

DEMOCRACY AS COLLECTIVE AGENCY

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Today the word democracy means “majority rule”, a mechanism for aggregating the preferences of individuals holding equal votes. This definition fits modern political institutions. Yet it fails to capture either the original meaning or the potential of democracy as a dynamic system for organizing complex forms of cooperation. The Greek term, *demokratia*, coined in Athens in the late sixth or early fifth century BCE, is a compound of *demos* and *kratos*. Although, in classical Greek, *demos* can indeed mean majority (the non-elite many) and *kratos* can mean rule (domination over others), comparison with other Greek terms for political regime (*aristokratia*, *oligarchia*, etc.) shows that, in the compound *demokratia*, *kratos* meant capacity to do things, and *demos* meant the whole of the citizenry. The original meaning of democracy was “the people’s capacity to do things.” The word expressed the fact of joint agency; it asserted that an extensive “we” could act together to change the world.

Democracy began as a political slogan, akin to “Yes, we can!”

Majority voting is one way that “we, the people” may change things, but classical Athenian democracy was focused less on aggregating preferences than on aggregating – and then aligning and codifying – useful knowledge. Democratic Athenian institutions were devised in the wake of a revolution and refined over six generations. If democracy had failed to deliver the goods, Athens would not have survived in the competitive world of the city-states. While the Athenians made mistakes, they flourished over time because their collective agency was well-informed by distinctive democratic knowledge-management practices. Because the citizen-crowd manifested more wisdom than madness, democratic Athens became the preeminent Greek city-state – rich, powerful, and able to survive crises that doomed its rivals. The emergence of democracy as a system of knowledge organization that enabled ordinary people to do things together transformed Greece and provoked the emergence of political philosophy as a critical enterprise.



The School of Athens Raffaello Sanzio, 1509

We ought never worship uncritically at the altar of antiquity. Classical Athenians deserve censure for imperial arrogance, chattel slavery, and unfair treatment of women and foreigners. Yet, as our world confronts crises of both knowledge and politics, Athens’ expansive conception of democracy demands our attention.

Democracy was once a means of doing important things together, by sharing what was known among diverse persons, across domains of region, class, and enterprise. Is there any reason that tomorrow’s democracy must remain stuck at the cramped level of a mechanism for counting votes?

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