

Bill of Rights in Action



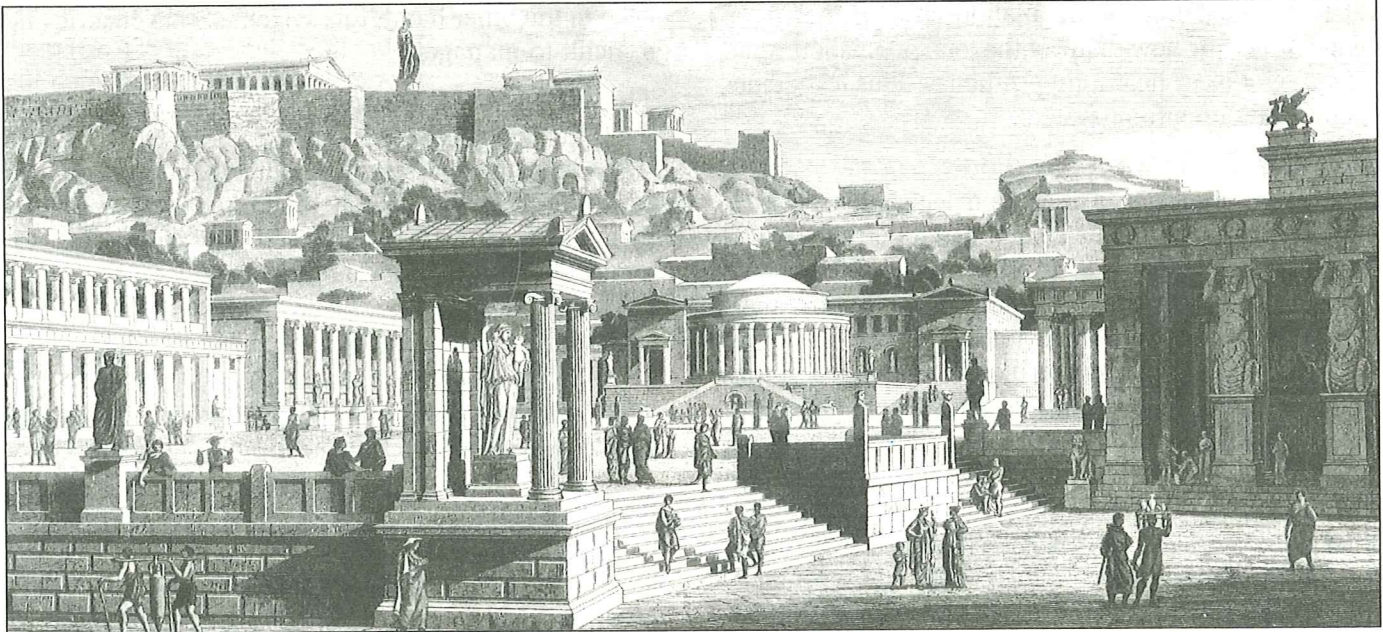
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HOW DEMOCRATIC WAS ATHENS?

Ancient Athens is sometimes lauded as having the most democratic government the world has ever known. The Athenian statesman and general Pericles called it “a model to others.” But critics throughout history have asked, just how democratic was Athens?



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A large open space in ancient Athens was called the agora. It is depicted here below the Acropolis, a complex of buildings on the hill in the background. Citizens originally gathered in the agora to discuss politics and to muster for battle. Later, the agora became an open marketplace for merchants.

The word “democracy” comes from the ancient Greek. *Demos* means “people,” and *kratos* means “authority.” So “democracy” means government by the authority of the people. In a democracy the whole of the people share in governing.

There are different forms of democracy. In most modern democracies (including the United States), the people govern through elected representatives. But in the democracy of ancient or classical Athens, every citizen had the responsibility to govern.

Athens in the fourth and fifth century before the Common Era (BCE) was a *city-state*. The city was the sovereign state, which means it ruled itself. By contrast,

the United States of America is a *nation-state*. Almost all states in the modern world are nation-states, but a few are city-states. For example, Vatican City where the Pope lives and governs is a city-state.

Who Governed Athens?

All adult citizens of Athens were expected to participate in government, regardless of wealth or poverty. And as you can imagine, this meant that decision-making groups were larger than what modern democracies are used to. Athenian juries had 500 or 501 jurors serving at each trial. The main legislative body, the Assembly, had about 6,000 or more participants at each meeting. ▶

DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE

How do we define democracy? The first article examines an age-old question about how democratic was the “birthplace of democracy,” ancient Athens. The second article takes a close look at how our early representative democracy met the challenges of expansion in the Northwest Territory. The third article presents startling data about how people view and value the fate of democracy.

World History: *How Democratic Was Athens?* by guest writer Aimée Koeplin, Ph.D.

U.S. History: *The Northwest Ordinance and Westward Expansion* by guest writer Thomas

Government/Current Issues: *Is Democracy in Trouble?* by longtime contributor Carlton Ma

Look for Supplemental Activities!

Teacher-leaders from CRF’s Teacher to Teacher Collaborative (T2T Collab) have created innovative activities for lessons in this issue! Look for the T2T symbol to access activities in the print and online editions.

T2T

As large as these numbers sound to modern Americans, they were only a small fraction of the total inhabitants of Athens. Only citizens could govern. And citizenship was restricted to adult males from citizen-families. The total number of citizens was 20,000 – 30,000 males. Women, children, slaves, and resident aliens (immigrants) were excluded. Only 10 to 20 percent of the total population of the city could participate in democratic practices.

Some historians think that it seems odd to describe Athens as “democratic” if only 10 to 20 percent of the population had any say in the government. That means 80 or 90 percent of the population was left out. If we judge Athens by how many of the total population could have their voices heard, then Athens seems *less* democratic than our current system.

How the Democracy Worked

The Assembly was the main legislative body of Athens. Every adult male citizen had a place in it. The Assembly met outdoors in an amphitheater. Participants were paid a small amount for showing up. Today, American citizens are paid a small amount for jury duty, too.

This very large group voted on laws and policy. Any member of the Assembly could address the group, regardless of social standing or wealth. But speakers could be shouted down by opponents. Speakers had to learn how to state their cases quickly and logically to have their ideas heard. Those with good reputations, too, had more leeway in sharing ideas.

The Assembly voted on many issues that modern Americans might find surprising. For example, they decided who should be a general and what the military should do. Everyone who counted as a citizen could directly participate in a wide range of political decision-making. That is why the Athenian system is called *direct democracy*. In this sense, the Athenian system seems extremely democratic.

The Assembly could not make every decision. A Council of 500 took care of some of the administrative duties of the state. Every year, each of the ten tribes (or neighborhoods) of Athens sent 50 members to the Council. These members were selected randomly in a system called selection by lot. Selection by lot was a lottery to see who would serve on the Council. Athenians considered a lottery to be a fair and democratic way to choose who should lead.

In the modern United States, we sometimes use selection by lot, too. The people who serve on juries are first selected by lot. This large group is the jury pool. Then the court and lawyers in a case choose who from that pool will be in the 12-member jury panel that decides the outcome of the case.

In Athens, a person could only serve on the Council once in his lifetime. The Council acted as a steering committee that set the agenda for the Assembly, collected taxes, and handled the day-to-day operations of the state.

A new *epistates*, or chairman, was selected by lot each day. (A person also could only serve as *epistates* once in his lifetime.) The duties of the *epistates* included leading the Council for the day and meeting with ambassadors from foreign governments. On the one hand, it seems quite democratic and egalitarian to randomly select one person to lead the city’s important business and negotiations with foreign powers. On the other hand, this system seems chaotic and difficult to manage.

The Mytilenean Revolt

Organizing debate and voting among 6,000 citizens is challenging. And selecting individual administrators by lot and for only a short time often does not allow them to learn how to govern from experience. This system could involve models of good deliberation among citizens, but it could also be unwieldy at the same time, such as the example of the Mytilenean Revolt.

In 478 BCE, Athens banded together with several other Greek city-states. The official meeting place of the league was the Greek island of Delos, so it was called the Delian League. The league’s purpose was to attack the Persian Empire, which had previously invaded the Greek peninsula.

Athens led the Delian League. In 454 BCE, Athenian general Pericles moved the treasury of the league from Delos to Athens. Athens also used the league’s navy to create an empire, colonizing islands and territories across the Aegean Sea.

In 427 BCE, the city of Mytilene revolted against Athens’ imperialism. The Athenian Assembly took up the question of how to respond to the Mytilenean Revolt. On the first day of debate, the Assembly decreed that their response to the revolt would be swift and harsh. Every adult male in Mytilene was to be killed and the women and children were to be sold into slavery.

The Athenians sent a ship to carry out the sentence. But the next day, many Athenians regretted their hasty decision to carry out the brutal reprisal. The Assembly initiated another debate. After persuasive speeches by notable Athenians, the Assembly voted to amend their earlier decision. They would not execute all the Mytileneans but instead only execute the leaders of the revolt.

A second Athenian ship was sent to Mytilene to call off the original sentence. The second ship was unable to catch up to the first. It arrived at Mytilene before the original, harsher sentence had been carried out, but after the original sentence had been announced.

Athenians regretted their hasty decision to carry out the brutal reprisal.

In this case, direct democracy allowed a hasty decision to be made in anger. It also exposed to the Mytileneans how brutal the Athenians could be. But direct democracy also allowed the correction of a terrible mistake. That correction came about as a result of wise deliberation.

Plato's Criticism

The ancient Athenian philosopher and political thinker Plato (ca. 428 BCE – 348 BCE) did not deny that Athens was democratic. But he was deeply suspicious of democracy. In his *Apology*, Plato expressed concern about allowing everyone to participate in the affairs of state. He argued it was better to leave decision-making to experts.

In the *Republic*, Plato argued that democracy is one of the worst forms of government. He compared oligarchy, or rule by a small group, with democracy. In Plato's view, oligarchies are ruined by too much wealth in the hands of only a few people. Democracies, on the other hand, are ruined by the people having too much freedom.

What a person wants and what is good for him are often opposed. So in a democracy, the voting citizens are free to make bad choices. The first debate during the Mytilenean debate is one example. As Plato phrased it, "the excessive increase of anything often causes a reaction in the opposite direction."

Plato believed that the only form of government worse than democracy is tyranny. He also argued that tyranny arises from democracy. In a democracy citizens are vulnerable to a tyrant who promises citizens what sounds good to them. Because of their need for a semblance of order, the citizens are likely to follow him.

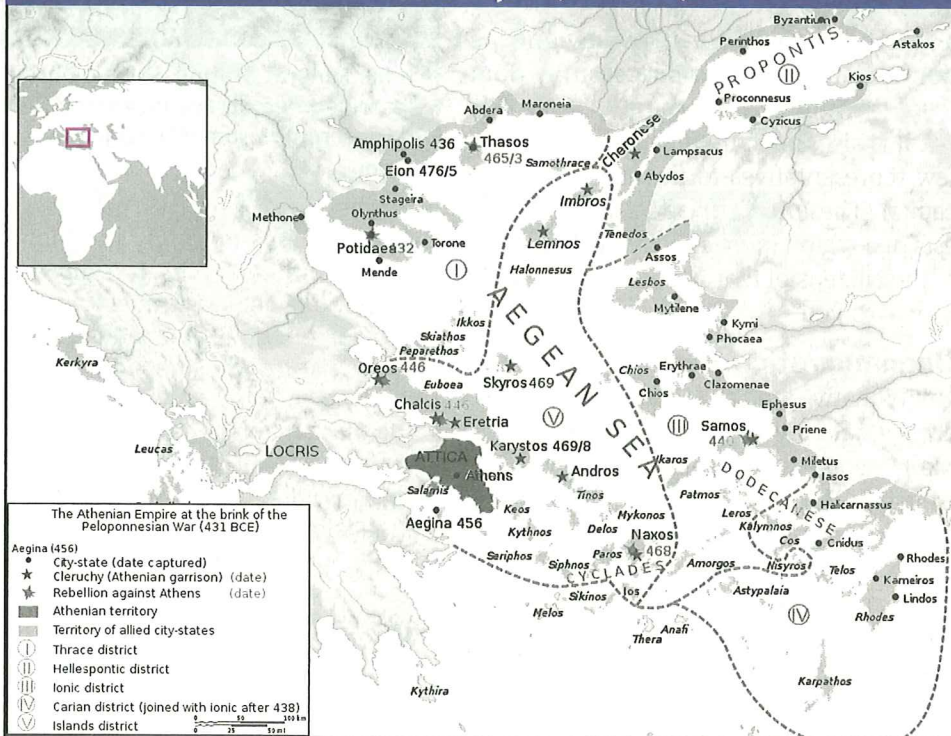
"The excess of liberty," wrote Plato, "whether in states or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery." In 404 BCE, Athens was defeated in war by Sparta, another Greek city-state. Athens then did become a tyranny, as Plato warned. But soon after, democracy was restored.

Madison's Criticism

The founders of the United States of America also had qualms about direct or "pure" democracy. Alexander Hamilton and John Adams used the word "democracy" as a criticism of their political opponents.

In *Federalist #10*, James Madison raised the concern that direct democracies, such as Athens, experience

The Athenian Empire (431 BCE)



Locate the positions of Athens, Mytilene, and the island of Delos on this map of the Athenian Empire in the 5th century BCE.

problems with factions. Factions are small or large groups of citizens "who are united . . . by some common impulse of passion, or of interest."

Madison points out that factions can oppose each other, and some factions can even oppose the "interests of the community." In a direct democracy, factions will tend to promote their own interests at the cost of the interests of others. Madison claimed that factionalism is at odds with a peaceful and secure society. Democracies with factions, he wrote, "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property."

Madison claimed that the solution is to abandon direct democracy in favor of "republicanism." A republic is a representative democracy, or "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place." In a republic, citizens do not directly vote on legislation themselves. Instead, citizens elect representatives who will vote in the interests of the people whom they represent and with an eye to the common good.

According to Madison, republicanism should help fight the negative consequences of factionalism in two ways. First, election of representatives is likely to produce a well-qualified group of citizens best able to promote the interests of the state as a whole. Representatives will form "a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country."

Second, representative democracy will accommodate a nation-state, not just a smaller city-state. According to Madison, a nation-state is less likely to suffer from fighting among factions. The large scale of

a nation-state will not allow any one faction to gain control or successfully dominate the interests of others.

It is also much more practical to send a few representatives to travel to a nation's capital. These few can represent the interests of a region more effectively than for all of the citizens of that region to travel to the capital to vote.

Undemocratic Athens?

When we look at Athens through modern eyes, it may not seem very democratic. Many people were left out of Athenian citizenship. But when compared to other ancient societies, Athens seems very democratic. All citizens, after all, could directly participate in policy decisions. And all citizens equally faced the prospect of being chosen by lot to help lead the city.

Some historians, however, use the fact that Athens had slavery to show how undemocratic it was. Slaves in ancient Athens were prisoners-of-war. Almost all slaves could marry, raise families, and even buy their own freedom, if they could afford it. Sometimes, too, they were freed in order to fight in battle. But they were never citizens, and slaves' testimony in law courts was only accepted if done under torture.

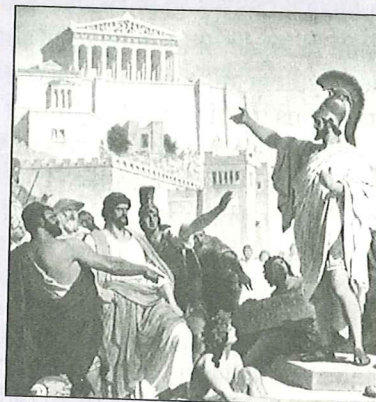
Over the centuries, democracy has changed. We know, at its root, it means "rule by the people." But we also know that rule by the people can be interpreted in different ways, and it can take many forms.

Pericles on Democracy

In his Funeral Oration, Pericles briefly described democracy in Athens. Does his description sound like a fair system to you?

Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbors. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability he possesses.

(Source: *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides)



This 19th century painting depicts Pericles delivering his famous funeral oration.

Wikimedia Commons

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Explain the terms *direct democracy* and *republic*. Which of these two forms of democracy did Athens have? Which form of democracy do you think is better? Why?
2. What did the Mytilenean Revolt reveal about Athenian democracy?
3. What did Plato think were the problems with democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny? Do you agree with Plato's criticism of democracy? Why or why not?
4. Do you think Madison was right that representative democracy avoids factionalism? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY: You're in the Assembly Now!

How does direct democracy work? As a class, choose one important question on a current issue:

1. Should the United States re-enter the Paris Climate Accord?
2. Should the United States have a national single-payer health care service?
3. Should the United States ban handguns?

Research the issue your class has chosen. Prepare your own 30-second speech on your answer (yes or no) to the question on the issue. Cite evidence in support of your answer.

Your class is now the Assembly! You will debate the issue just as they did in ancient Athens. Share your speech and be ready to respond to questions or comments from others in the Assembly. Every member of the Assembly must have the opportunity to speak in the debate.

When every member has had the opportunity to speak, have the whole Assembly vote on the issue.

Debrief: Did the Assembly vote your way? If not, how did that feel? Did you feel you had any influence on the final vote? Why or why not? What was the most challenging part of the debate? Is direct democracy an efficient way to decide national questions like these? What kinds of decisions could be made through direct democracy?

For a supplemental activity by teacher-leader Lindsay Russell who teaches American history at Southeast Guilford High School in Greensboro, North Carolina, download the digital version of this BRIA issue here: www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action.

