

How did the introduction of democracy change the life of ordinary Athenians?

The Athenians believed that democracy was the best way of preserving “the interests of the majority, not just the few.”¹ The fundamental ideal of democracy was liberty, both political and personal: political liberty was the freedom to participate in the democratic process and personal liberty, was the ability to live according to how you wanted to live. The most important aspect of this form of liberty was freedom of speech; in public life, this was the right of every citizen to be able to address people in the assembly, and in private life was the right to speak your mind. All citizens in Athens had legal equality, regardless of wealth or status: the concept of *isonomia* had existed even before the democracy was fully established. The shift towards democracy in Attica was a very radical move; before then, as with most Greek states, Attica had been ruled by tyrants and aristocratic committees. This shift from power being concentrated in one monarch or a small group of wealthy individuals, to it being spread more widely across the masses led to huge changes in the life of Athenian citizens. The political process became very open, taking place amongst large assembly meetings in which any citizen who so desired could, in theory, discuss and make decisions about the running of the state and propose new policies and legislation.

The creation of the democracy resulted in a society in which the vast majority of the citizens were either directly involved with politics, or at least very aware of the machinations of the Athenian government. A system in which the masses were very politically aware is a complete contrast to many other ancient states; the Roman Empire was ruled by an oligarchy, Ancient Egypt had an absolute ruler, and the majority of other Greek states were ruled either

¹ Thuc. 2.37.

by an oligarchy or a monarch. This led to the creation of a hyper-political society, where ordinary citizens were acutely tuned in to the political goings on of the state. The Athenians were very aware of the concept of legal equality, and from even before the democracy was fully developed, they had enshrined it in their law. Solon introduced the concept of *isonomia* into his proto-democratic state: this concept was founded entirely upon all citizens being equal in the eyes of the law. Due to the hyper-politicisation of Athens, ordinary citizens theoretically had a say in every aspect of government policy, even foreign policy, economic policy and taxation.² As well as this, Thucydides often depicted Athenians as being exceptionally skilled at public speaking,³ something that would have been the result of a hyper-political society; ordinary citizens would be used to political debate in the assembly, and Athenians who could afford it would invest in rhetorical training, since being able to deliver a good speech would guarantee a higher level of influence and boost that person's reputation in Athenian society.⁴ Athens was unique amongst other ancient states in that it did not have a *cursus honorum* or any other similar pattern into political power. A skilled public speaker could gain large amounts of power and influence without holding office, since an Athenian citizen's reputation could be greatly increased simply by having the ability to make good speeches.⁵ This is clearly indicative of a hyper-political society; an ordinary individual could, in theory, gain large amounts of political power simply by knowing what to say in order to please the people of Athens.

However, due to the knowledge of the political and judicial systems becoming very widespread amongst the population, some individuals learned how to manipulate the system to their advantage. This led to the rise of sycophancy. Sycophants would prosecute other

2 Ober (1993) 483.

3 Pope (1988) 280.

4 Taylor (2007) 325.

5 Taylor (2007) 325.

citizens, usually on false charges,⁶ in the hope that their case would win and they would receive some sort of reward.⁷ Those individuals engaged in sycophancy always portrayed themselves as “a ‘public benefactor’, a servant of the people and a patriot”; they were adamant that their exposition of crimes, often with questionable evidence, was for the good of Athens.⁸ During and after the Peloponnesian war, when paranoia was reaching high levels, sycophants became endemic in Athens.⁹ The presence of cynical individuals manipulating the system for their own gain caused a large impact on Athenian life, although mainly in legal matters; in the law courts, people would often accuse their opponent of being a sycophant, in the hope that their charges would be dropped.

As a result of the emergence of a democratic state in Athens, there was a shift in the balance of power in Athenian society. In the majority of ancient societies, power was exclusively held by an absolute ruler or by a small group of wealthy politicians. In Athens however, since the system of government had shifted towards favouring mass participation, the masses became a much more powerful force, arguably more powerful than the wealthy elite of Athenian society. This would have made a drastic change to Athenian society; social status was now much less dependent on personal wealth and family background, and more dependent on individual ability. This was reflected in a change in the organization of the military. Due to the construction of the Athenian navy, those who were too poor to afford armour could still assist in fighting wars by joining the navy and becoming rowers.¹⁰ Even the identity of the state changed due to the new found power of the majority: the state is referred to not as “Attica”, like a modern territorial state, nor “the Republic of Athens”, like the Roman

6 Ehrenberg (1951) 344.

7 Ehrenberg (1951) 343.

8 Ehrenberg (1951) 345.

9 Ehrenberg (1951) 343.

10 Anderson (1974) 41.

Republic, but was always referred to as “the Athenians”.¹¹ This is a clear demonstration that the real power of the Athenian state was perceived to have been held not by the government, but by its people.

With this rise in the power of the majority, there was a contrasting reduction in the power of the wealthy. Although Athens still contained “a politically powerful and litigious elite”, they did not dominate political processes and their impact in meetings of the assembly was reduced by making the council, which was made up of citizens of various different backgrounds and chosen by lot,¹² decide the agenda for the meetings. Furthermore, the elite would not have been able to try to work the agenda around the demographic present at the assembly; people who attended the assembly were from many different backgrounds and therefore different views.¹³ As well as having their influence reduced in this way, the democratic system put individuals from the Athenian elite in competition with each other, vying to win the people's affection by outdoing each other in their proposals and speeches. This would have prevented the elite from working together to preserve their own interests, since they were much more focused on trying to win the majority over.¹⁴ People who held political offices were paid for their duties, which would have in theory removed the need for large amounts of personal wealth. The holder of the office was paid a regular wage by the state, so there was no need for a citizen to dig into his own pockets to cover the expenses of being a magistrate or a general.¹⁵ Additionally, Athens did not have a system of patronage like that present in ancient Rome and the impact of any form of patron-client loyalty would have been lessened by the introduction of measures such as jury pay.¹⁶ Without having any ties of loyalty to wealthier citizens, the poorer majority of Athens had more of an incentive to

11 Ehrenberg (1951) 337.

12 Jones (1953) 5.

13 Ober (1993) 484.

14 Ober (1993) 485.

15 Jones (1953) 8.

16 Ober (1993) 484.

act against the elite, should they try and do something which would have bad consequences for the people or the state.

In this masses-led state, the people gathered in the assembly acted as a form of mass judgement, with the individual citizens being the judges. As a result, the majority gained enormous control over the proceedings of the assembly. Because of this constant judgement by the citizens, speakers at the assembly needed to be very careful with what they said, as it could result in them being shouted off the speakers' platform at best, and the populace completely losing faith in them as a politician at the worst.¹⁷ Adding to this role of judgement, individual citizens were wholly responsible for turning in criminals and criminal trials were very public affairs.¹⁸ The need of the majority to have sound judgement was so important to the democracy that any attempts to lead the assembly into a decision, which would have negative consequences for them, or conspiring against them was regarded as "Deceiving the People". This was a very serious crime and could result in heavy penalties.¹⁹

However, even though there was a huge impact on society due to political power being spread out among the masses, the participation of the people was still limited to an extent. How the Athenian democracy worked in practice was in some ways quite different from what the theoretical concept of a democratic state described. Although every male citizen had the right to attend meetings of the assembly, in practice attendance was often quite low. This phenomenon of low assembly attendance is played for laughs in the opening scene of *Acharnians*. Dikaiopolis remarks that there is "not a soul here on the Pnyx! Everybody's down in the Market Square gossiping, that is when they're not dodging the red rope".²⁰ This is very different from the situation in *Assemblywomen*, set after the restoration of the democracy in 403 BC: people are rushing to the assembly even before daybreak because they now

17 Ober (1993) 483.

18 Ober (1993) 483.

19 Ober (1993) 484.

20Aristoph. *Ach.* 1-40.

receive pay for attendance, “people who're not there by daybreak miss their pay, and have to slink back home without so much as a clothes peg”.²¹ Speaking in public was a skill which needed practice to master; many Athenian citizens may have not had the time to develop the skills needed to be a strong and persuasive political speaker. This throws into doubt how much the majority of Athenian citizens could actually participate, since the only people who would have been able to regularly attend and speak at assembly meetings were people who had enough free time and money to develop their skills as speakers and gain political connections. These people would have come from the elite of Athenian society, or members of the commercial middle class who were wealthy enough to have large amounts of free time. However, a great emphasis was placed on offices being chosen by lot, considered the most egalitarian method of choosing people as it could not be biased by wealth or political power.²² The most important offices in the state, such as general ships and positions of high economic importance, were elected. Election was seen as an oligarchic method of choosing who should take up the office, since it depended on public opinion, something which could be very easily biased by wealth and status.²³ The Old Oligarch remarks that Athenians were often very snobbish in regards to who they chose to hold elected offices, choosing them on the grounds of wealth rather than on ability.²⁴ This is something which is very oligarchic in nature, making a complete contrast to the ideal of a government in which people were appointed to office on the basis of merit rather than wealth.

There were some Athenian citizens who, although encouraged to participate in the democracy like all others, chose not to out of their own free will.²⁵ These people tended to be amongst the traditional elite, including Aristophanes and his contemporaries; they were uninterested in politics because they cared more about their businesses and the state of the

21 Aristoph. *Eccl.* 282-84.

22 Jones (1953) 6.

23 Jones (1953) 7.

24 Taylor (2007) 330.

25 Ehrenberg (1951) 362.

economy.²⁶ Furthermore, there were some citizens who were apathetic towards, or even afraid of, politics. A person like this was known as an *apragmon*, an unpolitical man.²⁷ Being unpolitical ran against some of the traditions of the democracy, as it was expected that a man from a rich family would engage himself in some form of political activity, even if it was in opposition to the state.²⁸ This would have made an impact on the lives of Athenian citizens, because with less and less wealthy people choosing not to take part in politics, power was even more open for the taking by the majority who were less well-off, and the middle class who had made their money through manufacturing. This is not unlike a situation which can be seen in some modern societies, in that people choose to opt out of getting involved in political affairs, or even actively despise politics because they feel that their own concerns are much more important.

One of the biggest issues with the democracy – especially amongst those who were more favourable towards oligarchy – was the fear that the assembly could choose a bad decision by majority vote and then have to suffer the consequences of their mistake. This impacted on Athenian society in a major way because there was always the possibility that the people could make a very bad decision, causing a guilty conscience at best, and disastrous consequences for the state at worst. During the Peloponnesian War, the assembly by a majority vote chose to send a military force to Sicily commanded by Nicias, which became known as the Sicilian Expedition. This ended in a catastrophic failure, and marked the end of Athens' domination during the Peloponnesian War, as well as meaning that many Athenian citizens were killed.²⁹ The failure of the expedition would have made many Athenians question whether democracy really was the best way to run the state, since the initial decision

26 Ehrenberg (1951) 319.

27 Ehrenberg (1951) 318.

28 Ehrenberg (1951) 319.

29 Thuc. 8.1-8.2.

to go to Sicily had been decided upon by the assembly. A recurrent issue in the democracy, which was criticised often by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, were politicians who deliberately adopted and supported populist policies in an attempt to gain the support of the majority. As seen in the example of the Sicilian Expedition; what was popular with the assembly was not always the best decision at the time.³⁰

Although under democracy citizens were legally equal, in other aspects there was still a great deal of inequality. The Athenian government made no attempt at redistributing wealth from the elite to the less well-off. This meant that the economic lives, personal wealth and social standing of the Athenian poor were not affected: economic disparity was seen as an unavoidable part of life.³¹ However, the democracy did encourage the redistribution of wealth, in the sense that rich Athenian men were encouraged to contribute towards the costs of building warships, producing drama and paying any special taxes that were needed in times of a national emergency.³² Contributing to liturgies would have been seen by the people of Athens as a very good thing, since the wealthy were helping the state financially out of their own generosity. Demagogues who wanted to appear popular to the masses would have stressed great emphasis on their financial contributions to the state, which went above and beyond what was expected of them.

As well as being economically unequal, what was required of a person to become a citizen of Athens, and be able to fully take part in politics, was very restricted. Many of those who lived in Attica were resident aliens from other Greek states or slaves; this would have denied them the right to take part in meetings of the assembly and other political processes. The citizen population of Athens numbered around 30,000, whilst the estimated population of Attica is about 300,000: only 10% of the entire population of Attica were citizens.³³ This

30 Thuc. 8.1.

31 Carey (2013) 35.

32 Ober (1993) 485.

33 Hornblower & Spawforth (2004) 220-21.

would not have affected how citizens lived very much, but it would have had a great effect on those who had travelled from elsewhere to live and work in Athens. All women, even those who were regarded as Athenian citizens, were barred from taking part in any form of public life, and it was thought that women were not able to take part in politics. The central themes in *Lysistrata* demonstrate this very clearly. The joke of *Lysistrata* is that women should not be able to take control of a state: they are too busy doing stereotypical female things such as “hanging round their husbands, waking up the servants, putting the baby to sleep or washing and feeding it”,³⁴ sitting “at home looking pretty, wearing saffron gowns and make-up and Cimberic shifts and giant slippers”,³⁵ and when Lysistrata proposes the idea of renouncing sex, they initially would rather do anything else.³⁶

By allowing the masses to make important political decisions, and allowing anyone who wished to speak on particular topics of concern or propose a motion, the Athenian people as a whole became a very politically aware population; who used the political process as a way of making sure their interests were heard and protected. They also became mass judges of politicians, silencing those who did not win favour with them. However, after the terrible outcome for Athens in the Peloponnesian War, ordinary Athenians thought that this hyper-politicised society had led to problems. This demonstrated that democracy did work, but not always in the interests of everybody. During and after the Peloponnesian War, the rise of sycophants exploiting the laws surrounding criminal justice for their own personal gain became a huge problem in Athens. Also, it has to be remembered that the vast majority of the residents of Attica had no political rights because they were slaves, women or resident aliens, meaning that their interests would not have been heard and their concerns not addressed. This democracy was also mainly controlled by rich men who had the money and time to devote

34 Aristoph. *Lys.* 17-19.

35 Aristoph. *Lys.* 43-45.

36 Aristoph. *Lys.* 129-38.

themselves to politics and to learning the art of rhetoric. Nevertheless, they had to make sure that they appealed to the ordinary man, or their careers would not last.

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