The Government of Ancient Athens

Standard 1.1: The Government of Ancient Athens

Explain why the Founders of the United States considered the government of ancient Athens to be the beginning of democracy and explain how the democratic concepts developed in ancient Greece influenced modern democracy. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T1.1]

Explain the democratic political concepts developed in ancient Greece: a) the "polis" or city state; b) civic participation and voting rights, c) legislative bodies, d) constitution writing, d) rule of law. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [7.T4.3]

FOCUS QUESTION: What Parallels Can We Draw Between Ancient Athens and the United States Government Today?

As a political system, democracy is said to have begun in the Greek city-state of Athens in 510 BCE under the leadership of Cleisthenes, an Athenian lawyer and reformer. Some researchers contend democracy emerged much earlier in the republics of ancient India where groups of people made decisions through discussion and debate (Sharma, 2005).
Democracy was not the only form of government among the city-states of ancient Greece. There was **monarchy** (rule by one individual who inherited the position by birth), **oligarchy** (rule by a small group), and **tyranny** (rule by a leader who seized power). In this context, the emergence of a democratic self-government - however limited - was a revolutionary development in world history for those who could vote did actively participate in setting policies for the community.

Only free adult men who were citizens - about 10% of the population - could vote in Athens' limited democracy. Women, children, slaves, and foreigners were excluded from participating in making political decisions. Women had no political rights or political power. Aristotle, in “On a Good Wife,” written in 330 BCE, declared that a good wife aims to "obey her husband; giving no heed to public affairs, nor having any part in arranging the marriages of her children."
There were **significant differences in women’s roles in Athens and Sparta**. Athenian women could not own property nor did they have access to money, while women in Sparta could own property, inherit wealth, could get an education, and were encouraged to engage in physical activities. Explore a resourcesforhistoryteachers wiki page Women and Slaves in Ancient Athens for a fuller comparison of women’s roles in Athens and Sparta.

Ancient Athens also depended on many other markedly undemocratic practices. **Slavery** was essential to the operation of society; slaves did much of the work of daily life as cooks, maids, miners, porters, and craft production workers. The practice of **ostracism** allowed citizens to vote a man into exile for ten years without appeal. Women had “virtually no political rights of any kind and were controlled by men at nearly every stage of their lives” (*Daily Life: Women’s Life*, Penn Museum, 2002, para. 1).

How did the political practices of ancient Athens impact how democracy became established in the United States? The modules in this topic consider that question in terms of 1) the emergence of modern-day **digital government** and the realities created by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2) the impact of the Olympic marathon on Native American runners, and 3) the efforts of students and teachers to make school classrooms more democratic places and spaces.

**Modules for this Standard Include:**

1. **INVESTIGATE:** Athenian Democracy and 21st Century Digital Government--Before and After the Pandemic
   - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Applying Athenian Democratic Principles to Social Media Platforms
2. **UNCOVER:** The Legend of Pheidippides, the Heraean Games and First American Runners in the Boston Marathon
3. **ENGAGE:** How Can School Classrooms Become More Democratic Spaces?
1. INVESTIGATE: Athenian Democracy and 21st Century Digital Government--Before and After the Pandemic

The word “politics” is derived from the Greek word “polis,” meaning "city." To the ancient Greeks the "city" was a geographic location, and also a political entity. To live in the city meant to be actively involved in making political decisions for the city. In ancient Athens, it was only male citizens who could vote that were allowed to engage in politics. Today, politics more broadly refers to the activities (including cooperation and conflict) among people that create and maintain a government.

A Foundation for Democracy

Athens' “first democracy,” limited though it was, operated on two principles new in world history, namely that "we all know enough to decide how to govern our public life together, and that no one knows enough to take decisions away from us" (Woodruff, 2005, p. 24). That system had seven features that over the centuries became the foundation for people’s efforts to create democratically self-governing communities, organizations, and nations:

1. Freedom from tyranny
2. The rule of law, applied equally to all citizens
3. Harmony (people adhering collectively to the rule of law while accepting differences among people)
4. Equality among people for purposes of governance
5. Citizen wisdom built on the human capacity to "perceive, reason, and judge"
6. Active debate for reasoning through uncertainties
7. General education designed to equip all citizens for social and political participation (quoted in Sleeter, 2008, p. 148)
The political practices of Athenian democracy are relevant to understanding how democracies function in the world today. Although severely limited, there was civic participation, voting rights, and legislative bodies (the Assembly and the Council of 500). There was a constitution and an assumption of the rule of law presided over by magistrates and juries made up of citizens. More information about Athenian democracy is available at a resourcesforhistoryteachers wikipage on the Government of Ancient Athens.

Digital Government and the Pandemic

The origins of democracy in ancient Athens invites us to explore how democracy and the democratic government is evolving in today’s digital world and consider how smartphones, computers, and other interactive technologies might create new ways for citizens to interact with political leaders democratically, especially in light of the changes produced by the 2020 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased efforts by governments to function digitally rather than through face-to-face meetings and interactions. Governments at every level are using mobile apps and social media platforms to communicate information to people about infection rates and appropriate public health practices. At local, state, and national levels, government meetings are being held virtually; in May 2020 the House of Representatives voted to allow remote voting and virtual hearings, ending a 231 year requirement that members be physically present to conduct business. Issuing a policy brief embracing digital government during the pandemic and beyond, the United Nations stated, "Effective public-private partnerships, through sharing technologies, expertise and tools, can support governments in restarting the economy and rebuilding societies" (UN/DESA Policy Brief #61).

Before the pandemic, the northern European country of Estonia claimed to have the world’s first digital government. The first country to declare Internet access as a human right for every person (Estonia is a digital society), 99% of Estonia’s government services are online. In 2005, Estonia held
the world’s first elections on the Internet; Estonian citizens can now vote online from anywhere in the world. Estonia is also consulting with the government of Ukraine on a “A State in a Smartphone” project where citizens can actively participate in government through electronic petitions, consultations, and elections (Ukrinform, 2020).

The Estonian President in 2020 is Kersti Kaljulaid, the first woman and youngest person to hold the office.

Watch the following videos and consider whether digital technologies and smartphones are a way for more people to participate more fully in democratic government:

- How Estonia Built a Digital First Government, PBS NewsHour, April 29, 2018;
- Welcome to e-Estonia, the World’s First Digital Nation

In this context, it is possible to consider the issue of how will humans govern outer space? It is projected that there will be regular settlements on the moon, an area about the size of Africa, within the next decade. There are complex issues of exploration and resource ownership and management to be settled.

- Civilization on the Moon–And What It Means for Life on Earth, Jessy Kate Schingler (May 2020)

What will the post-pandemic governments of the future look like? Everyone from elected policymakers to everyday people will be involved in answering this question in the months and years ahead.
Media Literacy Connections: Applying Athenian Democratic Principles to Social Media Platforms

Foundational principles included in Athenian democracy were equality, harmony, debate, and general education. In this activity, we’ll apply these same principles to more modern democratic spaces: social media platforms.

Step 1: Review the seven features of democracy from Topic 1.1 Investigate to familiarize yourself with the key concepts.

Step 2: Choose one of the following social media platforms: Youtube, Facebook, TikTok, or Twitter.

Step 3: Open up the community standards for your chosen platform.

- **Youtube**: Community Guidelines
- **Facebook**: Community Standards
- **TikTok**: Community Guidelines
- **Twitter**: Rules & Policies
  - Pro-tip: These guidelines tend to be long, so use the “find” function (CTRL + F on PC, CMD + F on Mac) to find specific words or phrases.

Step 4: In a 1-2 minute video/audio recording or a 3-paragraph written response, answer the following questions related to how their community standards do or do not uphold features of
democracy:

- Does the platform allow all users to post and comment equally, or does it ban certain types of content or actions from the platform? Do you agree with these bans?
- How does the platform encourage active dialogue and debate? Does this debate build harmony among users? (harmony means “accepting differences among people”)
- Are the guidelines easy to read or understand? If not, why do you think the standards are written in the way that they are?
- From your own experience on the platform, how effective do you think these guidelines are in maintaining democratic principles and dialogue on the site?

**Step 5:** Compose a social media post about an issue or topic that matters to you.

- Explain how the language you use in your post reflects a commitment to the democratic values of active debate that includes respect for multiple points of view.

**Additional Activities:**

- Annotate community standards for social media using Hypothes.is.
- Create a PSA (Public Service Announcement) to inform others about social media community standards.
- Devise a social media code of conduct.

**Additional Resources:**

- For Teachers
  - From the Polis to Facebook: Social Media and the Development of a New Greek Public Sphere (Journal Article)
  - Teaching Democracy: A Media Literacy Approach (Journal Article)
- For Students
  - The Internet as a Human Right (Brookings Institute)
Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design an Infographic**
  - Visit the [Philosophies and Forms of Government wiki page](#)
  - Choosing between an Oligarchy, Autocracy, Direct Democracy, Representative Democracy, Theocracy or Monarchy, create an infographic describing your selected government, including its benefits and drawbacks.
    - For more background material on types of government, explore [20 different types of government](#).

- **Create an interactive Timeline**
  - Design a historical timeline that traces the beginning of democracy to modern day U.S. democracy to Estonia's digital democracy (using Timeline JS, Adobe Spark, LucidPress, or Google Drawings).

- **Analyze and Discuss**
  - How might a digital government work in the United States?
  - What would be the benefits? What issues might emerge?

- **Create a Meme, Editorial Cartoon, or Short Video**
  - How might students more directly influence decisions and policies if there were a Government with a Smartphone initiative at your school, in your community, and in the state and the United States?

Online Resources for Athenian Democracy and Digital Government

- [Athenian Democracy: A Brief Overview](#)
- **Primary Source**: For a classic statement about democracy, read and discuss in current English "Pericles' Funeral Oration" from *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides.
  - What did Thucydides want listeners to think over or consider?
- [Democracy Web: Comparative Studies in Freedom](#)
- [Athens and Democracy](#) provides text, video, Powerpoint, and plans about Athenian democracy.
- [A teaching case study](#) includes primary sources that explore the lives of women in Athens and Sparta.
- [Women, Money and the Law in Ancient Athens](#) has more information about the societal position of women in Athens
- [Ancient Greece: Women](#) is a kid-friendly interactive website explaining the role of women in Ancient Greece.
- [Women in Ancient Greece](#) talks about how men viewed and talked about women in Greek society.
- [AP World History Period 2.2: States and Empires](#)
Teacher-Designed Learning Plan: Government in Ancient Athens

Government in Ancient Athens is a learning unit developed by Erich Leaper, 7th-grade teacher at Van Sickle Academy, Springfield Massachusetts, during the spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The unit covers one week of instructional activities and remote learning for students. It addresses both a Massachusetts Grade 7 and a Grade 8 curriculum standard as well as Advanced Placement (AP) Government and Politics unit.

- Massachusetts Grade 7
  - Explain the democratic political concepts developed in ancient Greece: a) the "polis" or city state; b) civic participation and voting rights; c) legislative bodies; d) constitution writing; d) rule of law.
- Massachusetts Grade 8
  - Explain why the Founders of the United States considered the government of ancient Athens to be the beginning of democracy and explain how the democratic concepts developed in ancient Greece influenced modern democracy.
- Advanced Placement: United States Government and Politics
  - Unit 1: Ideas of Democracy

This activity can be adapted and used for in-person, fully online, and blended learning formats.

2. UNCOVER: The Legend of Pheidippides, the Heraean Games and First American Runners in the Boston Marathon

Democracy was not the only accomplishment that modern day America owes to Ancient Greece. Greek thinkers made history-altering contributions in science (Thales), mathematics (Pythagoras and Euclid), medicine (Hippocrates), philosophy (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle), and history, poetry, and drama (Herodotus, Thucydides, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes and Euripides).

Athletic competitions, signified by the Olympics and its long-distance races, also stretch back to Ancient Greece. The Boston Marathon, the New York City Marathon, and the Olympic Marathon itself are among the most exciting events in sports today. Modern marathons have their origins in ancient Greece with the legend of Pheidippides, a messenger.
During the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, Pheidippides is said to have run from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens to announce a Greek victory, a distance of about 24.85 miles. Pheidippides’ long journey inspired the marathon race at the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896. Marathons for men have been run in every Olympics since then - a women’s marathon was added in 1984.

The legend of Pheidippides invites exploration of a largely forgotten history of First (or Native) American Runners at the Boston Marathon, the modern world’s oldest annual marathon. Iroquois tribe member Thomas Longboat (or Cogwagee) won the Boston Marathon in 1907 and Tarzan Brown; Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island won the race in 1936 and 1939. Google Doodles celebrated Thomas Longboat’s 131st birthday with an animation and a short biography on June 4, 2018.

Running is deeply part of American Indian culture and history. Jim Thorpe (the first Native American to win a gold medal and the greatest multi-sport athlete of the early 20th century), Lewis Tewanima, and Billy Mills all excelled as runners during the Olympics. Patti Catalano Dillon from Quincy, Massachusetts won the Honolulu Marathon four times in a row. You can learn more about running and sports among First Americans from the article "For Young Native Americans, Running is a Lesson in their own History."

In addition to the marathon, athletic competition in ancient Greece featured tests of individual skill and strength for men - there were no team sports or records kept of individual achievements. The first Olympic Games were held in 776 BCE. Events included sprinting, wrestling, javelin, discus, chariot racing, and a fight to the death called “pankation.” The ancient Olympics were abolished by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I in 393 or 394 CE (Frequently Asked Questions about the Olympic Games).

Women were excluded from Olympic events with men. Unmarried girls were allowed to participate in their own athletic event - a once-every-four-years foot race during the Festival of Hera known as the Heraean Games. The first Olympic woman champion was Cynisca from Sparta who
won the four-horse chariot race twice, in 396 and 392 BCE. Monuments were built to honor her achievements. The modern Olympics began in 1896 and women were allowed to participate for the first time in 1900. In 2016, women were 45% of Olympic competitors (5,176 out of 11,444 athletes (Key Dates in the History of Women in the Olympic Movement).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create and Perform**
  - Use the following resources for a student-made TV news and sports show discussing how running and other sports have evolved in American Indian communities:
    - *Sports were Essential to the Life of the Early North American Indian*, *Sports Illustrated*, December 1,1986
    - *The Importance of Running in Native American Culture*, *Women's Running* (February 25, 2019)
    - *For Young Native Americans, Running Is a Lesson in Their Own History*, *The Christian Science Monitor* (January 15, 2019)

Online Resources for the History of the Marathon

- *The Truth About Pheidippides and the Early Years of Marathon History*
- The History of Marathons
  - Where did the 26.2 mile marathon route come from? *The History of the Marathon* describes the development of the modern marathon that we know today.

Teacher-Designed Learning Plan: The Ancient and Modern Olympics

*The Ancient and Modern Olympics* is a learning activity developed by social studies teacher Erich Leaper and University of Massachusetts Amherst faculty member Robert Maloy. It is designed for in person, virtual or hybrid learning settings and addresses the following curriculum standard:

- Massachusetts Grade 7: Topic 4/Standard 7
  - Identify the major accomplishments of the ancient Greeks

3. **ENGAGE: How Can School Classrooms Become More Democratic Spaces?**

While the word democracy is often used, it is experienced far less often by most people in this country. "Although we think of ourselves as living in a democratic society," observed journalist Jay Cassano (2015), "we actually practice democracy very rarely in our everyday lives" (para. 1).
Many consider voting for President every four years as their primary democratic experience, but practicing democracy also means exercising one’s rights through free speech, peaceful protests, petitions for change, consumer boycotts and buycotts, and other forms of civic participation and engagement. Democracy also means having a say in determining what happens in one’s work, family, education and recreation settings. It is through vote and voice, people have opportunities to exercise control and agency over their lives.

Worker cooperatives and worker/employee owned businesses are increasingly common in our economy, but not widely discussed as examples of democracy being practiced in American society. Cooperatives (aka co-ops) are organizations where “the people who own the businesses are the same people who work there” (Anzilotti, 2017, para. 4). You can learn more about worker cooperatives and workplace democracy in Topic 6/Standard 10 in this book.

Democratic schools operate classrooms where students invest time and energy in designing their educational activities. Advocates believe schools should organize educational experiences so that both students and teachers have voice and vote about what happens instructionally and interpersonally in classrooms and corridors. In such democratic classroom environments, students are involved “on a regular basis and in developmentally appropriate ways, in sharing decision making that increases their responsibility for helping to make the classroom a good place to be and learn” (A Democratic Classroom Environment, State University of New York Cortland, para. 1).

Democratic schools, contend Michael Apple and James Beane (2007), involve two essential elements:

1. “Democratic structures and processes by which life in the school is carried out and
2. A curriculum that gives young people democratic experiences” (pp. 9-10).

Having student representatives on local school boards or other educational decision-making committees is another opportunity for students to have democratic experiences in schools. Many districts allow students to have an advisory role on school boards and committees, but actual student voting power is fairly rare. In Maryland, however, students do vote on many school boards in the state, although not on the hiring of school personnel. In the state’s Montgomery County, high school
students choose their school board student representative through direct election.

Allowing students to vote on local school boards is complicated, and in some places, a contentious issue. In late 2020, a group of Maryland parents filed a lawsuit against the practice after a student representative cast the deciding vote to block a return to in-person schooling during the pandemic. The parents claimed student member voting rights violated the Maryland state Constitution that sets the legal voting age in the state at 18. The student representative said he hoped the lawsuit would be unsuccessful because students need to have a consequential voice in educational matters that directly affect them (Baltimore Sun, December 18, 2020).

**Suggested Learning Activities**

- **Watch and Learn**
  - Watch teachers, including Marco Torres, describe what it is like to teach democratically in school classrooms from the Democratic Classrooms page of Teaching Tolerance.

- **Dialogue and Debate**
  - How can students create more democratic schools and classrooms?
  - How can students gain greater voice and agency in school classrooms and learning activities?
  - Do you agree or disagree with suggestions for democratic classrooms offered in What is Democratic Education?

- **Draw Connections to Personal Experiences**
  - Think about your earliest memories of democracy - when you were in a situation where you felt your voice and participation mattered to making decisions.
    - Was it in a family setting, at church, during youth sports, with peers, in stage or musical performances?
    - What role did you play in the process?

- **Conduct a Poll**
  - Ask 5 other people for their earliest memories of participating in a democratic setting. List times when those interviewed felt their voice and participation mattered and when it did not matter.
    - You can ask your: Family, community, peers, and school members.

**Online Resources for Democratic Schools**

- How Students Lead the Learning Experience at Democratic Schools from MindShift (2014)
- Putting Students in Charge of Building the Classroom Community, NCTE Blog (September 2017)
- Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History, NTCE Blog (January 12, 2018)
- How to Revive Your Belief in Democracy, Eric Liu (Ted Talk 2019)
Standard 1.1 Conclusion

The United States system of government has its origins in the Greek city-state of ancient Athens. **INVESTIGATE** examined the nature and decidedly undemocratic elements of Athenian democracy, particularly in terms of women’s roles, before considering how today's interactive digital technologies may offer new ways for people to participate directly in government and decision-making. **UNCOVER** looked at Greek marathons and the histories of First (Native) American runners in the Boston Marathon and Olympic competitions. **ENGAGE** asked how school classrooms can become more democratic spaces where students have greater voice and agency concerning their educational learning activities.

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