

History Matters: The Lessons of the Ancient Greeks and Romans

It is hard to overestimate the influence of the Ancient Greeks and Romans and their fledgling attempts at democracy. Western Civilization has long idealized the Greeks, a sentiment that was already present in the Romans, who greatly admired their predecessors. Both civilizations were enamored with the ideas of self-determination and self-government, and among their first lessons for us is the idea that changing the world is no easy task. Although neither the Greek nor the Roman governments would be recognized as democracies by today's standards, they unquestionably set the early course for the West's journey toward democracy.

Greece

The Greeks put forward a strong effort at building a democracy and had some notable successes, but their influence and ambition ultimately reached beyond their ability to form a clear idea of what it meant to be Greek. This lack of a shared vision across the Greek city-states led the empire to become internally weak and polarized, unable to fend off aggression from the outside due to conflicts among its member states about issues that today we would recognize as modern dilemmas. In this sense, the Greeks had a critical flaw: their inability to build unity and use centralized power to their benefit.

Knowing this about the Greek model, we might imagine politics has always been as mean-spirited as it appears today. However, in this sense, the Greek and American examples are outliers, because although it's not unusual to find occasional examples of politicians engaged in vicious battles—to the point of, in one instance, coming to physical blows on the floor of Congress!—this animosity tends to be far less apparent in the day-to-day interactions among citizens.

Today, ramped up by entertainment news, many Americans seem to treat their loyalty to political parties and individual politicians as though it were the same as their devotion to a football team. Yet, importantly, no one compromises on the football field. In this sense, the Greeks offer us a warning. What they failed to learn was that compromise is an important and necessary element of a successful democracy.

When candidates are led to represent political extremes, they make unrealistic promises about policy, and democracy fails to deliver on the most important aspect of self-determination—it fails to represent the people.

Rome

No one can accuse the Romans of failing to form a successful central government. The expression “all roads lead to Rome” was true—at the center of Rome was a government that ruled over an enormous region. The Roman world is an example of how to do many things right, but it also illustrates crucial ways in which things can go wrong. The Romans were experts at creating political and cultural unity, instituting impressive symbols of their power and dominance, and expanding their territory. Ironically though, one of their greatest strengths is also one of the weaknesses that led to their destruction.

At their best, Romans governed through compromise, becoming ever more inclusive and creating new paths to Roman citizenship. Where they failed was in the peaceful passing of power. Rome made no provision for compelling powerful leaders to bow to the will of the people. The result of this was that, in the end, the will of the people gradually became less important as powerful men took their country to violence and war in attempts hold on to their power and wealth.

The Founding Father, John Adams, wrote to his wife, Abigail Adams, “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”

America's Founding Fathers were aware of history's lessons when they outlined their plan for the United States. They did not choose the word "united" by accident. They understood that unity was going to be needed for America to maintain independence. They also knew that no country could bring freedom, liberty, prosperity, and independence if they could not pass power in peace.