

# To what extent was ancient athens a democracy politics essay



The question here is not whether Athens was a democracy but to what extent it was democratic. Let us imagine that there exists a gradient by which to measure degrees of democracy- it is not categorical. If we briefly compare what we today understand as democratic (e. g. contemporary parliamentary democracy) and its ancient Athenian counterpart, we will notice strong similarities: all citizens may vote and all votes carry the same weight; leaders and members of Parliament/Assembly can be ousted by popular vote; all citizens have a legal right ' to hold office or to sit in Parliament'[3]if elected; freedom of speech and of opinion; members receive payment. This brief comparison already compels us to propose that Athens was democratic. This essay seeks to evaluate the full extent of democracy in Periclean Athens by studying its restrictive citizen-body, its institutions based on the direct, democratic participation of citizens and its political ideology founded on the ideals of equality and liberty[4].

It is natural for us to assume that a political society must include all those living within its geographical boundaries. However, in Athens, the exercise of political power was limited to citizens only, with complete disregard for women, metics and slaves. There was no right to citizenship, it was a matter of being born into it. Citizenship was highly restricted[5]; political rights and privileges only applied to free adult male Athenians. Women had no political rights and their civic rights were limited[6]. In that sense, it was a 'democracy of the patriarchs'[7]. The perpetual marginalisation of metics and slaves meant that equality only applied to those of equal standing[8]. Equality was purely a political concept which did not extend to the social or economic realms.

It is a common enough held belief that Athenian democracy was only made possible by slave labour. In fact, it is an obvious argument against the claim that Athens was democratic. Field contends that this '[...]is entirely untrue. In general, [...] the majority of citizens worked with their hands and a great many of them did not own slaves at all'[9]. However, most poleis were economically dependent on slave labour. Without slaves, there simply would not have been enough manpower to carry out the necessary work of production[10]. Little insight can come from hastily discrediting democracy on these grounds. It is important that we situate ourselves in the historical context in order to evaluate the true extent of democracy in Periclean Athens.

A commitment to the principle of equality[11]is evident in the main bodies of Athenian governance. The Assembly, the main sovereign body, was composed of a minimum of 6 000 citizens and met at least forty times a year. Every citizen had a right to speak, isegoria[12], and the right to vote in the process of developing and determining public policy. The courts were made up of large juries drawn by lot from the entire citizenry. Equality before the law meant that juries were trusted to judge all men equally and impartially, which denotes an adherence to the rule of law and due process. The Council of Five Hundred, in charge of setting the agenda of the Assembly, was chosen by lot from every deme of Attica[13]. The boards of magistrates, responsible for everyday administrative duties, were also chosen by lot. Selection by lot was employed to give every citizen an equal opportunity irrespective of wealth, status ' or even popularity or eloquence'[14]. Moreover, this unique political equality was tied in with

strong personal accountability. Before taking up office, a magistrate was subject to a formal review at which point he could be made ineligible. What is more, a magistrate could be ousted and even penalized upon review of his performance by a vote of the Assembly which was taken at least ten times a year. After his year in office the magistrate was subject to a searching scrutiny in which his accounts were thoroughly examined and any citizen ‘could charge him with inefficiency or abuse of authority’[15]. In an attempt to quell the ‘temptations of irresponsible power’[16], the above measures were strictly adhered to. Moreover, short terms in office, annual appointment to any office, and ‘limitations on the possibility of being selected more than once’[17]meant that there was a steady rotation of citizens and that it was near impossible to accumulate personal political power. This illustrates several important features of Athenian democracy: direct participation in the decision-making process, the equal opportunity to hold office, the equal right to contribute as well freedom of speech, which allowed for critical discussion, effective debate and opposition when necessary.

With regards to the positions in high political offices, such as generals or admirals in charge of the army and fleet or principal financial magistrates, the Athenians were not so committed to the egalitarian principle[18]. These positions were elected by the people, ‘a procedure which could be regarded as aristocratic’[19]rather than democratic. However, political equality was further supported by the fact that the 6 000 jurors, the Council of Five Hundred and all magistrates were all paid albeit at different rates. In theory this meant that poverty was not an impediment to the exercise of political rights. In reality the poor most likely preferred more gainful employment and

the assemblies and juries were preponderantly middle-class citizens.

[20]Furthermore, the wealthy dominated the more important elective offices. It is important to note that political participation was a choice and that the right to participate was stringently upheld. Yet the idea remains that political equality between the average citizen was enabled both by lot and by payment.

Laws were relatively permanent in nature and followed a complicated proceeding, which ultimately ended with a vote put to the Assembly. The '[â€¢] tendency to act by decrees instead of by fixed laws [has been viewed] as a sign of degeneration in a democracy'[21]as each particular case brought before the Assembly demanded a specific interpretation of the law. The Assembly dealt primarily with executive decisions such as declarations of war and foreign policy[22]. The administration of justice was entrusted to the large juries selected by lot forming a ' microcosm of the whole people'[23]. This demonstrates that in all aspects of governance – legislative, executive and judiciary – the citizen had an active and involved role. The citizen had a unmediated say in decisions affecting him, which is a defining characteristic of direct democracy; those subject to the rules decided the rules.

As previously stated, the Athenian citizen-body was very restricted. It was 'equality', not in terms natural equality, but in terms of opportunity and political rights which were limited to citizens regardless of all else but ability. Liberty, like equality, meant something different in the private and public spheres (see footnote)[24]. Hansen distinguishes between liberty as a 'negative ideal'[25], such as freedom from political oppression and a '<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-ancient-athens-a-democracy-politics-essay/>

positive ideal'[26], such as freedom to participate in or abstain from politics. Yet the assertion that each individual is free to choose is undermined by the following belief articulated by Pericles: '[â€!] we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all'[27]. This implies that in the private sphere, man has the right to do as he pleases but in the public sphere, in the role of citizen, there are certain requirements he is expected to fulfil. As Hansen says, ' a positive political freedom is contrasted with a negative individual freedom'[28]. However, political affairs required such commitment that private life was subordinate '...to public affairs and the common good'[29]. The merit of an individual was measured by his civic virtue[30]. Intense solidarity, unity and dedication were prerequisites for the process of radical self-government.

We have focused our study on the political sphere excluding women, metics and slaves; the concept of demos is restricted to the citizens. The ideals of liberty and equality, fundamental to any democratic ideology, only apply within these confines in Periclean Athens. With that in mind, it is clear that Athens was ruled by a direct form of democracy which relied on an active and involved citizen-body. The institutional framework not only assured that citizens were consulted on matters affecting them on every level of the political decision-making process, but also relied on it. Equality of opportunity meant that any citizen who chose to participate in the public life had a right to participate. However, each man was free to chose whether or not to take on this role. Direct participation was not only a form of governance but also a way of life[31], equating individual and civic virtue.

Today, we might have a much broader and more inclusive notion of demos but this does not change the fact that Periclean Athens was democratic to the extreme.