Ancient Greeks Wouldn't Call U.S. a Democracy – They’d see an Oligarchy

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The Temple of Hephaestus in Athens. This building is in the agora, the place where citizens would meet and make important decisions about the city's future. Photo: Sharon Mollerus/Wikimedia

Much of the language we use to talk about politics comes from Ancient Greece. For example, words like "democracy" and "anarchy" are Greek. Democracy means "rule by the people," and refers to a political system where power is shared by all citizens. Anarchy means "without ruler," and describes a system in which no one is in charge.

There is another Greek word that is useful for today's politics: oligarchy, which means "rule by the few." Oligarchies are societies in which a small group of powerful citizens controls the government. Rich citizens in some countries, like Russia, are sometimes called "oligarchs" because they are so rich and powerful.

Most advanced modern countries are representative democracies, at least in name. This means that people vote for certain politicians who should represent them in the government.
If ancient Greeks had a chance to see modern governments, they would not call them democracies but oligarchies. That is because most people today do not truly have power, even though they vote in elections.

The average citizen cannot fully participate in politics. They can vote in elections, but for the ancients voting alone did not count as real political participation. Full participation meant having a say in the day-to-day decisions of government and actively sharing in political power.

**Modern citizens have no say**

In the fourth century B.C., the Athenian democratic assembly was made up of more than 6,000 adult male citizens. This assembly, or meeting, usually gathered once every nine days. In these mass meetings, government policies were debated, approved and disapproved. It was a chance, every other week, for citizens to weigh in on questions of the state.

In comparison, citizens in modern democracies have almost no say in the day-to-day decision-making of their governments. They do not rule themselves; they are ruled by their representatives. The politicians who are supposed to represent them actually, for the most part, represent the interests of a few powerful people, who are sometimes referred to as "oligarchs," "elites" and "fat cats." The reason for that has a lot to do with inequality.
Modern societies have become extremely unequal. The richest 1 percent of the world’s population own as much as the remaining 99 percent put together.

There is a natural link between wealth and power. As a result, the unequal spread of money has resulted in an unequal spread of power. This has allowed those at the top to take control of societies that are supposed to operate as democracies.

Oligarchs have ruled over modern history with little input from the vast majority of citizens. In most questions that come before the state, most people get almost no say.

**Going to war without approval**

In 2003, for example, the U.S. and the U.K. went to war in Iraq, in the Middle East. Neither U.S. President George W. Bush nor U.K. prime minister Tony Blair got approval for that decision. The majority of voters in their countries had no say about whether they should risk their lives or the lives of others.

Moreover, our representatives are often not the representatives we chose. Citizens in our "democracies" spend up to one-fifth of their lives governed by political parties they voted against.
Moreover, elections are not in fact "free and fair;" they're usually won by the side that spends the most money. Thus, they are contests of spending as much as they are contests of ideas. As a result, no modern party comes to power without being backed by a corporation in one shape or another.

Finally, the vast majority of people are excluded from public decision-making altogether, even on the level of elections. Local governments are sometimes able to prevent specific groups, such as minorities, from voting. Campaign financing also guides the decisions that voters make.

**The sad state of democracy today**

These are just some of the ways in which our democracies have become undemocratic.

"Democracy" is a word with several meanings. By its ancient Greek definition, however, most of our modern democracies are not democracies at all. They do not truly put the power of government in the hands of its citizens.

One can well see why Winston Churchill described democracy as the worst of all systems of government, apart from all the rest. Modern democracies have their shortcomings but it's not clear that there are better alternatives.

That should not be a reason for us to continue ignoring the various ways that our modern democracies fall short. We need to be honest about the state of democracy today and do what we can to improve it. The ancient Greeks might help show us the way.

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Quiz

1. Read the section "Going to war without approval." Which paragraph BEST supports the conclusion that citizens may be blocked from participating in an election?

2. Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-5].

   *If ancient Greeks had a chance to see modern governments, they would not call them democracies but oligarchies. That is because most people today do not truly have power, even though they vote in elections.*

   Which of the following is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?
   (A) In a true democracy citizens are more actively involved in governing.
   (B) Modern governments are completely undemocratic.
   (C) In ancient Greek democracies all people could vote in elections.
   (D) People today care less about building strong democracies.

3. Read the section "Modern citizens have no say."

   Why does the author compare modern democracy with Athenian democracy?
   (A) to emphasize the limitations of most modern democracies
   (B) to describe how much both systems have in common
   (C) to highlight the origin of democratic traditions
   (D) to celebrate the history of democracy
One can well see why Winston Churchill described democracy as the worst of all systems of government, apart from all the rest. Modern democracies have their shortcomings but it's not clear that there are better alternatives.

The word "shortcomings" in the sentence above tells the reader that ____.

(A) modern democracy should be replaced
(B) modern democracy no longer works
(C) modern democracy has many flaws
(D) modern democracy has often failed