

Athenian democracy and meritocracy



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To what extent did the Athenian democracy live up to its ideology of being a meritocracy, and to what extent was power still in the hands of the wealthy?

Athenian democracy was an evolving process in the 5th century B. C. The concentration of power in the political establishment would change considerably from when the first seeds were planted until the voting citizenship was expanded and new leaders emerged towards the end of the century. Democracy was not instituted in the name of human rights but for pragmatic purposes and it is necessary that we look at it in this light when considering whether Athens was a meritocracy and whether the wealthy still held considerable power in Democratic Athens. It is certainly true that Athenian Democracy, like all systems, on paper differed considerably to how it was implemented.

In this essay I will argue that Athenian Democracy was largely successful in implementing a state democracy in which, to a large extent, there were no obvious discrepancies over who was favoured in matters of society and the state. I will show that the Athenian constitution largely kept the city as a meritocracy, making its citizens equal before the state in matters of legality and political power. However, I will also consider the limitations of Athenian Democracy and to what extent certain functions may have limited its success. I will argue that the power of the wealthy was in most respects limited by the structure of the state but was held back to some extent by the inevitable advantages that come from wealth. I will mainly be arguing that whatever limitations there were, they were not enough to have a damaging effect on democracy as a whole.

The Athenian Democracy allowed that only adult males of Athenian ancestry were part of the democratic system, which overall made up around 10-20% of the *demos*. Slaves, freed slaves, children, women and metics (foreigners in Athens) were excluded. It is obvious from this that to label Athens as a meritocracy in the modern sense is absurd. In this essay, I will consider Athens as a meritocracy in terms of the rights and opportunities of those who are citizens, not from those who aren't and will therefore consider to what extent Athenian Democracy worked the way it was supposed to.

The wealthy did not hold power to the extent that it harmed the democratic process. The wealthy certainly did have many advantages compared to the poor, but this is not necessarily any comment upon Athenian democracy simply an inevitability that those with wealth will be able to achieve more than those without. The wealthy had power but not to an extent that was greatly damaging to the state.

When defining wealth, I will consider Aristotle's definition as including money, land, real estate, furniture, livestock and a high quality and quantity of slaves (Rhet. 1361a12-16). There was most definitely a significant wealth inequality amongst Athens's citizens whereby the leisure class (those who didn't need to work as a result of family fortunes, nobility etc.) made up roughly 5-10% of the populace. This class barrier was certainly realised by the lower classes who often showed their resentment at the wealthy.

However despite this inequality, they did not see this as particularly affecting when it came down to the political and legal powers of the people, as this inequality was grudgingly accepted. Wealth discrepancies were not seen as

unjust as potential legal or political barriers that may have affected the citizens. (see Ober ch. 5)

Politically, wealth as a tool was restricted as a result of the various stipulations in the constitution. There was no longer any property qualification for the academy or for voting and the holding of political offices as well as juries received payment for these services, meaning that the democratic or legal process was not hinged on the use of wealth to buy political office or to serve as part of the legal jurisdiction. The constitution minimised any overt legal or political control by the wealthy, who still had economic power but this fact is only to be expected in a society such as Athens which thrived on the control of goods and services.

This idea of the accepted separation of wealth inequality with legal and political affairs can be seen with the orator Demosthenes:

“ The rich have great wealth which no one keeps them from enjoying though they must not keep us from enjoying the security which is our most common possession - the laws”

(Demosthenes, Against Meidias, (22. 25-27))

Therefore, the wealth inequality was not viewed by the people as undemocratic or damaging to their political power and rights (Ober 199.)

The wealth even often had a positive effect on the democratic process, benefiting even the poor. The various taxes imposed on the rich (liturgies, war taxes and fines given out by the courts) was often redistributed in a way that greatly benefitted the poorer in society, such as state projects, the

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upkeep of the city, the academy and also security from outside threats.

Therefore, often the wealthy had a positive effect on both the city and the poor, with their money often acting as subsidies for the less wealthy instead of them exploiting the poor for their own benefit. (Ober 202)

However, it is true that there were indeed many situations in which the wealthy were able to use their money as levers and to exert a certain amount of power over the lower classes. In legal matters, the wealthier would often get less punitive punishments for certain crimes such as theft. The wealthy could also dominate proceedings through the use of bribes - they could use money to buy silence from witnesses or make them lie, they could also try and bribe prosecutors and use their wealth to buy support from the crowd.

Also, the dependence of the state on the money received from the rich could have damaging effects. The wealthy may try and hide their wealth from the state or even refuse to pay certain taxes that are voluntary. It is also true that the allegiance of the wealthy to the Athenian state was not as solid as the poorer citizens as they were less dependent on the state structure which was very beneficial towards the poor. These actions of the rich could potentially have very negative outcomes in situations where the state were in need of the wealth of the rich. Finally, in times of war the rich certainly had an easier time, whereby the rich could use their money in order to buy positions as horsemen which were less involved in the fighting than the frontline soldiers who were often composed of those soldiers who could not afford as expensive equipment as those less wealthy.

The wealthy were limited in the power they could hold. While they held economic power, this did not have much of an impact upon the legal and political rights of Athenian citizens as economic inequality was not seen as having as important a role in democracy as other egalitarian principles - they was accepted. The occurrences of violations of democracy by the rich does not show the weakness of the state as a whole only the weaknesses of individuals in certain instances and the inevitability of those with wealth having certain advantages over others - these should not be seen as any substantial drawback to the ideals of meritocracy in the Athenian state.

The Athenian Constitution largely justifies describing Athens as a meritocracy. It allowed for legal and political rights to become universal for all Athenian citizens where each man was considered justly under the eyes of the *polis*. Athenian Democracy was not perfect. Like all systems there were areas which were vulnerable to corruption and which were arguably harmful to a healthy state. There undoubtedly was a selection of the wealthy elite who would often use their wealth for self-aggrandisement rather than supporting the state - but this has to be expected in all societies. On the whole, the Democracy of Athens was largely egalitarian in political and legal matters where those who were citizens were treated with the same eyes. The wealthy in society were, to a large extent, prohibited from using their wealth to defile the workings of the state. The times in which the wealthy were able to exert a certain level of power were inevitable blowbacks to a society where there was a competition for money and a competition for power. The power that the wealthy had and used was not enough to taint a relatively sophisticated political system and where corruptions of that

system occurred, personal power-grabbing was often shrouded in popular support and the use of wealth for personal gain was seen as an inevitable circumstance of self-preservation.

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