

LESSON

1

CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT

Historic Basis for U.S. System

Key Ideas

- The idea of democracy originated with the Ancient Greeks who spoke of the 'rule of the people.'
- The historic basis of the U.S. government came from the British system that limited the king's powers and protected individual rights.
- The U.S. system evolved from the British idea of a parliamentary democracy to a representative democracy.

ON THE GED® TEST

While you will not need to memorize dates, it will be helpful to be familiar with key terms, such as the ones in bold type.

The system of government in the United States is known as **representative democracy**. In this form of government, the citizens vote to elect representatives who make and execute laws. To understand this form of democracy, it is helpful to first distinguish democracy from other types of government. Then, you can trace the historical development of democracy and see how representative democracy differs from other types of democracy employed over time and around the globe.

The origins of **democracy** are ancient. The term *democracy*, which means "rule of the people" in Greek, arose in approximately 500 BCE in the Greek city-state of Athens. This distinguishes democracy from **monarchy**, the "rule of one person" (such as a king or queen); **aristocracy**, the "rule of an elite class" (lords or barons, for example); **theocracy**, the "rule of the church"; and **anarchy**, the "rule of the mob" (arguably not a form of government at all). Democracy is also distinct from forms of **authoritarian rule**, such as dictatorship, military rule, and fascism.

In ancient Athenian democracy, laws were voted upon by a council of all citizens, a system known as **direct democracy**. In ancient Athens, however, a "citizen" was defined as a free male landowner over the age of 20. Women, foreigners, slaves, non-landowners, and minors were excluded from the vote.

For the eventual development of democracy in the U.S., one of the most important events was the signing of the **Magna Carta** (Latin for Great Charter) in England in 1215. England was a monarchy, but some protested the king's absolute power. The result was the signing of the Magna Carta, a document limiting the king's rule and subjecting his decisions to review. This same period also saw the development of the legal doctrine of **habeas corpus**, which made it illegal for the government to hold or imprison individuals without granting them trials.

Over time, the group allowed by the Magna Carta to review the king's decisions developed into a **parliament** of lawmakers appointed by title and/or elected by citizens. As the power of the parliament grew, England transformed into a **parliamentary democracy**. In this system, a government is formed by the party holding a majority of seats in the parliament. In most parliamentary democracies, the majority party appoints or authorizes the chief executive, such as the president.

Known as the Age of Enlightenment, the 17th and 18th centuries saw the spread of democracy to many other European countries. England, France, Holland, and other European powers also adopted **bills of rights** for individuals during this period. The philosophies dominant in this era emphasized reason and individual rights and encouraged government by the people. Enlightenment philosophers such as Adam Smith, John Locke, and Voltaire strongly influenced the founders of the United States.