



War, disenfranchisement and the fall of the ancient Athenian democracy

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Athenian democracy emerged in 508 (all dates BCE), became a dominant naval power, fought a multitude of external wars and ended in 322 after it was defeated by Macedon and was replaced by oligarchy. The paper employs a political economy framework to examine the demise of democracy. It illustrates that war was a means of redistribution, benefiting the majority of poorer Athenians at the expense of the rich elite, who bore a disproportionate burden of its cost. A model of conflict is set up to study the incentives of the poor majority to go to war. After analyzing a dynamic setting it also investigates the circumstances when after defeating Athens her enemy chooses to impose oligarchy that disenfranchises the poor. As victory at war is probabilistic it is concluded that the fall of the democracy was neither unavoidable nor inevitable.

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1. Introduction

Contrary to the foundation and institutions of the ancient Athenian direct democracy of the 5th and 4th centuries (all dates BCE), its fall in 322 has not attracted the attention of political economy scholarship. The present paper begins such an inquiry by exploring how defeat in war may explain the end of the Athenian democracy. The direct democracy of ancient Athens emerged in 508 with the Cleisthenes reforms that transferred policy making power from the landed aristocracy to the Athenian demos. During her life span the Athenian democracy achieved extraordinary successes and overcame catastrophic failures. Athens won the Persian wars, established herself as the supreme naval power in the Mediterranean Sea, recovered from the defeat against Sparta in the Peloponnesian war in 404 and prospered again in the second half of the 4th century. After fighting several wars with mixed success, she finally succumbed to the might of Macedon in 322, who then established a government run by the rich elite that ended the democracy by disenfranchising the majority of middle and low income earners. Drawing on the economic literature of conflict the paper presents a parsimonious model to examine an abstract picture of a complex phenomenon, which focuses on how wars against foreign powers were used as a means for redistribution in favour of poor Athenians and defeat in war led to the fall of democracy.

The study is part of a growing and distinct literature that uses economic analysis, and especially collective choice and game theory, to explore the political institutions of ancient Greece. Amongst others, [Fleck and Hanssen \(2006\)](#) focus on the ability of democratic institutions, and especially the enfranchisement of the demos, to mitigate time inconsistency problems and encourage investment.

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In Fleck and Hanssen (2009) they use notions of gains from division of labour and incentive theory to explain why the women of Sparta, a militarist society whose agricultural production was based on occupied land and a captive labour force, uniquely amongst Greek city-states were granted secure land ownership rights. In a recent contribution (Fleck and Hanssen, 2013) they argue that by ending intra-elite conflicts and adopting growth-promoting policies, archaic period (8th–6th century) tyrants, rather unwittingly, advanced the formation of a population of citizens with common interests about rules of government that after the (often violent) overthrow of the tyranny led to the emergence of democracy. In a series of studies Lyttkens (2006, 2010, 2013) employs the framework of institutional economics to study the formation of the city-state (polis) as a political and judicial unit, intra-elite competition, the institution of governance of ancient Athens and the nexus between institutional changes and economic performance. Pritchard (2007) supports a closer integration of ancient history and political science to gain a greater understanding of the effect of democracy on war. Ober (2008) argues that the power and wealth of ancient Athens were built on democratic institutions, which along with a civic culture, led to the organization and distribution of knowledge amongst citizens. Kyriazis (2009) uses a public choice framework to examine the Athenian public finances during the 4th century and especially the bargains struck between rich and poor in financing civilian and navy expenditures. Bitros and Karayiannis (2010) and Karayiannis and Hatzis (2012) dwell on the moral norms of Athens including virtue, moderation, honour, respect of the liberty of others, defence of the Athenian way of living and aversion towards the acquisition of undue individual power, and argue that the economic success of Athens was based on market-friendly, growth-promoting institutions administered by men motivated by such moral norms. Pitsoulis (2011) discusses the origins of the majority voting rule. Tridimas (2011, 2012a) argues that the Athenian institutions of direct democracy, absence of political parties and appointment to office by lot were inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing so that none could operate without the simultaneous presence of the other. Lyttkens (2013) aptly summarises the gains from applying economic methodology to the Athenian democracy; namely, it helps to explain the ancient world, it allows application of the intuition gained from historical societies to the institutions and policies of the modern world, and it offers a better understanding of the use and limitations of economic theory. None of the aforementioned studies however deals with the question of the fall of democracy.

The present paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a short historical account of the Athenian democracy, her wars and eventual demise. Section 3 reviews selectively two relevant strands of literature on the change of suffrage and the relationship between domestic political institutions and international conflict. Section 4 presents a static model of war. Dividing the society into two groups, the rich elite and the poor majority of citizens, it identifies when the latter decide to go to war that may be won with a probability that depends on the wealth of Athens relative to that of her enemy and provide them with significant material gains. Section 5 examines whether the Athenian poor choose to go to war in a two-stage game when defeat in the first stage may precipitate the victorious enemy to impose on Athens oligarchy bringing in the end of democracy. Section 6 puts the model in context and discusses how a combination of naval defeat, reliance on agricultural wealth and inherent structural aspects of direct democracy may have conspired to end the Athenian democracy, while Section 7 concludes.

2. Historical overview of the Athenian democracy

2.1. 5th century

Table 1 presents the timeline of institutional and military developments of ancient Athens. The birth of direct democracy, its decision making bodies, their jurisdiction and functions, and the methods of appointing public officials by election or by lot, and their evolution over the span of two centuries have been analysed in several scholarly publications and a short review will suffice here.¹ Briefly, direct democracy rose with the Cleisthenes reforms of 508 and subsequent institutional changes which reconstituted the rules for citizenship, established the assembly of (male) Athenian citizens as the principal decision making body, and set up the Council of Five Hundred selected annually by lot, with responsibilities to prepare the agenda of the assembly and carry out the day-to-day administration. Ten generals elected annually served as commanders of the army and navy, while the *Heliaia* or 'People's Court' of 6000 jurors selected annually by lot, took responsibility for trying civil and penal cases, checking the eligibility and conduct of public officers and trials for treason and corruption.²

The political transformation of Athens was matched by impressive successes in the battlefield. First, in the 490 land battle of Marathon the hoplites army of landowner–farmer citizens defeated the invading Persians. Second, following an extensive shipbuilding programme, the Athenian fleet triumphed against the Persians in the 480 sea battle of Salamis.³ The Salamis victory marked the transformation of Athens to a sea power which was accompanied by a shift in the internal balance of political power against the large and mid-size landowners who were the backbone of the land forces, and in favour of the poor class of the *thetes* who before that had been excluded from public office, but gained profitable employment as rowers and proved indispensable in manning the

¹ The original account is given in Aristotle (1984). For a short review of the establishment of democracy in ancient Athens and its principal institutions of governance, see Tridimas (2011) and the literature therein. For extensive reviews of the operation of democracy see amongst others Hansen (1999) and Ober (2008). The volume by Raaflaub et al. (2007) offers a lively debate about the origins of the Athenian democracy. Lyttkens' (2013) economic analysis of the causes and consequences of institutional change in ancient Athens, is closest to the intellectual approach of the present paper.

² For political economy accounts of the Athenian justice system see D'Amico (2010) who applies the theory of public goods to examine the establishment of public prisons in Ancient Greece. Similarly, McCannon (2010) and Guha (2012) apply political economy and game theory to analyse various procedural and substantive aspects of the trial of Socrates, the famous philosopher, where, interestingly, they reach contrasting conclusions on the institutional efficiency of the justice system. Fleck and Hanssen (2012) focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the legal system that by relying on large, randomly chosen, juries of non-specialists limited opportunities for rent seeking but eschewed professional legal expertise.

³ See Tridimas (2013) for an examination of the shipbuilding programme.

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