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11 February 2017

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/76810/>  
MPRA Paper No. 76810, posted 15 Feb 2017 17:13 UTC

# Choosing the optimal public choice scenario through a democratic educational procedure: A history from ancient Athens\*

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**Abstract:** In the present essay we argue that the Athenians were well aware that for a smooth functioning of democracy the citizens, who voted in the Assembly under direct democracy procedures, had to be educated. We argue that they had to find good solutions in the decision process of the Assembly. We analyse a public choice issue: the case of shipbuilding of the Athenian fleet that played a crucial defeat of the Persians in 480 BCE. The Athenians actually had to decide on a public choice set issue: sacrifice personal consumption in favour of the public good defence. We argue that the Athenians finally reached to the optimal choice, after having received at first undergone a process of democratic education.

**JEL:** A13 • A14 • N33 • Z1

**Keywords:** Democracy, education, Classical Athens, policy measures

## Introduction

The ancient Greek philosophers and “political scientists” like Plato and Aristotle were well aware that a precondition for the smooth functioning of democracy was the education of its citizens-voters, thus in a sense anticipating the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers such as John Steward Mill and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Plato took a negative view (in his “Politeia”, mainly) believing that the mass of the ordinary citizens were not, and could not be well educated to run a democracy. Thus, in his eyes, democracy was a bad system of government, degenerating into “mob rule”. His solution was the ideal model of a society governed by educated specialists, the “philosophers-guardians”. Although Aristotle took a milder view, distinguishing

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between types of democracy, like an “extremist” one (having in mind Athenian democracy during the Peloponnesian War, 431-404 BCE, when it was run by the so-called “demagogues”) and a more “moderate” one (having in mind the Athenian democracy of his own times, 403-322 BCE), he also cast doubts about the ability of ordinary citizens-voters to govern themselves.

The main issue they raised, was how could a system be run, in which unequal citizens, from the point of view of education, knowledge, ability, morals etc. had equal political rights. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle argued, that it could not, there was no solution to the problem, and thus democracy was a bad political system. However, practicing politicians in democratic Athens, like Themistocles, Pericles, and Lycurgus, were to prove them wrong. Modern philosophers such as Goethe, Hölderlin and Humboldt, representatives of the so-called “neo-humanistic” movement in Germany during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, revived the significance of studying the political functioning of the ancient Athenian democracy. Humboldt wrote in 1807 an essay, “Geschichte des verfalls und untergangs der griechischen freistaaten” by arguing that ancient Greek literature could be used as a bond to reinforce the historical ties between Germans and Hellenes (Greeks) (Benes, 2002).

Having in mind the above views, we analyze the role of education for the smooth running of the Athenian direct democracy through the use of the period’s mass media, theatrical plays, and through participation in the popular Assembly itself. In this essay we present how Athenian “initiators”<sup>1</sup> used education measures in order to achieve, under direct democracy, specific public choice aims. This is followed by our conclusions.

## **Democracy and education in Classical Athens**

Even before the criticism put forward by the philosophers, democratic initiators well understood that education of citizens was necessary if correct decisions in the Athenian citizen Assembly were to be reached. The practical issue was how could this

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer the term “initiator” than politician, to characterize leaders of ancient Athens, since at the time, there were not established political parties, and most government positions were covered by lot. The initiators brought forward initiatives in front of the citizens Assembly, and arguing in order to convince citizens to vote in favour.

be achieved, during a period where no compulsory education of children existed, and when children's education was a private family matter. Children of rich families got a good education in reading, writing poetry, music, morals and religion (after the mid-fifth century also in "rhetoric" and politics). By contrast, children of poor citizens probably got none or they had access to the "basic" (elementary) education, and thus, they were often illiterate (Kyriazis and Economou 2015). But in ancient democracies, as in modern ones, less well off citizens constituted the great majority.

After the great Athenian victory at Marathon in 490 BCE., Themistocles, foreseeing the danger of the second Persian invasion, initiated his famous proposition, known as "Themistocles Naval Decree" or "Law" of 483/2 BCE to finance the building of 100 new warships (triremes) each in two consecutive years, out of the proceeds of the Lavrion silver mines (Kyriazis and Zouboulakis, 2004). At the time a new very rich vein of silver was discovered. After paying all ordinary budget expenditures, there was still a surplus, and Themistocles' opponent, Aristides, who was supported by the aristocratic elite, proposed that the proceeds should be distributed to all 60,000 Athenian citizens, each receiving 10 drachmae (about 15 working days remuneration).<sup>2</sup>

So, the two proposals were: either Aristides', to use the surplus for private consumption, or Themistocles', to use it in order to finance the public good defense (warships). This was actually a public choice dilemma: the Athenians had to choose between more private consumption (each Athenian could receive 10 drachmae each year as a share of the revenues that they could be reached during the exploitation of the Lavrion mints) instead of using the proceeds in favour of shipbuilding (trireme warships, thus investing in favour of the public good defence).

The decision was not easy. How could the Athenians be convinced to forego a "gift" of private consumption in order to acquire a public good? Themistocles undertook to educate the Athenians prior to the vote. His political friends would probably speak informally in every occasion, to groups of their friends and acquaintances, in market places, festivals, dinners (the famous "symposia") making clear the looming Persian danger and the advantages accruing to the simple citizens. The major points would have been, first the safeguard of the city's independence and

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<sup>2</sup> For the calculation of the number of the Athenian citizens during the 5<sup>th</sup> century, being 60,000, see Kyriazis and Paparrigopoulos (2014). The basic source is Herodotus "History".

democracy and second, full political rights for class of poor citizens, called “thetes”.<sup>3</sup> (Lyttkens, 2013).

But for the first time ever, Themistocles used the time’s “mass media” to educate his fellow citizens. He entrusted one of his friends, to commission a play, by playwright Phrynichus, a tragic poet, called the “Fall of Miletus”<sup>4</sup>, to be presented during the theatrical contests. The play, illustrating the losses and the hardships of the population after the fall of the city, was a direct warning as to what would happen to the Athenians if they were not successful in facing the Persian invasion, eg, if they did not accept Themistocles’ proposals.

Thousands of Athenians saw the play in Attica’s theaters. They were moved to tears, and they fined the playwright, because he reminded them the tragic fate of their compatriots in Asia Minor. But they got the educational message. When the time came, they voted in favour of Themistocles proposal, the fleet was build, and the Athenians together with the fleets of some other city-states won the great naval battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. Greece and democracy were saved.<sup>5</sup>

It was a triumph of direct democracy and education. Themistocles showed that ordinary citizens could be educated in order to reach correct decisions. But except the educational process, what is also important here, is the fact of the free choice of the Athenian people to decide and support willingly the correct policy, by taking into account the pros and cons. It was a conscious decision taken by the people, who had a very good access to information concerning the real situation and the alternative choices they had to decide on.

Later Athenian initiators well understood the precedent set by Themistocles. By the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the era when Pericles dominated the Athenian political scene, a very important step in education was undertaken: “Theorika”, payment to the poorer Athenians out of the state budget, of money in order to allow

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<sup>3</sup> At the time the fourth class (according to wealth criteria) the “thetes” did not have full political rights. They would vote, but not be elected to government positions (Kyriazis, 2012). But by serving as rowers in the fleet, eg. taking part in the defense of their country, they would get full political rights, as they finally did.

<sup>4</sup> Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor, was sacked and destroyed by the Persians in 479BCE, after the unsuccessful Ionian Revolt against Persian rule.

<sup>5</sup> 180 of the 340 Greek ships at Salamis were Athenian (Strauss, 2004).

them to watch the four days long theatrical contests. Since they took four complete days, if not paid, poor Athenians would lose four days remuneration (wages etc.) which they could ill afford.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the theater became the first state sponsored and publicly financed type of education. Athenian plays taught almost everything: history and mythology (for example Aeschylus “The Persians”...“The Trojan Women”...“Ajax”, the “Seven against Thebes” and “Mycenaean” cycles) religion, morals, politics and political criticism (as for example, “Antigone”<sup>7</sup>, “Oedipus” the comedies of Aristophanes etc). Theater plays were not perform only in the city of Athens, but all over the scattered Athenian “deme” (communities) so that the educational teaching reached almost all Athenians.

But apart from the theater, participating in the Assembly meetings, of which about 40 full days long were held during the 4<sup>th</sup> century per year, (Hansen, 1999) provided simple Athenians with education. An Athenian citizen who had participated in about half (20 out of 40) annual meetings of the Assembly, after ten years (when he could have reached his 30<sup>th</sup> year) he would have heard during 200 meetings the best experts on every subject (foreign policy, strategy, public works, economics, etc.) arguing in favour or against a plethora of issues. Having heard of them, he would have become a well-informed citizen-voter, with considerable knowledge on all public subjects. Listening and being guided by the experts in the Assembly, created common knowledge, commitment, and facilitated coordination and cooperation in the political field (Ober, 2008, ch. 5).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Contrary to older views, modern scholars have presented a lot of evidence that the average Athenian citizen was hard working, either as self-employed in one of the almost 200 types of jobs specified by Xenophon on “Oeconomicus” and “Cyropaedia”, or as a salaried employee. (Cohen, 1992; Amemiya, 2007; Halkos and Kyriazis, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> On morals, Antigone includes the famous line “*I was not born to hate but to love*”, a precursor by five centuries of Christian teaching.

<sup>8</sup> Kyriazis (2012) and Kyriazis and Metaxas (2013) have argued that ancient Greeks developed coordination and cooperation mechanisms, which were the phalanx tactical formation, and the ships (triremes) and fleets. Values and norms developed in the military field, like equality, self-awareness, listening to the expert, courage etc, were taken over and adapted as democratic political values. For example, it required real political courage (known as “*paressia*”), to come confidently forward in the Assembly and make specific proposals, since the initiator could face substantial punishments if his

Again, Athenian initiators well understood that for the good working of the Athenian direct democracy, poorer Athenian citizens would have to be enabled to participate. In order to make this possible, they adopted a similar solution to that for watching the theater performances. They paid to the first 6000 citizens to attend the Assembly (6000 being the required quorum) a sum for their attendance, to be paid again out of the state's budget, called "eklesiastika" (Kyriazis, 2009).<sup>9</sup>

As a final comment in this session, it could be said that the values and principles that were developed through theatrical plays, such as moral behaviour, valour, integrity of character, personal pride, etc. were also correlated with values expressed through the democratic assembly of citizens, reinforcing thus a wider democratic culture that had to do with society as a whole, instead of being a privilege of the intellectuals or the high-ranking officials of the state.

## **Conclusion**

We have sketched above, for the first time as far as we know, the role of education for the smooth running of the Athenian direct democracy and for taking the optimal decisions concerning public choice issues. Similar policies were adopted also by other Greek democracies, although we are better informed about Athens due to a wealth of extant sources.

Athenian initiators and orators understood well that democracy can be as good or as bad as its citizens, so they tried to educate them. They introduced two ingenious policy measures: Education through the use of the period's mass media, theatrical plays, and through participation in the Assembly itself.

In order to allow poorer citizens to participate, they gave them incentives, in the form "participation fees". Lack of interest in modern democracies of citizens to

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proposal proved to be wrong, mainly fines, but sometimes even the death penalty. The victor of Marathon, Miltiades was fined to the exorbitant fine of 50 talents, for his failed military expedition against Paros, which his son Kimon paid after his death.

<sup>9</sup> "Ekklesia" being the name of the popular Assembly, originally meaning coming together, gathering. The name was taken over in Greek and Latin to mean religious gatherings, in Christian times, church. The remuneration was between 4 and 6 obols, one drachma being 6 obols and one drachma being the average wage for skilled worker during the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This was the wage paid to workers (stone masons etc.) in the Acropolis-Parthenon building project.

participate in elections (even if held every four or five years) is increasing in Europe. This again is linked to problems with the functioning of democracy, rise of extremist parties, “euroscepticism” etc.

Can we learn something from ancient democracy? Can we educate today’s citizens in order to become more conscious and “better” democrats? Athenian experience indicates that the introduction of direct democracy procedures like popular initiatives leading to referenda with binding results does motivate citizens more, and gives them more knowledge on the particular issues, thus educating them politically.

Public education is now of course obligatory and paid in part out of the state’s budget, a culmination of the first steps taken by the Athenians through “theorika”. But the main issue here concerns the content of public education: Modern children, up to the time they finish university studies as adults get a lot of information on very varied subjects but the main questions are still pertinent: Do they get an education that will make them better citizens and democrats? This is of course an ongoing discussion on educational aims, teaching methods etc., but a general answer seems to indicate that democracies are not working better during recent years, and that democratization is falling back, a very disturbing trend.

What is not in doubt, is the importance of education for forging a democratic culture between people in the European Union. The 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athenian orator Demades, being perfectly aware of this, remarked that “theorika” was the “glue of democracy” (Plut. Mor. 1016B). We are convinced that Humboldt would fully concur.

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