

WHO CREATED DEMOCRACY?

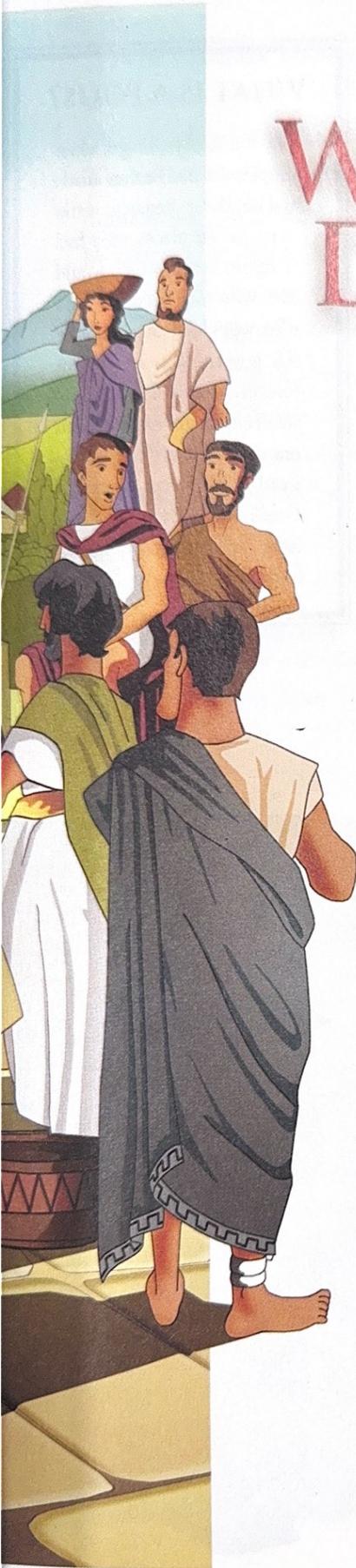
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Illustrated by Jamil Dar

Before we ask the question *Who created democracy?* perhaps we should ask another question first. Just what exactly is democracy? A democracy is a form of government in which the people take part in governing themselves. The word *democracy* comes from two Greek words: “demos” meaning “people” and “kratos” meaning “power” or “authority.” When you put these two words together, *democracy* can be translated to literally mean “people power,” or “rule by the people.”

Thousands of years ago, when people first began to live in communities and cities, they looked for ways to create rules and laws for everyone to follow. Many of these early cities and civilizations had autocratic governments. The word *autocracy*, the opposite of democracy, comes from the Greek words “kratos” and “autos,” meaning “self.” In an autocratic government, one person holds all the power. Sometimes he or she governs without the consent of the people.

So how did people win the right to govern themselves? In other words, who created democracy? To find the answer to this question we must journey back in time, to the city-state of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.



In 700 B.C., there was no Greek word for “democracy.” It didn’t exist for the same reason that the Greek word for “computer” didn’t exist. It had not yet been imagined. For the wealthy citizens of Athens, there was no reason to imagine it. The social system of the city was based on wealth rather than aristocratic birth. Rich landowners relaxed on enormous estates. They grew olives, grapes, and other crops, their fields attended to by slaves. And they made the laws for everyone else.

Only the rich were part of the oligarchy that ruled Athens. An *oligarchy* is a government that is ruled by only a few people. Yet most Athenians were not rich. Many struggled to grow crops on their tiny farms and plots of land. If they could not pay their taxes they were forced to borrow the money. If they couldn’t pay back their debts, family members were often sold into slavery.

By 630 B.C. the poor of Athens were becoming angry and frustrated. In the weekly marketplace they met and traded not only food but stories of broken families. They grumbled about debts that could never be repaid. In time, the conversation turned into action.

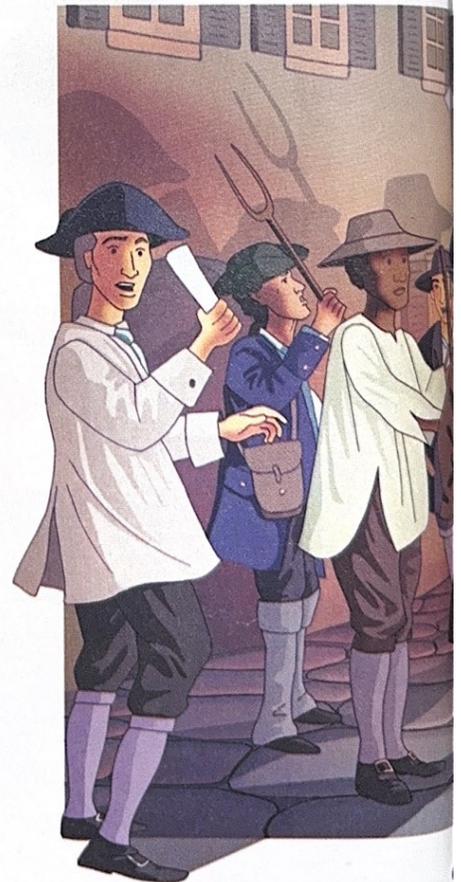
The wealthy members of the oligarchy knew they could not fight the poor. They were outnumbered. They had to make changes before Athens headed straight for a civil war.

Taxation Without Representation

Over a thousand years later, in 1765, debt was also on the mind of Britain’s King George III. He had just fought an expensive war to defend his American colonies in the French and Indian War. Instead of being grateful, however, the colonists were aspiring to rule themselves. They began by forming assemblies that hadn’t been approved by the British Parliament. So Parliament passed the Stamp Act. This required colonists to buy a stamp and attach it to every piece of paper they used, from newspapers to magazines to playing cards. The king believed this would refill the British treasury. It would also remind the colonists who was in charge.

WHAT IS A POLIS?

Thousands of years ago, when people who had been nomads and wanderers began to settle in particular places, they had to figure out how they would live with one another and who would be in charge of the government. In ancient Greece, several hundred small city-states formed, each one called a polis (“city”). The word *politics* comes from this Greek word. Each polis had its own army, government, and culture.



The colonists, however, became furious. Not over the amount of the tax but over the idea that Britain thought it had the right to tax citizens who could not vote for their representatives in Parliament. The colonists **withstood** this assault on their freedom by demanding that the king repeal the Stamp Act. This was followed by protests in the streets of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Many people burned the hated stamps. Seeing the hostile reaction in the colonies, the British government repealed the Stamp Act in March 1766. But at the same time it passed the Declaratory Act, which said that Great Britain was superior to the American colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” In other words, Britain could raise taxes on the colonies whenever it felt like it.

Anger in the 13 American colonies began to bubble over. If the colonists didn't have a vote in Britain's Parliament, why should they follow the laws that it approved? Soon whispers of war were passed from person to person in the shops and harbors of America's cities and villages. The situation was spinning out of control.

STOP AND CHECK

Ask and Answer Questions In what way were taxes a part of the fight for democracy in both the American colonies and ancient Athens?



A New Government for Athens

By 600 B.C. the situation in Athens was also spinning out of control. The wealthy landowners knew they had to find a way to calm the city and quiet the protests that erupted almost daily. In 594 B.C., for reasons that remain obscure, they turned to a man named Solon for help.

Solon was a landowner. He had built a fortune working for many years as a trader. But he had also once been poor. For this reason he was able to build a bridge between the classes.

At first, there was great **speculation** about what Solon would do with the power that had been given to him. But Solon surprised everyone. First, he changed the debtor's laws. Athenians would no longer have to sell family members into slavery to settle debts.

Then Solon began to change government and society. He divided citizens into four classes based on how much their farms produced. Now people were able to move into another class by growing more food. In the new system, people in the first three classes were able to run for government office. The wealthy were no longer in charge of making laws for everybody.

Many people liked what Solon had done, but not everyone. The wealthy were not happy about having to share power. The lowest class still could not participate in government and make laws. Would the new Athenian government survive?

The Revolutionary War Begins

In contrast to the Athenian crisis of 594 B.C., the colonial crisis in September 1774 could not be solved by one person. In the months that had **preceded** the crisis, Britain had closed Boston Harbor thinking it would teach the colonists a lesson. Without their harbor, the people of Boston could not send or receive goods. But instead of giving in to Britain the American colonies boldly sent representatives to a general Continental Congress in Philadelphia. The colonists fired off a letter to King George III asking for a voice in Parliament. In April, 1775, the King sent British troops to Massachusetts to seize colonial weapons that had been stored there.



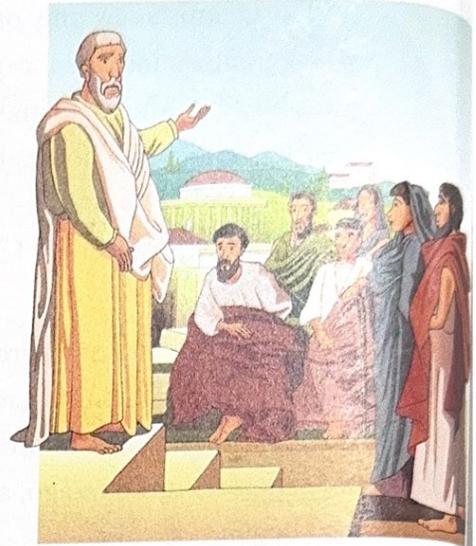
The colonists saw only one way forward: they began preparations to wage war against the most powerful country in the world. It was a war based on the **principal** idea that citizens should have a say in their government. Thomas Jefferson argued the case elegantly when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. Every man who signed that document, on July 4, 1776, was guilty of treason in the eyes of the British.

As the British army marched toward Lexington, Massachusetts, a small band of colonists gathered to meet them. A British officer ordered the colonists to drop their weapons and leave. Suddenly, as the colonists turned to go, a shot rang out. The Revolutionary War had begun.

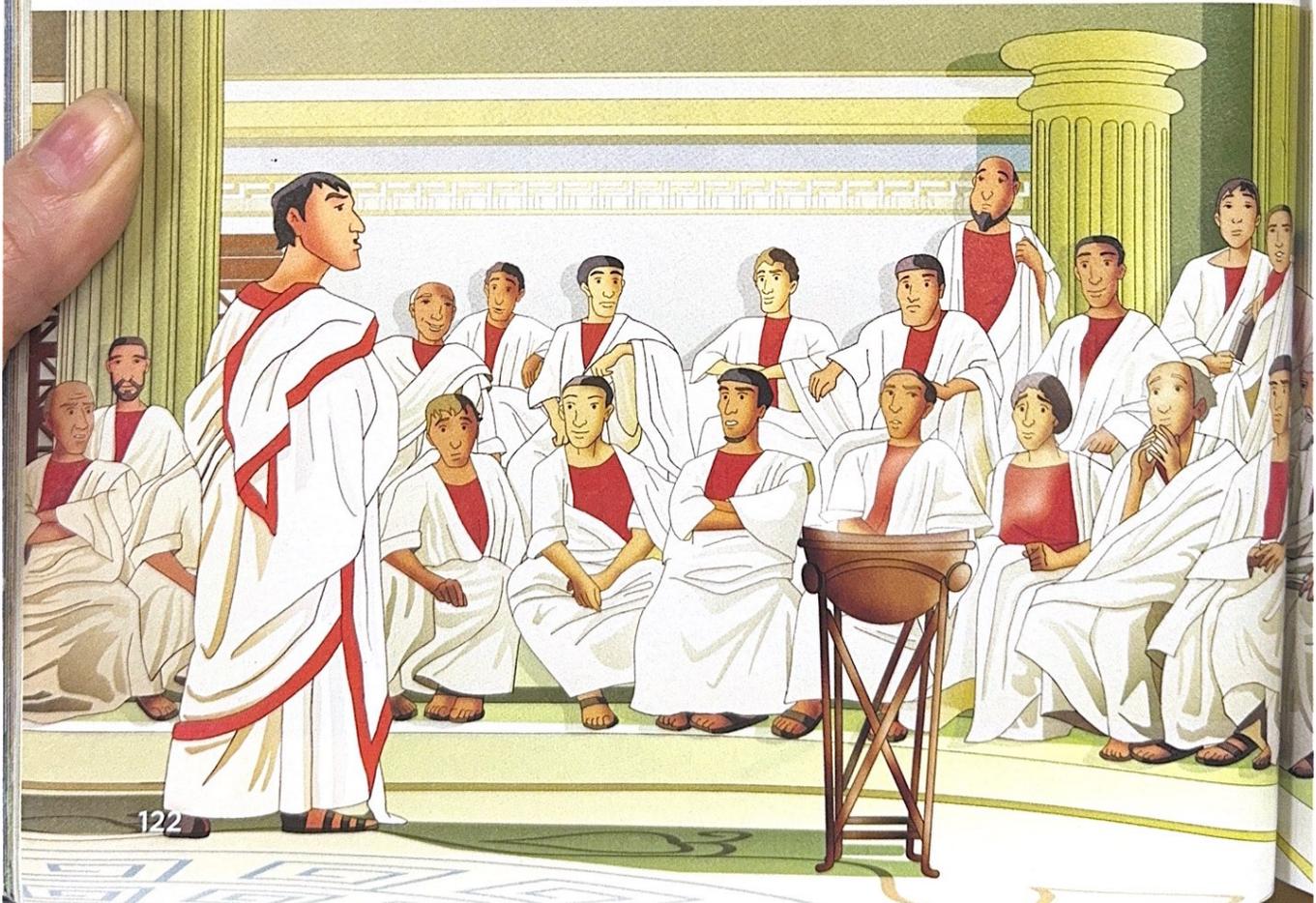


True Democracy for Athens

In 561 B.C. another powerful man sent troops, this time to Athens. Peisistratus was rich and powerful, and with the help of his soldiers he took control of the city from Solon. A short 34 years after Solon's reforms, Athenian democracy stumbled. The people had no control over what Peisistratus did, and he began to **restrict** their rights. When his son Hippias took control after his death, the wealthy landowners of Athens hired an army to remove Hippias from power. Then they asked a man named Cleisthenes, who helped defeat Hippias, for his ideas about a new government.



Cleisthenes wanted a government run by the people, and he made sweeping changes. First, he formed what he called an Assembly, which became the city's lawmaking body. Every citizen, rich or poor, got a vote there. Assembly meetings occurred on a hillside outside Athens every ten days where laws and taxes were debated. No laws were passed in Athens unless they were approved by the Assembly.



In 507 B.C. Cleisthenes also formed the Council of the Five Hundred to run the daily business of Athens. Ideas for laws and taxes started in the Council and were then brought to the Assembly for a vote.

After almost fifty years, the people of Athens had a true democracy – government run by the people.

A Republic for Rome

While Cleisthenes was hard at work forming the Council of Five Hundred, across the Mediterranean Sea the Romans were busy establishing their own republic. In 509 B.C., King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus was driven from Rome and the Roman government was eventually divided among three separate branches: the Senate, the Assembly, and the Consuls:

Senate - The Aristocratic or Patrician Branch of Government

Roman Senators (from the Latin word *senex* meaning “old man”) were patricians (or aristocrats) chosen by the Consuls as advisors. Their number started at 300 but grew over the years of the republic. The Senate controlled how much money the government spent and because its members served for life, it became more powerful over time.

Assembly - The Democratic Branch of Government

The earliest Roman Assembly was made up only of patricians so the plebeians, or working class, established an assembly of their own. They were tired of having only a limited say in government. By 287 B.C. the plebeian Assembly included a few patricians and created laws for all Roman citizens. Since the Assembly elected the Consuls and all Consuls became Senators, the Assembly became a powerful branch of the government over the years.

Consuls - The Monarchical or King-like Branch of Government

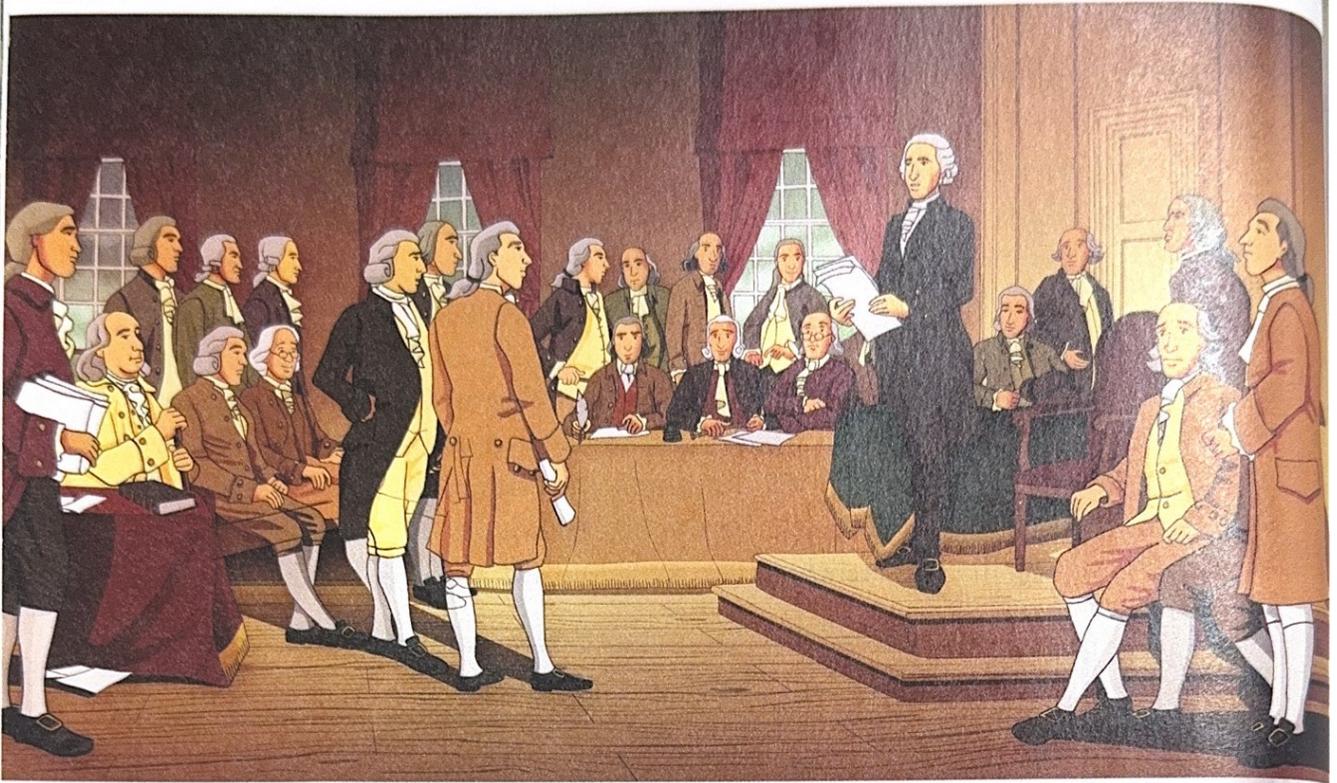
Two men were nominated by the Senate and elected by the Assembly each year to rule Rome. They had veto power over one another, they took monthly turns ruling over the Senate, and they commanded the Roman army. After 367 B.C., at least one of the two had to be a “plebeian” or common person. Consuls automatically became Senators at the end of their terms.

STOP AND CHECK

Ask and Answer Questions

How did the reforms of Cleisthenes change the concept of Greek democracy developed under Solon?





We the People

In 1783, after eight years of fighting, the British surrendered and a government ruled by the people finally became a reality in America. But for a few years following the peace treaty with Great Britain the very foundation of the newborn United States of America was threatened. As some powerful state governments tried to **promote** their ideas and force their wills on the nation, many people realized that a compromise between state governments and a new federal government would be necessary.

When a delegation of men finally gathered in Philadelphia for a Constitutional Convention in May 1787 to address the problem, they had done their homework well. They had studied Solon, Cleisthenes, and the government of ancient Athens. They were familiar with Rome's three-branch model of government.

But if they agreed on the three-branch plan, they disagreed on how the two houses of the legislative branch ought to look: should each state send an equal number of representatives as the New Jersey Plan urged? Or should the Virginia Plan, which proposed representation based on a state's population, be adopted?

The Convention was near collapse when a solution was proposed: The Senate would have the same number of representatives from each state while the members of the House of Representatives would be chosen based on the population of their state. So today Texas would have more representatives than a state such as Rhode Island. With the crisis averted, the Convention produced a government much like the Republic of ancient Rome:

The **executive branch** is headed by the president who executes, or carries out, laws and directs national defense and foreign policy.

The **legislative branch** is headed by the two houses of Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Congress passes laws, approves treaties, and creates spending bills.

The **judicial branch** is headed by the Supreme Court which interprets the Constitution.

How did democracy develop? It began when the ancient Greeks and Romans tried to answer the question *Who should be in charge of government?* Influenced by the Greeks and Romans, the writers of the U.S. Constitution answered the question in the first three words of the document they wrote in 1787: *We the people.*

