THE BEGINNINGS OF DEMOCRACY

The idea of a democratic form of government is closely associated with many modern countries, including the United States. But democracy -- in a direct form -- was first documented in ancient Greece, particularly in the city-state of Athens.

Government by democracy developed slowly and gradually, over almost two hundred years, beginning in Athens around 507 B.C. and continuing there until 318 B.C. During that time, Athenian democracy changed very little. However, in order to understand fourth-century Athenian democracy, we must first understand the foundations from which it evolved.

When Attica (the name of the area where the city-state of Athens was established) was first settled, men of noble birth were chosen for political offices. These leaders, or magistrates, made the laws, enforced the laws, and judged those who broke the laws. Originally, however, the laws were not written down and no poor people held political offices.

Tradition states that in 621 B.C. the people of Athens entrusted a lawgiver named Draco with the task of writing down their laws. As a result of Draco’s codification of the laws, the nobles’ monopoly on the law was weakened. Still, unrest continued between the nobles and the poor.

In 594 B.C. a statesman named Solon was appointed as a special magistrate with the power to revise Draco’s laws. Solon made many important changes. He freed all who had been made slaves as punishment for failing to pay their debts and he abolished the laws which had permitted such enslavement. Solon then set up a People’s Court, called the Heliaia, which was manned by sworn jurors. This People’s Court was established to offer dissatisfied citizens the right to appeal judgments made against them by magistrates. Solon also established the Council of Four Hundred, which included one hundred representatives from each of the four main tribes of Athenians. One duty of the council was to prepare laws to be submitted to the
Assembly, which included all male Athenian citizens. But Solon's reforms were not enough to bring peace to the troubled state.

In 507 B.C., another Athenian statesman, named Cleisthenes, came to power. Cleisthenes' reforms became the basis for the true beginning of democracy in Athens.

Cleisthenes reorganized the people of Athens into ten tribes, each named after a hero. Citizenship was determined by tribe and by membership in a deme, the name given to districts into which tribes were divided. There were 139 demes in all. The Council of Four Hundred was reorganized to include five hundred members. Along with the Assembly and the People's Court, the Council was a principal component of Athenian democracy.

Another reform brought about by Cleisthenes was ostracism, the right of the Assembly to banish a citizen from political activity for ten years. According to the Greek historian Plutarch (c. A.D. 46-120), "each man took an ostrakon (potsherd), wrote on it the name of a citizen whom he wished to exile and carried it to a place in the Agora which was fenced in with barricades. The arkhons (a type of magistrate) first counted the total number of ostraka. ... Then they sorted the ostraka by individual names and the one whose name had been written by the greatest number of voters was exiled for ten years though he enjoyed income from his property."

After 461 B.C., the Athenian statesman Perikles pushed democracy even further. Jurors were paid for their official services and could cast secret ballots. Magistracies were opened to all but the lowest class, and the power of the Assembly was supreme.

Speeches of the great Athenian orators have survived from about 420 B.C. These speeches, by men including Antiphon, Isokrates, Demosthenes, and others, reveal details about the workings of Athenian democratic government.

The government of fourth-century Athens was a direct democracy, which meant that the citizens of Athens governed themselves and that political office was open to almost everyone. The Assembly, which required a quorum of six thousand people, met thirty to forty times a year. The members discussed matters that had been put on the agenda by the Council. Every member had the right to speak and offer opinions. Voting was done by show of hands, and meetings were to last no longer than one day.

The Council was composed of five hundred citizens, all over the age of thirty. Council members were chosen by lot, with fifty chosen from each tribe. Duties of council members included discussing and preparing bills for the Assembly, prosecuting charges of treason, superintending religious festivals, and managing public buildings and naval works.

The courts met about two hundred days each year, but never on the same day as an Assembly meeting. The courts were manned by six thousand jurors, who were chosen by lot. To qualify as a juror, a male citizen had to be over thirty years of age and could not be in debt...
to the state. Juries consisted of 201, 401, or 501 jurors, depending on the type of case.

Jurors also had other duties. Some counted votes. Others paid daily wages to those jurors who were on duty. Still others monitored the water clocks. (Both defendants and accusers were allotted a limited amount of time in which to present their arguments. When a predetermined amount of water had flowed into a container, their time was up).

The jurors at the People's Court tried all cases but treason and homicide. There was no judge -- the jury alone passed judgment, and litigants conducted their own defense and prosecution.

Although the Athenian form of democracy was highly regarded in ancient Greece, it was not the only type of government among the Greek city-states. The Spartan form of government, for example, combined monarch (rule by kings) with oligarchy (rule by a few) and democracy (rule by many).

In Sparta, there were two kings. Both commanded the army in war. The Spartan Council included both kings and a group of twenty-eight elders. Like the Athenian Council, the Spartan Council prepared material for the Assembly. Unlike the Athenian Council, the Spartan Council voted by shouting, and its decisions were sometimes set aside, which greatly reduced its power.

The Spartan Assembly was made up of an elite group of male citizens over the age of thirty, each of whom had been elected as an "Equal." There were no People's Courts in Sparta, and, in general, Sparta's form of government complemented the rigid military lifestyle of its inhabitants.

In a speech given in 355 B.C., Demosthenes defined the most important difference between the Athenian and Spartan political systems in the following manner: "In Athens, it was permitted to praise the Spartan government and not the Athenian form, whereas in Sparta no one could praise any system other than the Spartan."California.

~~~~~~~~

by Pam Dixon

Pam Dixon, a long-time student of the classics, writes about ancient democracies from her vantage point of a participant in a representative democracy. She lives in Cardiff-by the Sea, California.

**CITIZENSHIP IN ATHENS**

In Athens, people were divided into the following three groups:

**CITIZENS**
Citizens included all males over the age of eighteen or twenty who were registered in their deme or village community. Citizens did not, however, include metics who lived in Athens and pursued gainful professions. No one except citizens had political rights, could hold office, and could own land. All women were excluded from citizenship, even if they were born in Athens or married a citizen.

**METICS**
Metics were resident foreigners, usually traders and craftsmen, who were free. They were also freed slaves. Metics had no political rights. Male metics could be granted citizenship by vote of other citizens, but this action was rarely taken.

**SLAVES**
Slaves usually were obtained by capture in war or purchase in slave markets. Slaves could be given their freedom. Also, slaves could become wealthy -- some Athenian slaves acquired a fortune.

---

Copyright of Calliope is the property of Cricket Media and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.