded by its enemies; he cites a widely read "book of virtues" (1643) that depicts democracy as "a coarsely dressed peasant woman," one of the great mass of "uncouth and unwashed humanity." This slim volume is a fine read from a gifted author that will remind readers of the many forgotten characters who fought for democracy over thousands of years.

— *Art Lichtenstein*