



The egalitarian battlefield: Reflections on the origins of majority rule in archaic Greece

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ABSTRACT

We explore the emergence of formal institutions of majority rule in archaic Greece from a historical and conflict-theoretic perspective. Referring to ancient and modern sources we first conclude that institutions of majority rule entered Greek collective decision-making in the seventh century BC. We argue that this development must be seen in connection with the local economic growth pattern and the adoption of a highly idiosyncratic form of warfare, which enabled Greek city-states to mobilize a greater number of citizens for war. Military participation of citizens depends on parameters of warfare and economic parameters. We show that the reduction of the average costs of fighting, coupled with an increased decisiveness of conflict, may result in an increased military participation rate. The integration of elements of majority rule in the constitution of the city-states was the political consequence of this development.

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1. Introduction

Let him go ahead! Ares is a democrat. There are no privileged people on a battlefield. (Archilochos, c. 680 BC).

The ancient Greeks left an important political legacy which has long been almost exclusively a subject of three branches of scholarship: ancient history, political theory and political philosophy. Modern scholarship is much more diverse and nowadays the legacy of ancient Greek democracy is attracting the interest of game theorists, public choice theorists as well as political economists.¹ It seems a truly “interdisciplinary field of classical democracy studies” is emerging (Ober, 2008, p. 67). This field utilizes the theoretical and empirical contributions of the social sciences in order to increase our understanding of the origins, nature and functioning of ancient democracy.

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¹ See e.g. Bitros and Karayiannis (2008, 2010); Kyriazis (2009); Coll Martin (2008); Ober (2008); Tangian (2008); Teegarden (2007); Kaiser (2007); Fleck and Hanssen (2006); Lyttkens (2006); Morris (2004); Quillin (2002); Scholtz (2002) and von Ungern-Sternberg (1998).

What do we know about the origins of Greek democracy? Although many facts and important details are not clear it is today generally understood that the adoption of democratic institutions in parts of Greece was the result of interdependent economic, institutional, and technological trends that reached back as far as the eighth century BC. Economic growth, the emergence of the city-state (*polis*), new military practices as well as developments in social and political thought influenced political institutions. Research in this topic is a difficult task as one needs to take into account diverse kinds of ancient and modern evidence. Making use of all these requires to transgress several disciplinary boundaries.

Some works on the origins of Greek democracy start from the assumption that two earlier innovations, which took place roughly at the same time, greatly accelerated the evolution of political institutions towards democracy. The first was the introduction of elements of majority rule, like formal voting procedures, in popular assemblies.² The second was the emergence of an idiosyncratic method of warfare in which heavy-armed infantry (*hoplites*), drawn from the wealthier citizens, played a central role. The concurrence of these important developments appears not to have been the result of random coincidence. Yet if these developments were indeed linked what was the cause and what was the effect? Both innovations may have been caused by other variables, like an egalitarian ethic becoming prevalent (Morris, 2000, p. 190), or hoplite warfare may have followed from a democratization of politics as an extension of democratic ideology to warfare (Hanson and Heath, 2001, p. 67). A third possibility is that the first steps towards the democratization of politics may have followed from the very experience of hoplite warfare. A fourth possibility is that warfare, politics and other correlates co-evolved and mutually influenced each other over a longer period of time, settling temporarily down at a 'democratic' equilibrium. We would like to contribute to the debate by presenting some new arguments in support of the last thesis. In doing so, we concentrate on the relationship between warfare, military mobilization and majority rule.

Our starting point is that majority rule is in essence a *conflict resolution-mechanism*. This is a classical topic in political sociology. According to Georg Simmel "outvoting", i.e. a majoritarian decision where the will of the majority is binding even though the minority does not agree, "operates on the idea that the many are more powerful than the few, and that the function of voting is merely to reach the result of the real contest of forces without engaging in this contest itself" (Simmel, 1908, p. 243).³ Our hypothesis is that institutions of majority rule were adopted when the male citizens of archaic states associated conflict not only with numerical strength but also with the principle of equality (Morris, 1996). This in turn affected other correlates.

Developing this hypothesis requires a differentiated inventory. The basic idea is that not only the number and relationship of states but also their internal political institutions were influenced by developments in offensive and defensive technologies (Hirschleifer, 2000, p. 786). We will argue that economic, technological and institutional factors produced a 'macrotechnology of conflict' such that low costs of fighting coupled with an increased decisiveness of warfare led to a rapid expansion of military participation, which in turn forced aristocratic elites to devolve power by agreeing on constitutions based on some form of majority rule.

This paper is organized as follows: In section 2 we explore the emergence of formal institutions of majority rule in archaic Greece. In section 3 we explore the conditions of warfare that were given in that period; here special emphasis is laid on the idiosyncratic characteristics of hoplite warfare. In section 4 we develop our hypothesis of how several correlates acted together over a longer period of time, thus supporting the introduction of institutions of majority rule, in more detail; here special emphasis is laid on economic growth. Section 5 concludes and summarizes our results.

2. Collective decision-making in archaic Greece

It is today generally understood that the Greeks gradually introduced forms of majority rule in the archaic period⁴ and most probably sometime during the seventh century BC. In some city-states popular assemblies voted directly on political issues. The practice of taking such votes in political assemblies seems so normal in the modern context that "the average observer does not realize that any invention has been necessary; yet it would be hard to point out any single innovation which has influenced more profoundly the development of political institutions" (Larsen, 1949, p. 164).

Majority rule has never been uncontroversial. As a social choice mechanism it has a number of radical implications and implies a completely different approach to collective decision-making as compared to consensual forms of decision-making (cf. Flaig, 2004). First of all, a majority decision is well defined only when there are just two options; when there are more options it is possible that there is no majority for one of them. Second, it presupposes individualism and equality of the votes; social, economic and status differences have to be set aside for the purpose of collective decision-making. Third, it has the potential to deprive those with authority of their function to manufacture consensus. Fourth, it works only if people actually express their preference; this is however possible in a limited way, as one can only vote for a proposal, against, or abstain. Finally, the majority decision differs from the unanimity or consensus principle because of its very divisiveness; it is conflict-prone and may lead to the break-up of the decision-making group. Yet the Greeks employed it most systematically and comprehensively.

The introduction of the concept of equal weights in collective decision-making was a watershed; it allowed the citizens of a community (*demos*) to experiment with new conceptions of citizenship and radically new forms of political organization. As a

² The Greeks were probably not the first to introduce majority votes. But they were the very first to introduce majority rule as a principle for determining the general will of a collective; cf. Heinberg (1926, p. 54), Larsen (1949, p. 164) and Ruzé (1984, p. 247).

³ This theory was adopted by an influential school of thought founded by the French historian Gustave Glotz (1928) who used it to explain the origins of the Greek city-state.

⁴ According to the conventions of historical scholarship the following periods in ancient Greece are distinguished: the Mycenaean period (c. 1,600–1,200 BC), the 'Dark Age' (c. 1,200–800 BC), the archaic period (c. 800–480 BC) and the classical period (c. 480–323 BC).

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