

# Government in Athens

## What You Will Learn...

### Main Ideas

1. Aristocrats and tyrants ruled early Athens.
2. Athens created the world's first democracy.
3. Ancient democracy was different than modern democracy.

### The Big Idea

The people of Athens tried many different forms of government before creating a democracy.

### Key Terms and People

democracy, p. 236  
 aristocrats, p. 237  
 oligarchy, p. 237  
 citizens, p. 237  
 tyrant, p. 237  
 Pericles, p. 240



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### TAKING NOTES

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on the various types of government the people of Athens tried.

## If YOU were there...

For many years, your city has been ruled by a small group of rich men. They have generally been good leaders. They have built new buildings and protected the city from enemies. But now a new leader wants to let all free men help run the government. It won't matter whether they are rich or poor. Some people, however, worry about giving power to ordinary people.

## What do you think of this new government?

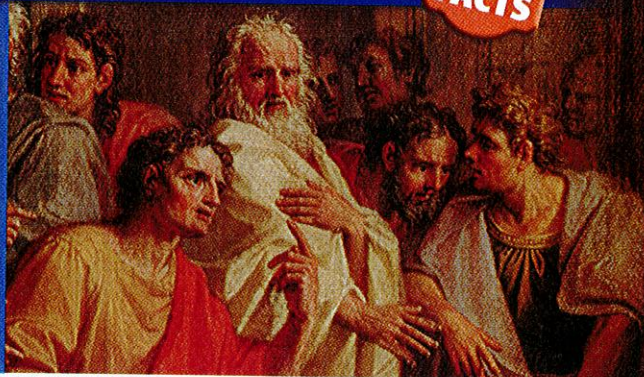
**BUILDING BACKGROUND** The decision to change a city's government was not unusual in Greece. Many cities tried several forms of government before people were satisfied. To see how these changes came about, we can look at one city whose government changed many times—Athens.

## Aristocrats and Tyrants Rule

Greece is the birthplace of **democracy**, a type of government in which people rule themselves. The word democracy comes from Greek words meaning “rule of the people.” But Greek city-states didn't start as democracies, and not all became democratic.

## Government in Athens

### QUICK FACTS



### 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.”

## Rule by a Few People

Even Athens, the city where democracy was born, began with a different kind of government. In early Athens, kings ruled the city-state. Later, a group of **rich landowners, or aristocrats** (uh-RIS-tuh-krats), took power. A government in which **only a few people have power is called an oligarchy** (AH-luh-gar-kee).

The aristocrats dominated Athenian society. As the richest men in town, they ran the city's economy. They also served as its generals and judges. Common people had little say in the government.

In the 600s BC a group of rebels tried to overthrow the aristocrats. They failed. Possibly as a result of their attempt, however, a man named Draco (DRAY-koh) created a new set of laws for Athens. These laws were very harsh. For example, Draco's laws made minor crimes such as loitering punishable by death.

The people of Athens thought Draco's laws were too strict. In the 590s BC a man named Solon (SOH-luhn) created a set of laws that were much less harsh and gave more rights to nonaristocrats. Under Solon's laws, all free men living in Athens became **citizens, people who had the right to participate in government**. But his efforts were not enough for the Athenians. They were ready to end the rule of the aristocracy.

## The Rise of the Tyrants

Because the Athenians weren't pleased with the rule of the aristocrats, they wanted a new government. In 546 BC a noble named Peisistratus (py-SIS-truht-uhs) overthrew the oligarchy. He became the ruler of Athens. Peisistratus was called a **tyrant, which meant a leader who held power through the use of force**.

Today the word *tyrant* means a ruler who is harsh, but the word had a different meaning in ancient Greece. Athenian tyrants were usually good leaders. Tyrants were able to stay in power because they had strong armies and because the people supported them.

Peisistratus brought peace and prosperity to the city. He began new policies meant to unify the city. He created new festivals and built temples and monuments. During his rule, many improvements were made in Athens.

After Peisistratus died, his son took over as tyrant. Many aristocrats, however, were unhappy because their power was gone. Some of these aristocrats convinced a rival city-state to attack Athens. As a result of this invasion, the tyrants lost power and, for a short time, aristocrats returned to power in Athens.

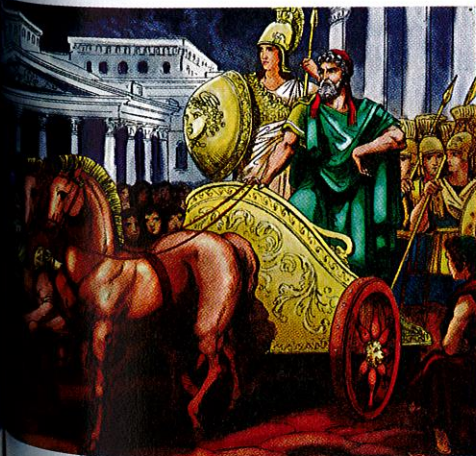
**READING CHECK** Finding Main Ideas What was a tyrant in ancient Greece?

### FOCUS ON READING

How do Greek roots give you clues to the meaning of *oligarchy*?

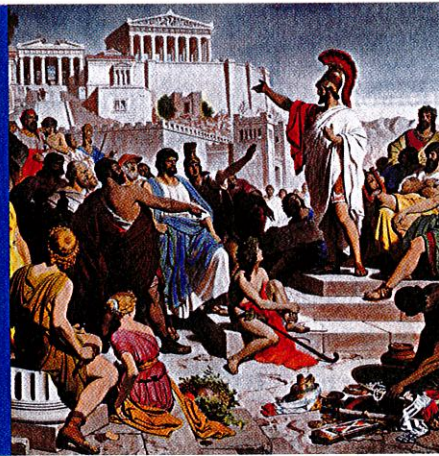
### THE IMPACT TODAY

Today very harsh laws or rules are called "draconian" after Draco.



### 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.



### 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.

## History Close-up

# Democracy in Action

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.

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

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.

## Athens Creates Democracy

Around 500 BC a new leader named Cleisthenes (KLYS-thuh-neeZ) gained power in Athens. Although he was a member of one of the most powerful families in Athens, Cleisthenes didn't want aristocrats to run the government. He thought they already had too much influence. By calling on the support of the people, Cleisthenes was able to overthrow the aristocracy once and for all. In its place, he established a completely new form of government.

Under Cleisthenes' leadership, Athens developed the world's first democracy. For this reason, he is sometimes called the father of democracy.

## Democracy under Cleisthenes

Under Cleisthenes, all citizens in Athens had the right to participate in the assembly, or gathering of citizens, that created the city's laws. The assembly met outdoors on a hillside so that everyone could attend the meetings. During meetings, people stood before the crowd and gave speeches on political issues. Every citizen had the right to speak his opinion. In fact, the Athenians encouraged people to speak. They loved to hear speeches and debates. After the speeches were over, the assembly voted. Voting was usually done by a show of hands, but sometimes the Athenians used secret ballots.

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.

Men in the crowd often argued with speakers.

**ANALYSIS SKILL** ANALYZING VISUALS  
How did people vote in ancient Athens?

The number of people who voted in the assembly changed from day to day. For major decisions, however, the assembly needed about 6,000 people to vote. But it wasn't always easy to gather that many people together in one place.

According to one Greek writer, the government sent slaves to the market to round up more citizens if necessary. In one of the writer's plays, slaves walked through the market holding a long rope between them. The rope was covered in red dye and would mark the clothing of anyone it touched. Any citizen with red dye on his clothing had to go to the assembly meeting or pay a large fine.

Because the assembly was so large, it was sometimes difficult to make decisions. The Athenians therefore selected citizens to be city officials and to serve on a smaller council. These officials decided which laws the assembly should discuss. This helped the government run more smoothly.

### Changes in Athenian Democracy

As time passed, citizens gained more powers. For example, they served on juries to decide court cases. Juries had anywhere from 200 to 6,000 people, although juries of about 500 people were much more common. Most juries had an odd number of members to prevent ties.

#### THE IMPACT TODAY

Like the ancient Greeks, we use juries to decide court cases. But our modern juries have only 12 people.

## Primary Source

### SPEECH

## Pericles' Funeral Oration

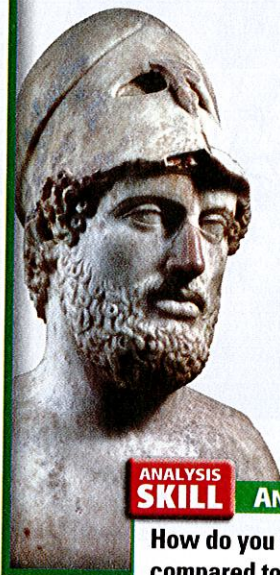
In 430 BC Pericles addressed the people of Athens at a funeral for soldiers who had died in battle. In his speech, Pericles tried to comfort the Athenians by reminding them of the greatness of their government.

Pericles is praising the Athenians for creating a democracy.

“Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not copy our neighbors, but are an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few ... There is no exclusiveness [snobbery] in our public life, and ... we are not suspicious of one another. ...”

—Pericles, quoted in Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

Athenian government was open to all free men, not just a few.



### ANALYSIS SKILL

### ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

How do you think Pericles felt Athenian government compared to other cities' governments?

Athens remained a democracy for about 170 years. It reached its height under a brilliant elected leader named **Pericles** (PER-uh-leez). He led the government from about 460 BC until his death in 429 BC.

Pericles encouraged the Athenians to take pride in their city. He believed that participating in government was just as important as defending Athens in war. To encourage people to participate in government, Pericles began to pay people who served in public offices or on juries. Pericles also encouraged the people of Athens to introduce democracy into other parts of Greece.

## End of Democracy in Athens

Eventually, the great age of Athenian democracy came to an end. In the mid-330s BC Athens was conquered by the Macedonians from north of Greece. After the conquest, Athens fell under strong Macedonian influence.

Even after being conquered by Macedonia, Athens kept its democratic government. But it was a democracy with very limited powers. The Macedonian king ruled his country like a dictator, a ruler who held all the power. No one could make any decisions without his approval.

In Athens, the assembly still met to make laws, but it had to be careful not to upset the king. The Athenians didn't dare make any drastic changes to their laws without the king's consent. They weren't happy with this situation, but they feared the king's powerful army. Before long, though, the Athenians lost even this limited democracy. In the 320s BC a new king took over Greece and ended Athenian democracy forever.

**READING CHECK** Summarizing How were citizens involved in the government of Athens?

## Ancient Democracy Differs from Modern Democracy

Like ancient Athens, the United States has a democratic government in which the people hold power. But our modern democracy is very different from the ancient Athenians' democracy.

### Direct Democracy

All citizens in Athens could participate directly in the government. We call this form of government a direct democracy. It is called direct democracy because each person's decision directly affects the outcome of a vote. In Athens, citizens gathered

together to discuss issues and vote on them. Each person's vote counted, and the majority ruled.

The United States is too large for direct democracy to work for the whole country. For example, it would be impossible for all citizens to gather in one place for a debate. Instead, the founders of the United States set up another kind of democracy.

### Representative Democracy

The democracy created by the founders of the United States is a representative democracy, or republic. In this system, the citizens elect officials to represent them in the government. These elected officials then meet to make the country's laws and to enforce them. For example, Americans elect senators and representatives to Congress, the body that makes the country's laws. Americans don't vote on each law that Congress passes but trust their chosen representatives to vote for them.

**READING CHECK** **Contrasting** How are direct democracy and representative democracy different?

## Democracy Then and Now

**QUICK FACTS**

### 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.

**SUMMARY AND PREVIEW** In this section, you learned about the development and decline of democracy in Athens. You also learned how Athenian democracy influenced the government of the United States. In the next section, you will learn about the beliefs and culture of the ancient Greeks and how they affect our culture and literature today.

## Section 2 Assessment

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**ONLINE QUIZ**

### Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Define** What are **aristocrats**?

**b. Contrast** How were **oligarchy** and **tyranny** different?
- a. Describe** Describe the **democracy** created by Cleisthenes.

**b. Analyze** How did **Pericles** change Athenian democracy?
- a. Identify** What type of democracy did Athens have?

**b. Develop** In what situations would a representative democracy work better than a direct democracy?

### Critical Thinking

- Finding Main Ideas** Draw a chart like the one shown. Using your notes, identify who held power

in each type of government. Then write a sentence explaining what role common people had in each government.

| Oligarchy | Tyranny | Democracy |
|-----------|---------|-----------|
|           |         |           |

### FOCUS ON WRITING

- Connecting Personalities and Governments** Think back to the personalities you assigned to natural features in Section 1. What if people with these same personalities were working to create a government? What kind would they create? Would they rule as tyrants or build a democracy? Write your thoughts in your notebook.