

Democracy

A **democracy** is a form of government in which the ruling power is in the hands of all the people. The word “democracy” comes from the Greek terms *demos* (meaning “people”) and *kratos* (meaning “power”).

Democracy developed in ancient Greece about 500 B.C.E. in the city-state of Athens, where many people began to oppose the rule of the tyrants. The main governing body of the Athenian democracy was the Assembly. The Assembly was open to all 30,000 to 40,000 adult male citizens, but usually only 5,000 people attended.

Both rich and poor citizens attended the Assembly. This body met about 40 times a year to direct foreign policy, revise laws, and approve or condemn the conduct of public officials. Assembly members reached all their decisions through public debate and vote. A smaller, important executive body, the Council of 500, was responsible for the day-to-day running of the state. This body—whose members were chosen annually in a lottery—proposed new laws and enforced the Assembly’s decisions, or decrees. The Council also administered the state’s finances, received foreign ambassadors, and oversaw the maintenance of the Athenian fleet.

An important aspect of Athenian democracy was the fact that its public officials did not have much individual power. In wartime, a group of 10 generals made decisions about military matters. These generals were elected annually and could be reelected several times. Nearly all government officials—including generals and assembly and council members, as well as citizens who served on juries—were paid for their services. This allowed both poor and rich male citizens to fully participate in the Athenian government.