

# The Democratic Experiment

by Professor Paul Cartledge

## What's in a word?

What's in a word? We may live in a very different and much more complex world, but without the ancient Greeks we wouldn't even have the words to talk about many of the things we care most about. Take politics for example: apart from the word itself (from *polis*, meaning city-state or community) many of the other basic political terms in our everyday vocabulary are borrowed from the ancient Greeks: monarchy, aristocracy, tyranny, oligarchy, and—of course—democracy.

The ancient Greek word *demokratia* was ambiguous. It meant literally “people-power.” But who were the people to whom the power belonged? Was it all the people—the “masses”? Or only some of the people—the duly qualified citizens? The Greek word *demos* could mean either. There's a theory that the word *demokratia* was coined by democracy's enemies, members of the rich and aristocratic elite who did not like being outvoted by the common herd, their social and economic inferiors. If this theory is right, democracy must originally have meant something like “mob rule” or “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

## Greek political systems

By the time of Aristotle (fourth century BC) there were hundreds of Greek democracies. Greece in those times was not a single political entity but rather a collection of some 1,500 separate *poleis*, or city-states, scattered round the Mediterranean and Black Sea shores “like frogs around a pond,” as Plato once charmingly put it. Those cities that were not democracies were either oligarchies—where power was in the hands of the few richest citizens—or monarchies, called “tyrannies” in cases where the sole ruler had usurped power by force rather than inheritance. Of the democracies, the oldest, the most stable, the most long-lived, but also the most radical, was Athens.

## Solon and Cleisthenes

The origin of the Athenian democracy of the fifth and fourth centuries can be traced back to Solon, who flourished in the years around 600 BC. Solon was a poet and a wise statesman but not—contrary to later myth—a democrat. He did not believe in people-power as such. But it was Solon's constitutional reform package that laid the basis on which democracy could be pioneered almost 100 years later by a progressive aristocrat called Cleisthenes.

Cleisthenes was the son of an Athenian, but the grandson and namesake of a foreign Greek tyrant, the ruler of Sicyon in the Peloponnese. For a time he was also the brother-in-law of the Athenian tyrant, Peisistratus, who seized power three times before finally establishing a stable and apparently benevolent dictatorship. It was against the increasingly harsh rule of Peisistratus's eldest son that Cleisthenes championed a radical political reform movement which in 508/7 ushered in the Athenian democratic constitution.

## Ephialtes and Pericles

It was under this political system that Athens successfully resisted the Persian onslaughts of 490 and 480/79, most conspicuously at the battles of Marathon and Salamis. That victory in turn

encouraged the poorest Athenians to demand a greater say in the running of their city, and in the late 460s Ephialtes and Pericles presided over a radicalization of power that shifted the balance decisively to the poorest sections of society. This was the democratic Athens that won and lost an empire, that built the Parthenon, that gave a stage to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, and that laid the foundations of western rational and critical thought.

The democratic system was not, of course, without internal critics, and when Athens had been weakened by the catastrophic Peloponnesian War (431-404) these critics got their chance to translate word into deed. In 411 and again in 404 Athenian oligarchs led counter-revolutions that replaced democracy with extreme oligarchy. In 404 the oligarchs were supported by Athens's old enemy, Sparta—but even so the Athenian oligarchs found it impossible to maintain themselves in power, and after just a year democracy was restored. A general amnesty was declared (the first in recorded history) and—with some notorious “blips” such as the trial of Socrates—the restored Athenian democracy flourished stably and effectively for another 80 years. Finally, in 322, the kingdom of Macedon which had risen under Philip and his son Alexander the Great to become the suzerain of all Aegean Greece terminated one of the most successful experiments ever in citizen self-government. Democracy continued elsewhere in the Greek world to a limited extent—until the Romans extinguished it for good.

### **Greek democracy and modern democracy**

The architects of the first democracies of the modern era, post-revolutionary France and the United States, claimed a line of descent from classical Greek *demokratia*—“government of the people by the people for the people,” as Abraham Lincoln put it. But at this point it is crucial that we keep in mind the differences between our and the Greeks' systems of democracy—three key differences in particular: of scale, of participation and of eligibility.

First, scale. There were no proper population censuses in ancient Athens, but the most educated modern guess puts the total population of fifth-century Athens, including its home territory of Attica, at around 250,000—men, women and children, free and unfree, enfranchised and disenfranchised. Of those 250,000 some 30,000 on average were fully paid-up citizens—the adult males of Athenian birth and full status. Of those 30,000 perhaps 5,000 might regularly attend one or more meetings of the popular Assembly, of which there were at least 40 a year in Aristotle's day. 6,000 citizens were selected to fill the annual panel of potential jurymen who would staff the popular jury courts (a typical size of jury was 501), as for the trial of Socrates.

### **An Athenian men's club**

The second key difference is the level of participation. Our democracy is representative—we choose politicians to rule for us. Athenian democracy was direct and in-your-face. To make it as participatory as possible, most officials and all jurymen were selected by lot. This was thought to be the democratic way, since election favored the rich, famous and powerful over the ordinary citizen. From the mid fifth century, office holders, jurymen, members of the city's main administrative Council of 500, and even Assembly attenders were paid a small sum from public funds to compensate them for time spent on political service away from field or workshop.

The third key difference is eligibility. Only adult male citizens need apply for the privileges and duties of democratic government, and a birth criterion of double descent—from an Athenian mother as well as father—was strictly insisted upon. Women, even Athenian women, were totally

excluded—this was a men’s club. Foreigners, especially unfree slave foreigners, were excluded formally and rigorously. The citizen body was a closed political elite.

### **A political space**

There are some other important differences too. Athenian democracy did not happen only in the Assembly and Council. The courts were also essentially political spaces, located symbolically right at the center of the city. Aristotle in his *Politics* defined the democratic citizen as the man “who has a share in (legal) judgment and office.” Also in the shadow of the Acropolis lay the theater of Dionysus. Athenian drama, both tragic and comic, was a fundamentally political activity as well, involving the city and the citizen-body directly or indirectly in the staged dramatic action.

### **Power to the people**

One distinctively Athenian democratic practice that aroused the special ire of the system’s critics was the practice of *ostracism*—from the Greek word for potsherd [a broken piece of ceramic material]. In this reverse election to decide which leading politician should be exiled for ten years, voters scratched or painted the name of their preferred candidate on a piece of broken pottery. At least 6,000 citizens had to ‘vote’ for an ostracism to be valid, and all the biggest political fish risked being fried in this ceremonious way. For almost 100 years ostracism fulfilled its function of aborting serious civil unrest or even civil war. At the end of the fifth century it was replaced by a legal procedure administered by the jurors of the people’s courts. Power to the people, all the people, especially the poor majority, remained the guiding principle of Athenian democracy.

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