

Comparative Analysis of Athenian and American Democracy: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *This article provides a comparative analysis of Athenian and American democracy, tracing the similarities in their historical development and examining their practical implications. It delves into the foundational principles of these democracies, their evolution over time, and their current state in the light of globalization and societal complexities. This article holds significance as it provides a comprehensive understanding of democratic systems, and how they vary in different cultural and temporal contexts.*

Keywords: Athenian Democracy, American Democracy, Comparative Analysis, Historical Perspective, Globalization, Social Complexities

Politics, in its quintessence, is an arena of power and possibilities that arise as a result of human interactions which seek to 'better' collective life. The Greek civilization is recognized as the homeland of *polis* or state affairs, owing to the organization of the Athenian democracy and the Spartan Diarchy, as well as the thought - exercises of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle.

Over time, Greek political thought has been classified within the 'idealist' notion of state - centered philosophy, that for contemporary thinkers, seems substantially far from applicability. Terms such as democracy, justice, monarchy, and even 'politics' itself are an offshoot of Greek thought and conceptualization. The transcendentalism of Greek political thought and its ingenuity to hold relevance in the modern realm demands an analysis of the ancient understanding of the 'ideal state' and its actualization in current affairs.

The distribution of power and ideas surrounding it has evolved into a long - standing debate, in the political domain, where it is understood as 'democracy versus monarchy'. The notion of ideal authority, however, is subject to layers of ethics, efficiency, and the fulfillment of the "common good". The idea of morality itself is not static and is subservient not only to time but even to region and culture. Following the French and American revolutions, it was understood by scholars that the pursuit of the 'ideal state' would end in the liberal - democratic system, yet countries such as Bahrain, Denmark, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan still hold onto their love for monarchy.

The concept of 'rule by many' finds itself in a paradox with regard to its substance in philosophy versus practice. In contemplative terms, a democratic government seems the most ideal, where each citizen's opinion is taken into consideration. However, the nature of power itself remains exclusive and some would argue that democracy in practice is nothing but an oligarchy. Modern democracies limit the role of citizens to voters, with the right to protest or form political parties. A question arises – what is the fine line between a democracy and an oligarchy?

Solon, an Athenian legislator, belonging to the pantheon of the seven wise men of Greece, is credited with having laid the foundations for the Athenian democracy, the primordial

historic system of 'rule by the people'¹. This paper will analyze the impact of Solon's republicanism with regard to the making of America and dwell on the practicality of Solon's ideal *polis*.

Just as the momentous transition of America from feudalism to democracy was ignited due to lack of mobility in the social order, so too, the ancient city of Athens saw itself in a state of asphyxiation stemming from Draconian laws that favored the *Eupatrids* (Noble - borns)² by reserving death punishments for the subalterns or forcing them into slavery for the trespassing of aristocratic orders.³

The continuity of Draco's code led to feelings of discontent and anger amongst the unfavoured masses, as all office post holdings were based on how much property or capital one possessed, limiting governance and power to the hereditarily privileged. Solon describes this situation as '*Stasis*' or a state of social strife spread throughout the *polis*.⁴ In order to maintain the state, Solon vouched for reformations over a revolution. He writes:

*My laws have armed the crowd with useful might, have banished honours and unequal right, have taught the proud in wealth, and high in place, to reverence justice, and abhor disgrace; and given to hold a shield, their guardian tower against ambitious aims and lawless power.*⁵

Just like Karl Marx, Solon saw the root of inequality in economic impoverishment. This is why he foremost sought to abolish slavery on the basis of an individual's inability to

¹ World History Edu. (2021, August 15). Solon – biography, philosophy, reforms, accomplishments, & quotes - page 2 of 5. *World History Edu*. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://www.worldhistoryedu.com/solon-biography-philosophy-reforms-accomplishments-quotes/2/>

² Eupatrid definition & meaning. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eupatrid>

³ Hyde, W. W. (1918). The Homicide Courts of Ancient Athens. *University of Pennsylvania Law and Review*, 8, 66(7), 319–362.

⁴ Guia, V. (2018). (rep.). *Solon's Law on Stasis*. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from https://www.persee.fr/docAsPDF/dha_0755-7256_2021_num_47_2_5094.pdf

⁵ McWhorter, Robert Ligon. "The Athenian Democracy." *The Georgia Review* 5, no. 3 (1951): 290-99.

return debts, and rewrote the heavy land mortgage tradition of Athens. This act came to be known as *Seisachtheia*.

Subsequently, he ameliorated the Council of Areopagus by stripping down its aristocratic preferences and formed a council of four - hundred where a hundred citizens from each section (*Pentokosimedemni*, *Hippeis*, *Zeugitae*, and *Thetes*) could have better representation.

The democratic makeover of Areopagus pulsed a domino effect, where district - level courts began acknowledging even the serfs as jurors in their own right. However, it is important to keep in mind that Solon did not wholly eradicate aristocratic belligerence at the dignified positions, rather he tamed it by reconfiguring one's amount of capital to be translated as years of service, over the previous Draconian lifetime hold. This meant that one holding ten pieces of land would serve tenure for ten years, after which another would take over.

Solon undertook a pragmatic approach to implementing a democratic institution in Athens. The concept of 'rule by many' could be appropriately functional only if citizens played an active part in voicing their needs or opinions than granting everyone legislative power.

Plutarch, a Greek biographer, makes a noteworthy observation of Solon's democratic reforms in this regard, "*And all the others were called Thetes, who were not admitted to any office, but could come to the assembly, and act as jurors; which at first seemed nothing, but afterwards was found an enormous privilege, as almost every matter of dispute came before them in this latter capacity.*"⁶

Solon's conceptualization of an ideal state was firmly rooted in the belief that serfdom and eugenic supremacy were the sources of all dilemmas. By successfully divorcing political power from aristocratic kinship, he bifurcated the social and political spheres and saw it as an essential element to stabilizing the state. The Solonian constitution in its later years came to be known as 'demokratia' and set the basis for Athenian governance until the Peloponnesian war.

The cyclic nature of happenings manifested in the soil of America during the 18th century, with the fall of modern aristocrats or the feudal lords. Ideas from the era of Enlightenment once again popularized notions of equality, favouring a democratic state. Thomas Paine, a founding father of America even remarked, "What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude".⁷

The idea of America itself, as a union of republican ambits, was inspired by the organization of Greek city - states and their overthrow of the mighty Persian empire. Historian Carl J. Richard states, "The founders learned that it was possible for a collection of small republics to defeat a centralized

monarchical empire in a war for survival. This was a crucial lesson because the founders faced just such a power in the Revolutionary War".⁸

America in its infancy restricted the initial phase of voting only to the white landowning males, who were deemed 'mature' enough to decide for the remaining bulk of people. Solonian principles on the other hand sought to go beyond such boundaries that could result in civil disobedience and eventually break the state.

The legislative processes, however, between Athens and America strike a similarity. Just as Solon sought inclusivity in the Council of Areopagus, the people of the United States are bestowed with the freedom to select their desired candidates in the Electoral College. However, the final decision - making power rests only with the Council or Electoral College to administrate or vote for the most eligible President. Hence one could state that Solon also sowed the seeds for an indirect/ representative democracy like America. Although the basic outline of Solonian democracy remains embedded in American politics, it fails to live up to the just nature that Athens was founded on.

The United States as we know it today has become a cultural hub where migrants from all around the sphere settle in the hopes of getting path - breaking opportunities. The advent of globalization has become a litmus test to judge whether a nation is simply a democracy, or is actually 'democratic'.

Minorities in America, such as African - Americans, Asian - Americans, and Latin - Americans remain marginalized in terms of minimum wages, housing facilities, and access to basic amenities such as healthcare and education. The distance between the 'indigenous' and the 'immigrant' is created through a difference in race, appearance, cultural, and even linguistic preferences. This is perhaps why, the statistics from the 1995 Glass Ceiling Commission show that, while white men constituted about 43% of the workforce, they held 95% of senior management positions in the American industry.

Research by CNBC also highlights that in 2021, the minimum wage for an average person of colour in the United States remains \$0.7 while the average white individual receives \$1 as his/her basic pay for every hour they work in a day.

In the era of minimal borders and maximized immigration, the concept of a 'democracy' seems to be losing its value as a platform for the common man and is rather evolving into a tool for majoritarian needs. It is essential to keep in thought that the society of Ancient Athens during the time of Solon shared a common language, faith, race, and culture. The boundaries that separated them were purely social and not racial/cultural in nature.

⁶ Plutarch, & Dryden, J. (1912). Life of Solon. In *Plutarch's lives of illustrious men*. essay, Philadelphia: D. McKay.

⁷ Romeo, N. (2021, May 4). What modern democracies didn't copy from Ancient Greece. *History*. National Geographic. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/greek-ancient-origins-modern-politics>

⁸ Richard, C. J., & Madden, T. F. (2014). *The founders and the classics: Greece, Rome, and the American enlightenment*. Omaha, NE: The Legal Classics Library, Division of Gryphon Corporation.

Robert Michels, a political theorist had famously remarked, "It's the (democratic) organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors." He concluded that as society became more complex, any democratic system was bound to turn into an oligarchy.

In conclusion, while Athenian and American democracies share foundational principles, their practical implications vary significantly due to social complexities and the impact of globalization. The efficiency of a democracy like Solon's is possible only over a filtered social setting, where people are more similar than they are diverse.

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