# The Athenian Way: For Our Allies, Subjects and Neighbours

## By: Pericles

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*DOI: https://doi.org/10.15353/et.v1i1.6784*

In my years of service to the Athenian *demos* I have been asked by many men both worldly and intelligent how the Athenian system works, and why? Ironically, I must begin my explanation by discrediting myself in many people's eyes. I am asked habitually "As Athens' ruler why …." but I am no such thing. Athens has no ruler, I am merely a citizen who has had the honour to serve as one of ten *strategoi* several times throughout my career.[1] I know no offence is meant by these allegations, but still I must fervently diminish them. My fellow Athenians do not take kindly to such ambitions, and I have no aspirations to be ostracized. Nonetheless, I will attempt to explain the ways of my people and justify my fondness for them.

*Demokratia* is rule by the common people and its most valued principles are the election, the lot and open discussion.[2] Elections seem to be the easiest for foreigners to grasp. You see it simply as a more elaborate way of selecting men of noted intelligence and pedigree. The wider population may vote but the positions are only open to them in theory.[3] In some ways the foreigners are right; because of this limitation, elections must be restricted to only the most specialized and consequential roles, like the *strategoi.* Selection by lot is the truest democratic institution because it gives all citizens access to government positions. It allows for genuine rule by the common people rather than electing from a small pool of elites. It fosters an engaged citizenry, ready and willing to serve. Citizens understand that our system allows the *polis* to serve them and are willing to serve their city in return.[4] I know many of you will find it absurd that our people are paid for the governmental and judicial positions for which they are selected. You may think to yourself: "All this talk of the Athenian sense of duty, and they need to be paid! In my city politics is an act of service to the state and the gods." When politics is uncompensated, it becomes a hobby of the leisure class. [5] The average citizen should not be excluded because they must work to survive. His dedication to his fields, business and feeding his family should not prevent a good man from serving his state [6]. There is therefore no *Demokratia* without this pay. Finally, the value we place on openness to discussion and debate. I have heard others joke that we are a city of many words and little action, that our love of deliberation ultimately paralyzes us. Here I must remind you that discussion is not an impediment of action, but the prerequisite to any and all wise deeds.[7]

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[1] Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 244.

[2] Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 247.

[3] Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 246.

[4] Christ, *Bad Citizen*, 26.

[5] Markle, *Jury Pay*, 265-269.

[6] Thucydides 2.37.1

[7] Thucydides 2.40.1

Our critics accuse us of being blind to the prowling threat of self-interest to which we will inevitably fall prey. Democracy is not a failure to recognize that citizens are motivated by individual interest but an open acceptance of it.[8] It is an attempt to make this interest compatible with the preservation and prosperity of the state. No one man can compel Athens to act; to be actionable politically, self-interest must be approved by the masses. If something is in the interest of the majority of citizens, does it not transcend the individual and become Athens' interest? Good citizenship entails the use of enlightened self-interest to make rational decisions. Citizens understand their fate is one with the empire and their contribution (*eranos)* to the city will be paid back.[9] We, of course, have means of compulsion such as the courts, but we prefer to persuade a citizen to willingly enter a social contract in exchange for the freedom and prosperity it will bring him.

You may have heard of the restrictions on Athenian citizenship that were passed several years ago; citizenship was limited to those with two citizen parents.[10] For some this is an inexcusable degradation of our principles, but I suspect for most it is a comforting triumph of Athenian pragmatism over 'democratic ideologues'. To my mind neither perspective is correct because none of our values were abandoned in the process, however pragmatic. You must understand the environment this change evolved in. It was a time of simultaneous peace, food shortages, and strain on democratic institutions.[11] In peace we had no war-dead and no need to expand the army or navy. With shortages of grain, we needed effective distribution of state resources and supplies from our allies in Egypt. And as always, there was the enduring desire to sustain our system of direct democracy. All these problems found a suitable solution in the reduction of the citizenry. I briefly outlined why this decision was logical, but it was also democratic and just. It passed through the democratic assembly and was fair to all those affected. The *metoikoi* still have their personal rights protected, although they are not citizens, and they were given the opportunity to move to new settlements in Thurioi and Histiaia and become full citizens in those *apoikiai*, if they chose to.[12]

I have heard complaints from Delian League members about the artistic and architectural indulgences of Athens. Our goal is to honour the gods in a way benefiting the city of the goddess of wisdom and crafts. The focal point of these criticisms is often the Parthenon, but is it not any *polis*' duty to give their patron a befitting home? Athena has been Hellas' unwavering protector

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[8] Christ, *Bad Citizen*, 16.

[9] Christ, *Bad Citizen*, 29.

[10] Coşkun, *Perikles*, 22.

[11] Coşkun, *Perikles*, 20-21.

[12] Coşkun, *Perikles*, 23.

since the Trojan War, aiding Achilles in his fight against Hector, rearming him with his spear.[13] We all know of her devotion to the freedom, protection and revenge for which this League fights. In honouring her we extend her protection and wisdom to all our subjects. Do not, I implore you, go forth with the false notion that her *aegis* covers only Attica as Athena protects and guides all her subjects. Critics are persistent, muttering about a violated oath which says the temples must remain in ruins to remember the sacrilege and cruelty of the Persians.[14] In the spirit of *isegoria*, I have presented their case and ask you to decide which you value more, oaths among men or our duties to the gods?

I know many questions and valid criticisms have gone unaddressed, but I am but one man of limited time and capacity. It would be hypocritical of all my exposed values to not allow you to draw your own conclusion. Persuaded by my arguments or not, I invite you with open arms to come visit our great city — to see our ways and our people.[15] I believe you can learn much more from the masses than from me. Come see our art and architecture, which, though some may find it 'distasteful', very few have denied its beauty. I wish my fellow Hellenes to know not just Athena's protection but to witness the glory of her home here in Athens. I will consider this speech a success if you leave with an understanding that Athens fights valiantly and maintains the League insistently because we are blessed and have a myriad to lose.[16]

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[13] *Iliad* 22.

[14] Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 76-82; see also Diodorus 11.29.2. Note that versions of the oath are found in these sources but the oath's historicity is debated, so I have chosen to consider it a rumour believed by some.

[15] Thucydides 2.39.1

[16] Thucydides 2.42.1

## Artist's Statement

I wrote this piece as a third-year Political Science student with a minor in Classical Studies. My aims were to explain the basic mechanisms of Athenian democracy and embody their self-understanding. One of the ideological tensions in the piece is how Athenian propaganda managed the contractions between empire and democracy. The speech is delivered by Pericles (d. 429), a statesman and general during the Athenian Golden Age, roughly between the Greco-Persian and Peloponnesian Wars. He was a prominent political leader in the Athenian democratic system and helped transform the Delian League into an Athenian Empire. His domestic political projects, including the construction of the Parthenon, continue to shape the landscape of Athens.

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