

**CLASSICAL GREECE
(4TH-5TH CENTURIES
BCE): ATHENS:
DEMOCRACY**



CLASSICAL GREECE (4TH-5TH CENTURIES BCE): ATHENS: DEMOCRACY

Description

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to compare and contrast how different ancient writers saw Athenian democracy and the role of citizens in that system. Using this knowledge, students will then take a position as to whether the expansion of citizenship and voting rights to all people creates a society built on freedom or mob rule.

Subjects

World History, Government

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- [Ancient Athens](#)
- [Agora of Athens](#)

Essential Questions

- What was the structure of the Athenian democratic system?
- Was Athenian democracy an effective system? How did it benefit citizens to live in such a system?
- Were there critics of Athenian democracy? What were some of the arguments against giving citizens the right to rule?
- How was the Athenian democratic system different from the modern parliamentary and republican systems in the modern western world?

Academic Summary

From Pericles' Funeral Oration from the Peloponnesian War, 5th Century BCE

Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Against this fear is our chief safeguard, teaching us to obey the magistrates and the laws, particularly such as regard the protection of the injured, whether they are actually on the statute book, or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace.

... we differ from our antagonists. We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality; trusting less in system and policy than to the native spirit of our citizens; while in education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger. In proof of this it may be noticed that the Lacedaemonians do not invade our country alone, but bring with them all their confederates; while we Athenians advance unsupported into the territory of a neighbor, and fighting upon a foreign soil usually vanquish with ease men who are defending their homes. Our united force was never yet encountered by any enemy, because we have at once to attend to our marine and to dispatch our citizens by land upon a hundred different services; so that, wherever they engage with some such fraction of our strength, a success against a detachment is magnified into a victory over the nation, and a defeat into a reverse suffered at the hands of our entire people. And yet if with habits not of labor but of ease, and courage not of art but of nature, we are still willing to encounter danger, we have the double advantage of escaping the experience of hardships in anticipation and of facing them in the hour of need as fearlessly as those who are never free from them.

Nor are these the only points in which our city is worthy of admiration. We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy; wealth we employ more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact but in declining the struggle against it. Our

public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for, unlike any other nation, regarding him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, we Athenians are able to judge at all events if we cannot originate, and, instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all. Again, in our enterprises we present the singular spectacle of daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, and both united in the same persons; although usually decision is the fruit of ignorance, hesitation of reflection. But the palm of courage will surely be adjudged most justly to those, who best know the difference between hardship and pleasure and yet are never tempted to shrink from danger. In generosity we are equally singular, acquiring our friends by conferring, not by receiving, favors. Yet, of course, the doer of the favor is the firmer friend of the two, in order by continued kindness to keep the recipient in his debt; while the debtor feels less keenly from the very consciousness that the return he makes will be a payment, not a free gift. And it is only the Athenians, who, fearless of consequences, confer their benefits not from calculations of expediency, but in the confidence of liberality.

In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Hellas, while I doubt if the world can produce a man who, where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility, as the Athenian. And that this is no mere boast thrown out for the occasion, but plain matter of fact, the power of the state acquired by these habits proves. For Athens alone of her contemporaries is found when tested to be greater than her reputation, and alone gives no occasion to her assailants to blush at the antagonist by whom they have been worsted, or to her subjects to question her title by merit to rule. Rather, the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs; and far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist, or other of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression which they gave to melt at the touch of fact, we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us. Such is the Athens for which these men, in the assertion of their resolve not to lose her, nobly fought and died; and well may every one of their survivors be ready to suffer in her cause.

Pseudo-Xenophon, Constitution of the Athenians, 5th century BCE

And as for the fact that the Athenians have chosen the kind of constitution that they have, I do not think well of their doing this inasmuch as in making their choice they have chosen to let the worst people be better off than the good. Therefore, on this account I do not think well of their constitution. But since they have decided to have it so, I intend to point out how well they preserve their constitution and accomplish those other things for which the rest of the Greeks criticize them.

First I want to say this: there the poor and the people generally are right to have

more than the highborn and wealthy for the reason that it is the people who man the ships and impart strength to the city; the steersmen, the boatswains, the sub-boatswains, the look-out officers, and the shipwrights -- these are the ones who impart strength to the city far more than the hoplites, the high-born, and the good men. This being the case, it seems right for everyone to have a share in the magistracies, both allotted and elective, for anyone to be able to speak his mind if he wants to. Then there are those magistracies which bring safety or danger to the people as a whole depending on whether or not they are well managed: of these the people claim no share (they do not think they should have an allotted share in the generalships or cavalry commands). For these people realize that there is more to be gained from their not holding these magistracies but leaving them instead in the hands of the most influential men. However, such magistracies as are salaried and domestically profitable the people are keen to hold.

Then there is a point which some find extraordinary, that they everywhere assign more to the worst persons, to the poor, and to the popular types than to the good men: in this very point they will be found manifestly preserving their democracy. For the poor, the popular, and the base, inasmuch as they are well off and the likes of them are numerous, will increase the democracy; but if the wealthy, good men are well off, the men of the people create a strong opposition to themselves. And everywhere on earth the best element is opposed to democracy. For among the best people there is minimal wantonness and injustice but a maximum of scrupulous care for what is good, whereas among the people there is a maximum of ignorance, disorder, and wickedness; for poverty draws them rather to disgraceful actions, and because of a lack of money some men are uneducated and ignorant.

Someone might say that they ought not to let everyone speak on equal terms and serve on the council, but rather just the cleverest and finest. Yet their policy is also excellent in this very point of allowing even the worst people to speak. For if the good men were to speak and make policy, it would be splendid for the likes of themselves but not so for the men of the people. But, as things are, any wretch who wants to can stand up and obtain what is good for him and the likes of himself. Someone might say, "What good would such a man propose for himself and the people?" But they know that this man's ignorance, baseness, and favor are more profitable than the good man's virtue, wisdom, and ill will. A city would not be the best on the basis of such a way of life, but the democracy would be best preserved that way. For the people do not want a good government under which they themselves are slaves; they want to be free and to rule. Bad government is of little concern to them. What you consider bad government is the very source of the people's strength and freedom. If it is good government you seek, you will first observe the cleverest men establishing the laws in their own interest. Then the good men will punish the bad; they will make policy for the city and not allow madmen to participate or to speak their minds or to meet in assembly. As a result of these excellent measures the people would swiftly fall into slavery.

Now among the slaves and metics at Athens there is the greatest uncontrolled wantonness; you can't hit them there, and a slave will not stand aside for you. I shall point out why this is their native practice: if it were customary for a slave (or metic or freedman) to be struck by one who is free, you would often hit an Athenian citizen by mistake on the assumption that he was a slave. For the people there are no better dressed than the slaves and metics, nor are they any more handsome. If anyone is also startled by the fact that they let the slaves live luxuriously there and some of them sumptuously, it would be clear that even this they do for a reason. For where there is a naval power, it is necessary from financial considerations to be slaves to the slaves in order to take a portion of their earnings, and it is then necessary to let them go free. And where there are rich slaves, it is no longer profitable in such a place for my slave to fear you. In Sparta my slave would fear you; but if your slave fears me, there will be the chance that he will give over his money so as not to have to worry anymore. For this reason we have set up equality between slaves and free men, and between metics and citizens. The city needs metics in view of the many different trades and the fleet. Accordingly, then, we have reasonably set up a similar equality also for the metics.

The people have spoiled the athletic and musical activities at Athens because they thought them unfitting (they know they can't do them). In the training of dramatic choruses and in providing for athletic contests and the fitting out of triremes, they know that it is the wealthy who lead the choruses but the people who are led in them, and it is the wealthy who provide for athletic contests, but the people who are presided over in the triremes and in the games. At least the people think themselves worthy of taking money for singing, running, dancing, and sailing in ships, so that they become wealthy and the wealthy poorer. And in the courts they are not so much concerned with justice as with their own advantage.

In regard to the allies: the Athenians sail out and lay information, as they are said to do; they hate the aristocrats inasmuch as they realize that the ruler is necessarily hated by the ruled and that if the rich and aristocratic men in the cities are strong, the rule of the people at Athens will last for a very short time. This is why they disfranchise the aristocrats, take away their money, expel and kill them, whereas they promote the interests of the lower class. The Athenian aristocrats protect their opposite numbers in the allied cities, since they realize that it will be to their advantage always to protect the finer people in the cities. Someone might say that the Athenians' strength consists in the allies' ability to pay tribute-money; but the rabble thinks it more advantageous for each one of the Athenians to possess the resources of the allies and for the allies themselves to possess only enough for survival and to work without being able to plot defection.

Also in another point the Athenian people are thought to act ill-advisedly: they force the allies to sail to Athens for judicial proceedings. But they reason in reply that the Athenian people benefit from this. First, from the deposits at law they receive their dicastic pay through the year. Then, sitting at home without

going out in ships, they manage the affairs of the allied cities; in the courts they protect the democrats and ruin their opponents. If the allies were each to hold trials locally, they would, in view of their annoyance with the Athenians, ruin those of their citizens who were the leading friends of the Athenian people. In addition, the people at Athens profit in the following ways when trials involving allies are held in Athens: first, the one per-cent tax in the Peiraeus brings in more for the city⁶; secondly, if anyone has lodgings to rent, he does better, and so does anyone who lets out on hire a team of animals or a slave; further, the heralds of the assembly do better when the allies are in town. In addition, were the allies not to go away for judicial proceedings, they would honor only those of the Athenians who sail out from the city, namely generals, trierarchs, and ambassadors. As it is now, each one of the allies is compelled to flatter the Athenian populace from the realization that judicial action for anyone who comes to Athens is in the hands of none other than the populace (this indeed is the law at Athens); in the courts he is obliged to entreat whoever comes in and to grasp him by the hand. In this way the allies have become instead the slaves of the Athenian people.

Furthermore, as a result of their possessions abroad and the tenure of magistracies which take them abroad, both they and their associates have imperceptibly learned to row; for of necessity a man who is often at sea takes up an oar, as does his slave, and they learn naval terminology. Both through experience of voyages and through practice they become fine steersmen. Some are trained by service as steersmen on an ordinary vessel, others on a freighter, others -- after such experience -- on triremes. Many are able to row as soon as they board their ships, since they have been practicing beforehand throughout their whole lives.

Today Athenian democracy is seen by most westerners as the cradle of freedom and politics. The idea of citizens participating in their own body politick is central to the modern enlightenment notions of government deriving its powers from the governed. European and American politicians in the 18th century looked back to ancient Athens for inspiration when creating modern western governments on both sides of the Atlantic. Above all, today ancient Athens is seen as a society founded in freedom and equality.

The problem with such visions is that they are not true. Athens was a democracy where citizens voted directly on laws and participated as jurors in the judicial system, but it was not a city based on freedom or equality. First of all, freedom in the ancient world went hand in hand with slavery, and Athens was no exception. Records are spotty and difficult to compile, but most historians believe that slaves outnumbered citizens at any given time in ancient Athens by a ratio of at least 2-1. Obviously slaves were never given the right to vote. Athens was also a cosmopolitan trading city with thousands of non-citizens living within its borders at any given time, none of whom could participate in politics.

Women could not own land, inherit property or vote in Athens. Their place in Athenian society was simple. Their job was to take care of the home and the children, so that

eliminated about 50% of the population.

Free male citizens who had completed military service were expected to participate in the assembly and as jurors in legal cases. There were no property qualifications nor checks and balances. Instead, a simple majority vote was required to pass a law or to decide a case. The Athenian system, sometimes still seen today in small towns around the country, relied on direct democracy. While most Athenian writers were fond of the system, perhaps one should ask Socrates if mob rule was really the best way to decide questions of state.

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to compare and contrast how different ancient writers saw Athenian democracy and the role of citizens in that system. Using this knowledge, students will then take a position as to whether the expansion of citizenship and voting rights to all people creates a society built on freedom or mob rule.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how different ancient writers saw Athenian democracy and the role of citizens in that system.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how ancient Athenian society defined citizenship.
3. Using knowledge gained in this lesson, students will take a position as to whether the expansion of citizenship and voting rights leads to a society built on freedom or one built on mob rule.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What's more important for society: individual freedom or equality for all? Is it possible for a society to protect and cherish both concepts? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Athenian Democracy (20 min)
- Video – Athenian Democracy (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Athenian democracy, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Suggestion: Students should read the primary sources located at the beginning of this lesson plan.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on Athenian democracy and the role of citizens (15 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Compare and contrast how different ancient writers saw Athenian democracy and the role of citizens in that system. Using this knowledge, students will then take a position as to whether the expansion of citizenship and voting rights to all people leads to a society built on freedom or one built on mob rule.

Extension

On tour: Ancient Agora, Athens

While on tour, students in Athens can visit the Ancient Agora in the city center. The Agora was the public center of Ancient Athens, and was the center of government, commerce and daily life. Like the Ancient Roman Forum, the Agora was an open air space where Athenians would come to discuss everything from political issues to business transactions. Socrates would have been a daily fixture in the Agora during his lifetime. It is also where he was probably tried and convicted in 399 BCE. Excavations in the Agora, under the direction of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, have been ongoing at the site since 1931. Just outside the southwest boundary of the Agora, archaeologists discovered a series of ancient jail cells, and tradition now holds that one of them was where Socrates died (although it is impossible to know for sure). The Museum of the Agora is housed in the Stoa of Attalos (see below), a reconstructed covered walkway in the Agora.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/pericles-funeralspeech.asp
Pericles Funeral Oration from the Peloponnesian War (primary source) – from the Ancient History Sourcebook at Furman University
- www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_aristotle_democracy?page=1&greekEncoding=/
Democracy in the Politics of Athens (primary / secondary source) – from Demos, the journal dedicated to classical Athenian democracy published by The Stoa Consortium
- www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0158
Pseudo-Xenophon, Constitution of the Athenians (primary source) – from the Perseus Digital Library at Tufts University
- www.historyteacher.net/EuroCiv/Resources/reading-Athens-SchoolforCitizens.pdf
Athens: the School for Citizens (PDF worksheet) – from Susan Pojer, history teacher at Horace Greeley HS (NY)
- www.agathe.gr/
Athenian Agora Excavations (website) – this comprehensive website on Ancient Athens is maintained by the American School of Classical Studies in Athens
- <http://byrneathens.wordpress.com/democracy-in-athens/>
Democracy in Athens (website)
- <http://apwhod2011.pbworks.com/w/page/39695040/Greece%3A%20Crucible%20of%20Civilization>
Greece: Crucible of Civilization (website)
- <http://faculty.njcu.edu/fmoran/pol205/pol205dem.ppt>
Athenian Democracy (PowerPoint) – from Fran Moran, Political Science Professor at the New Jersey City University
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfwXO85VVfw
The Athenian Democracy (video) – this 30-minute lecture is from Kenneth V. Harl, Professor of History at Tulane Univ.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=MR4euj6xjds
The Greeks – Crucible of Civilization – The Birth of Democracy (video). A 55-minute video from PBS. Highly recommended for all classes.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPnUK176AR0&list=PLpbTjA5idqiOeOTWF-7ePt8f-EcCiMCsl
Ancient Worlds – Athens (video) – 90-minute video from the BBC featuring Bettany Hughes, historian, author and broadcaster. Perhaps the most complete video on Athens, it is probably too long for most in-class viewings, but great for out-of-class showings. Highly recommended for all classes, and especially AP /

Advanced students.

Background Information

- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy
Athenian Democracy – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/greece/country_profile
On the Road: Greece – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad
Ancient Greece – Homer’s Iliad
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey
Ancient Greece – Homer’s Odyssey
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization
Ancient Greece – Minoan Civilization on Crete
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Alexander the Great
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Sparta
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Athens
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Marathon 490 BCE
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Thermopylae: Leonidas and the 300
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Allegory of the Cave
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Euthyphro
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Philosopher Kings and the Republic
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Socrates: Father of Western Philosophy

Key Terms

- Ancient Greece
- Athens
- Direct Democracy

