Demokratia: the Democracy of ancient Greece

Democracy is widely believed to have begun in ancient Greece. In actual fact, other civilizations did have forms of democracy. It is from Greece, however, where our word “democracy” comes from. This was based on a form of rule from Athens, although their demokratia is very different from the modern form of democracy that we know today.

In Greece, many groups of people were separated by land and sea who made up what we refer to today as the “Greeks.” Much of what we know about ancient Greece actually comes from Athens, as they were a constant seat of power in the Greek world. This system, demokratia, was not used throughout Greece. Athenian rule had been led by kings and groups of elite ruling families. The outcome was that few people got a say in the day-to-day governing of the city, and problems developed between the ruling families and other cities. Eventually, the people became too unhappy with the present system and a new system was introduced. The word demokratia means “power of the people.” Demos, the word for people, refers to the units of people belonging to the 30 trittyes, regional divisions of Athens. Three trittyes were selected—one each from the coast, rural and urban areas—and joined into a tribe, making 10 tribes in total. A council of 500—50 from each of these 10 tribes—was created to create a jury of peers that would hear trials. Each person only served for a year before a new council was made, allowing as many people as possible to have a turn.

This system only included male citizens, but was still much more inclusive than previous systems of ruling. The major difference between this system and our own is that, although we all have the power to vote, we still vote for people who take up positions in the government, who then make most of the decisions that govern our countries. In the Athenian system, every person could speak out and discuss every dispute, and then would be a part of the final vote that would decide an action. In fact, the Athenians went to great lengths to stop a single person from gaining too much power or popularity. Occasionally, the council will decide to hold an ostracism. This was a time when citizens would vote for the one man they wished to be sent from the city for a period of 10 years. The Athenians hoped that this would encourage equality among its citizens.

The biggest argument against this form of democracy is that the people who end up making decisions that affect the entire population could be very ignorant about what they are deciding. On the other hand, this system of government is one of the few in which every person from every walk of life has an equal say in what occurs.