

Preface:

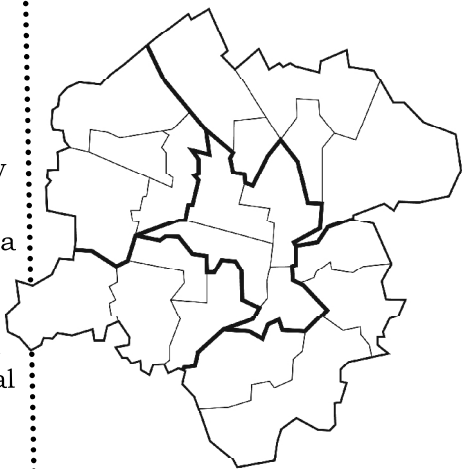
Understanding Democracy

With all the talk about “democracy” these days, it’s surprising how little time is spent thinking about *the very idea* of democracy—the *history* of this political institution and the *justification* for it as a political institution.

In this book we’ll look at the history and concept of democracy as well as some challenges that democracy faces today. And while we focus on the American institution of democracy, much of what we say can be applied more broadly.

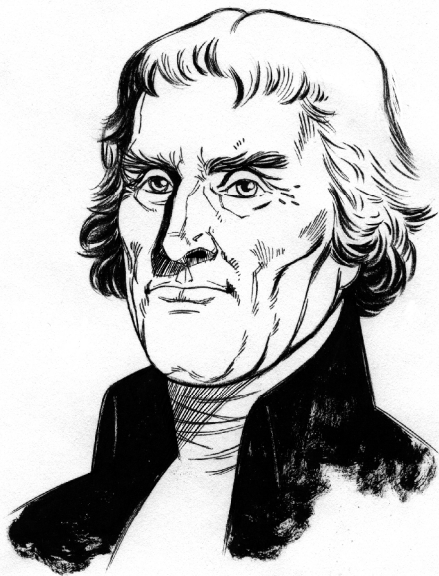
But first a little quiz.

- What state district do you live in?
- Who is your state senator?
- If you live in a city, who is your city council person?
- What ward do you live in? What is a “ward”? (This was a big deal for Thomas Jefferson.)
- If you’re old enough, when was the last time you voted in a presidential election?
- Have you ever attended a community meeting?
- Have you ever contacted any of your city and state representatives?



Don’t feel bad if you didn’t do well on this test, most Americans don’t. One reason for reading this book is to see how we all can be better at this—better at doing democracy.

By the way, for Thomas Jefferson, to ensure a properly educated citizenry, you should “divide every county into wards of five or six miles square...” (letter to John Adams, 1813). Why? Because it was here, in the wards, that our education would begin. And education counts!



Thomas Jefferson

“I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.”

—letter to W. Jarvis, 1820

In the Beginning



Most people see democracy or “rule by the people” as having its origins in the Greek city-state (*polis*). Over many decades during the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E.*, Greek society evolved from a culture of powerful warlords to a culture of laws and law-givers.

In **Athens**, new laws divided the country into “demes” or grids, and Athenian citizens became numerical entities—equal to each other in their ability to cast votes and influence policy. Of course, these citizens were males born in Athens; the larger majority of those living in Athens—women, slaves, and resident foreigners—had no voice in the city.

Still, without being too rosy-eyed, it was a remarkable achievement. By the mid-5th century, during the Age of Pericles, the city-state of Athens had become the world’s first fully functioning, direct, participatory democracy. As **Pericles** himself once famously said:



“Our constitution ... favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition....”

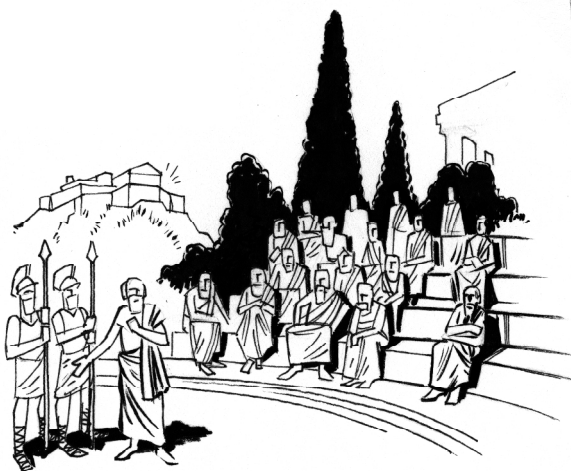
* “Before the Common Era” is what historians formerly called “Before Christ” (B.C.)

Pericles' oration came from a funeral speech given during a disastrous war between Athens and Sparta. By the end of the century, Athens would recover little of its former glory—and when democracy was restored after a brief period of Spartan-supported tyranny, the Athenians set about to bring one of its most notorious citizens, Socrates, to trial on charges of impiety and corruption of the youth. (Many saw Socrates—as some see secularism today—as a corrupting influence and the source for many of the ills that beset the state.)

Whipping up the emotions of the jurors—some 501 of them—Socrates' accusers eventually convicted him of these charges—and the penalty was death by hemlock.

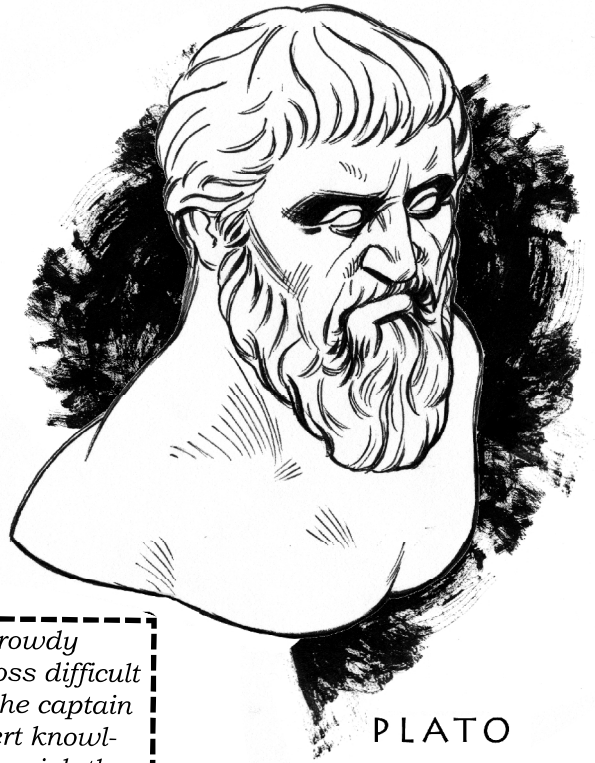


S O C R A T E S



The philosopher **Plato** (429-347 B.C.E.) was present during this ordeal and would later come to be one of the greatest critics of democratic institutions.

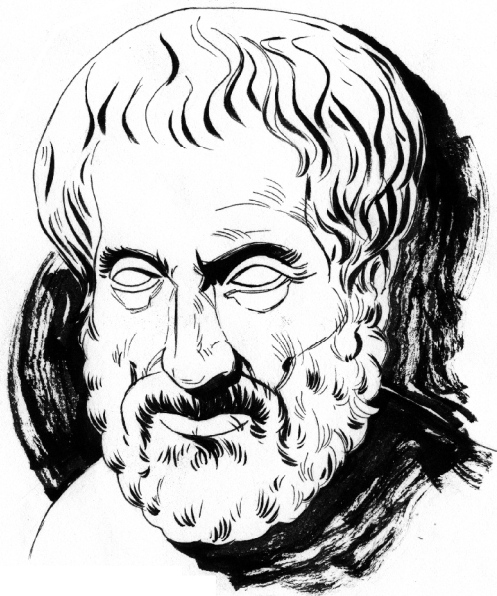
For Plato, the trial and death of Socrates was proof that the voice of the people is easily shaped and often mistaken. The masses are the *last* people to be put in power.



You wouldn't turn to a rowdy crew to pilot a ship across difficult waters...you'd turn to the captain of the ship, whose expert knowledge would always outweigh the opinion of the many.

Appealing to the people (those feisty *hoi poloi*) becomes the *ad populum* fallacy—if everyone thinks the earth is flat, this doesn't mean that the earth *is* flat. Of every statement of the form, “The people say X is good,” we can always ask, “But *is* it good?”—and an answer to that requires a separate investigation. We ultimately want knowledge of these matters, not mere opinion...or opinion polls.

For Plato, such knowledge is ultimately found in a separate realm of eternal ideas (of justice, goodness, and beauty). And only those statesmen who are capable of understanding these ideas could truly be political leaders. This is his ideal of the philosopher-king. A truly bad idea, as the philosopher Karl Popper might say.



ARISTOTLE

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), the other great philosopher of the Classical Period, also had grave misgivings about democracy. In his discussions of the different types of constitutions found in the Ancient world, Aristotle believed that democracy would be beset by the class problems of rich and poor—and that the people will think of themselves and not the common good. This would lead, he feared, to mob rule and a tyranny of the majority.

Actually, it's more complicated for Aristotle. There are two forms of "rule by many"—one includes everybody (the crowd), the other is limited to rule by property owners. The ancients (and some of our Founding Fathers) felt that property owners would have more of a stake in the order of society and could not easily be bought off (as the very poor might).

Aristotle also perceived that a rising middle class of merchants would also have a moderating effect on democracies.

Still, for much of history, democracies of any kind were seen as inferior to regimes run by good monarchs (rule by one) or by aristocracies (rule by a few, the best, the *aristos*). These kinds of good rulers would supposedly be guided by virtue, seeking peace and the Common Good for all.*

* Aristotle also listed deficient versions of "rule by one" and "rule by many." These were called tyrannies and oligarchies (a few of the wealthy): both tyrants and oligarchs rule for the sake of themselves, not for the good of the country.



For these early critics, democracy as a political institution doesn't really help us answer the question: What ought we, as a society, to do?

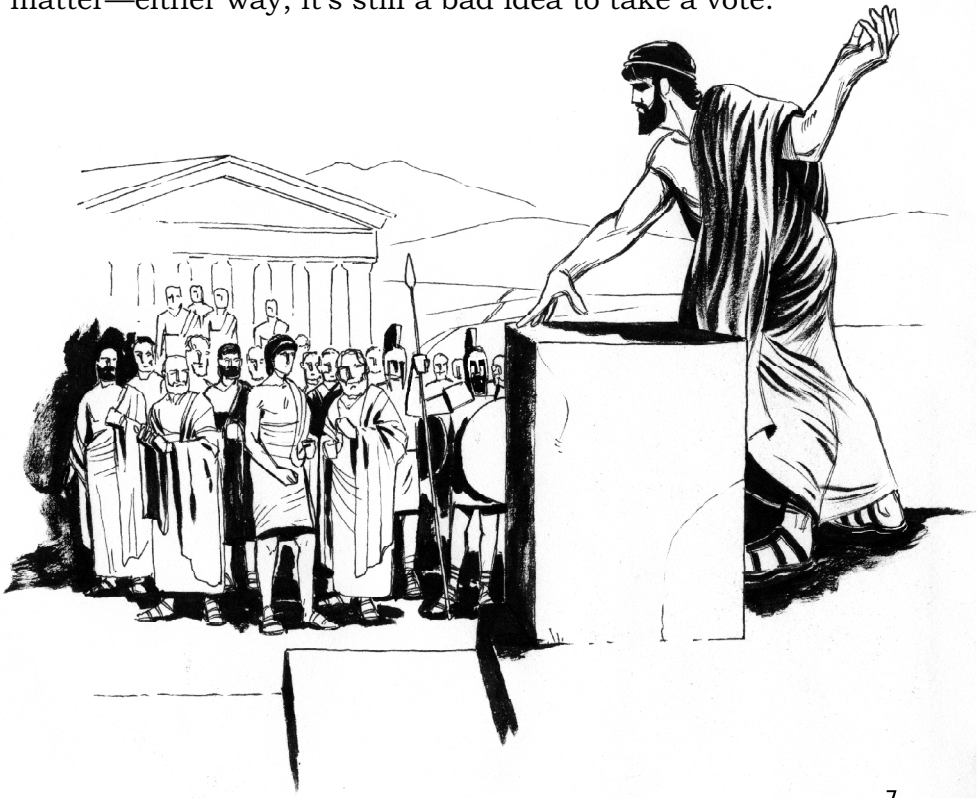
Seen as a decision-procedure, democracy seems to put the wrong people (the majority) in charge, since they lack:

(a) sufficient knowledge (Plato) and

(b) sufficient goodness (Aristotle).

By the way, the Greek idea of a city-state also saddled the concept of democracy with the notion that for everyone to participate in self-government, they would have to show up at meetings. For Aristotle a political state should be no larger than a three-day walk from the center.

Hence direct, participatory democracies would seem to be limited in size (Swiss cantons and New England towns). Yet again, as far as making decisions is concerned, size really doesn't matter—either way, it's still a bad idea to take a vote.



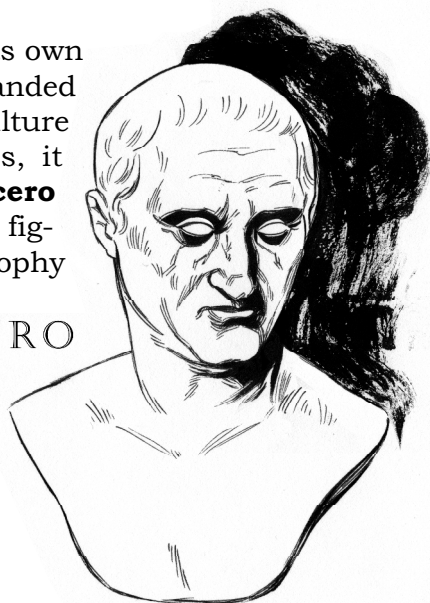
No sooner had Aristotle finished his philosophy than the world of the Greek city-state began to come to an end. **Alexander the Great** (who, as Alexander the Boy, was tutored by Aristotle) had conquered the world—all the way to India and down to Alexandria (in ancient Egypt).



After Alexander's death, his empire was divided into large kingdoms and soon after there arose in the West (Italy) a new force in the ancient world: the Romans.

As Rome ascended, it developed its own idea of a republic and quickly expanded its empire to rule the world. A culture of engineers and military legions, it also gave rise to thinkers like **Cicero** (106 - 43 B.C.E.), who literally and figuratively translated Greek philosophy into latin.

CICERO



Following Aristotle's division of constitutions (rule by one, the few, and the many), he noted that the absolute rule of a wise king might be best, but succession makes this regime unstable, the first and most certain to decay. Even a great ruler can beget a lousy son.

So Cicero advocated a *mixed constitution* consisting of consuls (executive, royal power), senate (aristocratic, deliberative power), and tribunes (representing the interests of the "plebs" or the people).

This scheme actually anticipates elements of our own democracy—corresponding roughly to our President, Senate, and House of Representatives. In this regard, John Adams, for one, took his study of Cicero seriously. He relied on the Roman philosopher and statesman for his arguments in favor of a democracy divided into separate branches of government. In *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), this division involves what we call a strong executive branch, a "bicameral" legislature (the two *camera*, Latin for "chambers," of Senate and House) and an independent judiciary.

Bravo for mixed constitutions!

