Who Ruled Athens?

Read how Athenian institutions expanded and limited political power.

AWH.C.6.3 "Analyze why the government of ancient Athens is considered the beginning of democratic government, by explaining the political concepts developed in ancient Greece (e.g., "polis" or city-state, rule of law, liberty..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two actions citizens could take, circle two institutions that organized or checked decisions, and number one group excluded from voting. Use your marks to weigh Athens's democratic innovations against its limits.

Power in an Athenian Polis

1. In the fifth century BCE, an Athenian citizen could climb the Pnyx, a hill where the Assembly met, to debate a public decision. Athens was a polis, an independent city-state that governed its city and surrounding farmland. Its citizens could act directly rather than choose representatives for a distant national government. Eligible citizens met to decide matters affecting their own community. That connection between a self-governing polis and direct civic participation helps explain why Athens is called an early democracy. Still, participation depended on citizenship, and many people who lived in Athens had no political voice.

2. Athens did not begin with a finished democracy. In 594 BCE, Solon's reforms ended debt bondage for Athenian citizens and opened some political participation beyond the wealthiest families, although wealth still shaped access to office. Around 508 BCE, Cleisthenes reorganized citizens into new tribes and created a Council of 500. Chosen by lot from the tribes, the council prepared business for the Assembly. In the fifth century BCE, eligible male citizens voted in the Assembly on public decisions, including war. Large citizen juries also heard cases. These bodies gave citizens ways to shape policy and judge disputes.

3. The Athenian constitution was not a single document like many modern constitutions. It was a changing arrangement of laws and political institutions that set out who could participate and how decisions were made. Citizens could speak in the Assembly, while legal procedures allowed them to challenge officials and bring cases. Such checks supported the rule of law: an official's authority was limited by public rules rather than personal whim. Together, the Assembly, council, and courts made ordinary male citizens central to government. Their influence was a major democratic innovation, but women, enslaved people, and resident foreigners lacked citizen voting rights.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Athens's status as a polis help citizens participate directly in government? Name the body where they did so.

2. How did the Council of 500 give citizens a role in shaping decisions before an Assembly vote?

3. How did the Athenian constitution limit an official's power? Include one action citizens could take.

4. Why can Athens be called an early democracy but not a government with equal voting rights for everyone?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Design two rules for a fictional polis: one that changes who may vote and one that keeps leaders answerable to the public. In one paragraph, explain how your rules would affect civic participation and rule of law, including one similarity to and one difference from Athens.

ANSWER KEY

Who Ruled Athens?

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.C.6.3

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two actions citizens could take, circle two institutions that organized or checked decisions, and number one group excluded from voting. Use your marks to weigh Athens's democratic innovations against its limits. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Athens's status as a polis help citizens participate directly in government? Name the body where they did so.	**As members of a self-governing city-state, eligible citizens could meet in the Assembly to debate and vote on decisions for their community.**
2	How did the Council of 500 give citizens a role in shaping decisions before an Assembly vote?	**Council members chosen by lot from the new tribes prepared business for the Assembly.**
3	How did the Athenian constitution limit an official's power? Include one action citizens could take.	**Public rules limited officials' authority, and legal procedures let citizens challenge officials or bring cases.**
4	Why can Athens be called an early democracy but not a government with equal voting rights for everyone?	**Male citizens could debate and vote directly in the Assembly, but women, enslaved people, and resident foreigners lacked citizen voting rights.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

In my polis, every adult resident may vote in the Assembly after living there for one year. A council chosen by lot must publish each proposal before a vote, and any resident may challenge a council member's misuse of power in court. More people could shape decisions than in Athens, where women and resident foreigners lacked voting rights. Like Athens, this polis uses a council, an assembly, and legal challenges to make leaders answer to public rules rather than private wishes.

Accept other accurate explanations grounded in the passage. For the open task, look for two distinct rules and an explanation of how each affects participation or accountability, with a valid comparison to Athens.