

# Democracy: A New Idea in Ancient Greece

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A painting of the city of Athens showing the buildings ordered built by the ruler Pericles. It was painted by Leo von Klenze in 1846 and is called "Reconstruction of the Acropolis and Areus Pagus in Athens."

In the year 507 B.C., the Athenian leader Cleisthenes introduced a system of political reforms that he called *demokratia*, or “rule by the people.” This system was comprised of three separate institutions: the *ekklesia*, a governing body that wrote laws and dictated foreign policy; the *boule*, a council of representatives from the ten Athenian tribes; and the *dikasteria*, the popular courts in which citizens argued cases before a group of lottery-selected jurors. Although this Athenian democracy would survive for only two centuries, Cleisthenes’ invention was one of ancient Greece’s most enduring contributions to the modern world.

## **"Equality before the law"**

"In a democracy," the Greek historian Herodotus wrote, "there is, first, that most splendid of virtues, equality before the law." It was true that Cleisthenes' demokratia abolished the political distinctions between the Athenian aristocrats who had long controlled the political decision-making process and the middle- and working-class people who made up the army and the navy. However, the "equality" Herodotus described was limited to a small portion of the Athenian population. For example, in Athens in the middle of the fourth century there were about 100,000 citizens, about 10,000 metoikoi, or "resident foreigners," and 150,000 slaves. Out of all those people, only male citizens who were older than 18 were a part of the demos. In other words, only about 40,000 people could participate in the democratic process.

## **The ekklesia**

Athenian democracy was made up of three important institutions. The first was the ekklesia, or Assembly, the governing body of Athens. Any member of the demos - any one of those 40,000 adult male citizens - was welcome to attend the meetings of the ekklesia, which were held 40 times per year in a hillside auditorium called the Pnyx. (Only about 5,000 men attended each session of the Assembly; the rest were serving in the army or navy or working to support their families.) At the meetings, the ekklesia made decisions about war and foreign policy, wrote and revised laws and approved or condemned the conduct of public officials. (The ekklesia had the power to ostracize citizens, or expel them from the Athenian city-state for 10 years.) The group made decisions by simple majority vote.

## **The boule**

The second important institution was the boule, or Council of Five Hundred. The boule was a group of 500 men, 50 from each of 10 Athenian tribes, who served on the Council for one year. Unlike the ekklesia, the boule met every day and did most of the hands-on work of governance. It supervised government workers and was in charge of things like navy ships and army horses. It dealt with ambassadors and representatives from other city-states. Its main function was to decide what matters would come before the ekklesia. In this way, the 500 members of the boule determined how the entire democracy would work.

Positions on the boule were chosen by lottery and not by election. This was because, in theory, a random lottery was more democratic than an election. Pure chance, after all, could not be influenced by things like money or popularity. The lottery system also prevented the establishment of a permanent class of civil servants who might be tempted to use the government to advance or enrich themselves. However, historians argue that selection to the boule was not always just a matter of chance. They note that wealthy and influential people – and their relatives – served on the council much more frequently than would be likely in a truly random lottery.

### **The dikasteria**

The third important institution was the dikasteria, or the popular courts. Every day, more than 500 jurors were chosen by lottery from a pool of male citizens older than 30. The philosopher Aristotle argued that of all the democratic institutions, the dikasteria “contributed most to the strength of democracy” because the jury had almost unlimited power. There were no police in Athens, so it was the demos themselves who brought court cases, argued for the prosecution and the defense, and delivered verdicts and sentences by majority rule. There were also no rules about what kinds of cases could be prosecuted or what could and could not be said at trial. Athenian citizens frequently used the dikasteria to punish or embarrass their enemies.

Jurors were paid a wage for their work, so that the job could be accessible to everyone and not just the wealthy. (However, since the wage was less than what the average worker earned in a day, the typical juror was an elderly retiree.) Since Athenians did not pay taxes, the money for these payments came from customs duties, contributions from allies and taxes paid by the metoikoi. The one exception to this rule was the leitourgia, or liturgy. This was a kind of tax that wealthy people volunteered to pay to support major undertakings such as the maintenance of a navy ship or a performance at the city’s annual festival.

### **The end of Athenian democracy**

Around 460 B.C., under the rule of the general Pericles, Athenian democracy started to change. It began to develop into what would today be called an aristocracy, the rule of what Herodotus called “the one man, the best.” Though democratic ideals and processes did not survive in ancient Greece, they have been influencing politicians and governments ever since.