

Lessons of ancient Greek democracy for the modern world

By Ilya Somin August 10, 2015

In an [interesting recent article](#) in *Foreign Affairs*, Josiah Ober – a leading academic expert on ancient Greek democracy – argues that there is much we can learn from the Greek experience that could be applicable to modern public policy. As he describes more fully in [a new book](#), democratic ancient Greek city states achieved impressive levels of economic growth and culture flourishing. Ober contends that their success was the result of reliance on democratic decision-making and well-structured political institutions:

So what made the impressive growth of the ancient Greek economy possible? The basic answer is good institutions. Greek city-states were governed by a range of regimes, but, by the fourth century BCE, the typical Greek city-state was, by world historical standards, very democratic. In Athens, and hundreds of other Greek states, most native adult males were participatory citizens, who set policy in citizen councils and assemblies, judged legal cases as jurors on people's courts, and were elected or chosen by lot to serve as public officials.

In his excellent earlier book, *Democracy and Knowledge*, Ober effectively argues that ancient Athenian democracy made effective use of knowledge, and that the citizens who made decisions in the assembly were far from being the ignorant mob typically depicted by both ancient and modern skeptics about direct democracy.

Ober's work is intriguing and powerful. But I am not as optimistic as he is that the relative successes of ancient democracy can be replicated in the modern world. As I pointed out in [a review of his earlier book](#), ancient Athenian democracy was less vulnerable to the dangers of voter ignorance than modern government is, because the functions of the state in the ancient world were much simpler and more limited than they are today, thereby making it easier for ordinary citizens to understand public policy and hold officials accountable for their performance. By contrast, citizens of modern democracies are [often ignorant of even the most basic aspects of government](#). If we want modern voters to be as effective as their ancient Athenian counterparts apparently were, we should consider cutting back on the size, scope, and complexity of government.

Moreover, by modern standards, ancient Athens was not so much a democracy as an oligarchy where the franchise was in some ways limited to those most likely to have a relatively high level of political knowledge. That doesn't mean modern states should limit the franchise in the same fashion as the Athenians did. But we should nonetheless take note of this aspect of the Athenian system in considering the extent to which it provides lessons for our own.

I do agree with Ober that democratic government works better if subject to various constitutional constraints:

[C]ontrary to the still-common image of Greek democracy as mob rule, we can now trace, at least in well-documented Athens, how the legislative authority of the people was tempered by democratically-enacted codes of fundamental laws. By the time Plato was writing the Republic, in the early fourth century BCE, every day-to-day policy decision made by the Athenian council and assembly was required to conform to a body of written constitutional law. And that law was taken seriously; politicians who sought to introduce measures that contradicted it risked losing the right to propose legislation. The laws effectively protected the property, dignity, and bodies of citizens, and to some degree non-citizens as well, against exploitation by over-reaching magistrates or powerful individuals.

This is a useful corrective to the simplistic image of ancient Greek democracy as a system of near-total majority rule under which popular assemblies could do almost anything they wanted. But it seems to me that the need for strong constitutional constraints on democratic government is already evident from extensive modern experience.

Ober's books are outstanding contributions to our understanding of the history and political theory of democracy. I have learned a great deal from them. But it may not prove easy to apply ancient lessons in the modern world.

UPDATE: I originally mistakenly wrote that Ober's article appeared in *Foreign Policy* rather than *Foreign Affairs* (where it was actually published). I apologize for the mistake, which has now been corrected.

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