**FUNDAMENTALS OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY**

A greek historian, once commented on the future of democracy on a neighboring country

The rule of the majority has the most beautiful name of all: equality under the law…the holders of magistracies are selected by lot and are held accountable for their actions. All deliberations are in public. I predict that we will give up monarchy and replace it with democracy. For in democracy all things are possible.

This small passage beautifully sums up the essence of the Athenian democracy:

Written laws, which were posted in the Agora for all Athenians to see, were the keys to equality. I When laws are written down, both the weak and the wealthy have equal justice. It is possible for the weaker citizens to use the same language to a prosperous man, whenever he insults them. And having justice on his side, the lesser man wins in court.

**Magistrates (Civil leaders)**

The Athenians were especially worried about the power of magistrates becoming a threat to the democracy. This was especially true of the archonship, which was the most distinguished office in Athens. The archons were the head magistrates. There were nine archons.

In order to restrict their power, the archons, like almost all other Athenian officials, were chosen by lot from citizens who offered their service. They were not elected. The use of the lot cut down on political rivalry, and also eliminated the possibility of corruption (bribery of voters). Magistrates were also held accountable to all citizens for their acts in office. Abuses of power were sure to bring prosecution when the official underwent his examination after he left office.

Another restriction on power for magistrates that kept them from becoming too influential was the Athenian practice of rotating the various offices among the citizens. A citizen could hold an office only once in a lifetime. This was true of virtually all Athenian magistracies, but here was no limitation on the number of times a citizen could be elected general; Pericles served as a general fifteen consecutive years. The method of selection for the generalship was also different. Generals were elected. The reason for these differences was that, although Athenian democracy could tolerate amateur government, in which inexperienced (and on some occasions no doubt incompetent) citizens had to learn the ropes of their office every year, it was of the essence that reliable men, experts in warfare, serve as generals as often as possible. During the fifth century, war was much more a normal condition than peace.
The Athenians, however, recognized that a powerful general could be a very dangerous threat to the democracy. Thus one general was never appointed commander-in-chief. Military decisions required consultation among generals resulting in a consensus. But the measure that perhaps kept generals in line was the constant scrutiny and threat of prosecution. Generals were also subject to prosecutions for crimes like bribery and treason. Generals served a year at a time and like all other magistrates, had to undergo the standard examination of his official acts before a jury. One Athenian general felt so pressured by his examination that he committed suicide.

**Assembly**

The Assembly was the supreme decision-making body in Athens, which met in an open area.  Technically every male citizen over the age of 18 could attend every meeting of the Assembly with the right to speak and vote on all matters of domestic and foreign policy. Space and other practical considerations, however, would not allow every citizen to attend every meeting. For example, it is estimated that the male citizen population numbered around 30,000. In addition, not all citizens wanted to attend.

In the fifth century, to get people to show up to the Assembly, public slaves would proceed through the Agora carrying a long rope coated with fresh red paint. Any citizen who was marked with this paint and was caught not attending the Assembly was subject to a penalty of some kind. Years later, when pay was instituted for attendance at the Assembly in the late fifth century, there was no longer need to force citizens to attend.

The agenda was posted four days preceding the meeting and a sign was set up on the very day of the meeting. A citizen did not have to hold any office to speak at a meeting of the Assembly, but, as one might expect, the great majority of attendees had no desire to speak. There were men like Pericles, who were influential and willing to advise citizens on matters before the Assembly. The rest of the citizens, however, were not required to be quiet; they could either show their support or displeasure during and after a speech. No doubt, a meeting of the Assembly could be a fairly rowdy affair. After the speeches were done, the final decision was made by the whole Assembly, when they voted with a show of hands.

**Council**

The Council consisted of 500 members selected annually by lot. All male citizens over the age of 30 were eligible to serve in the Council, but service was not mandatory. Citizens volunteered and were selected by lot for service on the Council. In contrast with the magistracies, a citizen could serve twice in the council during his lifetime.

The Council met every day. When the Assembly met, the Council would meet in the afternoon since most Assembly meetings lasted only till noon.  The primary responsibilities of this Council were the preparation of an agenda for the Assembly and the supervision of the magistrates. The Council itself had to answer to the Assembly at end of its year of service.

The Council had a group to supervise its activities. This supervision was performed by council chosen by lot. Every day one was selected by lot to serve for a night and a day as chairman, who was entrusted with the keys to the temples where the state funds and records were stored, and the state seal. Thus the reins of Athenian government were in the hands of a different Athenian citizen every day of the year.

**Law Courts**

The courts were another crucial part of the Athenian democracy. No citizen was above the law, so as in America everyone, both rich and poor, had to submit to the judgment of their fellow citizens, who made up the juries. Every year from citizens, who had voluntarily put themselves forward, 6000 jurors were selected by lot and were sworn in.  Every day the courts were in session, a varying portion of this panel of 6000 would show up early in the morning, attracted by the prospect of getting paid for their jury duty. The juries needed for that day were selected by a very complicated procedure involving an ingenious allotment machine. There were two steps in this procedure of allotment: the first to select all the jurors needed that day and the second to assign them to a specific court room. No juror could know ahead of time whether he was going to serve that day and, if selected, which case he would be involved in. The reason for the complex process was to prevent bribery.

The court system was run by non-professionals. There were no professionally trained judges and lawyers. A law attributed to Solon, stated that a prosecution could be undertaken by "anyone who wanted to."

At the trial the presiding magistrate merely kept order in the courtroom, but did not act as a modern judge might. Both the prosecutor and defendant had the same amount of time to speak, measured by a water clock. When the speeches were over, the [jury voted](http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/dunkle/athnlife/juryvote.htm) without discussing the case. In a public prosecution, if the jury decided against the defendant, both the prosecutor and the defendant proposed a penalty. The jury then voted again, again without discussion, to choose one or the other.

The Athenians saw the jury courts, working hand-in-hand with the law and the concerned citizen prosecuting wrongdoers, as essential to the workings of democracy.

**Conclusions**

On the whole the democracy served the Athenians well for over one hundred and eighty years. Democracy did exclude the majority of the population of Athens. Women, non-citizens,and slaves could not participate in the democratic process, but Athenian democracy allowed and encouraged a degree of direct participation in the democratic process unknown in modern democracies.

In modern America, involvement in the political process is quite limited. A very small percentage of the American population gets politically involved. In comparison, an estimated 40% of Athenian male citizen population was directly involved on a more or less regular basis in Athenian government. The system of pay for service as magistrates, councilors, for attendance at Assembly meetings, and for jury service allowed the poor to participate in the political process.

The individual citizen, willing to get involved, had an impressive amount of power. He could propose a law, which, if it found enough support, could be formulated by the Council , put on the agenda of a later Assembly meeting, discussed and voted upon at that meeting.

Not even the most influential politician could escape the power of the Athenian citizenry, if he had lost their support. In the fifth century, the process of ostracism through secret ballot was available to the citizens. When citizens in the Assembly had decided that they wanted an ostracism, voting took place two months later in the Agora. If 6000 citizens voted, then the person with the most votes was sent into exile for a ten year period.

Please answer the following questions after you do the reading:

1. Why was it important to “write down” the laws?

2. What was an archon? How many of them were in Athenian government?

3. How were archons chosen? Why?

4. How was in possible to make sure the archons acted honestly during office?

5. Why did Athenians put limits on how long someone could be in office?

6. Which positions did not have this rule? Why?

7. How did Athenians try and restrict Generals from getting too powerful?

8. Who was in the Assembly?

9. What was then task of the Assembly?

10. What was a meeting like? (describe)

11. What did the Council do?

12. How did you get to be a member?

13. How was the city-state’s leader chosen (from the Council)?

14. How were jurors for the courts chosen?

15. What steps were taken to make sure the jurors would be fair and unbiased?

16. Describe how jurors made their decisions?

17. When comparing participation in Athens to participation in American democracy, where do you find more people getting involved in civic duty?