Constitution Day

Athenian Direct Democracy

vs.

U. S. Representative Democracy

Athenian Direct Democracy

The Athenian political system was and is unique. The Athenian government was the world’s first democracy. A direct democracy is a form of government where all citizens, not just elected representatives, were involved in important decisions. There was no single head of government. There were no political parties.  The branches of Athenian democracy were the assembly, the council, and the jurymen.

The Assembly

The assembly was responsible for policy making. It was the legislative branch. According to the Athenians, the source of constitutional power rested in the hands of all the citizens. Ideas were expressed directly through the Assembly, which consisted of all male citizens over 18 years of age and who were willing to attend the sessions held about every 10 days. There was no system of representation calling for long campaigns and expensive elections. If you lived in the country you had to get up at the crack of dawn in order to get to the meeting place of the Assembly, a rocky hillside within the city gates. The police chased all the loafers off the Angora, a kind of public park, in order to encourage good attendance. Anyone who had powerful enough lungs to make himself heard by 6000 or more voters could speak to the Assembly. Of course, if you were a well-known and respected leader your chances of being listened to were greater. Whatever this Assembly decided by vote was the law of the land.  
Athenian democracy worked fairly well. The main reason for its success was the quality of the citizens. From the days of Draco and Solon, its first lawgivers, the Athenians like the rest of the Greeks had a deep respect for what they called the golden mean, which meant that they avoided extremes in politics. There was a sober devotion to the common good that is frequently missing in modern democracies, which tend to be much more individualistic, dedicated to private and group interests instead of basing decisions on the common interest they are frequently the result of compromises between powerful groups or parties with only slight concern for the general welfare.

There was also a way of ridding Athens of overly ambitious politicians. This was the famous unpopularity contest known as "ostracism.'' A special date was set at which citizens wrote on clay shards (ostraca) the name of the man they most disliked' Anyone who got a majority (if more than 600 votes had been cast) was sent into exile for 10 years. This could of course be abused and sometimes good men were sent into exile, but it was certainly a better system than kangaroo courts or secret police prisons.

The Council of 500

The council was for policy enforcing and administrative matters. It was in control of the army, navy and financial matters. It was the closest thing to an executive branch. It was made of 500 members. Each precinct of Athens named candidates over 30 years of age for the Council of 500. From these candidates 50 were chosen by lot for each tribe to serve as members of the Council of 500 for a year. The final choice by lot was one of the most democratic devices imaginable and reduced the danger of political skullduggery. There was no danger that the Council could turn into a private preserve for the wealthy or influential as modern government bodies have a tendency to do, because members served only one year: no man could be a member two years in a row; and no one could serve more than twice in his lifetime. Just imagine what our legislatures and Congress would be like if we had rules like that.  
The Council of 500 prepared the published agenda for each session of the Assembly. According to regular rules the Assembly would take up no issue not already investigated by the Council; normally the Council made a recommendation to the Assembly as to the best solution of each problem.

The Jurymen (Judicial System)

The Athenians also had an interesting way of dispensing justice. The courts of law were really committees of the people. Each year a panel of 6000 jurors over 30 years of age was drawn up from those who volunteered to serve. For each trial a jury of 201 or more was drawn by a very complicated system of lots so that bribery and influence could be limited. Each of the two parties in a lawsuit had to speak and act for himself, though he could hire a professional speech writer to compose his speech. Undoubtedly one had to be very careful as to how one appealed to the elders of the community who sat on the jury and determined by majority vote their verdict. There could be no appeal from this committee of the people in its judicial capacity.

U.S. Representative Democracy

         As stated in the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. government is a representative democracy with three equal branches.  The three branches are the legislative, the executive, and the judicial.  The legislative branch is responsible for making laws.  It is made of the Senate and House of Representatives.  The House has representatives from each state, one from each district.  The number of districts in a state depends on the population. For example Florida has 23 representatives, while Alaska has 1.  There are 435 total members in the House. They serve two-year terms. Each state sends 2 people to the Senate.  There are 100 total people in the Senate. They serve six-year terms.

The executive branch consists of the President and his Cabinet.  The president is both head of state and head of government.  He is elected every four years and can only serve for 2 terms.  The president appoints the cabinet.  They are his top advisors.  Cabinet posts include Secretary of State, Secretary of Treasury, Attorney General, National Security Advisor, and others.  The president is Commander in Chief, and has the power to introduce and veto bills.

The Judicial branch consists of nine justices, one of whom is the Chief Justice. The justices are appointed by the president, and serve for life. The job of the Supreme Court is to interpret the constitution.

Sources: www.falmouthschool.org

mars.acnet.wnec.edu/~grempel/course/wc1/lectures/07democracy.html