

# Short report on ancient athens



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Short Report on Ancient Athens Introduction Athenian democracy was a unique political system in the year 500 BC which evolved in the city of Athens. This political system was innovative, stable, and powerful as compared with the other democratic systems developed by Greek cities. A system of direct democracy, the people had the right to directly pass and draft laws. Political participation was limited to adult males who had served and participated in the military system. The remaining population was denied the right to vote or participate in the political system. This paper analyzes the problems and challenges faced by the Athenian democracy. Finally it concludes that the system was indeed democratic.

#### Political institutions and citizenship in Athens

The assembly, court, and council comprised the political institutions which governed ancient Athens. Throughout the history of Athens, the assembly remained the main avenue for political activity. It functioned to protect the integrity and security of the city state. It also had the power to negotiate or break treaties with foreign powers. The council was responsible for preparing the laws which would be passed by the assembly. The legal system was extensive and developed for that time period. The total population of Athens is reported to be around three hundred thousand people. Out of this population an estimate fifty thousand males were eligible for voting and participating in the political system. Pericles said in a speech that the Athenian system of government favored the majority of the citizens (“Pericles Funeral Oration”).

#### Problems and challenges faced by Athenian Democracy

One problem faced by the Athenian democracy was the clash between the court and assembly. A law was passed in 416 BC in which the courts could

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block or veto any law passed by the assembly. Any assembly member who had proposed the law could also be punished by the courts. This law restricted the power of the assembly. It also became a source of tension and frustration. Another problem faced by the city state was that ordinary citizens had too much power concentrated in running the affairs of the state. Pericles stated that the Athenian system provided "equal justice" for all of its citizens ("Pericles Funeral Oration"). The lack of professional civil servants, lawyers, judges, and politicians hindered the day to day affairs of the city state. It led to the inefficient allocation and use of resources as the citizens had direct power to pass or draft laws. An example of this would be the fact that amateur citizens could reduce taxes which might have been necessary for the survival of the government. The citizen initiator was the person responsible for starting the laws or bills that could be passed or drafted. But this position was risky as the current citizen initiator could be punished if the citizens selected another person. Social inequality also was a problem which faced the city state of Athens. The members of the political system belonged mostly to the wealthy and rich people (Ober, 192). Ancient critics of the Athenian democratic system considered it to be chaotic and irresponsible. For instance several generals were executed when they failed to rescue the victims of a storm. Socrates, a prominent intellectual and philosopher was executed for spreading deviant ideas. Military coups in the 411 and 404 BC also led to the dissolution of the democratic system for a time period. The democratic system was also criticized for its brutality and barbarism towards its subject states. Perhaps the greatest problem was that of political participation as the large number of women, slaves, foreigners were denied the right to participate and vote in the political process. Only

males were eligible for citizenship and the right to participate in the political system. Women were at a disadvantage as compared with the other city states. Finally slavery was also rampant in the city state which allowed even poor citizens to participate in political activity. Despite theoretically being democratic, the old influence of aristocracy was rampant in the Athenian political system (Ober, 252).

### Athenian democracy

Despite the apparent flaws inherent with the democratic system in Athens, it can be concluded that it was indeed democratic for its time period. The basic principle was that the citizens were capable of governing, administering, and running the political system of the country. The strong centralized political institutions led to a greater degree of political stability as compared with other city states (Rhodes 185). It also led to the promotion of knowledge and ideas from the citizens in running the affairs of the state. Every free citizen could express or contribute his idea towards the political, social, economic, military, and diplomatic issues of Athens. The form of direct democracy was indeed revolutionary for that time period. Similarly the system of assembly, council, and courts represented the modern branches of executive, legislature, and judiciary. The council and assembly consisted of the male citizens. The courts consisted of juries who resolved civil and criminal disputes. The Athenian system did not have one person as leader of the entire state neither did it have any political parties.

### Conclusion

The Athenian democratic system was unique for its time period because it offered the citizens the right to directly participate and run the affairs of the state. There was no single head of state who could rule the system. Each

citizen could use their knowledge to create and influence the decisions of the political institutions. The Athenian system offered a unique degree of political stability as compared with its neighbors. The dark side of the system was that it discriminated against women, slaves, and foreigners. It also led to the arbitrary arrest and execution of people like Socrates. Athenian democratic system was only for its own citizens as the subject states were bled dry and exploited for their resources.

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