**Democracy**, literally, rule by the people. The term is derived from the Greek dēmokratiā, which was coined from dēmos (“people”) and kratos (“rule”) in the middle of the 5th century BCE to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states, notably Athens.

The etymological origins of the term democracy hint at a number of urgent problems that go far beyond semantic issues. If a government of or by the people—a “popular” government—is to be established, at least five fundamental questions must be confronted at the outset, and two more are almost certain to be posed if the democracy continues to exist for long.

(1) What is the appropriate unit or association within which a democratic government should be established? A town or city? A country? A business [corporation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/corporation)? A university? An [international organization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-organization)? All of these?

(2) Given an appropriate association—a city, for example—who among its members should enjoy full citizenship? Which persons, in other words, should [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) the dēmos? Is every member of the association entitled to participate in governing it? Assuming that children should not be allowed to participate (as most adults would agree), should the dēmosinclude all adults? If it includes only a subset of the adult population, how small can the subset be before the association ceases to be a democracy and becomes something else, such as an [aristocracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/aristocracy) (government by the best, aristos) or an [oligarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/oligarchy) (government by the few, oligos)?

(3) Assuming a proper association and a proper dēmos, how are citizens to govern? What political organizations or institutions will they need? Will these institutions differ between different kinds of associations—for example, a small town and a large country?

(4) When citizens are divided on an issue, as they often will be, whose views should prevail, and in what circumstances? Should a majority always prevail, or should minorities sometimes be empowered to block or overcome majority rule?

(5) If a majority is ordinarily to prevail, what is to constitute a proper majority? A majority of all citizens? A majority of voters? Should a proper majority [comprise](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprise) not individual citizens but certain groups or associations of citizens, such as hereditary groups or territorial associations?

(6) The preceding questions presuppose an adequate answer to a sixth and even more important question: Why should “the people” rule? Is democracy really better than [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy) or [monarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/monarchy)? Perhaps, as [Plato](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato) argues in the Republic, the best government would be led by a [minority](https://www.britannica.com/topic/minority) of the most highly qualified persons—an aristocracy of “[philosopher-kings](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosopher-king).” What reasons could be given to show that Plato’s view is wrong?

(7) No association could maintain a democratic government for very long if a majority of the dēmos—or a majority of the government—believed that some other form of government were better. Thus, a minimum condition for the continued existence of a democracy is that a substantial proportion of both the dēmos and the leadership believes that popular government is better than any [feasible](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feasible) [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative). What conditions, in addition to this one, favour the continued existence of democracy? What conditions are harmful to it? Why have some [democracies](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracies) managed to endure, even through periods of severe crisis, while so many others have collapsed?

Democratic Institutions

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, both the theory and the practice of democracy have undergone profound changes, many of which have concerned the prevailing answers to questions 1 through 3 above. Thus, for thousands of years the kind of association in which democracy was practiced, the tribe or the [city-state](https://www.britannica.com/topic/city-state), was small enough to be suitable for some form of democracy by assembly, or “[direct democracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/direct-democracy).” Much later, beginning in the 18th century, as the typical association became the nation-state or country, direct democracy gave way to [representative democracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/representative-democracy)—a transformation so sweeping that, from the perspective of a citizen of ancient Athens, the governments of gigantic associations such as [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) or the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) might not have appeared democratic at all. This change in turn entailed a new answer to question 3: Representative democracy would require a set of political institutions radically different from those of all earlier democracies.

Another important change has concerned the prevailing answers to question 2. Until fairly recently, most democratic associations limited the [right](https://www.britannica.com/topic/right) to participate in government to a minority of the adult population—indeed, sometimes to a very small minority. Beginning in the 20th century, this right was extended to nearly all adults. Accordingly, a contemporary democrat could reasonably argue that Athens, because it excluded so many adults from the dēmos, was not really a democracy—even though the term democracy was invented and first applied in Athens.

Despite these and other important changes, it is possible to identify a considerable number of early political systems that involved some form of “rule by the people,” even if they were not fully democratic by contemporary standards.

Prehistoric forms of democracy

Although it is tempting to assume that democracy was created in one particular place and time—most often identified as [Greece](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Greece) about the year 500 BCE—evidence suggests that democratic government, in a broad sense, existed in several areas of the world well before the turn of the 5th century.

It is plausible to assume that democracy in one form or another arises naturally in any well-bounded group, such as a [tribe](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribe-anthropology), if the group is sufficiently independent of control by outsiders to permit members to run their own affairs and if a substantial number of members, such as tribal elders, consider themselves about equally qualified to participate in decisions about matters of concern to the group as a whole. This assumption has been supported by studies of nonliterate tribal societies, which suggest that democratic government existed among many tribal groups during the thousands of years when human beings survived by [hunting and gathering](https://www.britannica.com/topic/hunting-and-gathering-culture). To these early humans, democracy, such as it was practiced, might well have seemed the most “natural” [political system](https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-system).

When the lengthy period of hunting and gathering came to an end and humans began to settle in fixed [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities), primarily for [agriculture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/agriculture) and trade, the conditions that favour popular participation in government seem to have become rare. Greater inequalities in wealth and military power between communities, together with a marked increase in the typical community’s size and scale, encouraged the spread of hierarchical and [authoritarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/authoritarianism)forms of social organization. As a result, popular governments among settled peoples vanished, to be replaced for thousands of years by governments based on monarchy, despotism, aristocracy, or [oligarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oligarchy), each of which came to be seen—at least among the dominant members of these societies—as the most natural form of government.

Then, about 500 BCE, conditions favourable to democracy reappeared in several places, and a few small groups began to create popular governments. Primitive democracy, one might say, was reinvented in more advanced forms. The most crucial developments occurred in two areas of the Mediterranean, Greece and [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome).

Classical [Greece](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Greece)

During the Classical period (corresponding roughly to the 5th and 4th centuries BCE), Greece was of course not a country in the modern sense but a collection of several hundred independent city-states, each with its surrounding countryside. In 507 BCE, under the leadership of [Cleisthenes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cleisthenes-of-Athens), the citizens of [Athens](https://www.britannica.com/place/Athens) began to develop a system of popular rule that would last nearly two centuries. To question 1, then, the Greeks responded clearly: The political association most appropriate to democratic government is the [polis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/polis), or city-state.

Athenian democracy foreshadowed some later democratic practices, even among peoples who knew little or nothing of the Athenian system. Thus the Athenian answer to question 2—Who should constitute the [dēmos](https://www.britannica.com/topic/deme-ancient-Greek-government)?—was similar to the answer developed in many newly democratic countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. Although [citizenship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/citizenship) in Athens was hereditary, extending to anyone who was born to parents who were themselves Athenian citizens, membership in the dēmos was limited to male citizens 18 years of age or older (until 403, when the minimum age was raised to 20).

Because data is scanty, estimates of the size of the Athenian dēmos must be treated with caution. One scholar has suggested that in the mid-4th century there may have been about 100,000 citizens, 10,000 resident foreigners, or [metic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/metic)s, and as many as 150,000 [slaves](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology). Among citizens, about 30,000 were males over 18. If these numbers are roughly correct, then the dēmos [comprised](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprised) 10 to 15 percent of the total population.

Regarding question 3—What political institutions are necessary for governing?—the Athenians adopted an answer that would appear independently elsewhere. The heart and centre of their government was the Assembly ([Ecclesia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ecclesia-ancient-Greek-assembly)), which met almost weekly—40 times a year—on the Pnyx, a hill west of the [Acropolis](https://www.britannica.com/technology/acropolis-ancient-Greek-district). Decisions were taken by vote, and, as in many later assemblies, [voting](https://www.britannica.com/topic/voting) was by a show of hands. As would also be true in many later democratic systems, the votes of a majority of those present and voting prevailed. Although we have no way of knowing how closely the majority in the Assembly represented the much larger number of eligible citizens who did not attend, given the frequency of meetings and the accessibility of the meeting place, it is unlikely that the Assembly could have long persisted in making markedly unpopular decisions.

The powers of the Assembly were broad, but they were by no means unlimited. The agenda of the Assembly was set by the [Council of Five Hundred](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Council-of-Five-Hundred-ancient-Greek-council), which, unlike the Assembly, was composed of [representatives](https://www.britannica.com/topic/representative-democracy) chosen by lot from each of 139 small territorial entities, known as demes, created by Cleisthenes in 507. The number of representatives from each deme was roughly proportional to its population. The Council’s use of representatives (though chosen by lot rather than by [election](https://www.britannica.com/topic/election-political-science)) foreshadowed the election of representatives in later democratic systems.

Another important political [institution](https://www.britannica.com/topic/institution) in Athens was the popular courts (dikasteria; see[dicastery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dicastery)), described by one scholar as “the most important organ of state, alongside the Assembly,” with “unlimited power to control the Assembly, the Council, the magistrates, and political leaders.” The popular courts were composed of jurors chosen by lot from a pool of citizens over 30 years of age; the pool itself was chosen annually and also by lot. The institution is a further illustration of the extent to which the ordinary citizens of Athens were expected to participate in the political life of the city.

In 411 BCE, exploiting the unrest created by Athens’s disastrous and seemingly endless war with [Sparta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sparta) (see [Peloponnesian War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Peloponnesian-War)), a group known as the Four Hundred seized control of Athens and established an oligarchy. Less than a year later, the Four Hundred were overthrown and democracy was fully restored. Nine decades later, in 321, Athens was subjugated by its more powerful neighbour to the north, Macedonia, which introduced [property](https://www.britannica.com/topic/property-legal-concept) qualifications that effectively excluded many ordinary Athenians from the dēmos. In 146 BCE what remained of Athenian democracy was extinguished by the conquering Romans.