

Democracy's Roots in Ancient Greece

In 1776, thirteen of the former British colonies in North America signed the Declaration of Independence. When the United States proclaimed its independence from King George III, the new Americans sought a departure from monarchy, or rule by one. They chose democracy, or rule by the people.

Democracy was not a new form of government. It was established thousands of years earlier in Greece. Democracy is a compound Greek word. *Demos* means “the people,” and *kratos* refers to rule. Democracy was a new idea in ancient Greece, where citizens had been used to a monarchy or an oligarchy, which is rule by a few.



The Declaration of Independence set forth democratic principles first established in Greece.

Democracy in the City-State of Athens

Greece has many islands and is full of mountainous terrain. The rugged geography of Greece led to the development of city-states in ancient Greece. A city-state is a city which governs itself as a country would. Communication and travel between various parts of the region was difficult, which led to more independent settlements. By today's measures, some of these city-states would barely be considered towns. Most of the ideas in regard to democracy came from the Greek city-state of Athens.

Athens in the late 500s BCE was rich from agriculture, trade, and large silver mines. Another source of wealth was the accumulation of enslaved people, mostly foreigners captured in war. Enslaved people were valuable because they could be sold for money. Some Greek people were enslaved due to unpaid financial debts. The rising gap between the rich slave owners and the poorer common Athenians caused riots and mayhem.

During the late 500s BCE, Solon, a wise politician and lawmaker, tried to reduce tensions between the rich and the poor. Indebted Greek slaves were freed. Solon created four classes of citizens. Only free adult males were considered citizens in Athens. Women, children, and foreigners enslaved after war were not considered citizens. Actual citizens accounted for about 20

percent of the total population of Athens. Class was not based on birth, where the elite rule, as in Athens's former aristocracy. Rather, class was determined by yearly agricultural production. Members of the three highest classes of landowners—those who produced the most crops—were eligible for office.

In 508 BCE, Cleisthenes, the ruler of Athens, instituted reforms that lasted nearly two centuries. All citizens could participate in a direct democracy. That is, all free men could speak in public assemblies and take part in politics. Public debating was a form of entertainment and a skill expected of educated men. In fact, the Athenians called citizens who did not debate *idiotai*, a word that likely sounds familiar.

Cleisthenes made additional changes to the governing body. He expanded the 4 classes to 10 classes. Fifty men, citizens age 30 or older, from each of the 10 classes were eligible to serve on the council, or board of decision makers. Because it had 500 people, the council became known as the Council of 500. Therefore, the Council of 500 was more representative of the entire city. Each council term lasted for a year. No man could serve more than two terms. The Council determined the agenda for the public assemblies. Council members also looked after public property and determined if new facilities were needed.

All citizens—free men of Athens—were treated equally in the courts. Citizens over age 30, through a lottery, became jury members. Citizens over age 18 could vote. Voting and serving on juries were considered duties. Citizens who did not perform their duties were scorned. Juries of citizens had the final word over decisions made by legislators and executives.

Pericles, known as a gifted statesman, led Athens in the 400s BCE. Under Pericles, government office was the result of merit, not of birth or riches. The day-to-day running of the government of Athens was a full-time job. Pericles made sure government officials were paid for their services. The change in eligibility to elected office and payment for service allowed the landless and the poor to participate in government. Pericles also changed the citizenship requirements in Athens. Any man not born to two Athenian parents was no longer considered a citizen. Pericles hoped this change would limit alliances created between Athenian government officials and foreign leaders to help benefit some but not others. Under Pericles, democracy came to mean the equality of opportunity and of justice; however, was there really equality in this new democracy?

Democracy in Athens did not always have a positive result. Athenians also used the democratic vote to banish men from Greece. On the recommendation of a citizen, men could vote to require a man to leave Greece for 10 years. The decision was first made by an oral vote. Later, voting was done using small white or black balls or beans. A black ball was a vote to banish the person. A valid vote meant at least 5,000 citizens agreed.

Democracy in the United States

Even before the United States declared its independence, democratic ideas were tested. When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the men had already signed the Mayflower Compact. That document relied on a Greek idea: the consent—or permission—of the governed. The Pilgrims also elected their leaders.

Early on, the colonies were largely ignored by the British government, to the point of neglect. Given this lack of British authority, the colonies developed their own forms of government. In New England, town meetings open to all male citizens were common. These meetings were a form of direct democracy, similar to the democracy that the people of Athens followed. In Virginia, the House of Burgesses relied on a Roman idea: representative democracy. Here, citizens elected officials to local, state, and national government to make and enforce laws. Those officials represented the people who elected them.

The Founding Founders of the United States created a representative democracy, rather than a direct democracy. In the original Constitution, only the members of the House of Representatives were elected directly by citizens' votes. Senators were elected by state legislatures. Some election rules have since changed. Today, senators are also directly elected by citizens. The president was, and still is, elected by members of the Electoral College.

The rights of citizens have expanded during the 200-plus years of the United States. At first, the only citizens who could vote were white, land-owning men of wealth. Women, persons of color, and non-landowners were excluded. With the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) after the Civil War, all men born in the United States had citizenship rights. With the Fifteenth Amendment (1870), African American men gained the right to vote, as did all



Alice Paul worked for many years to give women the right to vote.

other male citizens. The Nineteenth Amendment (1920) guaranteed all American women the right to vote. Voting rights were expanded further with the passage of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment (1964). This amendment made it illegal to require payment, in the form of a poll tax, to vote. When the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 with the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (1971), still more citizens were able to vote.

Aspects of democracy from ancient Greece are used today in the United States. The U.S. government, then and now, is made of a group of elected officials. In both cases, citizens 18 and over cast election votes. Requirements for citizenship have since expanded. Today's citizens include women, non-landowners, descendants of enslaved people, and those from other countries who have been given citizenship rights. This range of people can all run for office and serve on juries. Trial is still conducted by jury. Today, however, it takes more than just a recommendation to banish or imprison someone. The democracy founded by the ancient Greeks provided an excellent foundation upon which the United States government was built.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** Which of the following reforms did Cleisthenes institute?
 - A.** He extended voting rights to foreign craftsmen in Athens.
 - B.** He based classes on agricultural production, not birth.
 - C.** He reorganized the governing body to be more representative of the entire city.
 - D.** He limited voting rights to only those born to two Athenian parents.

- 2.** Which of the following is closest to the Athenian form of democracy?
 - A.** New England town meeting
 - B.** the House of Representatives
 - C.** Virginia House of Burgesses
 - D.** the Electoral College

- 3.** How did Athenians determine if a man should be exiled from Greece as a punishment for a crime?
 - A.** The man could choose between death and exile if he murdered another man.
 - B.** Only the women and children of Athens were allowed to banish the criminals of the city. They did so by casting a vote.
 - C.** Exile was never a form of punishment in Greece.
 - D.** At first it was an oral vote cast by the citizens of Athens. Later black and white beans were used to count votes.

- 4.** The passage describes how the British neglected their newfound colony, the United States. It was during this time that Americans decided what kind of government ideals and values they wanted. Based on what you have read, why would America choose a democracy with similar values to the Ancient Greeks? Which aspects of democracy do you agree that the United States should have chosen? Are there any characteristics that you would not have voted for, as an early American leader? Explain your answers using details from this passage, as well as your knowledge of current events.