



# ***UNIVERSITY OF THE PEOPLE***

***HIST 1421-01 GREEK & ROMAN CIVILIZATION - AY2024-T3***

***LEARNING JOURNAL UNIT 1***

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The ancient Greek city of Athens pioneered democracy, granting citizens voting rights and political participation. Yet Athenian democracy lasted less than 200 years and faced skeptics - most prominently the iconic philosopher Socrates. As Stefan Ivanovski (2021) explains, Socrates believed democracy could not reliably produce good governance because elections reflect intuition rather than educated judgement. Moreover, Socrates warned that the masses could easily be swayed by charismatic demagogues advocating irrational policies. Ironically proving his point, Socrates was condemned to death by a narrow vote of the Athenian assembly in 399 BCE. He was executed for questioning prominent Athenians and critiquing democracy's logic - illustrating its potential for rash actions silencing dissent. Even in one of history's first democracies, the uninformed whims of the majority could trump reasoned debate and thwart competent rule by educated minds.

*Socrates* was skeptical of democracy, believing that most people lacked the knowledge and wisdom to govern effectively. He felt a government run by the uninformed masses would make poor decisions. *Plato* shared Socrates' reservations, seeing democracy as a system that could easily descend into anarchy or be manipulated by rhetorically skilled demagogues.

In contrast, *Aristotle* was more optimistic about democracy. He believed that as an aggregate, the "multitude" could often judge issues well. Aristotle also defended the idea that citizens should play a direct role in political decisions to develop civic virtue and feel invested in their society. However, Aristotle still saw benefit in limiting participation in government to an educated middle class, rather than extending full voting rights to all.

Living in a modern democracy, I appreciate the principles and tensions underlying democratic governance. Universal voting rights give citizens an important voice regardless of background. Modern technology also enables broad participation in political discourse. However,

I share some of the Greek philosophers' wariness about handing full power directly to "the people." An uninformed, tribalistic majority can make poorly reasoned decisions undermining expert consensus, minority rights, and long-term stability.

Therefore, I believe healthy modern democracies need an educated citizenry, capable leaders open to constructive criticism, and structures limiting the power of simple majorities when fundamental rights and freedoms are threatened. Voting should be easy and accessible, but most major decisions should be filtered through representatives upholding norms of deliberation, compromise, and respect for expertise. For example, independent judiciaries can uphold minority rights and civil liberties against majority overreach. Bicameral legislatures can require bipartisan negotiation and consensus-building. Institutions like scientific advisory boards, education departments, and administrative agencies can inject non-partisan expertise into social policymaking.

In this system of "constrained democracy," citizens retain an important voice through voting and civic participation, but also rely on leadership by capable public servants and domain experts. Poorly informed citizens cannot easily impose bad policies reflecting their prejudices or confirmation biases. This, to me, is a prudent balance between mass participation and responsible governance - one that draws on useful insights from both supportive and skeptical Greek philosophical perspectives on democracy. The fundamentals of democracy deserve support, but majoritarian rule has drawbacks requiring constitutional limits and check-balancing institutions. Maintaining this equilibrium is key to securing democracy's blessings while mitigating its risks in an increasingly complex, specialized world.

Reference:

Ivanovski, S. (2021, September 6). What did ancient Greek philosophers think about democracy?

Lifestyle Democracy.

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