

# Ancient Greece: Democracy is born

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Image 1. An illustration of the agora of Athens in Ancient Greece. The agora was a large open space in the center of the city. The assembly meetings of early Greek democracy took place here. Photo by DeAgostini/Getty Images

Ancient Greece was made up of several small city-states. Each one had its own government. In the city-state of Athens, the people created the first democratic government around 2,500 years ago. In a democracy, citizens are given the right to vote and work together to make decisions.

Not everyone in Athens was considered a citizen, though. Only free, adult men were given the rights of citizenship. Women were not citizens and therefore could not vote or take part in government. They were rarely permitted to go out in public. Slaves and foreigners were not citizens either. In all, only about 1 out of 5 people in Athens was a citizen. Democracy only existed for the free men who were originally from Athens.

## **New Members Of The Assembly**

Early in Athens' history, a man named Solon made changes to the government. These changes helped poor people have a larger voice. Poor citizens gained the right to sit in the assembly and vote. The assembly was a group that made important decisions. It chose people to lead the army and run the city.

Later, a man named Cleisthenes made more changes to the government. He expanded the democracy by giving every citizen equal rights. He also created a group of lawmakers for Athens. They were picked randomly from out of all the citizens.

The assembly meetings were held in the agora. This was a large open space in the middle of Athens. It had a marketplace as well as government buildings.

In the agora, citizens gathered to talk about problems of the day before gathering for the assembly meeting. During the meeting, citizens were free to share their opinions. Then they were expected to cast their votes.

The courts were also in the agora. The juries in court cases were very large. They were made up of hundreds and sometimes even thousands of people. This was because Athenians wanted their juries to look like the general population of the city. There were no lawyers in the courts, because each citizen was expected to make his own case.

### Majority Rule

In Athens, the people made decisions by majority rule. This means that they followed whatever decision won the most votes. All citizens had equal rights and powers. Athenian democracy depended on every citizen doing his duty. All citizens were expected to vote. They were also expected to serve in the government if they were needed. Every citizen had to take part or else they would get in trouble.

In this sense, democracies today are quite different. For example, in the United States, citizens are free to choose if they want to vote or not.

In a city-state as small as Athens, a pure democracy was possible. Every citizen was able to vote on every important decision. But as states grew larger, this became more difficult. It became easier for people to elect representatives to make decisions for them. People voted for lawmakers like they do today. But the notion that every citizen's voice should be heard began in ancient Athens.

