

The Original Meaning of “Democracy”: Capacity to Do Things, not Majority Rule

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Democracy is a word that has come to mean very different things to different people. In origin it is, of course, Greek, a composite of *demos* and *kratos*. Since *demos* can be translated as “the people” (qua “native adult male residents of a polis”) and *kratos* as “power,” democracy has a root meaning of “the power of the people.” But power in what sense? In modernity, democracy is often construed as being concerned, in the first instance, with a voting rule for determining the will of the majority. The power of the people is thus the authority to decide matters by majority rule. This reductive definition leaves democracy vulnerable to well-known social choice dilemmas, including Downs’ rational ignorance and Arrow’s impossibility theorem: If democracy as a political system is reducible to a decision mechanism based on a voting rule, and if that voting rule is inherently flawed as a decision mechanism, then (as critics have long claimed) democracy is inherently flawed as a political system.¹ If democracy is, at its core, something other than a decision mechanism based on a voting rule, social choice dilemmas may not prove to be inherent flaws in democracy as a system.

This paper concerns the original Greek meaning of “democracy” in the context of the classical (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.) terminology for regime-types. The conclusion is that democracy originally referred to “power” in the sense of “capacity to do things.” “Majority rule” was an intentionally pejorative diminution, urged by democracy’s Greek critics (Raaflaub 1989, Ober 1998).² Of course, we are not bound by any past convention, much less by the inventors’ original definition: if we can devise a better meaning for a political term, it should be preferred. But if common modern usages are not particularly good, in the sense of being “descriptively accurate” or “normatively choiceworthy,” then there may be some value in returning to the source. Reducing democracy to a voting rule arguably elides much of the value and potential of democracy. The original Greek meaning, while having no inherent authority for us, suggests ways to expand our modern conception of democracy and thereby (incidentally) to render it less vulnerable to the problems associated with aggregating diverse preferences by voting.

The Greek vocabulary for political regimes tended to focus in the first instance on the empowered or ruling body, which might be an a single person (one), or a limited number of persons (the few), or a large and inclusive body (the many). While the Greek vocabulary for regime-types is extensive, the three key terms for the rule of the one, few, and many are *monarchia*, *oligarchia*, and *demokratia*. Even in this small sample, two things immediately stand out: First, unlike *monarchia* (from the adjective *monos*: solitary) and *oligarchia* (from *hoi oligoi*: the few), *demokratia* is not in the first instance

concerned with “number.” The term *demos* refers to a collective body. Unlike *monarchia* and *oligarchia*, *demokratia* does not, therefore, answer the question: “how many are empowered?” The standard Greek term for “the many” is *hoi polloi*, yet there is no Greek regime name *pollokratia* or *pollarchia*. Second, Greek names of regimes divide into terms with an *–arche* suffix, and terms with a *–kratos* suffix. *Aristokratia* (from *hoi aristoi*: the excellent), *isokratia* (from *isos*: equal) and *anarchia* are classical regime-names that stand outside the one/few/many scheme yet fall into the *–arche*–*kratos* grouping. Not all regime names use the *arche* or *kratos* roots; see Table: column IV. Yet (with the exception of *tyrannia* – which in the classical period had consistently negative connotations) the *–arche* and *–kratos* families tended to dominate the terminological landscape. By the time of Plato and Aristotle, a number of new regime-terms had been coined by comic poets, philosophers, and political partisans engaged in intellectual debates. *Timokratia* (from *time*: honor) and *gynkaikokratia* (from *gynaikos*: woman) were made up by classical philosophers and comic poets to describe imaginary regimes. *Ochlokratia* (from *to ochlos*: the mob) was a post-classical (first appearing in Polybius: 2nd c. B.C.) and strongly pejorative variant of *demokratia*.³

I	II	III	IV	V
Empowered body	–kratos root	–arche root	Other regime-name terms	Related political terms: persons, abstractions
A. One	<i>autocracy</i>	monarchia	tyrannia basileia	tyrannos basileus (king)
B. Few	aristokratia	oligarchia	dynasteia	hoi oligoi (few)
C. Many	demokratia isokratia <i>ochlokratia</i> (mob)	<i>polyarchy</i>	isonomia (law) isegoria (speech) <i>isopsephia</i> (vote)	hoi polloi (many) to plethos (majority) to ochlos (mob) isopsephos (voter)
D. Other (exempli gratia)	<i>timokratia</i> (honor) <i>gynaikokratia</i> (women) <i>technocracy</i>	anarchia	isomoiria (shares) eunomia (law) politeia (mix of democracy and oligarchy: as used by Aristotle)	dynamis (power) ischus (strength) bia (force) kurios (master) exousia (authority, license)

Table: Greek (and neo-Greek) terminology for regime types. Earlier (fifth-century attested) forms in **bold**, later (fourth-century) inventions in plain face, post- classical/modern inventions in *italic*.

The Table offers a rough map of the terminological terrain. I focus in the first instance on the six bold-face terms in columns two and three of the Table: *demokratia*, *isokratia* and *aristokratia* among the *–kratos* roots and *monarchia*, *oligarchia*, and *anarchia* among the *–arche* roots. Each of these is attested in the fifth century, although *oligarchia* and *aristokratia* are probably somewhat later than *demokratia*, *isokratia* and *monarchia*. Given the Greek penchant for creative neologism, not least in the

realm of politics, it is notable that some terms are “missing” – I have already noted the absence of *polloi*-derivatives. Nor is *monokratia*, *oligokratia*, or *anakratia* ever attested. *Demarchia* refers not to a regime type, but to a relatively minor local office (*ho demarchos*, meaning something like “the mayor”).

Since so much of the Greek regime-type vocabulary falls into two suffix-groups, and since there are notable “gaps” in each group, it is reasonable to suppose that *kratos* meant something rather different from *arche* and pointed to a different conception of power. We might seek to explain the *–arche* and *–kratos* groups by reference to political legitimacy – that is, along Max Weber’s familiar dichotomy of *Herrschaft* and *Macht*. Greek philosophical thought (Aristotle’s *Politics* is the *locus classicus*) was indeed concerned to distinguish between “correct” and “incorrect/corrupted” regimes – and this might be seen as approximating Weber’s legitimacy-based categorization. But the terms with which we are primarily concerned do not fall neatly into “legitimate” or “illegitimate” groups on the basis of their suffix-roots. One might therefore conclude that there is no rhyme or reason to the Greek vocabulary of regimes, that *kratos* and *arche* were catchall terms for “power” in some ill-defined sense. Christian Meier (1970, 1972), a leading practitioner of the conceptual terminology-centered German approach to intellectual history known as *Begriffsgeschichte*, despaired of bringing the general Greek vocabulary of power into any systematic order and therefore concluded that the Greeks never had a very specific idea of power.⁴ Yet this seems to me to be too pessimistic.

Some of the “other” terms for regime (column IV) do fit the Weberian conception of *Macht*, as “power without legitimacy”: By the time of Aristotle, *tyrannia* and *dunasteia* were used of severely corrupt, badly “incorrect” forms of the rule of the one and the few, respectively. By the same token, Aristotle’s confusing decision in the *Politics* to use the term *politeia* – usually “constitution” or “political culture” – for a particular regime type (variously defined in Aristotle, but basically a “good” mixing of *oligarchia* and *demokratia*) places “the regime called *politeia*” quite solidly within the Weberian category of *Herrschaft*.

Perhaps, therefore, a modified Weberian categorization would help explain the *–arche* and *–kratos* root terms. Each of the three *–arche* root terms (III) seems to be concerned with “monopoly of office.” The word *arche*, in Greek, has several related meanings: beginning (or origin), empire (or hegemonic control of one state by another), and office or magistracy. A Greek magistracy was an *arche*, the public offices as a constitutional body were (plural) *archai*. An *archon* was a senior magistrate: the holder of a particular office with specified duties (in classical Athens, for example there were nine archons chosen annually – along with several hundred other magistrates⁵).

Each of the three *–arche*-root regime-names answers the question: “how many rulers?” The earliest of these seems to be *monarchia*, which appears in archaic poetry, and is strongly associated with eastern, non-Greek rulers. I would suggest that the primary meaning of *monarchia* was “domination of the official apparatus of government by one man.” Likewise, classical Greek descriptions of *oligarchia* concern a form of government defined in the first instance by access to participation rights in general,

and magisterial office in particular. An *oligarchia* was a regime in which the right to hold office was strictly limited to “a few” on the basis of a property qualification and often, additionally, on the basis of occupation or ancestry. Likewise, *anarchia* describes a condition in which the magisterial offices of the government are vacant, generally due to civil strife over who is to occupy them. While lacking the specifically Weberian force of “legitimacy,” the *-arche* root terms are concerned with how many people may occupy official positions of authority within a constitutional order of some kind. It is therefore unsurprising that oligarchic regimes were often named for a fixed number of potential office-holders: The Thirty, The Four Hundred, The Three Thousand, The Five Thousand, and so on.

By contrast, the *-kratos* terminology seems not to be about offices as such. Unlike *arche*, the word *kratos* is never used of “office.” *Kratos* has a root meaning of “power” – but Greek linguistic usage of the noun *kratos* and its verbal forms ranges widely across the power spectrum, from “domination” to “rule” to “capacity.” We can, however, narrow the range for *-kratos* as a suffix. Unlike the *-arche*-root group, which, as we have seen, is entirely composed of “number terms,” none of the terms in the *-kratos* group is a number term. The first of our three primary *-kratos*-root terms (II), *aristokratia*, does not get us very far. It remains possible, on the analogy of *oligarchia* in which the *hoi oligoi* monopolize offices, to imagine that *aristokratia* pertains just in case *hoi aristoi* (the excellent) hold a similar monopoly. But among the other prefix-roots in the *-kratos* group, only *gynaikokratia* can be a plural, and thereby refer to potential officeholders.

Isokratia does not refer to a group of persons but rather to an abstraction, “equality.” *Isokratia* shares its prefix-root with two other terms used by the fifth-century B.C. historian Herodotus as periphrasis for democracy: *isonomia* and *isegoria*. On the analogy of *isonomia* (equal-law), *isegoria* (equal-public address), and the evidently early regime-term *isomoiria* (equal-shares: attributed to the predemocratic Athenian lawgiver, Solon) it seems likely that *iso*- prefix-roots refer to distributive fairness in respect to access in a sense of “right to make use of.” Equal access in each case is to a public good (law, speech, “shares”) that, when it is equitably distributed, conduces to the common good. Thus, *isonomia* is fair distribution of legal immunities across the relevant population and equal access to legal processes. *Isegoria* means equal access to deliberative fora: equal right to speak out on public matters and to attend to the speech of others. By analogy, *isokratia* is equal access to the public good of *kratos* – to public power that conduces to the common good through enabling good things to happen in the public realm.

So *kratos*, when it is used as a regime-type suffix, becomes power in the sense of strength, enablement, or “capacity to do things.” This is well within the range of how the word *kratos* and its verb forms were used in archaic and classical Greek. Under this interpretation for *isokratia*, each person who stands within the ambit of “those who were equal” (say, the citizens) would, enjoy access to public power in this “capacity” sense. This might include, but need not be limited to, access to public offices. In sum, rather than imagining the *-kratos* group as sharing the *-arche* group’s primary concern for the control of a (pre-existing) constitutional apparatus, I would suggest that the *-kratos*-root

terms originally referred to a (newly) activated political capacity. This would explain why there is no *monokratia* or *oligokratia*: “the one” and “the few” were regarded as *inherently* strong and capable, through control of wealth, special education, and high birth. So it was not in question whether the one or the few possessed a capacity to do things – the question was whether or not they controlled the apparatus of government.

Which brings us, finally, to *demokratia*. *Demokratia* cannot mean the “*demos* monopolizes the offices” in that the *demos* (unlike the implied plurals *hoi oligoi*, *hoi aristoi*) must refer to a corporate body – to a “public” – and that public cannot collectively be an “office-holder” in the ordinary sense. But if we extrapolate from the definition I have proposed for *isokratia*, the term makes both philological and historical sense: *Demokratia*, which emerged as a regime-type with the historical self-assertion of a *demos* in a moment of revolution, refers to a *demos*’ collective capacity to do things in the public realm, to make things happen.⁶ If this is right, *demokratia* does not refer in the first instance to the *demos*’ monopolistic control of pre-existing constitutional authority. *Demokratia* is not just “the power of the *demos*” in the sense “the superior or monopolistic power of the *demos* relative to other potential power-holders in the state.” Rather it means, more capaciously, “the empowered *demos*” – it is the regime in which the *demos* gains a collective capacity to effect change in the public realm. And so it is not just a matter of *control* of a public realm but the collective *strength* and *ability* to act within that realm and, indeed, to reconstitute the public realm through action.

The *demos*’ capacity was first manifested during a popular uprising that sparked the democratic revolution of 508/7 B.C. But revolutionary moments are fleeting. If the *demos* were to sustain a collective capacity to do things over time – to form plans and carry them to completion in ordinary circumstances – then *demokratia*, as a form of popular self-government, required institutional forms (*pace* Sheldon Wolin⁷). Notably, the institutions of Athenian *demokratia* were never centered on elections. Voting on policy was certainly important – the individual Athenian citizen could be described not only as *isonomos* and *isegoros*, but also *isopsephos*: an equal in respect to his vote. But in contrast to *isonomia* and *isegoria*, *isopsephia* is another “missing” classical Greek regime name: It is unattested until the 1st century B.C. and was never periphrasis for *demokratia*.

The *demos* was composed of a socially diverse body of individuals, each capable of choosing freely in his own interests. Its members were not unified in their desires by an “all the way down” ideology. Many of them required some sort of subsidy if they were to participate on an equal basis. All of this meant that in order for the *demos* to be politically enabled, in a regular and sustainable way, some difficult collective action and coordination problems must be addressed. The Athenian regime did not try to address those problems by voting rules alone. Lotteries for offices and agenda-setting deliberative bodies were primary Athenian democratic institutional forms. But even these institutional forms do not fully capture the meaning of *demokratia* as capacity to do things. A fuller sense of *demokratia* is offered in Pericles’ funeral oration in Thucydides (2.37), and in preserved speeches delivered to the Athenian assembly and lawcourts.

Given that the funeral oration passage is so well known, I skip over it in favor of a passage from a court case of the mid-fourth century B.C. (Demosthenes speech 21: *Against Meidias*) Here, Demosthenes employs a rich vocabulary of strength, control, ability, and protection in summing up the democratic relationship between law, action, and public goods:

For in fact, if you [jurors] cared to consider and investigate the question of what it is that gives power and control (*ischuroi kai kurioi*) over everything in the *polis* to those of you who are jurors at any given time . . . you would find that the reason is not that you alone of the citizens are armed and mobilized in ranks, nor that you are physically the best and strongest, nor that you are youngest in age, nor anything of the sort, but rather you'd find that you are powerful (*ischuein*) through the laws (*nomoi*). And what is the power (*ischus*) of the laws? Is it that, if any of you is attacked and gives a shout, they'll come running to your aid? No, they are just inscribed letters and have no ability (*ouchi dunaint'*) to do that. What then is their motive power (*dunamis*)? You are, if you secure them and make them authoritative (*kurioi*) whenever anyone asks for aid. So the laws are powerful (*ischuroi*) through you and you through the laws. You must therefore stand up for them (*toutois boethein*) in just the same way as any individual would stand up for himself if attacked; you must take the view that offenses against the law are public concerns (*koina*) . . . (21.223–225).

So if the original meaning of democracy is the collective capacity of a public to make good things happen in the public realm, where does the idea of democracy as defined in the first instance by voting rules and by the monopoly of offices on the part of the many come from? Answering that question is beyond the scope of this paper, so suffice it to say that ancient critics of popular rule⁸ sought to rebrand *demokratia* as the equivalent of a tyrannical "*polloi-archia*" – as the monopolistic domination of government apparatus by the many who were poor: this is the strategy, for example, of the so-called Old Oligarch, an anonymous fifth-century pamphleteer. But just as *kratos* is not synonymous with *arche*, so too in classical Athens *demos* originally meant "the whole of the citizenry" (qua free native male population of a national territory) – not a sociologically delimited fragment of the citizenry. Placing democracy on a par with oligarchy, as little more, in principle or practice, than the monopoly over established governmental offices by, respectively, the many (poor) and the few (wealthy), is to accept fifth-century anti-democratic polemics as an accurate description of political reality. If our goal in returning to Greek antiquity is to gain an understanding of political power that might be of value to us, we must learn to attend to ancient democracy's practitioners as well as to its critics.

NOTES

1. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957); Kenneth Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

2. Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Kurt Raaflaub, "Democracy, Oligarchy, and the Concept of the 'Free Citizen' in Late Fifth-Century Athens" *Political Theory* 11 (1983): 517–44.

3. The primary Greek terms are as follows (with sample citations in classical authors): *Anarchia*: Herodotus 9.23; Aeschylus *Suppliants* 906. *Aristokratia*: Thucydides 3.82. *Demokratia* (and verb forms): Herodotus 6.43, Thucydides 2.37. *Gynkaikokratia*: Aristotle, *Politics* 1313b. *Dunasteia* (as the worst form of *oligarchia*): Aristotle *Politics* 1292b10, 1293a31. *Isegoria*: Herodotus 5.78, Demosthenes 21.124. *Isokratia*: Herodotus 5.92.a. *Isomoiria*: Solon *apud* Aristotle *Athenaion Politeia*. 12.3. *Isonomia*: Herodotus 3.80, 3.142 (opposed to *dunasteia*: Thucydides 4.78). *Isopsephia*: Dionysios of Halicarnassus 7.64. *Isopsephos*: Thucydides 1.141. *Monarchia*: Alcaeus Fragment 12; Herodotus 3.82. *Oligarchia* (and active and passive verb forms): Herodotus 3.82.2, 5.92.b', Thucydides 6.38, 8.9, (as personification (on tombstone of Critias: *scholion* to Aeschines 1.39). *Ochlokratia* as pejorative form of rule by the many: Polybios 6.4.6, 6.57.9. *Timokratia*: Plato *Republic* 545b, Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1160a. Fuller lists of citations available in Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*: <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>.

4. Christian Meier, *Entstehung des Begriffs Demokratie: Vier Prolegomena zu einer historischen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970); "Macht und Herrschaft in der Antike," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Otto Brunner and Reinhart Koselleck, eds. (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1972), 3820–30.

5. Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles and Ideology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

6. Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), especially chs. 3, 4, and 7.

7. Sheldon S. Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, ed. J. Peter Euben, John Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 29–58.

8. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*.

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