

WORLD HISTORY READERS

Level 6 - ⑥

The First Democracies

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Seed
Learning



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Before Democracy

You may have heard about democracy. But what is it? Democracy is a system of decision-making in an institution, organization, or country in which all members have an equal share of power. Typically, this means everyone has a right to vote on how the organization or country is run.

Throughout history, most political systems have been headed by a monarch—a king, queen, emperor, or empress.

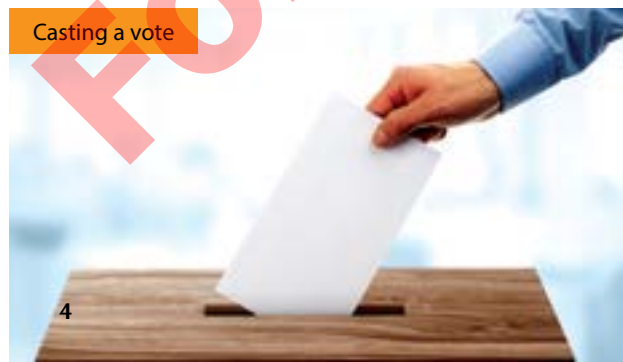
Under a democracy, the leaders are elected through voting and elections. The winning candidates in an election then assume the position to which they were elected. And they should follow the wishes of the people who voted them into power.



Voters having their say during an election



Making a political speech during an election, Uganda



Casting a vote

“Wise Men” Systems

About 3,000 years ago, in areas such as the Middle East, there were forms of government that included leadership by elders or “wise men.” They ran cities or had the political power to decide on major issues such as war. Although these governments were not truly democratic with elected leaders, they were not led by monarchs.



The king and queen of Spain, 2012



Wise men discussing important matters, Afghanistan

Sparta's Early Democracy

An early attempt at democracy in the 7th century BC occurred in a state called Sparta in the south of Greece. Sparta's system was unusual in the ancient world because it had two kings as well as different groups who shared power.



One group was called the “ephors.” New ephors were elected every year. The ephors were five men who were elected by Spartan citizens. Another group consisted of thirty elders. These elders had to be over 60 years old and were elected for life. These groups were formed to watch over each other to ensure one group did not become too powerful.

In Sparta's system, most of the real power rested with a very small number of people. It was not a true democracy, but it was a step in that direction.



Some ruins of ancient Sparta



A man dressed as a Spartan soldier

The First Real Democracy

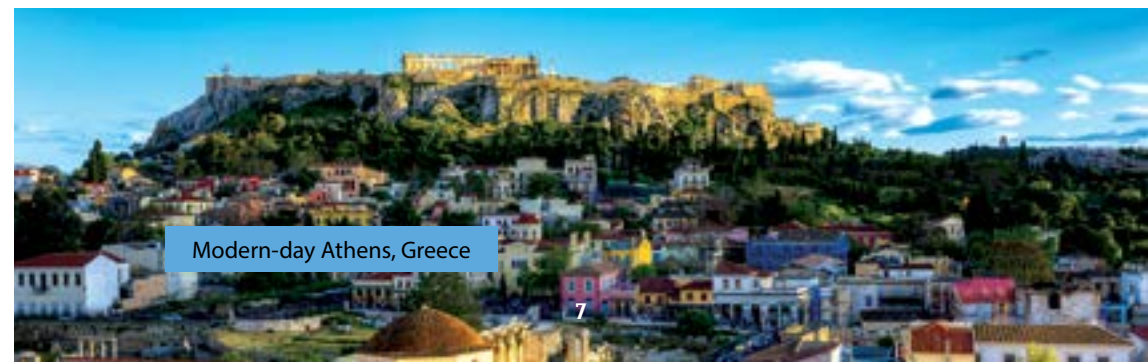
In the 5th century BC in Athens, there was an experiment to form the first democracy. Because the population was small, about 50,000 males over the age of 18, it made the communication of ideas easy. It also made an effective voting system possible. The power of the vote was given to adult male citizens who owned land.

The main democratic body of Athens was the assembly. The assembly met at least once a month, usually two or three times a month, at the top of a hill called Pnyx. About 4,000-5,000 citizens went. Voting was done by a show of hands.

Many things were discussed and decided upon at the assembly. The assembly voted on treaties to be signed, the organization of food supplies, and even military leaders.



The Pnyx,
Athens, Greece



Modern-day Athens, Greece



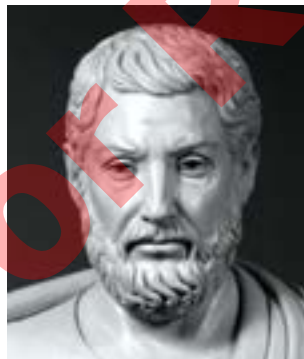
A relief of Athenian military leaders



Greek democracy today

The Athenian democracy had many checks and balances. There was a council of 500 citizens chosen every year who could make emergency decisions. There was a chosen executive committee. There were even chosen military leaders. Citizens were even selected randomly to serve on juries during court cases.

If a citizen acted badly, the others could vote that person out of Athens for ten years. This was mostly for people who became too powerful or dangerous. It made sure that people in power acted responsibly.



Cleisthenes, the father of Greek democracy

All this came to an end after the death of Alexander the Great when Athens tried to expand its powers but failed.

The Macedonian people replaced the political system in Athens with their own oligarchy.

A form of democracy did return to Athens eventually. But it would be more than 2,000 years before other attempts to give real power to the people were made.



Alexander the Great

Comprehension Questions

1. Another name for a king, queen, emperor or empress is...
 - (a) a democracy.
 - (b) a parliament.
 - (c) a monarch.
 - (d) a commune.
2. About 3,000 years ago, some communities were led by...
 - (a) an oligarchy.
 - (b) wise men or elders.
 - (c) a parliament.
 - (d) a constitution.
3. Under Sparta's political system, there were...
 - (a) 5 ephors.
 - (b) 30 elders.
 - (c) 2 kings.
 - (d) All of the above
4. In Athens in the 5th century BC, citizens were...
 - (a) made to serve in the military.
 - (b) allowed to vote.
 - (c) made to go to the Pnyx every day.
 - (d) All of the above
5. The democracy formed in ancient Athens was...
 - (a) used in Athens for thousands of years.
 - (b) replaced by an oligarchy.
 - (c) not possible for 10 years.
 - (d) made up of 30 tribes.
6. A commune in 12th century Italy was...
 - (a) made up of only merchants.
 - (b) a group of people who promised to protect each other.
 - (c) an arengo.
 - (d) All of the above
7. Parliament means...
 - (a) to speak.
 - (b) the right to speak.
 - (c) a place to speak.
 - (d) a speech.
8. The Magna Carta was...
 - (a) a group of elected citizens.
 - (b) a type of political system.
 - (c) an illegal act by a king.
 - (d) a document outlining some laws.
9. The Bill of Rights is a...
 - (a) way to control the president.
 - (b) set of amendments to the US Constitution.
 - (c) constitution.
 - (d) All of the above
10. Women were first given the right to vote in...
 - (a) The US.
 - (b) India.
 - (c) New Zealand.
 - (d) The Isle of Man.

Glossary

- **amendment** a change or changes made to the words of a text
- **assembly** a meeting of a large group of people gathering to make decisions
- **Bill of Rights** the first 10 amendments to the US Constitution
- **commune** a group of people who promised to protect each other among community members of a town, city, or area
- **constitution** a formal document outlining the main laws of a country
- **council** a group of people formed in order to advise
- **democracy** a political system in which the people choose their leaders
- **merchant** a business person who buys and sells things
- **monarch** the king, queen, emperor or empress of a country
- **oligarchy** a political system whereby most power is held by a small number of people or families
- **partial** in part; not complete
- **restrict** to limit something
- **slavery** the ownership of people by others
- **suffragette** a person protesting to get women the right to vote

Key 1. (c) 2. (b) 3. (d) 4. (b) 5. (b) 6. (b) 7. (c) 8. (d) 9. (b) 10. (d)