

# The Reflection of Ancient Greek Democratic Thought in Modern and Contemporary American Politics

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**Abstract:** This article explores how Athenian democracy—through institutions like the Ekklesia (Citizen Assembly), Boule (Council of 500), and Dikasteria (People's Courts), as well as principles such as isonomia (equality before the law) and isegoria (equal right to speak)—influenced the development of modern American political thought. It also discusses how these democratic ideals shaped the works of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in turn inspired the political foundations of the United States. Their ideas are reflected in key American documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, and the U.S. Constitution. The article further analyzes how Greek democratic values have been adapted into American institutions, including the jury system, representative government, and the separation of powers. Ultimately, the Athenian democracy reveals the relevance of its core ideals in shaping participatory governance and the principles of modern democratic societies.

## 1 GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

### 1.1 The Basic Structure of the Athenian Democratic System

The structure of the Athenian democratic system has three essential parts: Ekklesia, Boule, and Dikasteria. All the three institutions show the strong civic participation and popular sovereignty in Athens. The core of Athenian democracy is believed to be Ekklesia. According to Young-Ho Park, Ekklesia's primary meaning is a physical gathering at a particular time and place. The Ekklesia had a civic purpose, and Athenian citizens were responsible for hearing, discussing, and voting on decrees with the Ekklesia's authority.

Then, the Boule, Athens' administrative and governing council, was responsible for setting the agenda for the Ekklesia. The Boule was the central administrative body of Athenian democracy, consisting of 500 citizens elected by lot each year from the ten tribes of Athens. Its main function is to prepare the agenda for Ekklesia and oversee the day-to-day operations including finance, foreign policy, and public works. At the same time, Boule ensured a rotation of political responsibilities, which could

minimize the influence of aristocratic elites. By allowing ordinary citizens to participate in governance, the Athenian democracy embodies the characteristics of equal participation in politics.

The Dikasteria were citizen courts responsible for judicial decisions in Athenian democracy. Juries were formed from a large pool of volunteer male citizens over 30 years old, often numbering 200 to 500 jurors per case. Judges were not legal experts, and decisions were made by majority vote, without professional lawyers or judges. This system reflected the belief that justice should be in the hands of the people, not a privileged elite. The Dikasteria served as a check on political power and a practical expression of popular sovereignty in the judicial sphere. Park posits that participation in ruling by attending the Ekklesia was of the highest importance in Greek identity and pride. Citizens fulfilled their role as citizens through those most significant means. According to Kei Eun Chang, the part-whole connection was responsible for the creation of ethical space in the Greco-Roman world. He states, "The fact that this concept recognized that an individual is a part of a civic organism and of the cosmic whole became a starting point for ethical theories in antiquity. These individual-community relationships only allowed for the possibility of virtuous behavior."

Athenian democracy adopted the form of a democratic assembly, effectively preventing the concentration of power in the hands of a specific individual or a small group. This ensured that every citizen's rights were upheld in a fair manner, serving as an early method of protecting equal civil rights. At the same time, this form of mass gathering in a parliamentary setting allowed for the convergence of ideas, facilitating the formation of a collective consciousness and the unification of national strength, thereby avoiding ideological stratification that could lead to conflict. "Civic participation" is a great feature of Athenian democratic system. Ancient Athenians gathered their spirits and created their unique national thoughts through these methods. The feeling of belonging to the whole is a form of an ethic in which the parts that make up the whole take the good of the whole into account. Participation and the means by which citizens sought the good of the city through common advantage were the means by which every single man found significance and freedom.

## 1.2 Core Principles of Ancient Greek Democracy

The core principles of ancient Greek democracy include popular sovereignty, political equality, and citizen participation. Popular sovereignty means that political power originates from the people. In Athenian democracy, all male citizens had equal political rights, freedom of speech, and the opportunity to directly participate in the political arena. Political equality was reflected in the principle that everyone is equal before the law when resolving private disputes. Citizen participation was highly valued. Thucydides noted that Athenians considered a citizen who did not engage in politics not only as someone minding their own business but also as useless.

Athenian democracy emphasized the importance of civic participation and public debate. As Aristotle stated in his work "Politics," the purpose of a political community is to promote the common good, and citizens should actively participate in decision-making to achieve this goal. The idea of political equality was also evident in the principle that all citizens had equal opportunities to hold public office and participate in the political process. This was further reinforced by the use of random selection (lottery) to choose government officials, ensuring that power was not concentrated in the hands of a few elites. Finley (2015) notes that this system of random selection was designed to prevent the accumulation of

power and to ensure that a broad cross-section of citizens could participate in governance.

## 1.3 Limitations of Ancient Greek Democracy

Despite its pioneering nature, ancient Greek democracy had significant limitations. First, it was limited to free male citizens born in Athens, excluding women, slaves, and non-citizens such as metics (resident foreigners). Second, wealthy individuals could still exert considerable influence over politics, and skilled speakers could sway large assemblies. Third, the frequent rotation of officials hindered long-term political stability. Additionally, direct democracy was only feasible in small city-states like Athens and became impractical for larger populations.

The exclusion of women and slaves from political participation meant that a large portion of the population was denied the rights and privileges enjoyed by male citizens. This limited the scope of democratic representation and participation. Furthermore, the influence of wealthy individuals and skilled orators could lead to the manipulation of public opinion and decision-making processes, undermining the principles of equality and fairness. Hansen (1999) notes that the system of direct democracy required a high level of civic engagement and public speaking skills, which could be advantageous for those with rhetorical abilities. The frequent rotation of officials, while intended to prevent the concentration of power, also made it difficult for officials to develop long-term policies and strategies. Cartledge (2003) notes that the stability and continuity of governance were challenges in the Athenian democratic system. The system of direct democracy was also impractical for larger populations and territories, as it required the physical presence and active participation of citizens in the political process. This limitation highlights the challenges of scaling democratic systems to larger and more complex societies (Osborne, 2010).

## **2 THE INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT ON THE AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE AND FOUNDING PERIOD**

### **2.1 The Impact of Greek Ideas on Enlightenment Thinkers**

The Enlightenment was a period of intellectual ferment in Europe and America, and Greek democratic ideas played a crucial role in shaping the thought of Enlightenment thinkers. Philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were inspired by Greek democracy and incorporated its principles into their theories.

John Locke's ideas regarding natural rights and government by consent were influenced by Greek democratic thought. He contended that the role of government was to safeguard the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. The concept of individual rights and the social contract can be traced back to the Greek emphasis on the individual's importance in the political process. He asserted that the objective of law is to preserve and expand freedom, not to abolish or restrict it. The Greek democratic ideal of allowing individuals to freely participate in and impact political decisions concerning their lives is reflected in this.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the general will draw from Greek democratic ideals. He believed the collective will of the people should guide the government, which reflects the principles of Athenian democracy. In *The Social Contract*, he emphasized that the general will alone direct the state's forces for the common good. This idea of the general will as the foundation of legitimate government echoes the Greek principle that political power comes from the citizens' collective will.

The Enlightenment thinkers were deeply influenced by the Greek idea that reason and rationality should guide political decision-making. They believed that by applying reason to political problems, they could develop systems of government that better served the interests of all citizens. This intellectual legacy of Greek democracy provided the philosophical foundation for the democratic principles that would later be enshrined in the American political system.

### **2.2 Reflections of Greek Democracy in the Declaration of Independence**

The Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, is a document that reflects the influence of Greek democratic thought. The opening lines of the Declaration, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," echo the Greek belief in equality and the idea that all citizens should have a voice in the governance of their society. As Foner (2005) notes, "The Declaration of Independence drew upon a long tradition of political thought that emphasized popular sovereignty and the rights of citizens, dating back to ancient Greek democracy".

The Declaration also outlines the grievances of the American colonists against the British government. These grievances include the denial of the right to participate in the legislative process and the imposition of laws without the consent of the governed. These are issues that were central to the Greek democratic experience, where the participation of citizens in decision-making was seen as essential to the legitimacy of the government. The colonists' demand for representation and their rejection of arbitrary rule reflects the Greek democratic principle that political power should be derived from the consent of the governed. As Appleby (2013) observes, "The Declaration of Independence was not merely a statement of separation from Britain but a reaffirmation of the democratic ideals that traced their roots to ancient Greece".

The influence of Greek democratic thought is also evident in the emphasis placed on popular sovereignty in the Declaration. The document asserts that governments derive their powers from the consent of the governed and that the people have the right to alter or abolish a government that fails to secure their rights. This principle of popular sovereignty, which was a cornerstone of Greek democracy, provided the moral and philosophical justification for the American colonists' break with Britain and their establishment of a new political order based on democratic principles.

### **2.3 Connections Between Greek Democracy and the Federalist Papers**

Hamilton et al. (1787) wrote *The Federalist Papers*, a collection of essays that advocated for the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Greek democratic thought is reflected in these essays in multiple ways.

One key connection is the concept of a representative democracy. The Greek idea of direct

democracy wasn't practical for a large and diverse nation like the United States. So, the Founding Fathers adopted representative democracy, where citizens elect representatives to make decisions for them. This idea has its roots in Greek political philosophy, which understood the significance of giving citizens a say in politics while dealing with the challenges of governing a large population. Madison in Federalist No. 10 said a pure democracy couldn't handle the issues of faction. The Founding Fathers' solution was a representative republic. It moderated the intensity of direct democracy yet ensured the people's will was reflected in governance, showing the adaptability and lasting relevance of Greek democratic ideas.

The Federalist Papers also discuss the importance of a system of checks and balances to prevent the concentration of power in any one branch of government. This concept is similar to the Greek emphasis on the rule of law and the idea that power should be balanced and restrained. The Greek experience with democracy highlighted the dangers of allowing too much power to be concentrated in the hands of a few, and the Founding Fathers sought to avoid these pitfalls by creating a system where different branches of government could check and balance each other. As Montesquieu, drawing on Greek political thought, wrote in *The Spirit of the Laws*, "There can be no liberty where the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person" (Montesquieu, 1989). The Founding Fathers were aware of this principle and incorporated it into the design of the U.S. Constitution to ensure that no single branch of government could dominate the others. This system of checks and balances reflects the Greek democratic ideal of preventing the abuse of power through institutional safeguards.

### 3 THE INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY ON THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

#### 3.1 The Philosophical Origins of the Division of Powers

The allocation of political powers stands as a fundamental principle within the U.S. Constitution, and its philosophical roots can be clearly traced back to the ancient Greek democracy. In Greek thought, the concept of dividing power among various branches of government was ingeniously crafted with a specific aim. It was meant to thwart the

concentration of power and guarantee that no single group could hold sway over the entire political process.

As Aristotle insightfully stated in "Politics," "The most primitive communities are families of men and women, masters and slaves. Families combine to make a village, and several villages combine to make a state, which is the first self-sufficient community (Aristotle, 1998)." This profound notion of distributing power and constructing a balanced government held immense significance for the Founding Fathers. When they were meticulously designing the U.S. Constitution, they drew inspiration from it, believing that such a division would safeguard the nation's democratic system and foster stability by preventing any undue dominance in governance.

Aristotle's political philosophy placed significant emphasis on the necessity of a balanced government, one that artfully incorporated elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. His profound idea exerted a notable influence on the Founding Fathers during the establishment of the American government.

They thus created three branches—the executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch was assigned distinct powers and responsibilities. For instance, the legislative makes laws, the executive enforces them, and the judicial interprets them. The system of checks and balances was put in place, enabling each branch to check the others' power. This way, it effectively prevents any single branch from growing overly powerful, safeguarding the nation's democratic stability.

#### 3.2 The Continuation and Development of the Jury System

The jury system in the United States has its roots in ancient Greek democracy. In Athenian democracy, juries were composed of citizens who were selected by lot to hear cases and make decisions. This system was designed to ensure fairness and to prevent the concentration of judicial power in the hands of a few. As Finley (2015) notes in "Democracy Ancient & Modern," "The Greek concept of democracy emphasized the equality of all citizens and their right to participate in the political process, which is reflected in the jury system's emphasis on citizen participation in judicial decision-making."

The U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to a trial by jury in both criminal and The U.S. Constitution firmly guarantees the right to a trial by jury in both criminal and civil cases. This significant



provision is deeply rooted in history, mirroring the Greek belief that citizen participation in the judicial process is of utmost importance. In ancient Greece, ordinary citizens played a vital role in dispensing justice, and the United States has carried forward this democratic essence.

Over time, the jury system in the U.S. has seen changes and adaptations to suit the modern context. Nevertheless, it still vividly reflects the Greek democratic ideal, enabling everyday citizens to be part of the administration of justice, ensuring fairness and a sense of public involvement.

### **3.3 Integration of Civic Participation and Representative Democracy**

The U.S. Constitution masterfully integrates the principles of civic participation and representative democracy, drawing upon the foundational concepts that were first laid out by ancient Greek democracy. The Greek democratic system was a remarkable experiment in its own right, relying heavily on the direct participation of its citizens. In the city-states of ancient Greece, especially in places like Athens, the people would gather in the agora or other communal spaces. They would engage in lively debates, put forward their viewpoints, and then directly vote on a wide array of matters, whether it was about the construction of new public buildings, the formulation of laws, or decisions regarding warfare and peace. It was a vibrant display of democracy where every citizen had the opportunity to have a hands-on role in shaping the course of their community's affairs.

However, the United States, with its sprawling territory that stretches across vast landscapes and a population that is not only large but also incredibly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, and beliefs, needed a different approach. Thus, the U.S. Constitution established a representative democracy. In this system, citizens from all corners of the nation, be it the bustling urban areas, the quiet rural towns, or the remote regions, exercise their democratic rights by electing representatives. These representatives, who are chosen through a fair and competitive electoral process, are then tasked with the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of the people who have placed their trust in them.

In summary, the combination of civic participation and representative democracy holds great significance. It mirrors the Greek democratic ideal of having citizens engaged in societal governance. Moreover, it's cleverly adapted for a modern nation like the United States. With its vast and diverse population, this blend allows people from

different backgrounds to take part. It ensures democracy is inclusive, giving everyone a voice, and functional, facilitating effective decision-making, thus making the democratic system thrive.

## **4 THE MANIFESTATION OF ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY IN MODERN AMERICAN POLITICS**

### **4.1 The Basic Structure of the Modern American Democratic System**

The modern American democratic system presents itself as a complex and intricate structure that artfully incorporates various elements derived from ancient Greek democracy. Rooted in the principle of representative democracy, it enables citizens to elect representatives who then take on the responsibility of making decisions in their stead. The U.S. government is composed of three branches, namely the executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch has its own clearly defined powers and responsibilities. Moreover, the system of checks and balances is in place, constantly monitoring and restraining the actions of each branch to guarantee that no single one amasses excessive power, thus maintaining a stable democratic order.

The most primitive communities are those consisting of families of men and women, masters and slaves (Aristotle, 1998). A village is formed by families, and a state is formed by several villages, making it the first self-sufficient community. The Founding Fathers' design of the U.S. relied heavily on the concept of dividing power and creating a balanced government. Constitution. Lawmaking falls under the responsibility of the legislative branch, which is made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Enforcing laws is the responsibility of the executive branch, which is headed by the President. Law interpretation is the responsibility of the judicial branch, which is led by the Supreme Court. The Greek democratic ideal of balancing power and preventing its concentration in any one group is reflected in this division of power.

### **4.2 The Evolution of Civic Participation**

Civic participation in modern American politics has witnessed a truly remarkable evolution since the

nation's very founding. In the early days, the right to vote was an exclusive privilege reserved solely for white male property owners, shutting out a vast majority of the population. However, as the years rolled on, significant progress was made. The 15th Amendment opened the door for African Americans to exercise their voting rights, the 19th Amendment empowered women to have a voice in politics, and the 26th Amendment extended the opportunity to 18-year-olds. These shifts have expanded participation, aligning with the Greek democratic ideal of broad involvement and making the political process increasingly inclusive.

Modern technology has also transformed civic participation. The internet and social media have made it easier for citizens to access information, express their opinions, and engage in political discourse. Citizens can now make their voices heard through online petitions, virtual town halls, and social media campaigns. As Finley (2015) notes in "Democracy Ancient & Modern," "The Greek concept of democracy emphasized the equality of all citizens and their right to participate in the political process, which is reflected in the jury system's emphasis on citizen participation in judicial decision-making." Citizens' ability to participate in the political process has been enhanced by technological advancements, which aligns with the Greek democratic emphasis on active citizen involvement.

### 4.3 Contemporary Case Studies

Contemporary American politics indeed offers plentiful examples demonstrating the influence of ancient Greek democratic thought. Take the 2020 presidential election as a prime instance. It vividly spotlighted the significance of civic participation and how crucial the role of citizens is in determining the nation's course. Amid the tough circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, with various restrictions and difficulties, millions of citizens still tenaciously exercised their right to vote. Whether they chose to cast their ballots in person or opted for the mail-in option, this remarkable level of engagement truly reflects the Greek democratic ideal of citizens actively involving themselves in the political process.

The Black Lives Matter movement is another example of the enduring impact of Greek democratic principles. Inspired by the Greek emphasis on equality and justice, this movement has mobilized citizens across the country to advocate for racial equality and police reform. The use of peaceful protests, public demonstrations, and social media

campaigns mirrors the Greek democratic practice of allowing citizens to voice their concerns and seek change through collective action. As Tocqueville observed in "Democracy in America," "The principle of the sovereignty of the people is the fundamental principle of the American Constitution (Tocqueville, 2016)." This principle is evident in the way modern American citizens engage in political activism and strive to influence public policy.

In conclusion, it's undeniable that the reflection of ancient Greek democratic thought permeates multiple aspects of modern and contemporary American politics. Whether it's in the foundational texts like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which drew inspiration from Greek ideals, or in the gradual expansion of civic participation over time, such as through various amendments granting more rights to different groups. Even in today's political movements, we can see its imprint. The principles of Greek democracy truly act as a solid bedrock, continuously guiding and inspiring the growth and evolution of democratic values and practices in the United States.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Though ancient Greek democracy excluded women, slaves, and non-citizens, its core principles—equality, participation, and collective decision-making—profoundly shaped modern politics, especially in the U.S. This paper examines how Athenian institutions inspired America's founding documents, representative government, and judicial system. From Enlightenment thinkers to modern policymakers, Greek democratic ideals have been adapted, localized, and sustained in American political life, bridging ancient and modern democratic thought.

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