

STUDENT HANDOUT

What is Direct Democracy?

In a democracy, the people rule. This is the meaning of the word democracy. In Greek, *demos* means people and *kratos* means rule. This is the nature of democracy. Unlike societies where kings or dictators make the final decision, in a democracy the ultimate power resides with the people.

How people use their democratic power differs from place to place. In Canada, we elect people to government. These elected representatives make decisions on our behalf. This is called representative democracy.

Democratic power can also be used in a more direct way than simply voting for a representative. People may be asked to vote on a specific policy. When citizens—not elected representatives—decide specific issues, it is called direct democracy.

Some countries are governed by direct democracy. For example, the tiny European nation of Liechtenstein presents its proposed laws to the people. Citizens vote yes or no to each proposal. Because the people of Liechtenstein directly decide what will become the law, the country is a direct democracy.

People Like Democracy

Whether a country is governed by representative democracy or by direct democracy, in both cases the people rule. The idea that the people should rule is widely supported.

In 2017, the Pew Research Center—a non-partisan research organisation—studied beliefs about democracy in 38 countries. Their research found that in high-income countries, support for representative democracy is very strong. 78% of respondents said that representative democracy is a good way of governing their country.

Interestingly, the Pew Research Center also found that people living in representative democracies would strongly support more use of direct democracy. People were asked:

Would a democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law be a good or bad way of governing this country?

Put another way, people were asked if they supported more direct democracy. Two thirds of respondents said yes.

In Canada, we sometimes use direct democracy. For example, in 1992 Canada held a national vote on amending the constitution. In 1991, Saskatchewan held votes on public funding of abortions, balanced budgets, and methods of approving constitutional changes. And countless municipalities in Saskatchewan have allowed their citizens



to vote on local issues. For example, in 2013 the City of Regina asked citizens who should build their new waste water plant.

The idea of direct democracy—people directly voting on issues—is nothing new. It goes back at least 2,500 years, when ancient Greece was governed by direct democracy.

Athens and the Origins of Direct Democracy

Ancient Greece was a collection of approximately 1,000 city-states. Most city-states consisted of a walled-in urban core surrounded by agricultural land. This was called a *polis*. Each polis developed its own form of governance. Many used direct democracy.

Athens was ancient Greece's largest polis. At its peak in 5th century BC, Athens was home to about 250,000 people and covered a territory of 2,500 square kilometres. Because of Athens' size, because vast archaeological records of Athens remain, and because Athens was a direct democracy, Athens is ideal to help understand the origins of direct democracy.

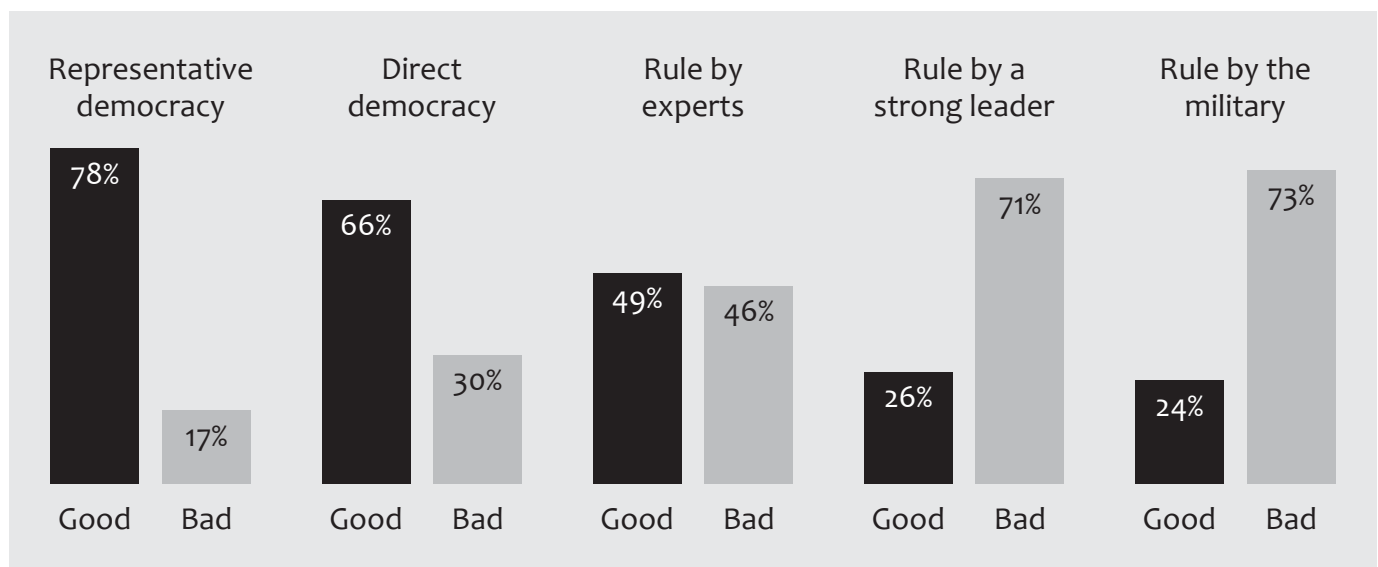
How Athenian Direct Democracy Worked

As a direct democracy, Athens was governed by its citizens. Assemblies were held so citizens could vote on laws and public policies. As well, about 1,200 public officials in Athens were chosen every year, either by a vote or by a lottery. Amongst the people chosen by lottery were jurors who would vote to decide court cases.

Assemblies in Athens were open to male citizens. How citizenship was granted changed over the years, but in general people were considered citizens if they completed military service, were born to citizen-parents, or had citizenship conferred upon them by the assembly. Women and children could hold citizenship, but unlike men they were not allowed to vote.

Assemblies usually took place at the Pnyx, a central hill in Athens. However, if more than 6,000 people were meeting they would assemble in the *agora*, the central marketplace. Attendance was usually optional. Those who attended were compensated for their time.

At an assembly, laws and policies were put forth for citizens to consider. The proposals could be made by any citizen beforehand. Public officials determined which suggested proposals would be



Support for various types of rule. Source: Pew Research Center Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey



A POWERFUL SOCIAL CHECK

Athens used a system of exile to help keep both average citizens and the elite in check. Once a year, Athenians could propose people for exile. A vote would be held, and if passed, that person was exiled from Athens for ten years. After ten years, they were given a clean slate and allowed back in. While exiling fellow citizens is ethically questionable, the threat acted as a powerful social check.

considered at the assembly. Most often, radical proposals for change would not be forwarded to the assembly for consideration.

Anybody could speak at an assembly. Nevertheless, it was usually ambitious men who spoke. The vast majority merely listened and voted. One reason most people just listened was because speaking out was risky: speakers could potentially be held legally responsible for giving bad or false advice. On the flip side, citizens were never held responsible if they irresponsibly cast votes.

Democratic power in Athens was a radical departure from earlier systems where leaders ruled by decree. The power of the vote meant that citizens could keep the elite in check.



The stepping stone (speaker's platform) of the Pnyx in Athens. Here citizens assembled to debate and vote on laws.

THINK

1. Is it a good idea to allow people to vote directly on issues? Explain.
2. Many Athenians remained silent during debates. Silence can be both useful and harmful. Think about remaining silent in a debate.
 - a) Can you properly contribute to a debate without also listening to all perspectives?
 - b) Why do some people remain silent during debates?
3. Athenian democracy gave citizens voting power, which helped keep Athenian elites in check. How does democracy today help keep elites in check?
4. Is the majority always right? If not, do the great masses of people also need to be kept in check?