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Limits to democracy

by [Roger Scruton](#)

What limits must be placed on democracy?

As its Greek name suggests, democracy is an ancient idea. But it is only a recent ideal. Greek writers either warned against democracy, or regarded it as simply one among many forms of political order, and not intrinsically preferable to its competitors. True, the Athenian democracy was a source of wonder and admiration—at least to Pericles and his faction. But it was a system of government far removed from anything that would be called democracy today, and not only because women, slaves, and metics—who between them constituted some 80 percent of the population—were disenfranchised. The Athenian democracy was confined to the narrow territory of a city-state; every citizen was known personally or by reputation to every other, and the issues put to the vote included many—such as ostracism—which would nowadays be ruled out as an invasion of individual rights. It was not until the Enlightenment that philosophers bega ...

Roger Scruton is resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. His latest book is *Beauty* (Oxford University Press).

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