



How Democracy Worked in Ancient Athens

KS2 HISTORY

ANCIENT GREECE

Ages 10-12 ⌚ 3 min read

What Was Athenian Democracy?

Around **2,500 years ago**, the people of **ancient Athens** invented something completely new: **democracy**. The word comes from two Greek words meaning "people" and "power" — so democracy means the **people have power**. Unlike most countries at that time, which had kings or emperors making all the decisions, Athens let ordinary **citizens** vote on important choices.

Think of it like a school where instead of just the headteacher deciding everything, every student in the whole school gets to vote on what happens. If most students vote for something, that's what the school does!

Who Could Vote?

Here's the tricky part: not everyone in Athens could vote. Only **free men aged over 18** who were born in Athens could participate. This meant women, slaves, and people from other countries — who made up most of the population — had no say at all. So while Athenian democracy was groundbreaking, it was also unfair by today's standards.

How Did Citizens Make Decisions?

In **Athens**, citizens gathered together on a hillside called the **Agora** for a giant public meeting. Men would stand up and argue for or against different ideas. They might debate whether to go to war, build a new temple, or make new laws. Then everyone voted by a show of hands or by dropping pebbles into urns — one colour meant yes, another meant no.

Think of it like your class having a meeting where everyone who gets to vote stands up and raises their hand to decide something together — except with thousands of people instead of 30!

The Danger of Mob Rule

Because so many people voted directly, sometimes the crowd made emotional decisions rather than wise ones. **Ostracism** was a weird rule where citizens could vote to banish someone they didn't like for **ten years**. People would scratch a name on a piece of pottery called an **ostrakon**, and if enough votes agreed, that person had to leave the city!

Why Does It Matter?

Ancient Athens showed the world that ordinary people could govern themselves. Even though it was limited and unfair, it planted the seed for modern democracies. Today, when you vote or have a say in decisions, you're using an idea that started in Athens all those centuries ago.