

Not So Simple

Historians from all periods of history have questioned the power of democracy. What? Yes! You've probably heard **democracy** defined as something like "government by the people." But if you were to take a time machine back to 1787, you'd find America's Founding Fathers trashing democracy. Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and James Madison all considered democracy just as dangerous as being governed by a single heartless ruler. In fact, scholars have even suggested that the word "democracy" might have started as a negative term meaning something like "mob rule." So you might be surprised to learn that our love of democracy is a completely modern idea—if you consider 240 years modern. So where did the idea come from? And what made our Founders so unsure about it in the first place? Take a look at democracy's beginnings to find out.

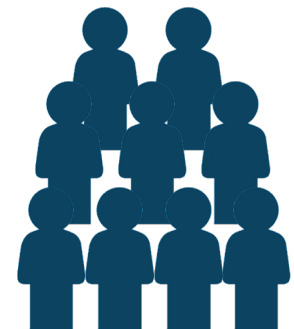


Start Here ←



The very beginnings of democracy showed up more than 2600 years ago in Greece, in a **city-state** called Athens. (A city-state was basically a country the size of a city and its surroundings.) We don't have a ton of historical evidence from that period, but there are some things that we do know. For one, what you might call "democratic" today didn't happen overnight.

By the 7th century BCE, free male citizens were attending a public meeting in Athens called **ecclesia**, or the assembly. The assembly was a lot like the assemblies you have in school today, but in addition to listening, men talked and voted on stuff. (Sound democratic so far?) Once a year, the assembly chose nine rulers. The rulers were called **archons**, and they were always from wealthy, high-status families known as **aristocrats**. The assembly didn't really meet for any other purpose than selecting the archons. And because these events happened so long ago, history isn't crystal clear on whether citizens actually *elected* the archons or if past archons chose the next group. Regardless, the archons were in charge of the entire government—lawmaking, justice, and from what scholars can tell, it would have also been up to the archons to decide when the ecclesia should meet.



In Athens's beginning, archons controlled all aspects of the government.

RULE BY "THE FEW"

In an **oligarchy**, the people who take control usually consider themselves to be "superior" because they belong to a different economic class, family line, religion, or differ in some other way.



Power to the (Wealthy) People

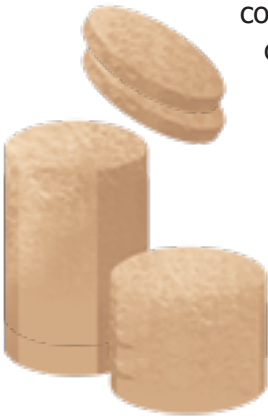
Sound democratic now? Or does something seem kind of... off? After all, only the archons had the actual *ability* to rule. And only aristocrats had the *right* to rule because a regular person couldn't become an archon. So, basically, the ultimate power and authority in Athens belonged to the archons, not the Athenian people. A government controlled by a small group of people like this isn't really a democracy. It's more accurately described as an **oligarchy**. In an oligarchy, a few people do the decision-making and hold political power. But it was from here that Athens's true democracy began to grow.

Lessons from Antiquity

Name: _____

Desperately Seeking Reform

The way this early system worked probably seems unfair. Free males could attend the assembly, but what about females? And were there un-free males? You bet. The ancient world was all about slavery. Back then you could secure a loan with your own freedom so that if you couldn't pay your debt, you would become a slave to the person who loaned you the money.



Inequality between the rich and the poor in Athens was a huge issue. Tons of people were going into slavery because of debt, and when they did, their wealthier neighbors often took their land. This helped the rich become richer and the poor become poorer (and increasingly dissatisfied with the way things worked). They couldn't even rely on the law for justice because Athens didn't have any written laws. Their laws had been passed down verbally and were more like oral traditions. And the archons (who remember were high-class aristocrats) had the final say in anything court-related.

In 621 BCE, an aristocrat named Draco was appointed to write the first set of laws for Athens, but Draco's laws were so slanted toward the rich that they only made things worse. Tension between the rich and the poor got so bad that 27 years later, in 594 BCE, Athenians were on the brink of a civil war. In a last ditch effort to solve the crisis, another aristocrat named Solon was appointed to rewrite the laws. Solon tried to be more balanced than Draco. He ended up not just rewriting the laws but restructuring the Athenian government. Solon's reforms included:

	Athenian citizens could not be sold into slavery for debt. This meant that citizens who had become slaves because of debt became free.
	He expanded the role of the ecclesia. All male citizens above the age of 18 had the right to participate in the assembly, which now met regularly, around 40 times a year.
	Solon created a council of 400 men called a boule , which planned what the ecclesia would discuss and ran the daily affairs of the city. Members were chosen by a lottery system (but the bottom class was probably left out).
	Before Solon, retired archons were acted as judges. Solon said citizens could challenge the archons' decisions to a jury made up of Athenian male citizens selected through a lottery.
	He opened the position of archon up to more classes than just the aristocrats (but the bottom class was still left out).

A Model for Success?

Was Solon's system more democratic? One thing was sure, the look and feel of democracy in Athens changed as different reforms were introduced. (Athenians weren't following a guidebook for building democracy. They were making it up as they went along.) Systems like the ecclesia and the boule grew in importance, and larger amounts of power were placed in the hands of Athenian men.

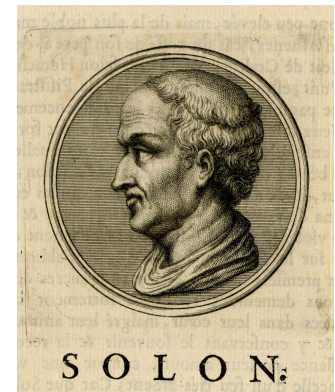
The boule prepared the agenda for the ecclesia and took care of Athens's day-to-day affairs. Members could serve a one-year term, and they swore an oath to follow the laws and put the interests of Athens and its people first. Real decision-making, however, happened in the ecclesia. There, men had the right to speak and vote on issues concerning the city, everything from managing money to matters of war. Votes were taken by a show of hands. Men also voted on Athens's laws. Any male Athenian could propose a new law or suggest that an old one be changed.

Two Sides of a Coin

But not everyone was happy with the shape of democracy. More than once, a single person took complete control of all aspects of Athens's government—this was another common form of government in the ancient world which the Greeks called **tyranny**. The aristocracy also had a difficult time letting go of the power they had gained over the years. As a result, Athenians preferred choosing archons and men for the boule through a random selection like a lottery system, rather than an election, to ensure that the selections could not be rigged.

Others feared the influence of the "common" man. Athenians were practicing **direct democracy**, where each man spoke

for himself in government. They weren't electing representatives to write their laws or make their decisions. The people took complete control of that. But few citizens in the ecclesia were "educated", and famous Athenian philosophers like Plato feared they didn't have the skills and knowledge needed to make wise decisions for the city. Would a man who'd spent his whole life farming the land outside of the city-center really understand all of the city's needs and expenses? Or would he just be persuaded to side with another man's eloquent speech? What would happen if someone riled up all the citizens with their fancy words and wishes? That person would be influential. With the strength of the people's support behind him, he could take over and become a tyrant. (Bye-bye democracy!) On top of that, having everyone involved in decision-making increased the risk that the "majority" might make laws that worked in their own benefit and hurt or ignored the "minority". Since there were more citizens in Athens that belonged to the lower class and a majority vote on decisions ruled, this meant that the wealthy had a higher chance of being mistreated.



Portrait of Solon

© Trustees of the British Museum

RULE BY "ONE"

A **tyrant** has total control of the government. Today, **tyranny** describes government that is cruel and that oppresses citizens.

In ancient Athens, a tyrant wasn't necessarily a "bad" leader; only power-hungry.



THE TRIBE HAS SPOKEN!

Imagine being asked to leave your own community. The ecclesia could vote every year for one person—usually someone becoming too influential in the political world—to leave Athens for 10 years. This law and practice was called **ostracism**.



The Making of the Roman Republic

At about the same time that democracy was evolving in Athens, it was getting ready to take root in another city not too far away: Rome. (Today, Rome is the capital of Italy.) Rome started out as a monarchy, a form of government where one person (usually called a king) rules and passes leadership on to his children when he is gone. Around 509 BCE, Romans replaced their king with two leaders called **consuls**. The consuls were like powerful military generals in charge of Rome's armies and the city itself.

Like Athens, Rome was a city-state. But Rome was larger than Athens, and democracy there needed to evolve into something different. Rome created a **republic**. A republic is a democracy where citizens pick leaders to represent them in government. In other words, they *entrust* leaders with the power to make governing decisions on their behalf rather than *directly* make every decision themselves. (This type of democracy is also called a **representative democracy**, because, well, it's all about representing for the people.) In a republic, there's usually a "president," like in the United States, or some other type of elected chief leader.

HEY YOU!

Think about what a direct democracy would look like with a very large population. How long would it take to hear opinions and make decisions? How often could people meet? Would the majority of citizens be able to travel to an ecclesia at all?



RULE BY "MANY"

Whether direct or representative, **democracy** is considered rule by the many since the people have power directly or through elections. Unlike oligarchy and autocracy, in a democracy the majority rules.

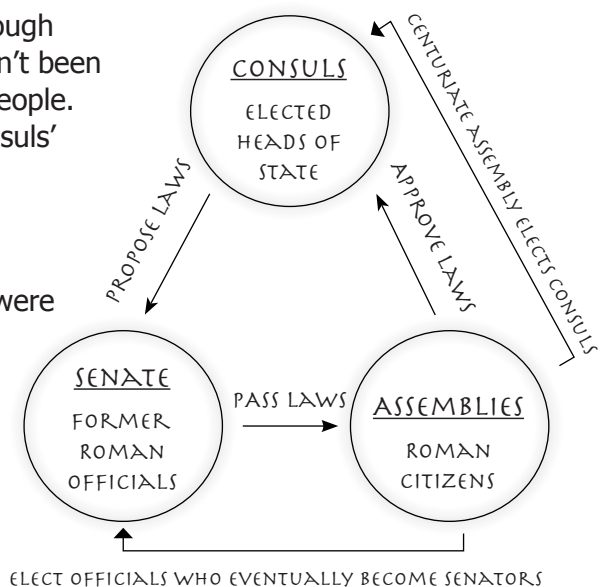


People Power

In Rome, government was still "by the people", but choices went through a kind of representative filter first. (Kind of like how your water goes through a filtration system to take out all the bad stuff before you eventually pour it into a cup to drink.) Instead of coming up with laws themselves, the power to propose a law belonged to the consuls. But a consul couldn't just make a law. First, he had to suggest it to the **senate**, a group of men with prior experience in government trusted to advise the consul, control Rome's money, and manage relationships with other countries. The senators served for life, but they couldn't just make a law either. They thought through the pros and cons of the consuls'

idea, discussed it, debated it, and then took a vote. If enough senators agreed that the law was good (and the idea hadn't been rejected during debate), they passed the idea on to the people. Citizens had the ultimate say. They could approve the consuls' idea—or not—with a vote.

Voting happened in assemblies. Rome had multiple ones. Different assemblies were responsible for voting for certain types of things. Inside of the assemblies, citizens were organized into groups, sometimes by tribes or location and other times by wealth. Each group was allowed one vote. If the majority of citizens in your group voted a certain way, then the group voted that way, too. And what happened if you didn't agree with your group? Since your group only had a single vote, as the minority in the group your opinion would probably be ignored.



RULE BY "ONE"

You're probably familiar with autocracy. Any government ruled by one falls into this category. Monarchs, tyrants, and dictators all fit here. North Korea and Saudi Arabia are examples of autocracies today.



Power Struggles

Romans built checks and balances into the government. After all, the last thing they wanted was to fall back into a system of **autocracy**—a term used to describe any government where one person controls everything like in a monarchy or tyranny. To prevent a power grab, Romans elected two consuls. Each one could **veto**, or reject, the other's decisions. They could only stay in power for a single year. Later, they could serve another one-year term if elected again by the people. The consuls also weren't all that powerful. The senate had to agree to approve and fund their decisions, and then the people had to say okay to that.

Even with these checks, the Roman people weren't entirely happy with the rules for the consul, or the senate for that matter. Similar to citizens in Athens, Romans were divided into classes based on wealth. Either you were from a family that had money, or you were in the lower class. One guess which group had most of the power in Rome's democratic beginning!

Consuls and senators only came from Rome's aristocrats, or classes called **patricians**. **Plebeians**, the lower Roman class, wanted full representation in Rome's democracy, too. But without the opportunity to serve in those political positions of power, they felt like their concerns would never fully be heard. Eventually, positions of power were opened to plebeians, too, and a special position called a **tribune** was created. Tribunes could only come from and be elected by the plebeian class. They had the power to veto laws from the senate if those laws weren't *also* good for plebeians.

WHO'S LOOKING OUT?

Today, Congressional caucuses, like the Congressional Black Caucus, help protect and advance group interests in government. While caucuses may have specific missions, their work affects many Americans.



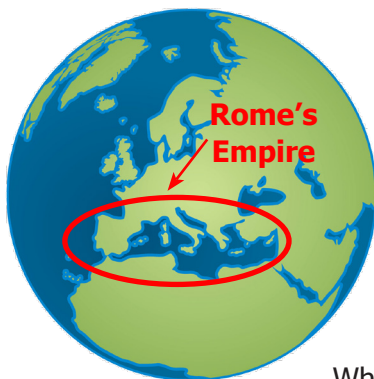
Congressional Black Caucus members in 1971.

Vintage Conclusions

Rome grew to be a powerful nation. Democracy lasted for about 500 years, but *...it didn't last*. Even with reforms, Rome's democracy didn't fix the inequality between the rich and the poor. Leaders chased after power and often used the strength of Rome's less wealthy majority to win their campaigns. Things got violent. In the end, an autocracy was established under a Roman emperor named Augustus.

Like the most unstylish fashion choices of your parents' past (*shudder*), it would be a long, *loooooonng* while before democracy reappeared.

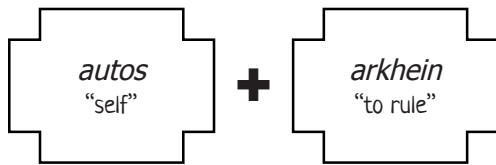
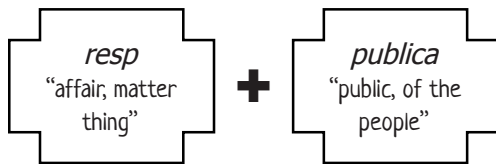
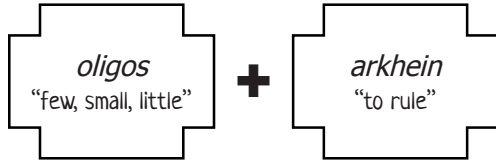
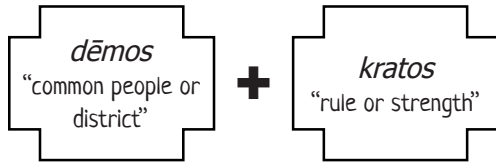
When it did, it was with a healthy dose of caution. How would the people participate? What would stop them from making less than wise decisions? And most importantly, what would safeguard against the rise of a king or a tyrant? Our Founders were well acquainted with the histories of Greece and Rome. They pondered each of these questions as they hammered out the details of a fresh, new Constitution inspired by lessons from the past along with the popular philosophies of their own time.



Lessons from Antiquity

Name: _____

A. Word Parts. Etymology is the study of where words come from and how they get their meaning. Match each word pair to the correct definition, then write the name of the type of government described.



- A. _____ : A government where a few people share political control and make governing decisions.
- B. _____ : A government where people elect representatives, including a head executive, to make decisions on behalf of the public.
- C. _____ : A government where one person rules by his or herself.
- D. _____ : A government where people are in control and participate in decision making.

* Challenge: Can you spot the origin of the word "archon" here? What does it mean?

B. School Democracy. Use your knowledge of direct and representative democracy to identify each as (D) for direct or (R) for representative. Write your answers on the lines below.

1. ____ Your third-period teacher asks students to come up with the list of classroom rules together.
2. ____ Elections for Student Council president happen in your first-period class.
3. ____ A student in your class campaigns to serve as your School Board's voice and advocate for student concerns.
4. ____ Your principal invites all students to attend a meeting to discuss and vote on this year's homecoming theme.
5. ____ You and the members of your graduating class vote for prom king and queen.
6. ____ Your parents vote on whether your school's district boundaries should be changed.
7. ____ You participate in an election to select the new School Board.
8. ____ Your school asks parents and students to volunteer ideas for this year's budget and vote on the best way to spend school funds.
9. ____ Your class nominates one student to attend Student Government Association meetings on behalf of the class and report back on what was discussed.
10. ____ The assistant principal is in charge of selecting and training student judges to hear minor discipline cases and determine appropriate punishments in student court.

Lessons from Antiquity

Name: _____

C. Debating Democracy. Read James Madison’s notes from the Constitutional Convention, then complete the summary and answer the questions that follow.

On May 31, 1787, delegates at the Constitutional Convention discussed how we should elect representatives for the National Legislature (Congress). They eventually settled on a compromise. The people would elect representatives to the first branch (the House of Representatives) and the state legislatures would elect representatives for the second branch (the Senate).

From Madison’s notes on the debates in the Constitutional Convention

May 31, 1787

[Regarding resolution]: 4. first clause “that the members of the first branch of the National Legislature ought to be elected by the people of the several States” being taken up,

Mr. SHERMAN opposed the election by the people, insisting that it ought to be by the State Legislatures. The people he said, immediately should have as little to do as may be about the Government. They want information and are constantly liable to be misled.

Mr. GERRY. The evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy. The people do not want virtue, but are the dupes of pretended patriots. In [Massachusetts] it had been fully confirmed by experience that they are daily misled into the most baneful measures and opinions by the false reports circulated by designing men, and which no one on the spot can refute. [...]

Mr. MASON, argued strongly for an election of the larger branch by the people. It was to be the grand depository of the democratic principle of the Govt. It was, so to speak, to be our House of Commons- It ought to know & sympathise with every part of the community; and ought therefore to be taken not only from different parts of the whole republic, but also from different districts of the larger members of it [...]

Complete the summary:

Mr. Sherman wants _____

because he believes _____.

Mr. Gerry _____ (agrees/disagrees) with Mr. Sherman. He says that an “excess of

[or having too much] democracy” is a _____ (problem/benefit). Gerry says that people

are _____ by false reports. Mr. Mason _____ (agrees/disagrees). He

says that the _____ branch _____ (should/should not) be

elected by the people because it should “know and sympathise with every part of the community”.

Discuss: Who’s argument do you agree with most? Why?

With your partner, brainstorm what might change Mr. Sherman and Mr. Gerry’s minds.

Lessons from Antiquity

Name: _____

D. Now Represent. These statements from the Constitution explain how we select people to serve in national government. Identify the official described. Then determine how democratic his or her selection is. Underline evidence from the statement that supports your answer.

1. The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States [...]

-- Article 1, Section 2

Official: _____

More Democratic

Less Democratic

2. The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof [...]

-- Article 1, Section 3

Official: _____

More Democratic

Less Democratic

3. Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors [...] The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons, of whom one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves. And they shall make a List of all the Persons voted for, and of the Number of Votes for each; which List they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the Seat of the Government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate shall, in the Presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the Certificates, and the Votes shall then be counted. The Person having the greatest Number of Votes shall be the President [...]

-- Article 2, Section 1

Official: _____

More Democratic

Less Democratic

4. [The president] shall have Power, [...] by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law [...]

-- Article 2, Section 2

Official: _____

More Democratic

Less Democratic

5. The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, elected by the people thereof [...]

-- Amendment 17

Official: _____

More Democratic

Less Democratic

* Bonus: For which official did the process of selection change? Did the process become more or less democratic?

Lessons from Antiquity

Name: _____

E. Something to Fear. Philosophers and politicians from all time periods have feared democracy. Why? Read the quotes below to find out. Draw a line to match the quote to each fear it describes. Some may match more than one. Then answer the question that follows.

“We are now forming a Republican form of government. Real liberty is not found in the extremes of democracy, but in moderate governments. If we incline too much to democracy we shall soon shoot into a monarchy, or some other form of a dictatorship.”
-Alexander Hamilton

“[Pure democracies] have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”
-James Madison

“Governments appear powerless in the face of such challenges as the Euro crisis, the migration crisis, or the debt crisis. This has set the scene for the resurgence of populism – charismatic individuals or fake prophets promising simplistic solutions to people’s grievances through radical policies that dismiss institutions and laws as either irrelevant or inconvenient.”
-Kofi Annan

- COMMON FEARS:
- A. DEMOCRACY IS CHAOTIC
 - B. PEOPLE CAN’T MAINTAIN IT
 - C. TYRANTS WILL TAKE OVER
 - D. PEOPLE WILL FALL FOR ANYTHING

“If there were a nation of Gods, it would govern itself democratically. A government so perfect is not suited to men.”
-Rousseau

Are these fears still relevant today? Why or why not?

“And as long as any survive who have had experience of oligarchical supremacy and domination, they regard their present constitution as a blessing, and hold equality and freedom as of the utmost value. But as soon as a new generation has arisen, and the democracy has descended to their children’s children, long association weakens their value for equality and freedom, and some seek to become more powerful than the ordinary citizens.”
-Plutarch