

Representative Democracy in Late Classical Greece

It is commonplace to contrast the origins of “direct” democracy in Ancient Greece with those of “representative” democracy (also sometimes called “republicanism”) that began in the medieval or early modern period (e.g. Keane 2010: 388–92). This narrative suggests that Greek democracies (especially Athens, for which evidence is exceptionally abundant) operated on the principle of direct participation of all citizens, while later republics operated on the principle of representation; the populace selected leaders who would represent their interests in the political sphere. This paper will argue that the principle of representation can in fact be traced back to the fourth-century Greek world.

First of all two different types of representation need to be distinguished. The first, the principal of proportion, has been addressed in scholarly literature, especially in regard to federal states (e.g. Larsen 1968; Taylor 2007). The second, the principal of delegation, has been largely passed over in classical scholarship. However, the specific dynamics at work between the electorate and the elected official are critical for determining the relations of power between mass and elite.

The American Founding Fathers understood this well, having a vigorous debate on the “responsibility” versus “responsiveness” of elected officials. Advocates of the former urged that electors should simply choose the most virtuous men, who would then be entitled to make independent judgments; while advocates of the latter believed that politicians should seek to understand the will of the people and respond to it accordingly. An early form of this distinction can be found in the Greek debates about democracy and oligarchy (especially helpful on this topic: Ober 1998; Ostwald 2000; Raaflaub 2004). Oligarchs (e.g. Isoc. 7; Xen. *Lac. Const.* 8.4; Pl. *Leg.* 945d ff.) argued that virtuous men ought to be able to make independent decisions. Democrats, with their insistence on *euthynai* and other accountability procedures (Hdt. 3.80; see

also Fröhlich 2004; Ashmonti 2006), believed in close surveillance and popular control of politicians.

Bearing this in mind, we should not be misled into thinking of the shifts in democracy in the fourth century B.C. as a retreat from “real” participatory democracy of the fifth century. It is true that at the end of the fourth century democracies in the Greek world tended to eschew the use of the lottery and direct participation in favor of reliance on elected experts (Rhodes 2013), but no return to oligarchy was possible after the virtue politics of oligarchic regimes had been discredited. The word *demokratia* did not become “watered down” by the time of Polybius (cf. Rhodes 1997: 531–5). The institutional parameters by which the *demos* exerted control had shifted from direct participation to delegation of power and close supervision of the elite, but the underlying reality of people’s power had not changed. These democracies, evidenced primarily by the plethora of extant decrees in the Hellenistic period, were characterized by close scrutiny of magistrates and rewarding of the loyal ones through honorifics (see e.g. *IG II²* 457). There is good reason, therefore, to consider late Classical/Hellenistic city-states the birthplace for representative democracy, more than a thousand years before its reincarnation in medieval Europe.

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