

# Democracy

LMS/08

## The Road to Democracy

The city-state of Athens did not become a democracy overnight. In fact, originally, power in Athens was held by the aristocracy – the wealthy, land-owning upper classes. The government was run by a series of tyrants. The word ‘tyrant’ has a negative connotation now, but for the ancient Athenians, not all tyrants were bad. Many tyrants made important and beneficial reforms.

In 621 BCE, **Draco** produced the first written legal code. It was very harsh – not unlike Hammurabi’s code – and the word ‘draconian’ comes from this code, and means severe, harsh or cruel.



Later, **Solon** initiated numerous reforms. He invited all citizens to participate in an Assembly. He also abolished debt slavery and promoted foreign trade. But Solon resisted land reform, and eventually conflict built up between wealthy & poor.

**Pisistratus** seized power in 546 BCE, and cut the power of the aristocracy by redistributing the land and helping the poor by providing cheap farming equipment. He also created massive building projects that employed the poor.



**Cleisthenes** made further reforms in 508 BCE. He removed the requirement that citizens own land in order to participate in the Assembly. He also created the Council of 500, which proposed laws and counseled the Assembly. Council members were to be chosen at random.

## Pericles (460-430 BCE)

Pericles was, perhaps, the greatest ruler in Athenian history. He guided Athens to victory over the mighty Persians, and ushered in a Golden Age.



He also completed Athens’ movement toward democracy. He opened all political offices up to any citizen, regardless of land ownership. Most importantly, he offered payment for jury duty or for public office, so that poorer people could afford to serve. He also initiated massive public works to rebuild Athens after the destruction of the Persians. This provided employment for many needy people.



Much of the acropolis in Athens was constructed in the era of Pericles – including the Parthenon

## Democracy’s Limitations

Athens’ democracy was hardly democratic by today’s standards. Only citizens were allowed to participate in the government, and only about 20% of the population of Athens qualified as citizens.



Only free men, over the age of 18, whose parents had been born in Athens qualified for citizenship. Women, slaves, foreigners, and second-generation foreigners were excluded from the governing process. (80% of the population – hardly democratic...)

Still, the notion that people had the right to govern themselves was a unique one, and one which would eventually find an echo in later western civilizations.

Global History

Democracy

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Originally, what type of government did Athens have?

6. How did Pericles move Athens toward greater democracy?

2. Define: *Tyrant* --

7. Why did he initiate so many public works projects?

3. What did Draco do as leader of Athens?

4. What does *draconian* mean?

8. How was Athens’ democracy limited?

5. List the three governmental reformers, and explain the reforms they made.

a.

9. Who were the citizens of Athens?

b.

10. Who didn’t qualify as citizens of Athens?

c.