

HOW DEMOCRATIC WAS ATHENS?



Democracy is one of those words that is on everybody's lips but in few hearts or minds. The concept behind the word is one of the most abused and misconstrued ideas in history. Our country was called a democracy when we still had millions of slaves. Our nation today is called a democracy when millions of citizens never exercise their right to vote, a few hundred party leaders select our national political candidates, and only those who have million-dollar treasuries can run for political office with a reasonable chance of winning. Latin American military dictatorships are called democracies. South Vietnam with a single candidate for president during the Vietnam War was called a democracy. China, with no legitimate elections at all, is called a People's Republic. Russia, a country run by a handful of party leaders and a single legal party during the Communist era, was called a democracy. France, under the kind of domination which would be called dictatorship behind the Iron Curtain, was considered to be a democracy under Charles de Gaulle. Even Germany under Hitler was considered to be a kind of democracy and East Germany until recently, ruled by a few party bosses, was called the German Democratic Republic. Does democracy really have any significant meaning?

The word democracy comes from two Greek words: a noun, demos which means "people" and a verb, kratein, which means "to rule," Its basic meaning is "government by the people" or "rule by the ruled." Since its origin is Greek we have to return to ancient Greece in order to find its origin and meaning. The city-state of Athens, 5th century Athens to be precise, is the inventor and first practitioner of democracy. So for 4,000 years men lived under forms of government other than democratic. For some 2500 years now democracy as a theory and actual system of government has existed, with varying degrees of consistency between theory and practice. But it all began in the middle of the 5th century before Christ in Athens.

According to the Athenians, the source of constitutional power rested in the hands of all the citizens. Ideas were expressed directly through the Assembly, which consisted of all male citizens over 18 years of age and who were willing to attend the sessions held about every 10 days. There was no system of representation

calling for long campaigns and expensive elections. If you lived in the country you had to get up at the crack of dawn in order to get to the meeting place of the Assembly, a rocky hillside within the city gates. The police chased all the loafers off the Angora, a kind of public park, in order to encourage good attendance. Anyone who had powerful enough lungs to make himself heard by 6000 or more voters could speak to the Assembly. Of course, if you were a well-known and respected leader your chances of being listened to were greater. Whatever this Assembly decided by vote was the law of the land.

On the face of it, it would seem that this kind of direct democracy might lead to anarchy at the worst and arbitrary decisions or unstable policies at the least. Both ancient and modern democratic experiments have shown that the will of the people is sometimes quixotic, changing to and fro with every rhetorical wind that blows. Yet, surprising as it may seem, Athenian democracy worked fairly well. The main reason for its success was the quality of the citizens. From the days of Solon, its first lawgiver, the Athenians like the rest of the Greeks had a deep respect for what they called the golden mean," which meant that they avoided extremes in politics. There was a sober devotion to the common good that is frequently missing in modern democracies, which tend to be much more individualistic, dedicated to private and group interests' Instead of basing decisions on the common interest they are frequently the result of compromises between powerful groups or parties with only slight concern for the general welfare.

Moreover the problems on which the Athenian Assembly had to vote were far simpler than those modern democracies face. The average citizen could pick up enough information in the Angora to decide how to vote. There was no need or desire to have the kind of official secrecy that threatens to destroy the very idea of democracy today. Most citizens in Athens who took active part in the Assembly were much better informed on public issues than the average voter today who goes to the polls.

There were also a variety of constitutional safeguards built into the system' Any law passed by the Assembly had to be proposed by some one person, whose name appeared at the beginning of the statute. If the citizens later thought they had made a mistake they could attack the law in court on a "writ of unconstitutionality," that is, as being contrary to Athenian principles. If the law were thus challenged within a year after its passage and found unconstitutional, its proposer was fined a sum that would bankrupt almost any citizen. This arrangement had a tendency to discourage frivolous ideas and glory seekers. It encouraged serious thinking and political responsibility.

There was also a way of ridding Athens of overly ambitious politicians. This was the famous unpopularity contest known as "ostracism." A special date was set at which citizens wrote on clay shards (ostraca) the name of the man they most disliked. Anyone who got a majority (if more than 600 votes had been cast) was sent into exile for 10 years. This could of course be abused and sometimes good men were sent into exile, but it was certainly a better system than kangaroo courts or secret police prisons.

Perhaps, the most important institution which helped the Assembly to function smoothly was the steering committee or Council of 500. Athens, both the city and its surrounding countryside was divided into 10 electoral districts called "tribes." These districts were further divided into precincts or "demes" which had some limited self-government in the rural areas. Each precinct named candidates over 30 years of age for the Council of 500. From these candidates 50 were chosen by lot for each tribe to serve as members of the Council of 500 for a year. The final choice by lot was one of the most democratic devices imaginable and reduced the danger of political skulduggery. There was no danger that the Council could turn into a private preserve for the wealthy or influential as modern government bodies have a tendency to do, because members served only one year: no man could be a member two years in a row; and no one could serve more than twice in his lifetime. Just imagine what our legislatures and Congress would be like if we had rules like that.

The Council of 500 prepared the published agenda for each session of the Assembly. According to regular rules the Assembly would take up no issue not already investigated by the Council; normally the Council made a recommendation to the Assembly as to the best solution of each problem. The Council was divided into 10 subcommittees (the 50 members of each tribe forming one subcommittee); when its turn came, a subcommittee had to meet every day and eat lunch in the Tholos on the west side of the Agora so as to watch the government for its tenth of the year. In turn about one-third of this subcommittee had always to be on hand in the council chamber night and day in case an emergency arose, and it provided a chairman if the Assembly met.

Once the Assembly had passed a resolution, the executive branch carried it out on behalf of the people and the Council of 500 supervised its execution. Almost all the administrative officials were chosen by lot for one year. Usually they were selected in groups of 10 to carry out one specific function such as policing the markets or caring for the streets. The street commissioners had a body of public slaves specifically to pick up the bodies of people who died at night in the streets, and public slaves did other work for the community. All officials chosen by lot

were examined by the Council before entering office to eliminate the physically or mentally incompetent. (I wonder what would happen if some of our elected officials were forced to undergo mental examination or take IQ tests?) Any official handling public monies was subject to repeated inspections. The Athenians had great faith in democracy in theory but little trust in the incorruptibility of any one individual. I have often wondered why so many of our public officials are so much richer when they leave Washington after years of faithful, sacrificial public service? But was there any kind of stable, continuous leadership in this system if officials were chosen by lot? In earlier times the main executive officials had been the nine archons, one of whom supervised religious functions, another was "war-leader" and the rest were "law-keepers" in charge of justice.

But after 487 BC the power of the archons was reduced and after their year of service they became members of an advisory council known as the Council of the Areopagus. The Areopagus itself was latter restricted to supervision of religious rites. The only officials actually elected by public vote were the city architect and the Board of 10 Generals. Thus the Board of 10 Generals, not chosen by lot, became the real leaders of the people in the 5th century. Pericles, the greatest leader of Athens and one of the greatest in history, was a major figure on this Board during the 5th century.

The Athenians also had an interesting way of dispensing justice. The courts of law were really committees of the people. Each year a panel of 6000 jurors over 30 years of age was drawn up from those who volunteered to serve. For each trial a jury of 201 or more was drawn by a very complicated system of lots so that bribery and influence could be limited' Each of the two parties in a lawsuit had to speak and act for himself, though he could hire a professional speech writer to compose his speech. Undoubtedly one had to be very careful as to how one appealed to the elders of the community who sat on the jury and determined by majority vote their verdict. There could be no appeal from this committee of the people in its judicial capacity: in verdicts of capital punishment one was sometimes allowed to commit suicide by drinking poison, except those who were found guilty of murder and the like. These unfortunate culprits were attached to a vertical plank on which they hung until they died. What kind of politicians did this type of democracy produce?

Democracies succeed only if the people are willing to choose and to support able leaders' In the second half of the 5th century Athens permanently gave its support to the mighty Pericles' He was an aristocrat who rose to power by helping to reduce the power of the conservative council of the Areopagus. He introduced state pay for service on the Council of 500 and the jury. In this way even poor citizens could take part in public life. One of his more popular measures was the

introduction of a law limiting Athenian citizenship to children both of whose parents were Athenians. This may seem like an unfair measure, but it had the effect of making citizenship a privilege and thus encouraging civic responsibility. Ironically, his own son who was born of a woman from Miletus, had to be given citizenship by special dispensation.

Throughout the 440's and 430's Pericles was elected year after year to the Board of 10 Generals. Normally he was able to persuade the Assembly to support his policies of democracy at home and imperialism abroad. Along with his own personal ambition and his patriotic desire to see Athens great, Pericles also had lofty ideals for uplifting his fellow citizens culturally. He spent public money lavishly to beautify Athens. As he put it, these public works gave employment to the citizens. and the result was the embellishment of the Acropolis with the great buildings which have made it famous ever since.

Yet, strangely enough and not unlike other great democrats in history, Pericles did not mix with common citizens in his personal life, which remained private and simple. His best friends were philosophers, artists and musicians. Still his name is connected with one of the world's great democracies' Ancient writers and modern historians tend to idealize him. He was (certainly incorruptible--a rare quality even among Athenian politicians--a masterful speaker and clear thinker. Reason and emotion were remarkably balanced in his personality. He was inspired by a great vision of the perfectibility of man in general and of the political greatness of Athens in particular.

These traits of his character have led historians to overlook his faults. His popularity, assiduously promoted, gave little room for other politicians. Yet turnover in personal is one of the prerequisites of democracy and was certainly intended by the whole Athenian system of government' After his death there was no one who could effectively step in his shoes. He had failed to train anyone, perhaps, out of fear of being replaced or out of jealousy of being outdone. He encouraged the democracy to be uncompromising; yet flexibility is supposed to be a feature of democracy in theory. Worst of all, he deliberately pushed and promoted Athenian imperialism. This blatant contradiction between democracy at home and imperial domination everywhere else is also a trait of many modern democracies, including our own. In the end this persistent imperialism led to war with Sparta which lasted 35 years and destroyed his own country.

Today most men in the Western World think --or say in public that they think-- democracy is the best form of government. So they look back favorably on the first great democracy in Western Civilization. Others can see serious defects in

Athenian democracy. Actually the good and bad sides of this form of government have been debated ever since it first came into being. This 25-century-old debate has not yet been resolved' Most of the criticism made of democracy today was already made then.

Many aristocrats then and now simply do not accept the equality of man, the ability of all men to make rational and reasonable political judgments. The educated and wealthy have always felt that they are better, more capable and more worthy of political power. Many Greek notable were horrified by the freedom of speech in Athens, which permitted the comic poets to make scurrilous attacks on public figures. Others assailed democracy more insidiously by pointing out its weaknesses in practice. Pericles was accused of being a democratic tyrant who gained general favor for himself by spending public funds on the populace. The Assembly was called fickle and bloodthirsty. During the Peloponnesian war Aristophanes leveled barbed shafts at the willingness of the people to follow leaders who promised rewards, played on superstitions, and otherwise appealed to baser instincts in order to gain power. The great historian Thucydides placed the blame for the Athenian collapse in this war squarely on the shoulders of the people for judging foreign policy incorrectly, though, as he indicates, the citizens tried to blame their leaders for their own poor decisions.

The same criticisms recur today. The people voted Hitler into power and supported his war to the bitter end. The same people who supported Kennedy and Johnson's war policies now call for immediate withdrawal from Vietnam' People who fought in World War 11 to rid Germany of Hitler's tyranny vote for George Wallace, who seemingly wants to return to the days of slavery or its equivalent. People are indeed fickle' Is democracy worth having?

But there is criticism of the Athenian system also from the radical democratic side. They insist that Athenian weakness stems from the fact that it was not democratic enough. For Athens did not allow foreigners, slaves and women to vote. Of some 45,000 male citizens not more than 6000 or so usually attended the Assembly. Before you judge, however, ask yourself: Who could vote in the United States in the days of Thomas Jefferson? Or, what percentage of the potential voters in my home district normally vote in a minor election?

Despite the undeniable, occasional defects of democratic practice, the Athenians clung to their way of government in prosperity and defeat alike, with the exception of one brief lapse just after the Peloponnesian war. Athens was a democracy from 508 to 267 BC, the longest-lived democracy which has yet existed. No democratic structure, moreover, has gone further, by direct vote and the use of the lot, to

ensure that every citizen had the same power.

So, how democratic was Athens? How democratic are we? Can democracy be carried further than it was by the Athenians or is by us?

The great Greek writer of comedies, Aristophanes wrote a play called *Lysistrata*. It was first produced in 411 BC, at a moment when Athens' fortunes were at their lowest point. Most of the men were away on the battle fields; the strongest allies had revolted; the Spartans were about to control the Aegean Sea with Persian aid; internally the city was on the verge of revolution. In the midst of this situation Aristophanes produced his last and best plea for peace.

The plot of his comedy is extremely simple' The women of Greece--remember they did not have the right to vote--led by the Athenian *Lysistrata*, unite and agree on a sex-strike to force their husbands to make a just and reasonable peace: despite the frailty of some of the women, the plan succeeds admirably. The strike has ;the desired effect on the men, as we see in a scene that leaves nothing to the imagination, and the play ends in general rejoicing. So the bed seems to be mightier than the sword and it also seems to be the ultimate form of democracy.

Send comments and questions to [Professor Gerhard Rempel](#), Western New England College.

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