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Math 89S: Game Theory and Democracy

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Athenian Democracy vs. American Democracy

Cleisthenes, the Athenian ruler in 507 B.C., called his new system of government “Demokratia,” meaning “rule by the people.” Athens is known as the world’s first Democratic society. Among many incredible inventions that Greece has given the Western World, Mark Cartwright still points out Democracy as Greece’s “greatest and most enduring legacy.” It clearly has had an enduring legacy, as the American founding fathers stole the name of their system of government from Athens over 2000 years later. In the modern world, it seems that there is a sliding scale of the systems that take on the name of “Democracy.” At its root, the word Democracy means “rule by the people.” Neither Athens nor America are able to fully live up to this utopian definition of Democracy; over its history, however, the United States has shifted down the scale from not very democratic closer to the side of “rule by the people.” However, looking at the two most celebrated and studied democracies ever, it is evident that society has a long way to go before we reach a nation with a true and functional democratic government.

Athens’ Democracy was separated into different groups and assemblies, similar to the United States system. The *Ekklesia* was the assembly that included the common citizen- the common male citizen that is. At any given time there ranged from about 30,000 to 60,000 male citizens in Athens. Meetings of the *Ekklesia* took place in spaces that were able to accommodate about 6000 people, and were run by nine presidents, who were chosen by lot. There were also smaller assemblies that met more regularly, and consisted of citizens who represented their

“tribes.” These positions were also picked by lot. Also chosen randomly, were the 6000 jurors and a body of chief magistrates of the Athenian courts of law. These different branches of the government served the purpose of creating checks and balances, much like the current American system.

Structurally, this government has holes in truly allowing for a completely functional “rule by the people.” To start off, women- half of the citizens- are cut completely out of the governing process. The next issue is that the *Ekklesia* meetings took place in space only allowing up to 6000 people to come together. This lack of space means that at times, only 10% of the *male citizen population* could take part in a meeting, meaning that only 5% of the total *citizen population* was represented at any given meeting.. Therefore, over any issue raised and voted upon at any given meeting, 95% of the citizen population actually would have absolutely no influence on the outcomes.. It is also important to point out that citizens are estimated to only have made up 10 to 20 percent of the Athenian population. These structural holes create a gap between the utopian democracy, and the actual practice of Athenian Democracy, since such a small portion of the citizens have any influence at all on the outcomes of votes.

All of these numbers are to assume that all male citizens wanted to take part in the democratic process. In reality, estimations say that only about 3000 male citizens regularly actively participated in the process. On top of this small group, there was a collection of the most influential 100 of these citizens who “dominated the political arena both in front of the assembly and behind the scenes in private conspiratorial political meetings and groups” (Cartwright). The extra influence, power, and secret meetings show that a very select group of citizens actually had more ability to influence the system directly, without any input from the rest of the citizens. These citizens were not even elected by the people; they were just able to play

the system the best. Such a small portion of citizens actually taking part in the political process, and an even smaller select group having more influence on the process, shows that this direct democracy did not actually encompass the true meaning of democracy. More accurately, it describes a system of rule by some of the people, rather than rule by all of the people.

This system also led to transient rules and policies for many reasons. The first reason is that not everybody could participate in all of the meetings, so an influential person's absence or presence at a meeting could quickly cause shifts and switches of rules. Next, citizens who took part in the democratic process were not always educated and not always up to date on the latest news. Lack of education in the group could cause easy influence and quick switches of rules. Finally, these large meeting groups could lead to the mob mentality being employed. This mentality causes a decline in the use of reason, and an increase in the use of passion. Passion could quickly overcome the group and switch rules and policies well thought out through the use of reason. Sheldon S. Wolin from Princeton University interprets Plato's writings on this subject of chaos in Athens' laws and policies.. He writes, "the passions so to speak were collectivized.. The result, so it was alleged, was 'turbulence,' 'disorder,' frequent changes in the laws, and erratic policies (*Republic*, 537b-d)" (Wolin 476). This turbulence was not a functional system, and was caused once again by the rule of some people. Since not everyone participated, and not everyone could come together at every meeting, different groups could lead to different conclusions, causing the chaos and reflecting "rule by some of the people," where the some people were those who were present to vote on a given topic.

Finally, the engine that kept this democratic society functioning economically was slave labor.. It is hard to overlook in praise for the Athenian system that many scholars argue, "Athenian democracy could flourish only with the spoils of empire or required slavery to make

possible a leisured citizenry with sufficient time to participate actively in politics” (Grofman 471). Without the slave class, citizens would not have the leisure time to directly vote on every issue that arose. The direct democracy system of the Athenians would crumble without slavery, a practice that is the antithesis of democratic values, which shows that the freedom for “some people” to rule, hinged upon the complete oppression of a whole class of others. This illustration does not sound like a utopian democracy where all people influence and have power in the decisions of the nation.

After analyzing the structure and functionality of Athenian Democracy, it is clear that the system does not fit the description of the utopian democracy of equal freedoms and rights. Through the structure, Athenian Democracy became “more like a select club, facilitated to some extent by a slave population and in addition really only made possible, many scholars argue, by Athens’ control over a large and profitable empire which kept money flowing into the city” (Scott). While the members of this select club had direct impact on their government, and got to live out close to an ideal democracy, it cannot be overlooked that this freedom came from the oppression of others. Without this oppression, this form of government would not function because the people would not have leisure time to directly participate in every political decision.

The next celebrated Democracy to inspect is the United States. Anthony B Knight from the Maryland historical society claims, “most citizens of the United States would probably argue that it is a democratic country and that most of what goes on here is democratic in nature, or has at its root a democratic cause” (Knight 21). How accurate is Knight’s claim that America is “democratic?” The US has undergone large changes over its history that have shifted its democratic prowess---starting from not democratic at all, closer to the side of democracy, and being ruled by the people.

The founding fathers of the United States debated whether or not they should adopt Athens' direct form of democracy, or create a republic or representative government. One founding member, Madison "contrasted direct democracy with representative government and recommended the later." The reason why he wanted this form of government,

"was that it would control democracy by making it difficult for the majority to rule and that it would establish a political system in which there was a fair prospect that most of the major institutions of the national government---the senate, electoral college, the president, and the Supreme Court---would be staffed by republican *aristoi*." (Wolin 476)

His thought process behind why he recommended representative government shows why upon the United States' founding, it truly wasn't very democratic at all. The whole reason the form of representative government was chosen was to suppress the rights of the common citizen, and stack the government with *aristoi*, a Greek word for a nobleman. Clearly, this desire to "control democracy" and place noblemen in the government is not anywhere close to rule by the people.

Democracy was almost nowhere to be found. Early voting rights put decisions in the hands of the states, and most states only allowed white males who owned property to vote. This rule fed more into an aristocracy than a democracy. Early on, only white males with enough wealth were able to vote for other wealthy white males to represent them in political decisions. This illustration expresses a government that represents rule and representation for wealthy white men, not the people. At this point of the United States, the government is very far away from a perfect form of democracy, much further than Athens was.

At its founding, the United States' was ruled by a class of nobles (*aristoi*), who were voted into power by other wealthy white males. At least in Athens all male citizens had the

vision of being able to directly impact the government. When the United States was founded and its structure of government was established, it had less rule by the people than did Athens because an even smaller portion of the people were able to impact political decisions. On top of male citizens who didn't own land, women, and non white ethnicities, the United States had a slave class, who did not have any political rights. At this point, Athenian government was closer to a rule by the people than the Aristocracy that existed in the United States at its creation.

In the representative government of the United States, the right to vote for representatives is the way that the people rule. As Massvote.org says, "voting is central to the equality of all Americans." This equality is also key for all of the people ruling as one, rather than some of the people ruling. Thus, the history of the voting laws in the United States provide a direct correlation with where the true democratic nature of the country stands. The key dates in American voting laws are:

"1788: With the ratification of the Constitution, all slaves are counted as 3/5's of a single person on the national census."

"1792: New Hampshire becomes the first state to eliminate its property requirements, thereby extending the right to vote to almost all white men."

"1807: Women lose the right to vote in every state in the US for the next 113 years."

"1856: North Carolina becomes the last state to eliminate its property requirements. The right to vote is extended to all white men in America."

"1857: In the landmark case Dred Scott v. Sandford, the US Supreme Court rules that "a black man has no rights a white man is bound to respect." African Americans are further deprived of the right to citizenship and, by extension, the right to vote."

“1869-70: The Fifteenth Amendment is passed in Congress and ratified by the states. The right to vote is now legally guaranteed to all male citizens regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

“1919-20: The Nineteenth Amendment is adopted by Congress and ratified by the states into law. The right to vote is now guaranteed to all citizens regardless of gender.”

“1948: The last state laws denying Native Americans the right to vote are overturned.”

“1965: The Voting Rights Act is signed into law, prohibiting any election practice that denies the right to vote to citizens on the basis of race and forces jurisdictions with histories of voter discrimination to submit any changes to its election laws to the government for federal approval prior to taking effect.”

“1990: The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act ensures that election workers and polling sites provide a variety of services designed to ensure the possibility of persons with disabilities to vote.”

“2009: The Military and Overseas Empowerment Act establishes more efficient means for troops stationed overseas and expatriates to request and receive absentee ballots through the mail or electronically.” (Massvote.org)

This timeline illustrates the ebbs and flows of America’s shift down the sliding scale toward Democracy. At times, the country took steps backwards in its steps toward democratic values, but the general trend since the founding of the nation has been closer to Democracy. This strive toward Democracy is evident in the voting laws, that over the country’s history have opened up the ability to impact the government to more and more people. The current voting laws allow any citizen 18 years or older who meet their state’s residency requirements to vote. It is clear

that the country has come a long way since the founding “Aristocracy” that only allowed wealthy white men to have an impact on their government.

Citizens can also impact their government directly, not just through their vote. It is easy to see how far the country has come when you think of the wealthy-white-male run government with a slave class, to the fact that our last president was of African American descent. In 1788, African-Americans were not even considered a full person. In 2008, Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States. This image shows that the US has clearly moved closer to Democracy, by allowing more of its people to impact the government, rather than a select few.

In current day, with a higher percentage of people having an impact on government than in Athens and the absence of the slave class, America has shifted closer to a rule by the people than Athens was able to achieve. Even though those in Athens who impacted their government did so directly, it was such a small percentage of the people living there that it is not fair to call the government “ruled by the people.” There also existed the slave class, which kept the country running, and allowed these select few the time to participate directly in their government. The United States began way behind Athens in their strive for Democracy. The United States had a slave class, very limited voting rights, and not even a direct impact in government; over time, however, the United States continued its strive to be ruled by the people, granting citizenship and the right to vote and impact the government to more and more people over its history.

There is still a long way to go if the United States ever wants to reach the utopian form of Democracy, where it is truly “ruled by the people.” As long as there are positions of power there will be corruption and power hungry individuals who play the game of politics for the wrong reasons. The country has come a long way, but the representative form of Democracy may hold it back from reaching a truly democratic state.

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