

# Government in Athens



# Aristocrats

- **Democracy** was born in Ancient Greece in the city of Athens. Democracy is a form of a government in which people rule themselves.
- However, Athens was ruled first by kings, and then by an **oligarchy of aristocrats**, or rich landowners.

# Oligarchy



Early Athens was governed by a small group of powerful aristocrats. This type of government is called an oligarchy. Oligarchy means “rule by a few.”

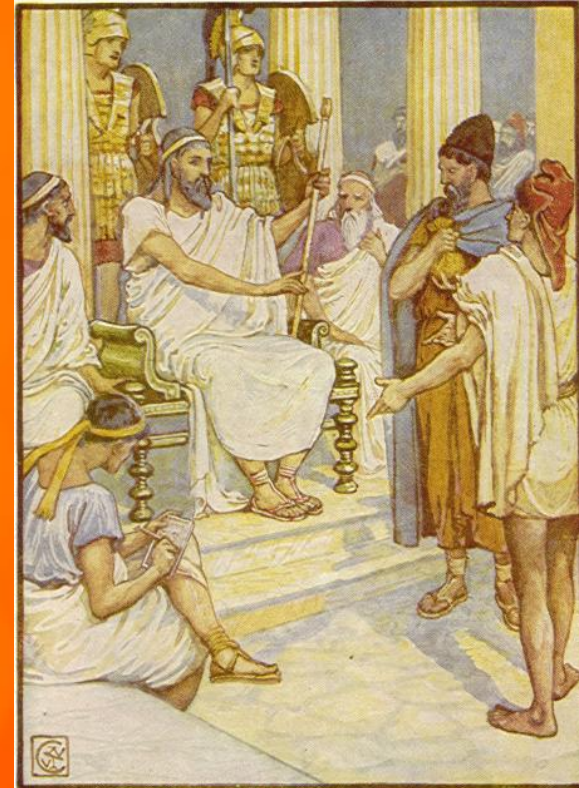
# Rebellion

- In the 600s BC a group of rebels tried to overthrow the aristocrats. The rebellion failed and Draco gained power in Athens. Draco was a strict leader and was very unpopular.
- His successor, Solon, ruled that all free men were **citizens** who had a right to participate in government.
- But it was too late; people were tired of the aristocracy.

# Draco

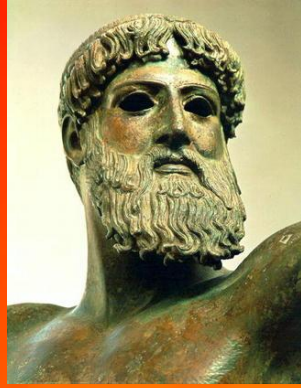


Draco was the first to codify Athenian laws or codes. These new codes were so stringent and harsh they became known as “Draconian measures.”



His first act was a great and unexpected one, for he proclaimed that henceforth no one might be made a slave because he was unable to pay his debts.

# Tyrant



- Peisistratus overthrew the oligarchy and became a leader of Athens by force.
- Peisistratus was the first **tyrant**. Though that word has a negative meaning today, some Greek tyrants were good leaders.
- Peisistratus led well and Athens flourished under his care.
- But after he died rebellious aristocrats regained control of Athens.

# Tyranny



Peisistratus overthrew the oligarchy in 546 BC, and Athens became a tyranny. Tyranny means “rule by a tyrant”—a strong leader who has power.

# Athens Creates Democracy

- A leader named Cleisthenes introduced democracy to Athens in 500 BC.
- Though he was an aristocrat himself, he did not support the aristocracy.
- He overthrew the aristocratic leaders using popular support.



# Democracy



Around 500 BC Athens became a democracy. Democracy means “rule by the people.” For the first time in history, a government was based on the votes of its free citizens.

# Athens Creates Democracy

- Under his rule all citizens had the right to participate in the assembly that created laws.
- The assemblies were held outdoors and anyone could give a speech before votes were taken. This could be messy. Either too many people would come to an assembly or not enough.
- Eventually the Athenians began to select city officials to make decisions. Citizens were eventually allowed to decide court cases by serving on juries.

# Democracy in Action



Only free male citizens of Athens were members of the assembly with the right to vote. Women, slaves, and foreigners could not participate.

The Athenian assembly met on a hill called the Pnyx (pah-NIKS). Sometimes, more than 6,000 men crowded onto the small hill.

Men spoke before the assembly to support or argue against different issues. Persuasive speakers often convinced others to pass laws they supported.

In Athenian democracy, people debated issues in the open air, and these debates were noisy affairs.

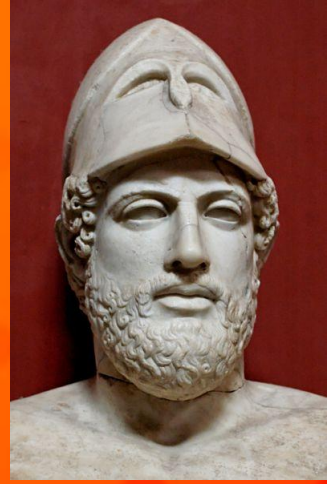
Voting was usually done by a show of hands, but sometimes assembly members wrote their votes on broken pieces of pottery. Then officials collected these pottery pieces and counted the votes.

Men in the crowd often argued with speakers.

Ancient Athens was the birthplace of democracy—the system of government in which the people rule themselves. Democracy was perhaps the greatest achievement of ancient Athens. In time, it became the Greeks’ greatest gift to the world.

# Pericles

- Citizens gradually gained more power.
- Athenian democracy reached its height with **Pericles**, who led the government from 460 to 429 BC.
- Still, democracy all but ended when Athens was conquered by Macedonia in the 330s BC.
- The Macedonian king did not like anyone other than himself making laws.
- Though the city council kept operating in a limited way, a new Greek king in 320 BC abolished even that right.



# **Ancient Democracy Differs from Modern Democracy**

- Although citizenship was very limited, Athens had a direct democracy, in which every citizen could participate and the majority ruled.
- The United States operates as a representative government, in which citizens elect people to represent them.

# Democracy Then and Now...

## In Athenian Direct Democracy...

- All citizens met as a group to debate and vote directly on every issue.
- There was no separation of powers. Citizens created laws, enforced laws, and acted as judges.
- Only free male citizens could vote. Women and slaves could not vote.

## In American Representative Democracy...

- Citizens elect representatives to debate and vote on issues for them.
- There is a separation of powers. Citizens elect some people to create laws, others to enforce laws, and others to be judges.
- Men and women who are citizens have the right to vote.