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The Birth of Democracy

Democracy, a government where power is in the hands of the people, is touted as the symbol of freedom and ideal political structure in the United States of America and many countries around the world. However, this form of government was not always popular, as the first civilizations of human history were ruled by various forms of monarchy or oligarchy. In the seventh century B.C., democracy began its growth in the Greek city-state of Athens until it eventually evolved into a political structure completely ruled by the people. The concept of equality slowly developed from a cultural desire into a political ideology that dominated one of the most powerful territories of ancient Greece. Just like all forms of government, Athenian democracy was not perfect and had flaws in representation, but when considering the cultural values of this era, it still sustained the city-state into its Golden Age.

During the seventh century B.C., Athens was governed by an aristocracy. The three chief officials were known as archons – nobles of sufficient prestige and wealth to be selected into government – and they held significant power in legal jurisdiction in society. The most powerful entity was the Council of Areiopagos, an assembly of former archons who held office for life. The members supervised laws, resolved constitutional disputes, discussed public policy, and appointed other high-ranking officials.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was clearly not a democracy since a small group of upper class nobles maintained power for life, and with the power to elect their own, they perpetuated a permanent rule by the elite.

However, there was a popular assembly called the ekklesia, but it excluded the lowest economic class and had little to no true political power. [[2]](#footnote-2) This provided the illusion of equal representation to the people and helped keep the public under control with a façade of representation. Since democracy had not yet been conceptualized, the idea of a government ruled by the people may not have been an important value to society. The ekklesia would have sufficed as a venue to express thoughts and opinions where the members had little expectation that their ideas would be actually implemented into the law.

Yet a pressure for change still did existed, and near the end of the century, the archonship power structure was reformed. An additional six lawmakers, thesmothetai, were supplemented to the three archons, diluting their power.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was the beginning of a push for new political organization which would eventually lead to the worlds first recorded democracy.

Burial grounds have provided the first hint for a shift in political and social values in ancient Greece. Archeologist Ian Morris found that in the sixth century B.C., a new tradition of citizen cemeteries arose, where the boundaries of economic and social class were discarded. This was a “breakdown in distinctions between the wealthy, the so-called *agathoi* (the good), and those with fewer resources, the so called *kakoi* (the bad)”.[[4]](#footnote-4) This revealed the early foundations of equality for all citizens, undermining the deep-rooted exclusivity of power that surrounded the nobility.

Another event that destabilized the political structure was the creation of tyrant rulers that overthrew the monarchial and oligarchical rule by lineage; status from birth was no longer a necessary criterion for authority. These new rulers “opened the door to alternative means of access to political power.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Inspired by the tyrants of nearby city states, an Athenian noble named Kylon attempted to seize the throne. Although he was unsuccessful, this illuminated the political unrest that festered within the city.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Following this turmoil, several economic crises took place. To address these issues, the archon, Solon, was given unique powers and implemented several reforms that have been regarded as the beginnings of Athenian democracy. His goal was to reduce the tensions between the wealthy, agathoi, and kakoi classes of citizens.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Solon began with economic reforms that eliminated the debt of the lower class and returning land to those who used it as collateral. This immediately helped resolve some tension among the poorer citizens of Athens, and the reduced risk of land ownership increased the population of small property owners. He then outlawed the use of a one’s body and labor as payment, ridding the city of slaves with Athenian citizenship. Now, economic dependence was directed to the whole of the city rather than life-long individual labor. Solon addressed the issue of inherited wealth and power, and social classes were redefined in terms of productive wealth instead of the amount possessed. There was no longer an insurmountable barrier between the different economic classes, promoting a sense of equality between all Athenians.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Political representation underwent major reforms as well. Solon opened mid-ranking public office positions to the top three property ownership classes and the archonship to the top two classes. Since these classes were now based on productive ability, Solon “introduced flexibility into a closed system and fixed political system, creating a path for access to office for those with wealth derived from trade.” Even the lowest property class was given a degree of representation by opening the Assembly and law courts to their participation.[[9]](#footnote-9) Solon laid the groundwork for equal representation and democracy, but the Council of Aeriopagos still existed and continued to hold its traditional power over law and public policy. This group still held significant power and its elite exclusivity was one of strongest obstacles to attaining a true democracy.

A period of tyranny followed Solon’s departure from Athens until 508 B.C., when the statesman Cleisthenes was elected archon. Many of Solon’s reforms were lost during the age of tyranny, but their legacies helped buffer the drastic changes from Cleisthenes’s restructuring. His biggest change was replacing the traditional classification and kin groups. Citizens of Athens joined one of one-hundred and thirty-nine local political units known as demoi, which in turn were part of broader groupings that ultimately separated the population into coastal, inland, and city factions.[[10]](#footnote-10) These large tribes would now act on interests that pertained to maximizing production in their regions and address issues that were relevant to their members. Family loyalty and land disputes were minimized so that society would equally pursue efficiency and economic growth.

With a new structure of equality in Athens, Cleisthenes then created the world’s first Democracy. There were three institutions of power, the largest of which was the ekklesia. Once powerless, this group was legitimized and given jurisdiction over war, foreign policy, law implementation, and ostracism, the exile of public officials by public vote. This assembly was open to any of the forty thousand adult male citizens that lived in Athens, but the sessions were limited to about five thousand attendees due to the size of the auditorium. Their decisions were determined by majority vote using a show of hands, and on occasion a secret ballot.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The second group was the Council of Five Hundred, where five hundred citizens were equally divided from the classification groups in Athens. Chosen randomly by lottery, these members were at least thirty years old, did not previously hold office, and had to pass an intensive questioning before holding office for one year. Their main duty was to determine topics of discussion for the ekklesia, acting as a check on their power. A subgroup of presidents was also selected randomly from within the council and met daily to structure discussions within their branch.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The third branch was the people’s court, a judicial system where citizens listened to cases, determined innocence by vote, and punished the guilty. Similar to council members, jurors were carefully vetted citizens who were chosen at random. Normally, there would be between two hundred to one thousand jurors.[[13]](#footnote-13) There were no judges that held legal authority, only Archons that helped facilitate the flow of the cases.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, there was still the Council of Areiopagos, whose life-serving members held considerable influence in politics. After two decades, this lingering power exclusivity for the upper class was eventually redistributed to the three branches of democracy. The appointment of Archons was also changed to a random lot method and the property requirement was significantly lowered to grant lower class citizens eligibility.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Since the ekklesia was open to all adult male citizens, and the other branches were composed of citizens of random chance, there was little room for corruption. In addition, there was no favor towards a centrist candidate, or even a method of analyzing the elections for a strategy to maximize one’s winning chance. Everything was up to chance. This form of democracy allowed for any opinions to be represented in government, regardless of how radical. However, was the population truly represented with equality?

The criteria to enter many of these positions required one to be a male adult citizen of Athens. First, women were not allowed to participate in any political office, accounting for a significant portion of the Athenian population. Furthermore, many men were excluded as well. Men younger than eighteen could not participate in any form of government, and had to wait until they were thirty to hold office in the council or court. Another barrier that could block one from representation was the requirement of citizenship. Two large groups fell into this category: slaves and immigrants. The majority of labor in the city was founded on slavery, so another large fraction of the population was ignored. Immigrants could only attain citizenship, and therefore political representation, if they performed exceptional public service. Until then, they were forbidden to own property and forced to pay a discriminatory tax. [[16]](#footnote-16) The remaining Athenians that could participate in this democracy only represented a small portion of the population, around sixty-thousand out of a total population of five-hundred-thousand.

In this small subpopulation of adult male Athenian citizens, there were still factors that contributed to unequal representation. Because these institutions were physically located in the center of Athens, it was geographically difficult for citizens in the rural countryside to journey thirty miles to the city center. Furthermore, wealthy candidates would have the time and resources to devote to these activities while lower class citizens lacked the means to participate or were employed by the military and sent outside of the city. [[17]](#footnote-17) Free time was a crucial component of democracy in Athens and this naturally created a bias towards wealthy slave owners. With no need to participate in work or labor themselves, these affluent citizens frequently participated in government while men who did not possess slaves had to personally work throughout the day.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Combatting this inequality, the Archon instituted several reforms that brought a degree of economic equality in representation. Under his rulings, “compensation for public duties was established (judicial salary for jury duty, assembly salary for participation in the ekklesia, salary for deputies, soldiers, etc.), and it was then that a huge program for public works was started which not only created the architectural masterpieces of Athens but also strengthened significantly the income of the lower classes.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Now, the poorer citizens had more financial buffer to spend time at the ekklesia and participate in political debates.

A distinction between Athenian democracy and modern democracy must be made in regards to values of personal freedom as well. Pericles deemed that the ultimate purpose of the citizen was to serve the city, so “human fulfillment comes from service to the political regime, not attention to personal life.” Therefore, the role of ancient Athenian democracy was not to provide individual rights; “it was to protect the liberty of the city and raise it to a heroic superiority over its neighbors.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

While this seemed like a cold and harsh philosophy, citizens were now protected from slavery and did not share the contemporary ideology that democracy should defend the freedom of its people. There were no sanctioned rights in Athens that protected the rights of the individual. There were rulings that concerned marriage partners, the rights and functions of business, the types of religious worship, and the forms of education taught to the young. Freedom of speech had a different definition as well. Rather than the outlaw of political censorship, this phrase meant that adult male citizens could speak freely about political events in the assembly.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The efficiency and effectiveness of these constantly rotating, randomly chosen institutions should also be assessed. It may seem that government would constantly be run by novices with little to no experience, and that justice would be dealt by an average citizen with no law experience and personal biases. But one of the council’s tasks was to prepare new officials for their job, providing guidance and information regarding the objectives of each political position. To the Athenians, it was more important to run the city-state fairly and equally than to find the most capable expert for a job.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This ancient form of popular rule is almost alien to the modern concept of democracy, and the most fundamental values of equality and representation have different cultural criteria to be deemed satisfactory. Today, the exclusion of women and immigrants from politics would cause widespread outrage, but it was completely logical for Athenians in their time period. Nevertheless, this government broke free from the common monarchies and oligarchies that dominated the rest of the ancient world, sparking the seed of equal representation that would eventually dominate the globe several thousand years later.

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