

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-4b Athenian Democracy  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 8-4b Athenian Democracy

Cleisthenes (ruling 508–494 B.C.E.) in effect gave away his tyrannical powers to a series of political bodies that were unprecedentedly democratic in character: the *ekklesia*, the *boule*, and the *deme*. The *ekklesia* (ek-KLAY-zee-ah) was the general “town meeting” of all free male Athenians, called on an ad hoc basis to make critical decisions affecting the future of the polis. All could speak freely in an attempt to win over the others; all could be elected to any office; all could vote at the meetings of the *ekklesia* in the center plaza of Athens below the Acropolis hill. The *boule* (BOO-lay) was a council of five hundred citizens who were chosen by lot for one-year terms. It served as a day-to-day legislature and executive branch, making and implementing policy under the general supervision of the *ekklesia*. The *boule* and its officers supervised the civil and military affairs of the polis and carried out many of the functions of a modern city council. All male citizens could expect to serve at least one term on it.

The *deme* (deem) was the basic political subdivision of the polis. It was a territorial unit, something like a modern precinct or ward, but smaller in population. Each *deme* was entitled to select a certain number of *boule* members and was represented more or less equally among the officers of the polis.

To enforce the will of the majority without resorting to bloodshed and possible civil war, Cleisthenes introduced the idea of *ostracism*, or the “pushing out” of a citizen who would not conform to the will of his neighbors. An ostracized person had to go into exile and lost all rights of citizenship for a certain length of time—normally ten years. So attached were the Greeks to their poleis that some preferred to kill themselves rather than submit to ostracism.

Of all the Athenian political institutions, democracy has attracted the most attention from later history. Americans tend to think of political democracy as a natural and normal way to govern a state, but in actuality, until the twentieth century, democracy was an abnormal system of government. It was talked about a good deal but was not put into practice outside the West, and in only a limited way within it. A great many modern countries still give only lip service to the idea of democracy, and sometimes not even that. The idea that an ordinary man or woman was capable of governing wisely and efficiently was quite daring when first introduced. After the initial democracy failed in Athens, as it did after about a century, it was so discredited that after the fourth century B.C.E. it was not resurrected as a legitimate and practical system of government until the eighteenth century C.E.—2200 years later!

How many other poleis became democracies at some time? The answer is not clear, but under the strong pressure of powerful Athens, probably quite a few adopted similar governments between 500 and 400 B.C.E. But even within Athens (as well as everywhere else), there was strong resistance to the idea—resistance that did not cease until

democracy had been abandoned and condemned as “the rule of the mob.” Ironically, it was the democratic leadership in Athens that created the conditions that allowed their opponents to win out.

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