

Ancient Greek Government: Foundations of Democracy in Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece is often referred to as "the cradle of democracy." In the late 500's to early 400's BCE, **democracy** developed in the city-state of Athens. The word democracy comes from the Greek words *demos*, meaning "the people," and *kratos*, meaning "to rule." This is a form of government which puts the power to rule in the hands of all the people. This tells the story of how democracy came to be in Ancient Greece.

Monarchy in Greece

Ancient Greece was not always a democracy. Because Greece is made up of many islands, the villages that developed in the area were isolated (separate) from one another. As the villages grew into **city-states**, or **polis**, each developed their own government, economy, and way of life. The early city-states (800-100 BCE) were ruled by hereditary kings, meaning the power to rule was passed down through the family line. This type of government is a **monarchy**. The kings were advised by wealthy nobles, or **aristocrats**.

Oligarchy & Tyranny

As many people of the Greek city-states grew tired of the kings, the rich & powerful landowners were able to overthrow the kings and seize (take) power. By the 8th century BCE many of the Greek city-states were ruled by nobles. This type of government is called an **oligarchy**, which means "ruled by a few." They had many of the powers like the kings. The common people had no power or say.

During the 6th and 7th centuries BCE, there were many middle class uprisings against the aristocrats and nobles. A new group of rulers emerged, the "**tyrants**." Greek tyrants seized power from the aristocrats by force, or military strength. In the beginning the tyrants were popular. They helped rid the people of the unpopular oligarchies and made many promises. After a time, they began to rule as a king. They kept power by using fear and military force.

Reformers in Ancient Greece Government

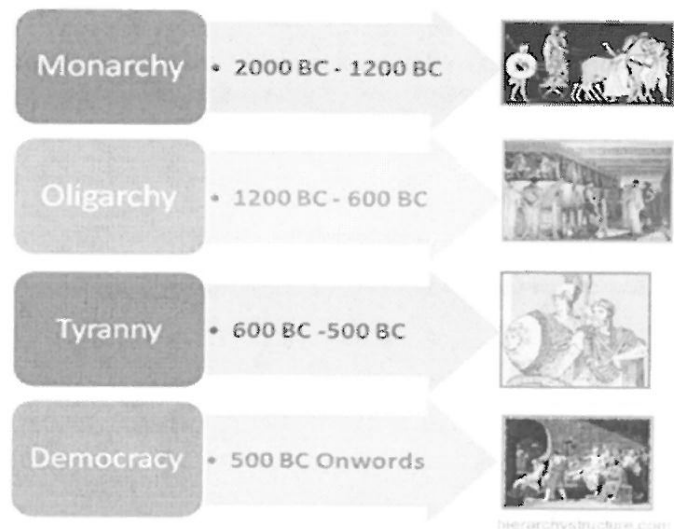
After awhile, people were ready for a change from the tyrants. Solon (So-lin) was one of the earliest **reformers**. Reformers are people who want to create change. He took power in Athens in 594 BCE and made some of the first strides towards **democracy**. He cancelled land debts and freed many people who had been made slaves because of debt. He set up a new code of laws and the first court system for all citizens.

In 510 BCE, Cleisthenes (Clise-then-ees) overthrew the tyrants and turned to the people of Athens for support. He believed in equal rights for all citizens and is considered by many to be the founder of Athenian democracy. Cleisthenes proposed a constitution that made Athens a democracy. He created the **council of 500** to oversee the government and propose laws and created an **assembly** to debate and vote upon the laws.

Cleisthenes called his new political structure **democracy** - rule by the entire body of citizens. The type of government in which all citizens participate in large meetings and vote on all issues is known today as a **direct democracy**.

Democracy continued in Athens and spread to many other city-states in ancient Greece. By the time **Pericles** became the leader of Athens, democracy was considered the way of life. Pericles contributed to democracy to allow more citizens to participate by paying people for serving in public office and jury duty. This payment allowed the poorer citizens of Athens to participate.

Not all residents of Athens were considered citizens. Citizenship was limited to those whose parents were also citizens. Slaves, former slaves, and foreign residents were not considered citizens. Women were not allowed to participate in **politics** either. With these restrictions, only about 30,000 to 40,000 of the approximately 250,000 residents of Athens were actually able to participate in politics.



Features of Democracy

Rule of law was an important value in Athens. It was the duty of all citizens to obey the law. Athens had courts and **trial by jury**. The juries were much larger than the ones we have today and might range from a few hundred to a thousand.

Athenians also viewed **civic participation** as an important part of their democracy. They considered this participation both an honor and their **civic duty**. Male citizens discussed and debated politics, spoke and voted in the assembly, served on juries, and served in the military. Although democracy was not always used in Ancient Greece, it had a lasting impact on the world. Over 2000 years later, it serves as a foundation for U.S democracy.