KIDS VOTING USA®

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY
(30-40 minutes)

OBJECTIVE

Students learn the basic structure of Athenian government and how it functioned; they compare Athenian democracy with American democracy.

MATERIALS

Athenian Democracy at Work handout;
Athenian Democracy Questions handout

GET READY

✔ Duplicate the *Athenian Democracy at Work* handout for each student.
✔ Duplicate the *Athenian Democracy Questions* handout for each student.
✔ Write the word "democracy" on the board prior to class.

INSTRUCTIONS

✔ Begin class by asking students to write a definition for the word "democracy" on a sheet of paper. Allow 1 minute (maximum) to write.
✔ Have a few students read their definitions, then explain the Greek roots of the word. In Greek, *demos* means "people," and *kratos (cracy)* means "rule by." You should also read to your students a dictionary definition of democracy.
✔ Pass out the *Athenian Democracy at Work* handout.
✔ Assign each student a partner and have the pairs silently read the handout.
✔ Next, chose students at random to read the *Athenian Democracy at Work* handout aloud and in order (10 different students to read items 1 through 10).
✔ Lead a discussion on Athenian democracy, drawing connections to American democracy. (Use the questions listed below.) Consider dividing the class into two groups during the discussion, half the class as 21st century Americans and the other half as fifth century B.C. Athenians.

✔ Pass out the *Athenian Democracy Questions* handout and have your students complete it in pairs.
✔ Lead a follow-up discussion based on the questions from the *Athenian Democracy Questions* handout. Consider assigning individual roles. Proportionally in a class of 30 students: 10 would be slaves, 10 would be women, 2 would be metics (resident aliens), 2 would be males under 18 and 6 would be males over 18.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

★ *How did Athenians feel about participating in their government?*
★ *How does this compare to how Americans feel about participating in their government?*
★ *How is our version of democracy different from that of Athens?*
★ *Which system of government, if any, is more democratic?*
★ *How would an Athenian of the fifth century B.C. criticize our present-day representative democracy? Of what would he or she approve?*
★ *What was the relationship between slavery and democracy in ancient Greece?*
★ *Was there a relationship between slavery and the development of democracy in U.S. history?*

VOTE QUOTE

"We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as harmless, but as a useless character; and if few of us are originators, we are all sound judges of a policy. The great impediment to action is, in our opinion, not discussion, but the want of that knowledge which is gained by discussion preparatory to action." – Pericles' Funeral Speech given in 430 B.C. to honor those Athenian soldiers who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War.

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY AT WORK PAGE ONE

1. Athenian government in the fifth century B.C. was perhaps the first true democracy. The government was of the people and for the people, like ours, but it was also by the people to a much greater degree than the large representative emocracies of modern times. However, the Athenian definition of the "people" was far narrower than ours today, excluding everyone but free adult males. In Athens, all male citizens from the age of 18 were expected by law to participate in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Young men first served two years of military service, then at 20 they had access to the assembly. We rely on elected politicians to run our government for us, but we have a far broader electoral base.

2. To a considerable extent, this direct, participatory democracy was a function of the relatively small size of the population. Athens at that time had approximately 300,000 inhabitants, about 100,000 of whom were unenfranchised slaves and 100,000 of whom were unenfranchised women. About 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants were metics, or resident aliens. Out of the 100,000 or so males left, perhaps 50,000 or 60,000 were 18 or older. This limitation of political rights makes participation much more feasible than in the mass societies of the 20th century.

3. The supreme political body was the Athenian Assembly. It was open to all free males over 20 whose father was Athenian. In 451 B.C., citizenship was restricted to males over 18 whose father and mother were Athenian. All males falling into these groups were citizens, regardless of income or class, and every male citizen was subject to universal political service as well as universal military training. The Assembly met about 40 times per year at the Pnyx, a natural amphitheater on one of the hills west of the Acropolis. Their main task was to enact legislation. Attendance was normally about 2,000 or 3,000 men, for it was difficult to take four days per month off from work. Mostly craftsmen and artisans attended the assemblies, farmers being too busy and aristocrats seeing it as beneath their station in life. Usually a summons and an agenda had to be posted at least five days before a meeting.

4. Meetings convened at dawn and the sometimes reluctant citizens were swept up from the Agora (marketplace) by slaves holding the ends of a long rope wet with red paint, which would mark their clothes and thus make liable for a fine anyone who lingered or attempted to escape the call of duty. Once in the Pnyx, voting was usually taken by a show of hands. This prevented secrecy and encouraged people to follow group leaders in their choices.

5. In addition to votes on many specific matters, the assembly set aside nine scheduled meetings per year in which members would approve or disapprove of how magistrates were handling their jobs. They would dismiss them for mismanagement of funds, etc. After all normal business was finished, the Assembly voted on the measures initiated by the Council of 500, called the Boule.

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY AT WORK PAGE TWO

6. The Council of 500 prepared the official agenda for the meetings of the Assembly. The Council was made up of 50 men selected from each of the 10 Attic tribes. These tribes corresponded to local villages or territories and were of different sizes. Council members were chosen by lot from a list of volunteers, all of them being male citizens over 30 years of age. A Council member could serve only two years in his lifetime, and only one year at a time. They were paid for their services, which helped to compensate for lost wages on their jobs.

7. The way in which Council members, jurors, and office holders were chosen is called allotment (lot) or sortition. In the fifth century B.C. this was often done by placing a number of white and black beans in a box equal to the number of candidates who volunteered. The white beans would match the number of offices to be filled and the black beans would match the extra candidates. Each candidate would reach in to the receptacle and pull a bean out, white indicating that he was chosen and black that he was not. This system guaranteed absolute fairness in the selection of council members, jurors or office holders. In the fourth century B.C. much more elaborate voting machines were developed, but they followed the same random principle.

8. The 50 members selected from each tribe acted as a unit in the Council and held the collective presidency (called the Prytany) for the Council for one-tenth of the year. This reduced the amount of time men had to be away from work. The members of the Prytany met every day and in effect administered the government. The Prytany changed 10 times a year and its chairman- ship changed daily. Thus 365 citizens each year would serve as head of state: an adult male, if he lived long enough, would have a good chance of holding the highest office. The Prytany prepared legislation, tried magistrates accused of misdeeds, and inspected cavalry and ships.

9. By rotating the Prytany every tenth of a year, by not allowing anyone to sit on the Council for more than one year and through the system of allotment, no man was in office long enough to entrench himself and to establish a following. However, in reality, the 10 generals representing the 10 tribes could be re-elected year after year and they often were. In addition, they were voted in by ballot, not by the random drawing of beans. They played a continuing role in non-military affairs and established a strong following, becoming the most important Athenian officials.

10. As you can see, the Athenian system of direct democracy was not perfect. Another serious flaw was its extensive reliance on slavery. Many craftsmen, farmers and shopkeepers who participated in the Council and the Assembly had slaves to do their work while they were away running the government. This dependence on slaves allowed free men the time to participate actively in their government and to perform their naval service. Perhaps in this context we should raise the question of whether or not modem representative democracy is more just than the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY QUESTIONS

1. What role did each of the following play in the Athenian system of government?

PURPOSE	WHO PARTICIPATED	HOW CHOSEN
THE ASSEMBLY		
THE BOULE		
THE PRYTANY		

2. Who got to participate in Athenian democracy?

3. What groups could not participate in the political process?

4. Do you think the groups that could not participate still influenced politics in Athens? If so, how?

5. Who was eligible to vote in ancient Athens?

6. Who is eligible to vote in the U.S. today?

7. What Athenian group(s) would not be able to vote under America's political system?

8. Identify three kinds of voting (or selection) in Athens.
    What were the advantages/disadvantages of each?

VOTING / SELECTION SYSTEM	ADVANTAGES / DISADVANTAGES