

Name: _____

The Birth of Democracy and “fair” Voting

The Cradle of Democracy

Athens was the world’s first democracy, though Athenian democracy differed in many important respects from our own. The popular assembly, open to all citizen, met in the Agora (market place), which may therefore be considered the cradle of democracy.

Fifth-century Athenian democracy was concerned above all with power. It was a democracy in the sense that all problems were decided by the vote of the citizen assembly, the *ekklesia*. Because women, non-Athenians and slaves were excluded from citizenship, however, so they did not participate in the *ekklesia*. So Athenian democracy was less representative than our own. But it was also in some ways more powerful. Democracy had evolved in Athens as a means of limiting powers of first the king, then of the aristocracy, and finally of popular leaders (tyrants). Most public offices were chosen by drawing lots (like drawing straws), and any person who got too powerful or too ambitious could be banished for ten years. The main goal of the democracy was to prevent any individual or group from gaining too much power, and to eliminate corruption. This aim was central to every aspect of government and the administration of the law in classical Athens.

1. What is a democracy? (You may need to look this one up)

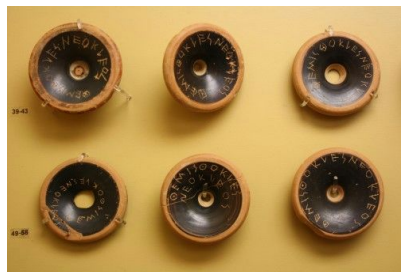
2. Who was allowed to vote in ancient Greece?

3. What was the main goal of Athenian democracy? How is this similar or different to how our government works?

Voting in Ancient Greece

In the 4th and 5th centuries BCE the male citizen population of Athens ranged from 30,000 to 60,000 depending on the period. The assembly met at least once a month, more likely two or three times, on the Pnyx hill in a dedicated space which could accommodate around 6000 citizens. Any citizen could speak to the assembly and vote on decisions by simply holding up their hands. The majority won the day and the decision was final. Nine presidents (*proedroi*), elected by lot and holding the office one time only, organised the proceedings and assessed the voting.

Specific issues discussed in the assembly included deciding military and financial offices, organising and maintaining food supplies, initiating legislation and political trials, deciding to send envoys, deciding whether or not to sign treaties, voting to raise or spend funds, and debating military matters. The assembly could also vote to kick out from Athens any citizen who had become too powerful and dangerous for the **polis**. In this case there was a secret ballot where voters wrote a name on a piece of broken **pottery** (*ostrakon*). An important element in the debates was freedom of speech (*parrhēsia*) which became, perhaps, the citizen's most valued privilege. After suitable discussion, temporary or specific decrees (*psēphismata*) were adopted and laws (*nomoi*) defined. The assembly also ensured decisions were enforced and officials were carrying out their duties correctly.



Ostraka

1. How did the ancient Greeks vote?

2. How often did the people of ancient Greece get together to vote?

3. What did the Greeks vote on?
