

# History of athenian democracy essay

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



The Athenian democracy was the kind of democracy that was introduced into Athens in 500 BC and later spread to other Greek cities. Its three main pioneers were Ephialtes, Solon and Cleisthenes and although it spread to other cities, it remained to be most powerful within Athens.

Every form of democracy has unique features that distinguish it from the rest. A representative democracy is one that allows people to elect their leaders and by so doing, ensures that their interests are catered for by government. This paper is going to look at this Athenian democracy and how representative it was.

The Athenian democracy was a direct rule form of political system with courts and citizens in the assembly making major political decisions. It eliminated many people from citizenship and therefore hindered their ability to make political contribution.

It was therefore non representative to a great extent. This democracy was only representative in a very limited number of ways. Men of Athens origin were well represented by this form of democracy as they were allowed to participate in making important decisions.

Citizens were considered to be men aged 18 years and above and whose both parents were citizens. An additional prerequisite for citizenship was the completion of military training. The men's wealth did not affect their decision making capacity thereby making this form of democracy fair.

However, for a man to be granted citizenship and consequently the power to vote they had to be scrutinized and factors such as inability to pay a debt

would disqualify them. On the other hand, women were excluded from the list of citizens.

They were fully excluded from all political activity and were only expected to take care of their households. The fortunate ones became nurses and midwives but none of them could participate in making decisions regarding communal matters. Other categories of people who were not eligible to citizenship were slaves, children and non Athenian Greeks (Coleman, 2000).

There were three main bodies that governed the affairs of Athens and they were the assembly, the council and the courts all which were run by representatives of the people. Athenian democracy was representative to the few people considered to be citizens because they were regarded as equals and as a result would equally participate in the political arena.

They were all granted the right to free speech and they would all present their speeches freely in the Assembly. This gave them the power to make decisions regarding communal matters that affected them in one way or the other. Many of those who had the citizenship had an opportunity to hold public office.

Most political positions were filled by rotation therefore enabling majority of citizens to participate. Leaders could only hold their posts for a limited duration. This made it impossible for one regime to dominate over the people of Athens for a considerable duration.

The procedures that were put in place when selecting people to take up office also helped in making the democracy representative. The character of

potential leaders was adequately scrutinized before election making sure that only suitable and morally upright citizens would become representatives of the people (Coleman, 2000).

Strict measures were put in place to follow up leader's actions. They were expected to maintain proper accounts at all times and were not exempted from auditing. If any public examination of an office holder proved that proper accounts had not been kept it would lead to prosecution of such office holders.

Army officials were elected by the Assembly which was a representative of the citizens. All citizens were to participate in administrative decision making in the Assembly. Every year, there was a vote of confidence on the set laws and the assembly had power to alter those laws that it deemed inappropriate.

However, for people to vote in the assembly, they had to be physically present. This was a limiting factor because those who were serving in the military could not get an opportunity to leave work for voting. Distance was another factor which restricted citizens from attending assembly proceedings (Coleman, 2000).

Some people were placed into leadership through allotment rather than vote. This was an effective way of eliminating corruption since the rich would not qualify through the purchase of votes. This method gave citizens a unique way of getting into leadership as well as equal opportunity.

The Athenian democracy did not discriminate since people were allotted positions whether they had the relevant skills or not. They were expected to learn while at the job. This form of governance gave a wide range of people the chance to be in government therefore most of the citizens were familiar with the undertakings of their government. They would therefore not be manipulated since they were well informed. Those put into office through allotment could not hold office for more than one term. It was therefore not possible to accumulate individual power through public office (Thorley, 2004).

Through Solon, a system of leadership that gave citizens the power to make political decisions was introduced. This system elected several people to deliberate on matters before they were tabled in the floor of the Assembly. Citizens had the opportunity to participate in law enforcement by taking legal action on behalf of plaintiffs.

All people determined what actions violated the law and therefore the judicial system was in the hands of most citizens and not necessarily the rich only. A political system that consisted of people from diverse backgrounds was introduced. New regional units known as demes were introduced and once someone became a citizen, he was expected to join one of these groups.

Political identity of people was therefore linked to these groups giving each member of the group powers to make political contributions. These demes were representative because each of them consisted of people from different geographical and social background. A general was elected from each tribe

to become a political leader therefore no group of citizens could claim that they were not adequately represented (Kagan, 1998).

Political authority was assigned to people according to the will of the majority as voted in the Assembly. Popular vote determined who would lead in the armed forces although citizens were allowed to join voluntarily to fight for Athens. Individual citizens had the power to prosecute people who were accused of public offenses.

This system had many critics as people would use it to gain wealth from the rich. The wealthy would be prosecuted giving the rest of the citizenry an opportunity to confiscate their wealth. Financial officials were also elected by the majority. This system limited the risk of money being embezzled.

This however favored the rich because they were the preferred one by most citizens. Any money that they stole or misused could be recovered from their property. Generals were another group of people who were elected rather than be put in office by lot. The nature of their work required them to have the necessary expert knowledge.

The Athenian democracy was in this sense representative because the majority had their say in the selection of the most important political figures. Having been elected by the majority, the generals would ensure that they worked towards meeting the electorate's wishes rather than their personal interests. Since public speaking skills were essential in expressing one's view in the Assembly, those who did not have such skills would hire professionals

to represent them. This gave all the citizens a fair playing field although it slightly favored the wealth.

Not every ordinary citizen could afford to pay for the services of a professional. Speech writing was therefore a lucrative business which was well utilized by the more ambitious citizens. This made the rich to become influential in the Athens political arena. The courts treated all citizens as equals regardless of their financial strength. All the courts put into consideration was the nature of crime committed and the extent of injury. This judicial system to a large extent eased the spread of a representative democracy (Coleman, 2000).

Elected officials would be removed from office at any time. Whenever assembly met and there was reason to believe that a certain official was not performing his duties as expected, the public would get a chance to elect a replacement. Such an occurrence had affected several treasurers as they served their term. After trial, they were executed although it later turned out that there had been an accounting error. Another justification of how representative the democracy prevailed in the fact that a death penalty would be imposed on any official who did not adequately perform his duties while in office (Kagan, 1998).

Cleisthenes introduced a policy that would facilitate democracy within Athens. In this system, every citizen in the Assembly would write the name of one person they feared would be too powerful. Each year, the person whose name appeared most was sent out of the city state for ten years thereby discouraging dictatorship as a form of governance.

The nature of this practice however became corrupt when those who could not read or right would have it done for them. The writers would write the name of the person they wanted banished turning it to their advantage. This system also ended up eliminating the most powerful and intelligent people from Athens therefore making it an easy target for enemies.

Leaders who were in leadership for personal interests were also attacked. Public interest was crucial and all leaders were expected to take care of their electorate's interests. Their moral conduct was also expected to be good to ensure that they were appropriate leaders (Thorley, 2004).

The assembly met about forty times each year and on every meeting, a different person was selected to preside over its activities. This meant that almost all male citizens had a chance to preside and make decisions in the assembly. This however put the government at risk of irrational decisions depending on the president elected.

The form of democracy took good care of those who qualified to be citizens. Those with disability were given grants. A fund was also put in place to cater for the poor and help them in to attend political and social festivals. Citizens were able to enjoy freedom and had their rights protected (Thorley, 2004).

Although most of the political laws in Athens were introduced to enhance equality and democracy, they failed to achieve this purpose. The representation of people only favored a small proportion of the population since a large group was not considered to be citizens.



The elimination of women, slaves and those not born in Athens disqualified the democracy from being representative. It is however clear that it was representative when it came to the interests of male citizens. This group was adequately taken care of by most of the policies.

Besides being given equal opportunities in governance, they were also given the freedom to vote. This uniquely qualified the leadership to be a democratic authority because it gave the local people the chance to make a choice about whom they wanted to govern their interests.

The overall effect however was that the rich were indirectly favored. They would either buy votes in order to hold positions for which applicants were voted in. They would also afford the services of professionals and could therefore have their speeches written for them. The few well educated people were also in better position to rule. The democracy operated on a majority rule policy and therefore it was difficult to have policies or laws that did not please most citizens. It was therefore a fairly representative Democracy.

Coleman, J. (2000). A history of political thought: from ancient Greece to early Christianity. Oxford: Blackwell

Kagan, D. (1998). Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy. Athens: Simon & Schuster

Thorley, J. (2004). Athenian democracy. London: New York Routledge.