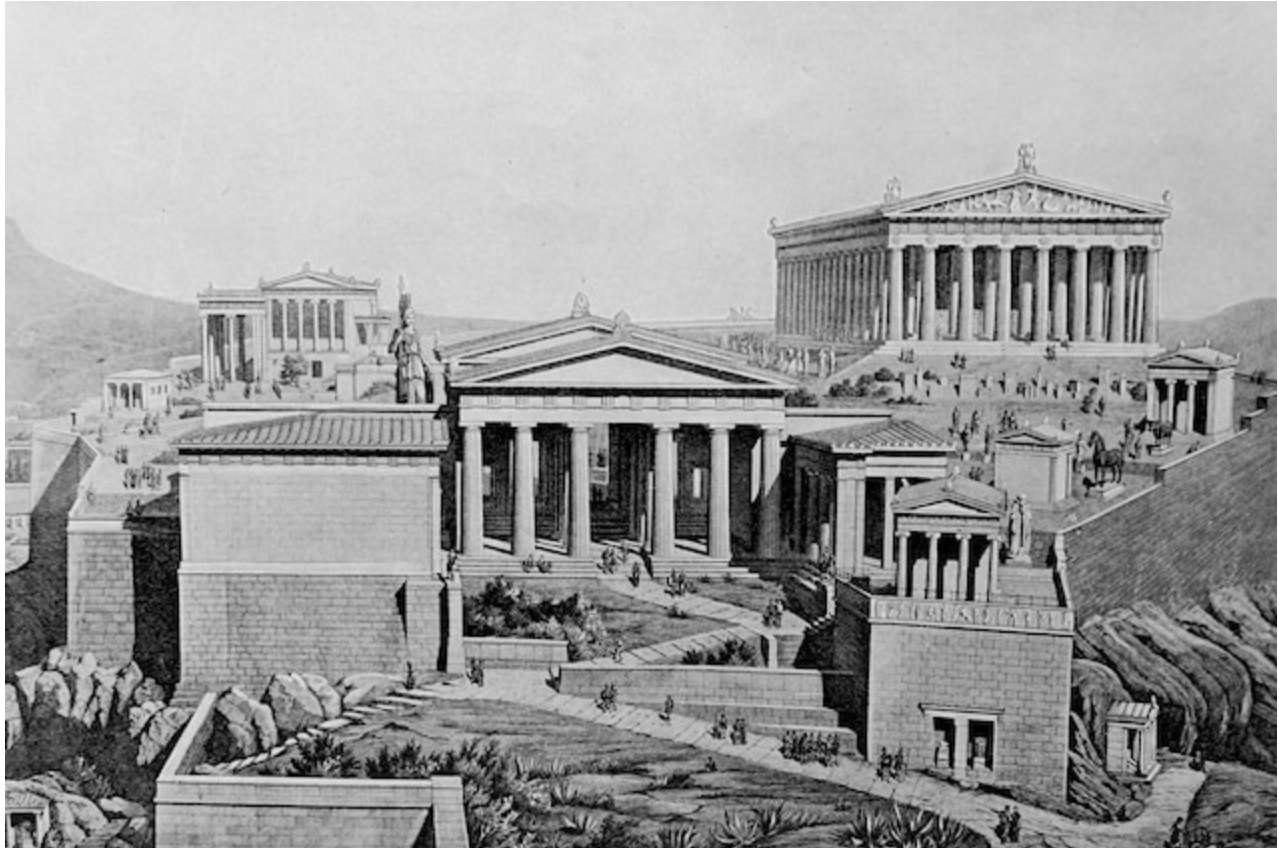


What Modern Democracies Didn't Copy From Ancient Greece

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ByNick RomeoPublished November 4, 2016• 6 min read



The Acropolis of Athens is a potent symbol of the history of democracy. But there are many facets of Greek democracy that didn't catch on.

Illustration from Universal History Archive, UIG via Getty Images

Ancient Greece was a model for the U.S. government, but the founders left a few things out.

“What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude,” Thomas Paine wrote in 1792. Equal parts prediction and promise, Paine’s claim has been realized in many ways: Major aspects of the American political system—from popular referendums to secret ballots to jury duty—derive from ancient Greek precedents.

But while the ancient Greeks are often dubbed the inventors of democracy, only some elements of their political system shaped American practices. The forgotten aspects of ancient Greek politics are numerous and fascinating: voting by hand-raising or shouting, banishment by popular vote, radically direct management of public affairs by average citizens, and many others.

So what exactly did the U.S. copy from classical models, and what has been left out?

Banishment

Many modern politicians would surely relish the chance to see rivals banished by popular vote. In fifth century B.C. Athens, this was actually possible. Citizens met annually in the agora—a public center of commerce and politics—and voted on whether any individual was becoming too powerful. The person with the most votes was exiled from Athens for 10 years.

The names of candidates for exile were scratched onto small potsherds and tallied, with a minimum of 6,000 votes required to banish someone. Called *ostraka* in ancient Greek, these potsherds are the root of the English word “ostracize.”



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Priceless Ancient Treasures Leave Greece for First Time

Shouting

While modern politics can *feel* like a shouting contest, voting by shouting was an actual practice in ancient Sparta.

This wasn't really like the voice votes held in the U.S. House and Senate (which can be challenged and followed by a roll call vote). In Sparta, the noise level was ranked by evaluators who assessed the volume produced when each candidate appeared before the

gathered citizens. The closest modern analogy might be if a stadium applause-o-meter were used for government.

Voting by Hand

The ancient Greek term for voting came from the word for pebble, and early sources suggest that the Athenians may have initially voted by placing pebbles in urns. By the fifth century, Athenians voted by hand-raising or with small bronze tokens.

For jury trials and some legislation, they used a type of secret ballot: Each citizen received two bronze tokens, one with a hollow axle, one with a solid axle. The tokens represented votes for or against a certain proposition or defendant. Their size and design made it easy to cover the end of the axle with the thumb while voting, thus concealing the nature of the vote.

Paying for Votes

Athenians received a small payment for serving on a jury or as a member of the largest deliberative body—the Assembly. Payment was a democratic innovation to ensure that poor citizens would not be prevented from civic engagement by indigence.

There was even an ancient equivalent to “Get Out the Vote” campaigns. The fifth century B.C. playwright Aristophanes describes a rope dipped in wet red paint that was used to herd citizens to the place where they could vote and participate in the assembly.

While compensating citizens for lost time made participation possible for more people, Athenian democracy was also quite restricted in certain ways. Only adult male citizens could serve on juries, participate in the Assembly, or hold official positions of any sort. Women, foreigners, and slaves were categorically excluded.

Deciding Who Votes

In other ways, however, Athenian democracy was far more inclusive and transparent than the modern American system. All citizens had the right to vote in the Assembly, which met roughly once every 10 days on the Pnyx, a small hill just beside the Acropolis that could accommodate the 5,000 to 6,000 members who typically participated. This large assembly decided military, financial, and religious matters and was also able to confer citizenship and honors on individuals.

A smaller council of 500 citizens met to prepare the agenda for the Assembly. This smaller council also deliberated on matters of foreign policy and could issue decrees regarding treaties and alliances.

The 500 members were chosen randomly from the city-state's tribes. Athens was organized into 10 tribal units, designed to cut across class, genealogy, and geography. And the smaller council drew 50 members from each tribe.

Implemented by Cleisthenes in 508 B.C., tribal reorganization helped decrease factionalism and build cohesion in Athens. Every tribe contained citizens from three areas that were previously rivals: the plain, the hills, and the coast. Members of tribes fought, feasted, sacrificed, and competed in religious festivals together.

Making the U.S. More Greek

An American political system that faithfully imitated the customs and institutions of ancient Greek democracy would be unrecognizable in many ways. For instance, it might feature the selection of senators and congressmen by a random lottery, with new members cycling through frequently.

Tribal reorganization would see Appalachian coal miners placed in the same tribe as New York stockbrokers, California tech executives, and Montana cattle ranchers. Popular referendums open to all citizens would play a significantly larger role in determining all domestic laws and foreign policy.

Of course, this system would also exclude women and immigrants entirely, and allow citizens to exile unpopular leaders—ideas that seem very un-democratic today.

Thomas Paine and other founding fathers admired the ancient Greeks, but they also feared the consequences of such radically direct democracy. As James Madison wrote in Federalist 55, “In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason.”