

ARTICLE

Democracy Ancient and Modern?

Carol Attack 

Newnham College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Email: cwa24@cam.ac.uk

(Received 04 June 2024; revised 15 August 2024; accepted 15 August 2024)

Abstract

The idea that democracy is in crisis is nothing new; ancient Greek commentators like Plato and Thucydides argued that political instability was baked into democracy as a regime type. Can examples drawn from classical Athens make a useful contribution to discussions of the failings of contemporary democracy? This article considers a range of interventions from the past decade in the United States and the United Kingdom, carried out at different scales and through different methods. It considers the strengths of working with material from the distant past – its non-partisan nature offering a safe space to discuss political conflict without engaging in it – and also the weaknesses, such as the limited franchise of ancient democracies like classical Athens, and the need to consider specific historical issues in their own context. It also considers the unfamiliarity of ancient history and the way in which knowledge of the classical past can itself be perceived as class-bound and exclusionary.

Keywords: democracy; elections; history; politics; public engagement

The idea that democracy is in crisis is nothing new; ancient Greek commentators like Thucydides and Plato argued that political instability was baked into democracy as a regime type, based on their observations of the failings of the direct democracy of classical Athens in fighting wars, exercising regional leadership, and even managing the economy. The Roman Republic too collapsed into a civil war, only ended by the rise of an autocracy, with a chorus of side-lined politicians from Cicero to Sallust positing a cultural decline as a significant cause of both conflict and the collective failure of the elite to resist their loss of power. In both Athens and Rome, ancient authors' proposed remedy was often a return to past practices, a more conservative golden age when it was believed that traditional values held sway. Can the analysis of the classical past make a meaningful contribution to modern debates about strengthening democracy and encouraging political engagement?

Ancient direct democracy, in its classical Athenian version, involved the in-person participation of one part of the population – adult male citizens – in debate and decision-making, a much more demanding role than the now-standard limited engagement of voters in representative democracies, yet restricted to a narrower proportion of the population. Thinking about Athenian practice might challenge apathy and disillusionment from the electorate; it also offers a model where democracy was always perceived to be, and sometimes was, under threat of capture by a narrow elite or would-be autocratic ruler.

And while participation in Athens was limited to males of full citizen status, this provides the opportunity to discuss remaining limits on and barriers to political participation.

Recently, political activists have invoked the practices of Athenian democracy to argue for institutional and procedural changes which might enable increased political participation. One focus is sortition, the selection by lot of citizens to take up political roles and office; the Sortition Foundation and DemocracyNext have both advocated for its use.¹ Within this landscape of thinktanks and engagement projects advocating for a return to direct democracy, or elements of it, academics and practitioners have pointed to the direct involvement of Athens' citizens in decision-making and used it to develop case studies and participatory activities, through which both existing and new voters can explore the responsibilities of political participation and decision-making.

Most of the examples I consider here are drawn from a U.K. and Anglophone context; they emerged from debate during the U.S. presidential election and the U.K. "Brexit" referendum of 2016. Interventions took place at different scales, from major funded international research and engagement projects to occasional talks given in secondary schools as part of the regular work of. They also point to opportunities for continuing public engagement in the current election cycle and beyond, using ancient politics as a case study, and to the possibility of informing and encouraging political participation from first-time voters.

Because students approaching voting age are precisely the age group targeted for university outreach and school enrichment activities, academics can readily reach this audience. In my own schools talks, I have presented problems of democratic decision-making through an exploration of the questions of political knowledge and practice to U.K. school groups of sixteen to eighteen year olds, not just those studying the classical period for examinations in Classical Civilisation, but also those studying related subjects including History and Politics.² The Athenian historian Thucydides' account of his city's disastrous campaign against Sicily in 415 BCE proved an excellent resource, with his paired speeches opening up differing positions and claims to analysis.³ Students considered how the Athenians reached the decision to launch the campaign, and how the Syracusans evaluated the unwelcome, and to some incredible, news that an invasion was imminent. Evaluating the claims made in the debates enabled them to reflect about how they might become better informed themselves for making decisions about current events, and assessing political messages critically. Here it was helpful that we were discussing events outside the partisan framework of current political debate, although themes of disinformation and intergenerational conflict resonated with the present.

Using ancient democracy as a case study to explore growing disenchantment with contemporary politics has its own history. The development of bureaucratic and managerialist types of democracy in the post-war period drove scholars such as Moses Finley to point to ancient participatory practices as an alternative. Finley's book *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, originally given as a series of public lectures at Rutgers University in 1972, compared the

¹ For further details, see their websites at <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org>, DemocracyNext (<https://www.demnext.org>), and for two cases for participatory democracy, see Hennig 2017 and Landmore 2020, along with Pope 2023 on the benefits of sortition.

² <https://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/as-and-a-level/classical-civilisation-h008-h408-from-2017/specific-tion-at-a-glance/>.

³ Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* books 6-7, focusing on the two debates in Athens (Thuc. 6.8-26) and Syracuse (Thuc. 6.33-41).

limited participation granted to citizens in modern democracies negatively against the example of fifth-century BCE Athens, in which citizens could participate in debate and decision-making on a regular basis.⁴

More recently, Cambridge ancient historian Paul Cartledge has emphasised the high level of active citizen involvement in Athenian politics in a steady stream of public interventions, most notably his “biography” of democracy, intended to introduce the workings of Athenian democracy to a wide audience.⁵ The book distilled Cartledge’s teaching for Cambridge’s History and Classics courses for a paper “Ancient Greek Democracy – and its legacies” which ran 2009–13. It also fed into a series of public and schools talks on the theme “Ten Things You Really Should Know about Ancient Greek Democracy,” delivered at schools and colleges across the United Kingdom and also at venues like London’s Gresham’s College, which offers free public lectures to the general public.⁶ Highlighting the differences between Athenian participatory democracy and the lesser involvement available to citizens in contemporary representative democracies enabled Cartledge to raise questions about the nature of modern democracy and the way it fell short of the ideals of Athens. Yet, as Cartledge noted elsewhere, there were more causes for pessimism than optimism about the prospects for democracy; in particular, he argued that a referendum held under a party-based representative democracy was unlikely to deliver the individual judgements that ancient participatory democracy did.⁷

Josiah Ober, another leading scholar of ancient Greek politics, acknowledged the difficulties of contemporary democracies with his intervention in *Demopolis*, originally the 2015 John Robert Seeley lectures at the University of Cambridge, a series which aims to provide “accessible” surveys of a topic in political thought and its history.⁸ Ober’s lectures, along with the subsequent book, and an Aeon essay introducing its argument to a wider public, offer an important example of how both the facts of ancient democracy and the practices of ancient political thinking can be productive for thinking about the present. Ober identified some key strengths of ancient democracy, at least in the amended version of fourth-century BCE Athens, while acknowledging its conceptual and practical limits, particularly its exclusion of women and its reliance on the labour of enslaved workers themselves denied any political agency.⁹ He argued that current thinking on democracy demonstrated a conflation of liberal universalism with the egalitarian citizen participation of ancient systems, and argued for a return to what he labelled “basic democracy.”

Ober followed ancient Greek practice by setting out an imaginary city, *Demopolis* as a thought experiment in how this might be done by citizens whose goals are “security, prosperity and non-tyranny,” and who define a series of rules for the system they devise. The use of an imagined city as a means of political theorising was a signature move of ancient Greek political thought, most famously seen in Plato’s *Kallipolis* in his *Republic*. Ober accompanied the book with opinion pieces aimed at encouraging wider audiences to think about what it was they valued in democracy and how those features might be delivered in diverse cultural environments.¹⁰ He argued that a “basic democracy,” which met citizens’

⁴ Finley 1973; see also Cartledge 2016b.

⁵ Cartledge 2016a, xv.

⁶ Cartledge 2016d.

⁷ Cartledge 2016c, 2018, 305–13.

⁸ <https://www.polthought.cam.ac.uk/seeley-lectures>.

⁹ Ober 2017.

¹⁰ Ober 2016.

needs while not guaranteeing universal human rights, offered a practical solution to the political needs of states undergoing political transformation with no heritage of either liberalism or democracy, in which such states could develop their own democracy rather than having a regime and associated values imposed from without. Reading Ober's model invites further thought on what limits to political participation and inclusion might be thinkable now, compared with the gender-based and status-based exclusions of classical Athens.

Athenian political practice has informed other projects, such as DemocracyNext, which advocates for democracy education and the use of citizen assemblies, formed of citizens selected by lot, to guide decision-making by elected representative bodies, from local groups to European-wide bodies. The group describes its toolkit for running such assemblies as "grounded in ancient Athenian practices" as well as by lessons learned from its own experiences.¹¹ The Sortition Foundation has moved from the theoretical and historical argument of its co-founder Brett Hennig's work to running a range of assembly projects focused on specific issues, from climate change to local transport planning, a major challenge for the Greater Cambridge Partnership explored through a citizen's assembly in 2019.¹²

Another distinctive strand of this discourse has been comparison – between both regimes and individual politicians of past and present, and between archetypes and named individuals. In a comment piece published during the 2016 presidential election campaign, Harvard's Danielle Allen identified Donald Trump as a "walking, talking example of the tyrannical soul," the monstrous figure described by Plato in his *Republic* as both agent and product of the final stages of political decline.¹³ The rise of autocratic leadership has been a feature in many democracies across the world, and an issue in many election campaigns.¹⁴ In her article, Allen powerfully deployed Plato's shocking description of a leader whose lust for power is accompanied by uncontrolled physical and erotic desire. She noted that when she presented this passage in her teaching, students were quick to make present-day connections even when she left them unspoken. However, in the teaching materials for her current Democratic Knowledge Project, with its strapline "Reimagining civic education in support of constitutional democracy," Allen and her team at Harvard's Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Ethics have turned to more recent moments in the historical past, showcasing a wide range of American politicians and reformers in a rich and diverse set of case studies.¹⁵ That offers a reminder that debates drawing on the classical past cannot address all historical contexts and or the nuances of every situation; in her recent monograph on justice and democracy, Allen draws sparingly and critically on classical Greek evidence and examples.¹⁶

Some public interventions, on the other hand, simply evoke classical antiquity without providing context. In Allen's opinion piece, Plato's description of the tyrant required no historical knowledge to speak powerfully to her readers, but more historical comparisons can struggle to make an impact because of the unfamiliarity of names and places in classical Greece to many readers. A series of opinion pieces from 2019 to 2020 examining the

¹¹ <https://assemblyguide.demnext.org/#examples-of-citizens-assemblies>.

¹² Hennig 2017, 17–18; https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/case_study_cambridge.

¹³ Allen 2016.

¹⁴ See <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.democraticknowledgeproject.org>.

¹⁶ Allen 2023.

leadership of then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate this. Simon Jenkins began his *Guardian* comment piece by describing the bust of Pericles on Johnson's desk, the physical materialisation of his self-identification with the Athenian leader.¹⁷ But, he went on to argue, Johnson was nothing like the great leader Pericles, and more like Alcibiades, a complex and charismatic member of the Athenian elite whose ill-considered policies and eventual betrayal of his city had contributed to its defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Jenkins argued that Johnson had demonstrated the character flaws of Homeric heroes, and lacked the good qualities of great Greek and Roman politicians. In another explanation piece, published in 2000 Armand D'Angour compared Johnson and the arrival of the COVID-19 epidemic with Pericles and the Athenian plague reported by Thucydides; both Johnson and Pericles suffered in their respective pandemics.¹⁸ Yet such analyses risked simply strengthening the link between politicians and the authority and prestige of classical literature, rather than serving as a critical engagement.

One problem is that such references to individual characters both signal the exclusivity of classical knowledge and require some historical explanation for their details to make full sense to a broad audience. The names of Pericles and Alcibiades are unfamiliar to all but a few specialists, and the likelihood in a U.K. context is that references to them or any other classical themes will be interpreted as elitist. Liz Sawyer noted the infrequency of references to the ancient historian Thucydides in twentieth-century British parliamentary records, in her contribution to a research project on the reception of Thucydides led by Neville Morley, which itself led to further engagement activities aimed at a broad public.¹⁹

One activity developed through this project offered participants the chance to explore political decision-making by role-playing their way through another key episode of Thucydides' history, the Melian Dialogue, in which a group of Athenian generals, after besieging and defeating the small island community of Melos, threaten its citizens with annihilation for their failure to offer support to Athens.²⁰ Here no knowledge is presumed, as players find their way through a text-based game, playing as either an Athenian or a Melian.²¹ The success of the activity depended on students' familiarity with role-playing games rather than any specific knowledge of the classical past – indeed, the website warns that the outcome of the game might surprise players.

Perhaps ancient case studies offer the possibility that, beyond the conservative coding of any classical reference, the events and political actors are distinct from contemporary debates, because of their unfamiliarity and lack of alignment with any current issues. That might make them more accessible as teaching resources, and less vulnerable to complaints of partisanship or bias. The distance itself can make the ancient case study a way of exploring a contemporary issue, a process French ancient historian Nicole Loraux identified in seeing the civic reconciliation which followed the defeated Athens' civic war. She saw it as a parallel to the healing that the French Fifth Republic had needed to undergo after the trauma and division of the Second World War and the failure of the Fourth Republic.²² While the parallels were fuzzy and relied on some anachronism, nonetheless there was a value in seeing the connection between the ancient and modern situations.

¹⁷ Jenkins 2019.

¹⁸ Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.49-54; Plutarch *Life of Pericles* 38; D'Angour 2000.

¹⁹ Sawyer 2014.

²⁰ Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.89-116; Morley 2019.

²¹ Play the game for yourself at <https://philome.la/NevilleMorley/the-melian-dilemma/play/index.html>.

²² Loraux 1993.

While Loraux emphasised the value of drawing comparisons, the very real differences between ancient and modern regimes present a further pitfall for public-facing classicists. Audiences might view with scepticism the exclusivity of historical ancient regimes themselves, the limitation of access to political participation to men of citizen status and the firm exclusion of women, immigrants and the enslaved, categories which of course overlap. The right to public speech did not extend to any women – in Athens even being spoken of in public was a cause of shame for a citizen’s wife, as Pericles notoriously states in Thucydides’ funeral speech.²³ “Of course, in the 21st century, the ancient Greek cultural imagination of who could be a participatory citizen appears so bounded as to be illegitimate,” Ober warned, even as he presented Athenian democracy as a useful exemplar that opened the way for “basic democracy.”²⁴ While a recent strand of popular explorations of the classical past has focused on the roles of women, whether retelling myths from the perspective of women characters, or finding “overlooked” women in historical narratives, such revisions risk creating a sanitised version of ancient societies, brushing away real difficulties, even as they make history more relatable. There are virtually no women political actors from classical Athens to present as relatable case studies – although one might usefully consider the limitations of political and legal access for the few women from Athens whose individual life stories we know in detail, or the circumstances in which some foreign-born women were able to negotiate the city.²⁵ This contrasts with the wide range of case studies offered by Allen’s Democratic Knowledge Project, including many presenting the different experiences of women and the formerly enslaved and their contribution to the development of democratic discourse and practice in the United States.

“Democracy, however you define it, is a tender plant and needs careful nourishing,” Cartledge told Roslyn Fuller in 2018.²⁶ While the schools talk from a visiting academic might be a cliché of public humanities work, the workings of Athenian democracy and the Roman republic offer a way to explore important questions of political engagement and participation and to enable dialogue and discussion. Innovative delivery through role-playing and interactive computer games offers a further option. At a larger scale, the experience and practices of classical Athens can inform attempts to deliver more inclusive and participatory deliberation and decision-making, as seen in DemocracyNext’s toolkit. Although ancient democracy is alien and restricted in significant ways, its distance makes it a safer space for exploring difficult questions of how we should participate in political decision-making.

Carol Attack is a fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge, where she teaches ancient Greek history and philosophy and directs studies in Classics. Her books include *The Discourse of Kingship in Classical Greece* (2019), *Xenophon (Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics, 2024)*, and *Plato: a civic life* (2024). With Paul Cartledge she edited *A Cultural History of Democracy in Antiquity* (2021). She is currently working on a monograph on the temporality of Plato’s dialogues, and editing a handbook of ancient Greek political thought, and as a syndic of Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam Museum supports and advocates for the museum’s inclusive and participatory public programming.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: C.A.; Writing – original draft: C.A.; Writing – review & editing: C.A.

Financial support. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interest. The author was a teaching assistant on the course discussed and has co-authored work on this topic with Paul Cartledge.

²³ Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.44.2.

²⁴ Ober 2016.

²⁵ A handful of elite women discussed by other authors – notably Pericles’ non-Athenian wife Aspasia (Plato *Menexenus*), and some women who featured in court cases, such as Neaira (Apollodorus *Against Neaira*), might provide counter-examples to this.

²⁶ Fuller 2018.

References

- Allen, Danielle. 2016. "Donald Trump Is a Walking, Talking Example of the Tyrannical Soul." *Washington Post*. Accessed April 23, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/10/08/donald-trump-is-a-walking-talking-example-of-the-tyrannical-soul/>.
- Allen, Danielle. 2023. *Justice by Means of Democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cartledge, Paul. 2016d. "Ten Things You Really Should Know about Ancient Greek Democracy." Accessed May 27, 2024. <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/ten-things-you-really-should-know-about-ancient-greek-democracy>.
- Cartledge, Paul. 2016a. *Democracy: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cartledge, Paul. 2016b. "Finley's Democracy: A Study in Reception (and Non-Reception)." In *M. I. Finley: An Ancient Historian and His Impact*, edited by Daniel Jew, Robin Osborne, and Michael Scott, 210–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cartledge, Paul. 2016c. "Brexitology, Brexitography: Some Disabused Reflections on the UK's EU Referendum." *Eidolon*, 25 July, 2016. <https://eidolon.pub/brexitology-brexigraphy-7d644c389f4f>.
- Cartledge, Paul. 2018. *Democracy: A Life*. Paperback Edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- D'Angour, Armand. 2000. "Coronavirus: What Boris Johnson's Greek Hero Teaches Us about Epidemics." *BBC News*, 13 April 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52236388>.
- Finley, Moses I. 1973. *Democracy Ancient and Modern*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Fuller, Roslyn. 2018. "Democracy: The Best of the Worst? A Conversation with Paul Cartledge." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 October 2018. Accessed May 27, 2024. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/democracy-the-best-of-the-worst-a-conversation-with-paul-cartledge/>.
- Hennig, Brett. 2017. *The End of Politicians: Time for a Real Democracy*. London: Unbound.
- Jenkins, Simon. 2019. "The Prime Minister Has a Bust of his Greek Hero in No 10. But Johnson Is No Pericles." *The Guardian*, July 27.
- Landemore, Hélène. 2020. *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Loraux, Nicole. 1993. "Éloge d'anachronisme en histoire." *Le Genre Humain* 27: 23–39.
- Morley, Neville. 2019. "The Melian Dilemma: Remaking Thucydides." *Epoiesen: A Journal for Creative Engagement in History and Archaeology*. <https://doi.org/10.22215/epoiesen/2019.2>.
- Ober, Josiah. 2016. "Lessons of Demopolis." *Aeon*, 4 February 2016. Accessed October 19, 2018. <https://aeon.co/essays/the-marriage-of-democracy-and-liberalism-is-not-inevitable>.
- Ober, Josiah. 2017. *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pope, Maurice. 2023. *The Keys to Democracy: Sortition as a New Model for Citizen Power*, edited by Hugh Pope and Quentin Pope. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Sawyer, Elizabeth. 2014. "Thucydides in Modern Political Rhetoric." In *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, edited by Christine M. Lee and Neville Morley, 529–47. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.