

# How the Ancient Greeks ‘Protected’ Democracy—and What It Teaches Us Today

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## *Commentary*

In the 1960s, archaeologists digging at Athens discovered thousands of pottery fragments in a landfill. The shards of pottery were the remains of ballots from a 471 BCE election, but the fragments were not votes to send candidates to political office. They were votes to *banish* citizens, a process known as *ostraca* that involved exiling citizens for a period of ten years.

“It was a negative popularity contest,” historian James Sickinger of Florida State University [told](#) Smithsonian Magazine in 2020.

Ostraca, the source of the modern word [ostracism](#), was not practiced outside of the 5th century BCE; and when it was introduced, it was seen as a political reform designed to purge corrupt officials from the public space to avoid tainting the democratic process.

“We’re told it originated as a way to get rid of potential tyrants,” Sickinger said.

Banishing citizens by vote is an extreme policy, but one can find a certain logic to ostraca. Since the rights of Athenians were subject to the whims of the state, and the state was controlled by the people, demagogues posed a genuine threat to the system and to Athenians.

The problem, of course, is that *ostraca* violated the individual rights of Athenian citizens. The natural right to privacy, due process, and free speech do not come with a “threat to democracy” clause. Nevertheless, Athenians could and sometimes did find themselves exiled when enough of their fellow citizens found them guilty of “threatening democracy.”

Few will be surprised to learn that the power of *ostraca* was not always used judiciously. The historical record suggests that some of those ostracized were not a “threat to democracy,” but citizens who were simply disliked or who had fallen out of political favor.

For example, [Megacles](#), son of Hippocrates, was ostracized a few years after the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE). Ostraca, the shards of pottery

or stone that served as ballots and also listed the [alleged offenses](#), cited Megacles’s “wealth and love of luxury” as his crime.

## ‘Rewriting the Constitution’

The Athenian practice of exiling citizens who allegedly posed a threat to democracy sounds crude, perhaps even appalling, to 21st century readers. Yet many today advocate a similar approach: violating the rights of citizens to “protect democracy.”

In 2020, in an interview with NPR, New York Times Magazine writer Emily Bazelon declared free speech a threat to democracy. The interview took place a week after Bazelon wrote an article headlined, “The First Amendment in the age of disinformation,” in which she writes “perhaps our way of thinking about free speech is not the best way.” In the article, Bazelon cites philosopher Jason Stanley and linguist David Beaver who argue in “[The Politics of Language](#)” that free speech may not be all it’s cracked up to be.

“Free speech threatens democracy as much as it also provides for its flourishing,” the authors write.

Censoring and controlling speech with state power is not the only illiberal tactic being proposed to protect democracy. In recent years, we’ve witnessed calls to [pack the Supreme Court](#), [end the filibuster](#), and [abolish the electoral college](#)—all in the name of protecting democracy.

Writing in Vox, Ian Millhiser [recently described](#) the Constitution as a “broken” document because of its many “antidemocratic features,” including an executive branch that is “increasingly subordinate to the courts,” a Senate that over-represents voters in sparsely populated states, and an Electoral College that hurts Democrats.

“Realistically,” Millhiser says, “turning the United States into a nation where every vote counts equally—and where each voter is actually able to shape the judiciary—would require rewriting its Constitution.”

# ‘The Very Definition of Tyranny’

Millhiser may or may not know it, but the checks and balances on centralized power he loathes are a feature of the Constitution, not a bug.

In his autobiography, Thomas Jefferson [explained](#) that “it’s not by the consolidation, or concentration of powers, but by their distribution, that good government is effected.”

Jefferson was speaking a sentiment [widely accepted](#) by the Founding Fathers: that centralized power was a dangerous force.

“The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny,” James Madison wrote in [Federalist No. 47](#).

Notice that Madison says the accumulation of centralized power is a threat even when it is “elective” in nature. What he and the other architects of the American system understood is that centralized power is not rendered benign simply because it was assembled democratically.

History shows that there’s [no guarantee](#) that democracies, absent meaningful constitutional constraints that limit the [centralization of power](#), will protect the natural rights of citizens, which is why John Adams pointed out democracies can trample the rights of individuals as thoroughly as a monarchy or autocracy.

“Remember Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes exhausts and murders itself,” [wrote Adams](#). “There never was a Democracy Yet, that did not commit suicide. It is in vain to Say that Democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious or less avaricious than Aristocracy or Monarchy.”

History would prove Adams right. Figures from [Hugo Chávez](#), [Adolf Hitler](#), and [Benito Mussolini](#) all rose to power through democratic

elections, and each would erode individual liberty by expanding the power of the state.

None of this is to say that democratic elections are inherently bad, of course. Far from it, democratic elections can also be a [key check](#) on government power.

Yet, as the Ancient Greek practice of ostraca showed, democratic systems of government are prone to many of the same abuses of power as other systems.

What the American Founders understood and the Ancient Greeks (and many today) did not was that “democracy” is not an end in itself. Rather, democratic elections are a means to an end—the protection of individual liberty.

If Americans continue to see democracy as an end in itself—a banal slogan to use against political opponents, or a mechanism to expand rule over each other—we may live to see the American experiment [reduced to that of Ancient Athens](#).

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