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The Challenge - Is Democracy an Efficient System of Government?

In [ancient Athens](https://www.thoughtco.com/maps-of-ancient-greece-4122979), the birthplace of democracy, not only were children denied the vote (an exception we still consider acceptable), but so were women, foreigners, and slaves. People of power or influence weren't concerned with the **rights** of such non-citizens. What mattered was whether or not the unusual system was any good. Was it working for itself or for the community? Would it be better to have an intelligent, virtuous, benevolent ruling class or a society dominated by a mob seeking material comfort for itself? In contrast with the law-based democracy of the Athenians, monarchy/tyranny (rule by one) and aristocracy/oligarchy (rule by the few) were practiced by neighboring Hellenes and Persians. All eyes turned to the Athenian experiment, and few liked what they saw.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. **Compare and contrast –“who could vote in the elections or on bills and laws in Ancient Athens vs who can vote today. Which situation is closer to true definition of democracy which is “power of people” and why?**

"In ancient Greece, the inventors of democracy set up a law that required every person to vote, regardless of who they voted for. If anyone was found not voting, the person would be publicly marked and labeled an idiot, someone who thought their own personal needs trumped those of the society around them, and over time, the word "idiot" has evolved into today's usage." -  [Isaac DeVille](http://www.statenews.com/op_article.phtml?pk=37958), Michigan State columnist

It just isn't true that all Greeks or even all citizens of Athens were required to vote, and it's not true on many levels.

* Only males (free and, originally, propertied; later, also born to two Athenian-born parents) could become citizens.
* Only citizens could vote.
* These potentially voting citizens were limited to those without a personal or inherited mark (*atimia*) against them.
* In addition, what's true about one period of democracy is not necessarily true of another.

"1275a: 22-23: A citizen defined in simple terms is someone who can participate in judging [that is, serve as a juror in the court system] and in governing [that is, serve in public office, which here means not just magistracies but also serving in the assembly and on the council in systems of government that have these institutions]." Stoa Project Aristotle "www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article\_aristotle\_democracy?page=8&greekEncoding=UnicodeC" Politics

Male Athenian citizens actively participated, but voting was only a part of what was meant by democracy.

* Speaking well and being physically present in the communal life were crucial.
* The Athenian assembly, which held 6000 citizens, decided most of the issues.
* Citizen-orators persuaded their fellow citizen-voters.
* The voting itself could be conducted by a show of hands, as is seen Aristophanes' comedy *Ecclesiazousai*, where Praxagora describes the voting in the Assembly:  
  *It's difficult; yet it must be done, and the arm shown naked to the shoulder in order to vote.*
* Officials chose the winner based on a visual estimate of the majority of hands. They certainly weren't counting exactly enough to make sure there were 6000 hands on 6000 discrete bodies. Sometimes more secretive **ballots** were used -- small, colored *ball*s -- placed in urns. 6000 was not the entire citizen body, although it was a hefty portion.
* A body of 6000 citizens served as juries, meeting about half the days of the year, with each of the ten tribes providing its required share.
* A lottery selected the 400 or 500 men for the third governmental group, called the *boule*.

[Steven Kreis' The Athenian Origins of Direct Democracy](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/lecture6b.html) explains the "idiot" reference in the student newspaper:

"At Athens, a citizen who held no official position or who was not a habitual orator in the Assembly was branded as idiotai."

This is a far cry from calling the non-voter an "idiot."

*Idiotai* is also used to distinguish the common people from the poor (*penetes*) and the more powerful (*dynatoi*). *Idiotai* is also used for "unskilled worker."

While we don't know what the population figures are for ancient Athens, and it changed over time, if there were say, 30,000 male citizens, more than a third of them were actively involved in politics at times. If we followed the Athenian example, who would feed, house, clothe, educate, and medicate the families of the politicians? Pay for time spent fulfilling the civic obligation was at first non-existent. Aristotle has several passages in his *Politics* explaining why. Here is one:

"1308b: 31-33: It is of the greatest importance in all systems of government to have laws and the rest of governmental administration so arranged that magistrates cannot profit financially from their offices."

There is a passage from a work ascribed to Aristotle in a section about Solon that probably led to the columnist's idea. It comes from [Constitution section 8](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/athenian_const.1.1.html):

Further, [Solon] saw the state often engaged in internal disputes, while many of the citizens from sheer indifference accepted whatever might turn up, he made a law with express reference to such persons, enacting that any one who, in a time civil factions, did not take up arms with either party, should lose his rights as a citizen and cease to have any part in the state.

Although not the last word that could be said on the issue, modern Americans are not like classical Athenians. We neither live our lives in public nor do we all want to be politicians (although neither did Socrates, even though he sat on the Athenian Boule). Requiring us to be penalized for failing to

1. go to the polling booths and
2. make choices on the ballot

*once every 4 years* because that's what they did in the birthplace of democracy misses the point of the ancient Greek democratic process.

**Questions to discuss:**

**Should modern democracy as we have it now allow certain people abstain from voting or even allow the right to vote be taken away from them? If yes, who these people should be and why? Consider examples from Ancient Athens**

Lessons of ancient Greek democracy for the modern world

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In [an interesting recent article](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2015-08-04/advice-antiquity) in *Foreign Affairs*, Josiah Ober – a leading academic expert on ancient Greek democracy – argues that there is much we can learn from the Greek experience that could be applicable to modern public policy. As he describes more fully in [a new book](http://www.amazon.com/Classical-Greece-Princeton-History-Ancient/dp/069114091X/), democratic ancient Greek city states achieved impressive levels of economic growth and culture flourishing. Ober contends that their success was the result of reliance on democratic decision-making and well-structured political institutions:

So what made the impressive growth of the ancient Greek economy possible? The basic answer is good institutions. Greek city-states were governed by a range of regimes, but, by the fourth century BCE, the typical Greek city-state was, by world historical standards, very democratic. In Athens, and hundreds of other Greek states, most native adult males were participatory citizens, who set policy in citizen councils and assemblies, judged legal cases as jurors on people’s courts, and were elected or chosen by lot to serve as public officials.

In his excellent earlier book, [*Democracy and Knowledge*](http://www.amazon.com/Democracy-Knowledge-Innovation-Learning-Classical/dp/0691146241), Ober effectively argues that ancient Athenian democracy made effective use of knowledge, and that the citizens who made decisions in the assembly were far from being the ignorant mob typically depicted by both ancient and modern skeptics about direct democracy.

Ober’s work is intriguing and powerful. But I am not as optimistic as he is that the relative successes of ancient democracy can be replicated in the modern world. As I pointed out in [a review of his earlier book](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1428612), ancient Athenian democracy was less vulnerable to the dangers of voter ignorance than modern government is, because the functions of the state in the ancient world were much simpler and more limited than they are today, thereby making it easier for ordinary citizens to understand public policy and hold officials accountable for their performance. By contrast, citizens of modern democracies are [often ignorant](http://www.amazon.com/Democracy-Political-Ignorance-Smaller-Government/dp/0804786615) of [even the most basic aspects of government](http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/11/03/what-no-one-talks-about-during-election-season-voter-ignorance/). If we want modern voters to be as effective as their ancient Athenian counterparts apparently were, we should consider cutting back on the size, scope, and complexity of government.

Moreover, by modern standards, ancient Athens was [not so much a democracy as an oligarchy where the franchise was in some ways limited to those most likely to have a relatively high level of political knowledge](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/01/30/the-modern-case-for-studying-ancient-athenian-democracy/). That doesn’t mean modern states should limit the franchise in the same fashion as the Athenians did. But we should nonetheless take note of this aspect of the Athenian system in considering the extent to which it provides lessons for our own.

I do agree with Ober that democratic government works better if subject to various constitutional constraints:

[C]ontrary to the still-common image of Greek democracy as mob rule, we can now trace, at least in well-documented Athens, how the legislative authority of the people was tempered by democratically-enacted codes of fundamental laws. By the time Plato was writing the Republic, in the early fourth century BCE, every day-to-day policy decision made by the Athenian council and assembly was required to conform to a body of written constitutional law. And that law was taken seriously; politicians who sought to introduce measures that contradicted it risked losing the right to propose legislation. The laws effectively protected the property, dignity, and bodies of citizens, and to some degree non-citizens as well, against exploitation by over-reaching magistrates or powerful individuals.

This is a useful corrective to the simplistic image of ancient Greek democracy as a system of near-total majority rule under which popular assemblies could do almost anything they wanted. But it seems to me that the need for strong constitutional constraints on democratic government is already evident from extensive modern experience.

**Question to discuss:**

**Consider what this article is saying –the Government and the business of Governments grew too complex for citizens to take on any influential and significant role in it” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?**

**Do you personally feel that you understand the questions (and solutions) that Government proposes to the variety of challenges our society faces nowadays? Why or why not?**

**Your task: In the table below, lost major points of Ancient Greek’s Democracy and today’s democracy and after that, in one-two paragraphs (or in point form) provide your own suggestions to what a “perfect democracy” and “Perfect Government” should look like**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Ancient Greek Democracy looked like this…** | **Modern Democracy looks like this…** |
|  |  |

This is what I think the “perfect democracy” and “perfect government” should look like….

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