Who invented democracy?

No one person invented the type of democracy that we have today. The building blocks were created in the classical period and developed over the centuries. The classical period covers the long history of the region that surrounds the Mediterranean Sea. Democracy was just one of the many different types of governments that the Greeks and Romans tried over the centuries. Political thinkers, including America’s Founding Fathers, studied the history of these civilizations closely for lessons on government.

It’s all Greek to me!

Almost 2,500 years ago the leader of Athens (a Greek city-state) decided to try something different – rule by the people, or direct democracy. This kind of democracy required all the citizens to participate directly in the actions of government. The assembly created laws and directed foreign policy, the council oversaw the actions of government, and the courts acted as police, judges, and jury! Back then, only male citizens of Athens over 18 were considered part of the demos, or government.

Good idea, but it needs some work.

In Athens, the citizens had a hand in all of the decisions and actions of government. This system only lasted about 200 years, but it made an impact on future civilizations. This approach worked as long as it did because Athens had a small population that allowed for close cooperation. Another major civilization in the neighborhood was Rome. The Roman government had a larger territory and more people, so direct democracy wasn’t going to work as well. They would have to make some improvements without losing the power of the people.

When in Rome...

In 508 BCE, the leaders of Rome wanted democracy, but knew they’d never be able to get every citizen to participate in government. So, a republic was born. In a republic, the citizens elect representatives to run the government for them. These representatives were responsible to the people that elected them. The people still had power, but now it was handed off to a group of citizens that could act on their behalf. The Roman Republic lasted almost 500 years!

So What?

You can see the influence of Greek democracy and the Roman Republic in the government we have today. Even in the 1700s, America was too big to work as a direct democracy. The Founding Fathers established a system that gave power to the people, and did so with elected representatives. The final product is called a representative democracy.