

**Democracy**, meaning 'rule of the commoners' in Greek, is a government system in which citizens can vote for their leaders. In contrast to dictatorship or monarchy, it is a system in which the majority influences the ruling elite.

The system of democracy was born in **Greece** around 500BC, specifically in the city-state of Athens. Athens used to be ruled by kings, but they were overthrown and a democratic system was established... the first in history, and in the world. This system was unique in that political leaders could be random citizens voted in by their peers. Also, they had a public **legislative forum** in which all citizens could speak and express their views.

However, not all were considered equal even under the democratic system, as women, slaves, foreigners, and people under 20 years old were not granted full citizenship, so they were not allowed to vote or express themselves politically.

Through medieval history, democracy was used usually in narrow ranges, which were not available to all people, but just for political elites. One example is **Frostating**, a court in Norway which operated in the 1200s, in which representatives of various regions could come to discuss laws and settle disputes.

The **Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth**, a European superpower in existence from 1569-1795, despite having a king, also practiced democratic voting in parliament. The Commonwealth had a law called ***liberum veto***, in which laws were only passed if they were unanimously agreed-upon by everyone, and if only one nobleman vetoed it, it could not pass. This would prove to cripple the country in its later years, and displays the fact that it's possible to be too democratic.

This same issue would be faced by the United States of America, one of the best examples of democracy in history. The US, while still fighting the **Revolutionary War**, had a precursor constitution called the **Articles of Confederation**. This document did not give the federal government a lot of power-to the extent that federal lawmakers had to achieve a significant majority of votes from the states to create laws, which was similar in effect to the ***liberum veto***. The United States would go on to create the **Constitution**, which resolved this problem.

However, the United States is not in fact a democracy but a **Democratic Republic**. Democracy in its purest sense means that the will of the majority-the popular vote-determines everything. Nothing is sacred, anything can be voted on and changed.

In a democracy, officials are also elected by the people directly, in other words, the person with the most votes gets office. However, in the United States, what is in place

is a **representative democracy**. In this form of democracy, the people of a region elect representatives, who then speak for them in an assembly, such as Congress, and then this assembly votes on legal issues.

This is the most common form of democracy in the world, and is arguably the most efficient. In direct voting, all citizens would have to vote on all laws getting passed, which means they would have to be educated on every single aspect of law. In a representative democracy, citizens elect people they trust, whose positions on issues they know—for instance, the people of New Jersey would elect a Congressman who looks after their interests, and if this Congressman works against their interests, then they vote for someone else.

No government system is perfect, however, and even democracies and republics can succumb to tyranny. **Adolf Hitler**, for instance, the leader of Nazi Germany, was appointed in a democratic country which elected its leaders, before taking power and turning it into a dictatorship. This is the burden of democracy—citizens who have the privilege of voting have the responsibility to educate themselves and use that privilege, because many people throughout history have been unable to influence their rulers.

**1) Democracy means...**

- Rule by the commoners
- Rule by the nobility
- Rule by the king
- Rule by the parliament

**2) Why was democracy in Athens not fully representative?**

- Farmers couldn't vote
- Men couldn't vote
- Women, foreigners and slaves couldn't vote
- It was fully representative

**3) What was Frostating?**

- The building in which the first US elections were held
- A court in Norway in the middle ages
- A province in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth
- A castle in Norway

**4) Why was the *liberum veto* bad?**

- Just one person could stop any legislation by vetoing it
- It was not inclusive enough
- Nobody had the power to veto legislation
- It was not bad

5) **What government form does the United States have?**

- Democracy
- Kingdom
- Empire
- Democratic Republic

6) **Why is voting important?**

- It lets us influence our leaders
- It helps us keep evil people from power
- It's a rare privilege
- All of the above