Who Had a Voice?

Direct democracy in Athens and its political legacy

MWH.C.1.1.C "Explain ancient Athens' experience with direct democracy and identify modern political principles which developed in ancient Greece (e.g., the city-state, civic participation through voting, law-making bodies)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline how citizens took part in Athenian decisions, circle who was excluded, and number three political ideas in the last paragraph that remain visible today.

A Vote on the Pnyx

1 Imagine walking uphill to the Pnyx, a meeting place in ancient Athens. A public vote could decide whether the city would go to war. Athens was a city-state: a city and surrounding land with its own government. In the fifth century BCE, its democracy gave citizens a direct role in government. Rather than electing lawmakers to make every decision for them, eligible citizens could gather in the Assembly, debate proposed laws, and vote on laws and other decisions. A raised hand showed a choice in a decision that might affect neighbors, farms, and ships.

2 That scene did not include everyone who lived in Athens. Adult male citizens could participate, but women, enslaved people, and resident foreigners could not vote in the Assembly. Even among citizens, attending took time away from work, so access in practice could vary. Government also involved more than a crowd voting. A Council of 500, whose members were selected by lot from citizens, prepared business for the Assembly and handled daily affairs. Citizen juries heard court cases. These bodies gave citizens ways to take part in public decisions, while leaving most residents outside political power.

3 Centuries later, people still debate who should make public decisions and how. Athens offers several political ideas that remain visible today: a self-governing political community, civic participation through voting, and bodies that organize debate and help make laws. Yet the connections are not exact copies. Many modern democracies elect representatives to vote on laws, while Athenians voted directly in their Assembly. Modern countries can include citizens whom Athens excluded, although voting rights still differ across the world. Studying Athens means tracing an idea and its limits at the same time: whose voice counted, what citizens decided, and who was kept out.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did an Athenian citizen's role in making laws differ from a voter's role in many modern democracies?

2. Why would calling Athens a democracy for all its residents be misleading?

3. How did the Council of 500 and the Assembly give citizens different roles in public decisions?

4. Which political idea visible today does Athens's status as a city-state illustrate? Explain the connection.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Your neighborhood is planning a new public park. In four or five sentences, propose a decision process using two ideas from Athens, then explain one way your process would include people Athens excluded and how that changes whose voice counts.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.C.1.1.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline how citizens took part in Athenian decisions, circle who was excluded, and number three political ideas in the last paragraph that remain visible today. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did an Athenian citizen's role in making laws differ from a voter's role in many modern democracies?	**Eligible Athenian citizens debated and voted on proposed laws directly in the Assembly. Voters in many modern democracies elect representatives who vote on laws.**
2	Why would calling Athens a democracy for all its residents be misleading?	**Women, enslaved people, and resident foreigners could not vote in the Assembly, so most residents lacked that political power.**
3	How did the Council of 500 and the Assembly give citizens different roles in public decisions?	**The Council, selected by lot from citizens, prepared business for the Assembly. Eligible citizens in the Assembly debated and voted on proposals.**
4	Which political idea visible today does Athens's status as a city-state illustrate? Explain the connection.	**It illustrates a self-governing political community: Athens and its surrounding land had their own government.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Our neighborhood could hold a meeting where residents discuss two plans for a new park. A small council could prepare the plans and answer questions before the meeting. Residents could then vote directly on the final plan. Unlike ancient Athens, women and residents who are not citizens could vote, so more people affected by the park would have a voice.

Accept explanations that distinguish direct voting from voting for representatives and recognize the limits of Athenian citizenship. For the open task, look for two identifiable Athenian ideas and a specific change in participation.