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Politics and political systems in ancient Greek cities

Arjan Zuiderhoek

To many of their contemporaries, the Classical Greeks must have seemed a deeply weird people. Where most states at the time (*c*. fifth and fourth centuries BCE) were ruled by kings or powerful aristocracies, the Greeks in their city-states (*poleis*, singular: *polis*) had taken the extraordinary step of allowing not just the wealthy or the well-born but *every adult male citizen regardless of property or descent* to have a voice in political decision-making. To those of us who live in countries where every adult, man or woman, can vote and stand for office, this may sound like a rather modest achievement, but at that time, it was unusual. True, the idea of the city as a citizen-community was known among non-Greek peoples: Phoenician cities, for instance, appear to have been organized as such, and some had public assemblies (Aristotle famously discussed the assembly of the people at Carthage), as did Mesopotamian cities during the Neo-Babylonian period (626-539 BCE). Greeks, however, or at least some of them, took this model to what many contemporaries thought was an absurd extreme by not only allowing every citizen, whether rich or poor, a vote in the assembly, but by actually turning the people's assembly into the supreme decision-making body. They also gave the world a term for this odd practice: *demo-kratia*, 'people-power', as well as the haphazard beginnings of a tradition of political thinking about it.

We now know that the practice of *demokratia* spread well beyond Athens. Yet we also know that some Greek cities during the Archaic and Classical periods were *not* democracies but oligarchies, that some, over time, had been both, and that the same socio-political conditions that produced democracy could also produce its antithesis: tyranny, or unconstitutional one-man rule. The heyday of democracy came later, at a time, surprisingly, when most Greek cities had lost their independence to Hellenistic kings: only then did every polis become a *demokratia*. So how did politics actually work in Greek cities, and how did their political systems develop over time?

Kings, democrats, oligarchs

Greek political thought recognized three types of political system: 'rule by one' (monarchy), 'rule by the few' (oligarchy) and 'rule by the many' (democracy). If we leave tyranny out of consideration for the moment, truly monarchic *poleis* were rare. The Spartans had not one but even two kings, but they also had elected magistrates, a council and a citizens-assembly. In fact almost every known Greek *polis*, whether officially a democracy or an oligarchy, had these latter political institutions: a council, an assembly, and magistrates.

Of these, the assembly was the oldest institution: its workings can already be dimly perceived in our earliest written sources for Greek history, the Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, orally transmitted poems committed to writing sometime during the late eighth or early seventh century BCE and though to reflect broadly the social and political conditions of that time. In the epics, aristocrats called *basileis* ('kings') dominate the nascent *poleis*, with one *basileus* being the first among his equals (like Odysseus on Ithaca), but almost all of their deliberations take place in the context of an

assembly of all free adult males, who constitute the *demos* (people). During the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, the figure of the 'top dog'-*basileus* disappeared, and aristocrats began to take turns in temporarily assuming the highest political offices, or *archai*, to which they were elected by the people in assembly. Those who held or had held such offices came to sit on councils that often served to advise the assembly and took care of day-to-day administration. Though often affecting to despise the ordinary citizens, the Archaic elite did allow them a voice in political decision-making, perhaps partly because each *polis* in fact depended for its physical survival on the large majority of its able-bodied men to fight its continuous petty wars with neighbouring *poleis*.

Such power sharing among elites and between elite and *demos* did however not prevent internal conflicts, between elite factions, and between rich and poor citizens. Sometimes these conflicts could be resolved through mediation, often leading to social and political reforms, as at Athens under the reformer Solon (*c*. 594/3 BCE). They might also lead to the establishment of a tyranny, when the people backed a renegade aristocrat against his peers, as at Corinth, and at Athens with the tyranny of Pisistratus. Alternatively, such internal conflicts, or the overthrow of tyrants, resulted in the establishment of democracy, as for instance at Ambracia, Achaea, Argos, Naxos, Samos, Syracuse, and, eventually, at Athens. Here, after the expulsion of the tyrant Hippias, son of Pisistratus, the aristocrat Cleisthenes, in conflict with a rival, won the support of the Athenian people, in exchange for democratic reforms in 508/7 BCE.

Over a period of almost two centuries, interrupted only by two short-lived oligarchic coups, the Athenian democracy flourished with the following chief characteristics: a sovereign assembly, in which all adult male citizens could vote and speak to propose decrees (even if wealthy citizens, who had been able to afford rhetorical training, spoke more often than others); a council of 500 annually changing members, selected by lot from among the adult male citizens, which advised the assembly, prepared its agenda, and was responsible for the day-to-day government of Athens; a variety of committees of magistrates, mostly selected annually by lot from all citizens (some officials, such as the *strategoi* or 'generals', were elected instead); and, finally, popular law courts, whose large juries were randomly selected per case from a large pool of citizens of 30 years and older. Councilors, jury members, magistrates and those attending the assembly received payment for their service, to ensure that even poor citizens could afford to participate fully in governing the *polis*.

During the fifth century BCE, the Athenians also frequently made use of another institution considered typically democratic in antiquity, namely ostracism. If a certain citizen had become dangerously influential in the *polis*, the assembly could vote to organize an ostracism. On the day of the ostracism, each citizen present scratched the name of the person he wished ostracized on a potsherd (*ostrakon*). Once a certain number of *ostraka* containing the same name was reached, the 'winner' was banned from the *polis* for ten years, while remaining a citizen and keeping his property. We find institutions and practices broadly similar to those of Athens in other later Archaic and Classical Greek democracies.

Not all Greek cities were democracies, however –*oligarchia*, the 'rule by the few' was a recognized form of *polis*-government in Greek political theory, even if no oligarchic *polis* publicly advertised itself as such. Rather, we find propagandistic terms such as *eunomia* ('good order') or *aristokratia* ('rule by the best/the most able'), suggesting that oligarchy was unpopular (which of course it literally was) among the general population. Democracies could become oligarchies, often after a coup by the

wealthy, or *vice versa*. In oligarchies, final decision-making power lay with the magistrates and council, open only to wealthy citizens. Most oligarchic *poleis* did have popular assemblies of all citizens, but these had a circumscribed role, voting only on proposals put to them by the oligarchs. Of course, given the open, visible voting (often by a raising of hands) in Greek assemblies, it might be very unwise to be seen to vote against an elite proposal in an oligarchic *polis*. For oligarchic rulers, the process of assembly voting could thus be a useful mechanism for weeding out dissidents and ensuring conformity with elite rule among the people.

Greek city politics in the Hellenistic and Roman periods

After gaining control of Greece, during his conquest of the Persian empire, the Macedonian king Alexander the Great turned the Greek cities which he freed from Persian domination into democracies, loosely based on the Athenian model. The Hellenistic kings that succeeded him did the same when they founded *poleis* in their kingdoms, as especially the Seleucids (who governed much of the former Persian empire) frequently did. One Classical democratic element missing in most of these *poleis*, however, was payment for office holding, probably because many did not draw in sufficient resources. This, historians have argued, ensured that the cities were in fact dependent on their wealthy citizens, who could afford to be politically active, and who managed to establish their dominance through paying for public amenities from their own pockets, as benefactors. Also, such elite citizens provided a vital diplomatic link to the Hellenistic kings: they might enter a king's circle of 'friends' (*philoi*), and ensure privileges for their city. Thus, the argument goes, Hellenistic *demokratia* was only a façade: behind the scenes, wealthy citizens dominated the council and magistracies, and assemblies merely rubberstamped their decisions.

Close study of the institutional workings of Hellenistic *poleis*, however, has demonstrated that many continued to operate as (moderate) democracies, with assemblies still playing a crucial part in political decision-making, even if wealthy citizens indeed assumed a visibly more prominent role in city councils and public life. Even the Greek cities under Roman imperial rule, in the empire's eastern provinces, continued such traditions of popular politics, as recent research has shown. This seems odd, since Hellenistic and Roman-era Greek cities were after all part of large autocratic states. Yet we should remember that the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman empire did not have extensive bureaucracies: many important administrative tasks were left to the local urban elites. This gave urban elites a lot of power and status, but it also provided them with a strong incentive to avoid central government intervention in civic affairs, since such intervention would instantly rob them of that very power. Internal conflicts between elite and people in the cities might provoke such imperial interventions, whereas allowing the traditional institutions of *polis* politics –council, assembly and magistrates- to operate harmoniously, ensuring that all citizens, rich and poor, could participate in decision-making, was a good way of preventing or at least managing internal conflicts. In other words, it made good political sense for Greek civic elites under Hellenistic and Roman rule to foster the continuation of democratic practices, at least to a certain extent.

Politics ancient and modern

The modern world has inherited the political vocabulary of the Greeks –'politics', 'democracy', 'oligarchy', 'aristocracy', 'tyranny.' Yet the modern parliamentary democracies in which many of us live differ fundamentally from Greek *poleis*. For one thing, *polis* democracy was direct, not representative: the assembly was open to all adult male citizens, even if not all of them fitted

physically into the place of assembly (in Athens, the Pnyx hill). There was no separation of powers: those who ruled (whether the people, the citizen-elite or a king/tyrant) did it all, legislatively, executively and judicially. There were no political parties, and no concept of an opposition. Debate there was, in the councils and assemblies, but in the end, the fullest possible agreement (*homonoia*, literally 'same-mindedness') was the ideal. There were also no professionals: no bureaucrats, career politicians, judges or legal specialists. Citizens, holding office for a limited time only, often a year, were simply expected to be administratively, politically and judicially capable. Finally, whole swathes of people were excluded from political life altogether, because of their status or gender. Adult males of citizen-parentage were entitled, and indeed expected, to participate in politics, but women, slaves and resident foreigners (including Greeks from other *poleis*) empathically were not. Slavery provides the starkest contrast: many *poleis* gave even their poorest citizens the vote, but at the same time reduced to utter bondage large numbers of their non-citizen (and often involuntary) inhabitants. The Greeks, then, are not our direct political forebears, whatever the terminology may suggest, but as so often in history, the differences between past and present are as instructive, and fascinating, as the (deceptive) similarities.

Suggested reading:

Hans Beck (ed.), *A companion to ancient Greek government*. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Malden, MA; Oxford; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

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Arjan Zuiderhoek is Associate Professor of Ancient History at the Department of History of Ghent University.