Athens Journal of History 2026, 12: 1-24
https://doi.org/10.30958/ajhis.X-Y-Z

Higher Education for Democracy from Classical Athens to the United States: Reflections on an Unfinished Project

*By Andrew F. Erwin**

This article addresses the convergence of two related problems facing U.S. higher education and democracy today by examining how analogous problems arose in ancient Athens and by suggesting how an ancient Athenian conception of higher education for democracy can help us navigate contemporary challenges. Ancient Athens is an especially fruitful place to explore these issues because both higher education and democracy first arose there. Furthermore, because they were novel projects without historical precedent, Athenians grappled with the tensions that arose between democracy and higher education in ways that highlight the most salient issues. The argument unfolds in three parts. First, the article identifies a crisis of faith in U.S. institutions of both higher education and democracy, which has generated a populist backlash against higher education and electoral support for candidates that undermine democratic norms and institutions. These twin phenomena challenge an ideal of higher education for democracy that is commonly identified as a core aim of American higher education. Second, the article argues that institutions of higher education should draw on an underappreciated conception of participatory civic higher education that was implicit in the functioning of Athenian democracy. Doing so requires expanding our understanding of classical higher education – traditionally conceived as a struggle between Isocratean rhetoric and Platonic philosophy – to encompass the popular Athenian democratic tradition of participatory civic higher education. The article reconstructs this tradition based on recent scholarship on Athenian democracy and readings of Thucydides and Plato. Finally, a conclusion offers four recommendations for addressing the populist challenge and democratizing contemporary higher education based on the Athenian example with reference to recent work on deliberative democracy and civic education.

Keywords: *higher education, democracy, classical Athens, Thucydides, Plato*

Introduction:
The Populist Challenge to Higher Education for Democracy

Across the West today, higher education finds itself besieged by various forms of populist democracy. In the United States, the problem is particularly

*Senior Academic Director of Adelphi International and Adjunct Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences, Adelphi University, USA.

acute.[1] Public faith in institutions of U.S. higher education is at all-time lows.[2] Many working and middle-class Americans, who in previous generations aspired to attend university, have given up on pursuing higher education, calculating that either the cost of university is too high for its benefits or that university curricula and culture run counter to their values and interests.[3] Higher education now acts as a driver of economic inequality, rather than social

1. Outside the United States, other Western democracies have experienced symptoms of a populist backlash against higher education similar to the U.S. case diagnosed here. While not the focus of this article, readers may find apt comparisons to developments in Hungary and Germany among others. For developments in Hungary under Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, see Michael Ignatieff, "An Authoritarian Came for My University. His Objective Was Clear," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/06/02/trump-harvard-attack-viktor-orban-ceu-hungary/; Alison Abbott, "Hungarian Government Takes Control of Research Institutes Despite Outcry," *Nature*, July 8, 2019, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02107-4; Kovács Zoltán, "Hungarian Academy of Sciences Stripped of Its Research Network," *Index*, July 2, 2019, https://index.hu/english/2019/07/02/hungarian _academy_of_sciences_research_network_taken_away_academic_freedom_ministry_of_innovation_and_technology/. It remains to be seen if the recent election of Orban critic Péter Magyar will reverse some of these trends. For developments in Germany with the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, see Emily Dixon, "What Could the Rise of the AfD Mean for German Universities," *Times Higher Education*, February 21, 2025, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/what-could-rise-afd-mean-german-universities; AStA University of Göttingen,"Resolutely Countering Attacks on the Freedom of Research and Teaching," February 12, 2025, https://asta.uni-goettingen.de/en/2025/02/12/resolutely-countering-attacks-on-the-freedom-of-research-and-teaching/. For a global analysis of attacks on academic freedom in universities, see Scholars at Risk, *Free to Think 2025: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*, (New York: Scholars at Risk, 2025), https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2025/.

2. Michael T. Nietzel, "Americans' Confidence In Higher Education Sinks To A New Low," *Forbes*, July 11, 2023

3. Lydia Saad, "Perceived Importance of College Hits New Low," *Gallup*, September 11, 2025; Sareen Habeshian, "College costs the biggest barrier for most Americans, survey finds," *Axios*, April 17, 2024; Kamaron McNair, "Just 22% of Americans say college is worth it if you have to take out student loans," *CNBC*, May 23, 2024; Nicole Stephens and Sarah Townsend, "The Unseen Reason Working-Class Students Drop Out From College," The College Puzzle (blog), March 5, 2019, https://collegepuzzle.stanford.edu/the-unseen-reason-working-class-students-drop-out-from-college/; William Thelin, "How the American Working Class Views the 'Working Class'," *Humanities* 8.1 (2019), 53, https://doi.org/10.3390/h8010053; Jennifer Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Anthony Jack, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Kaiser Family Foundation, "Kaiser Family Foundation/CNN Working-Class Whites Poll," September 23, 2016, https://www.kff.org/other-health/kaiser-family-foundationcnn-working-class-whites-poll-old-197757/.

mobility, and a generator of cultural division, rather than shared values.[4] This creates a vicious cycle of populist resentment toward the college-educated, which further undermines the relationship between democracy and higher education. In many populist corners, professors have become rhetorical targets of populist resentment, regarded essentially as corrupters of the country's youth. These sentiments have shaped elections and federal policy in the United States. With a populist wind at its back, the current U.S. administration has initiated an all-out assault on the independence of higher education by threatening public funding, academic freedom, and autonomy in hiring practices.[5]

At the same time, democracy faces a hard problem itself.[6] Public faith in the institutions of democracy is equally low.[7] A large majority of Americans regards the U.S. Congress as ineffective and beholden to wealthy interests. Many see the courts as inaccessible, corrupt, or partisan, and federal government agencies as inefficient bureaucracies that do not serve the people's interests.[8] In the minds of populists, democratic institutions increasingly serve

---

4. Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020).

5. PEN America, *By the Numbers: The Trump Administration's Assault on Universities*, February 2025, https://pen.org/by-the-numbers-the-trump-administrations-assault-on-universities/.

6. In referring to contemporary "democracy," I rely on a common usage of the term to denote systems of constitutional government where citizens elect representatives that make and execute laws on their behalf as well as systems that include features of direct democracy such as ballot initiatives and referenda (e.g. Switzerland, U.S. states). Contemporary usage of the term "democracy" generally assumes that popular sovereignty in the form of elections, representation, or referenda are necessary but not sufficient for democratic conditions to obtain. Contemporary usage also entails a normative assumption that the various procedural manifestations of popular sovereignty must be accompanied by the rule of law and the protection of basic rights and freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom from arbitrary search and seizure (the rule of law), etc. This means that countries may be procedurally democratic in a modern sense but normatively deficient due to failures in the rule of law or the protection of constitutional freedoms. From an ancient Athenian perspective, modern representative government falls short of a basic criterion of democracy, which was direct citizen participation in decision making, administration, and justice. See Gregory Papanikos, "The Five Ancient Criteria of Democracy: The Apotheosis of Equality," *Athens Journal of Humanities and Arts* 9.2 (April 2022): 105-120. Part of the underlying argument of this article is that responding to populist challenges to higher education and democracy requires moving the needle of contemporary higher education and democracy closer to the Athenian conception of direct participation.

7. Madeleine Aggeler, "Trust in US institutions has 'never been lower' – here's why that matters," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/jun/11/trust-us-institutions;

8. Ballotpedia, "Ballotpedia's Polling Index: Congressional Approval Rating," Updated March 5, 2026, https://ballotpedia.org/Ballotpedia%27s_Polling_Index:_Congressional_approval_rating; Pew Research Center, "7 Facts about Americans' Views of Money in Politics," October 23, 2023; Pew Research Center, *Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics*,

the interests of an elite class of college-educated experts or a cadre of business oligarchs who manipulate institutions and live without accountability. This has led to the paradox that a solid majority of working and middle-class Americans reelected, in a free and fair election, a twice-impeached former president who attempted to overturn another free and fair election and now regularly disregards the Constitution and the law.[9] The result is that democratic self-determination is paradoxically undermining democracy itself.

This state of affairs is disconcerting to advocates of a liberal ideal of higher education for democracy, which defines a core purpose of higher education as preparation for democratic citizenship. American thinkers from Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, and John Dewey to contemporary philosophers and university presidents give a special place to higher education in the preservation and cultivation of American democracy.[10] Yet, if growing numbers of democratic citizens are skeptical or hostile toward higher education, what does this portend for higher education's role in preserving democracy? As educators committed to democratic ideals of free speech, self-determination, and freedom from domination, we must build robust answers to the populist challenge lest we find ourselves increasingly at odds with democracy itself.

September 19, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/.

9. U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Undermining Constitutional Limits: The Trump Administration's Unlawful Seizure of Congressional Powers, Defiance of Court Orders, and Intimidation Campaign*, August 2025, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/hSGAC-Minority-Staff-Report.Undermining-Constitutional-Limits-FINAL.pdf; Justin Jouvenal, "Trump officials accused of defying 1 in 3 judges who ruled against him," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/07/21/trump-court-orders-defy-noncompliance-marshals-judges/; U.S. House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Final Report*, Government Publishing Office, 2022, https://www.govinfo.gov/collection/january-6th-committee-final-report?path=/GPO/January%206th%20Committee%20Final%20Report%20and%20Supporting%20Materials%20Collection.

10. Thomas Jefferson, *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* (1779), in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2, 1777–1780, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 526–535; Frederick Douglass, "At the Dedication of the Manassas Industrial School" (1894), in *Frederick Douglass: Speeches & Writings, 1881–1895*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Library of America, 1992), 872–878; John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Ronald J. Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

Learning from Ancient Athens: What the Traditional Account of Athenian Higher Education Misses

Fortunately, ancient Athenians faced similarly hard problems of democracy and higher education and left us a rich record of their pedagogical attempts to solve them. In response to the challenges of ancient democracy, Athenians developed three different traditions of institutionalized higher education: the rhetorical school of Isocrates founded in the early 390s BCE,[11] the Platonic Academy founded in the mid-380s, and the Athenian *ephebeia* founded in 335 in the last years of the democracy.[12] These traditions hold out some promise for us, if and only if, we can hold them in tension together – something Athenians themselves could not quite accomplish. A problem in our absorption of these traditions is that the two that have most influenced our intellectual life, the Platonic Academy and the rhetorical school of Isocrates, were either highly critical of democracy or directed only at its most elite members. Only the *ephebeia* was a truly democratic institution in the sense that it was directed at and open to all classes of Athenian citizens. Now, instead of looking at the well-documented fourth-century history of these institutions,[13] this article examines their prehistory in fifth-century Athens because it holds the key to understanding what we have missed. That prehistory begins with the democratic revolution of 508/7 and the great institutional, military, and cultural achievements of the new democracy. It continues with the mid-century emergence of Sophistic higher education and ends with populist demagogues, two oligarchic coups, a restored democracy, and the execution of Socrates.

The classic accounts of ancient higher education tend to divide the history into a struggle between the Isocratean and Platonic traditions.[14] On this view, Isocrates' school carries on a reformed version of the rhetorical and ethical

11. All subsequent dates are BCE.

12. George Norlin, General Introduction to *Isocrates*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library 209 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), xvi–xvii; Robin Waterfield, *Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 123; Kenneth J. Dover, Introduction to *Aristotle: The Athenian Constitution*, Loeb Classical Library 285 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), xxv–xxviii.

13. Thomas R. Henderson, *The Springtime of the People: The Athenian Ephebeia and Citizen Training from Lykourgos to Augustus* (Brill's Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy, vol. 15, 2020); John L. Friend, *The Athenian Ephebeia in the Fourth Century BCE* (Brill Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy, 13, 2019); Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956).

14. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture. Volume I: Archaic Greece. The Mind of Athens*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1945); Marrou, *Education in Antiquity*; Frederick A. G. Beck, *Greek Education: 450-350 B.C.* (London: Methuen, 1964); Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1986).

education the Sophists had provided to wealthy elites in the fifth century, who were competing for relevance and influence in an increasingly radical democracy. Plato's Academy carries on a legacy of Socrates and founds a philosophical, scientific tradition concerned more with a search for truth and its proper method of discovery than with practical politics. The resulting narrative of ancient higher education is one that tells of a battle between rhetoric and philosophy that can be traced through Roman antiquity and into the modern age.[15] This traditional narrative falls short on one crucial point, however, namely that it leaves out the late democratic Athenian *ephebeia* and its prehistory in a popular democratic conception of *participatory civic higher education*. This popular democratic tradition, which began to receive proper attention recently with the work of Josiah Ober, traces to the beginnings of the democracy and predates the rise of Sophistic higher education.[16] The relative absence of this tradition from classic accounts is due to the fact that ancient democracy and participatory civic higher education do not fit neatly into our modern conceptions of either democracy or higher education. Recovering this tradition changes the way we understand the Athenian contribution to an ideal of higher education for democracy.

The Athenian Democratic Theory of Political Competence: Participatory Civic Higher Education

One aspect of Athenian democracy that vexed its ancient critics and puzzled historians ever since was its remarkable effectiveness and longevity despite the fact that it had no chief executive or council of experts (like its rival Sparta) and was governed by a broad cross-section of citizens from all economic classes with allegedly little to no political expertise.[17] We can add to this a further temporal puzzle. The seminal political and cultural achievements of Athenian democracy occurred before the emergence of higher education in its Sophistic form in the middle of the fifth century. To name just a few achievements, one thinks of the democratic revolution of 508/7 itself, the victories at Marathon and Salamis, the establishment of the Delian League in 478, the great institution of Athenian drama, the second constitutional revolution of the 460s that gave virtually all political power to the popular Assembly, Council, and jury courts; the

15. See especially Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*.

16. Josiah Ober, "The Debate over Civic Education in Classical Athens," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 175–207; Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

17. The classic ancient expression of this sentiment is Pseudo-Xenophon, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, written by an unknown author sometime between 441 and 424. For a discussion of implicit anti-democratic bias reproduced in modern twentieth-century scholarship, see W. G. Forrest, *The Emergence of Greek Democracy, 800-400 BC* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), 21-36.

institution of pay for jury service shortly thereafter, which enabled greater participation by poor and working Athenians; and the architectural and artistic program instigated by Pericles in 447, which produced the Parthenon and the sculptural monuments we admire on the Acropolis today. The first self-described Sophist Protagoras was just establishing his reputation as a traveling professor when the final stages of this Athenian democratic revolution were complete. How then, without a system of higher education for self-governance in place, could average Athenians have managed to take the reins and govern their polis so brilliantly and effectively? And what was the Athenian democratic theory of political competence? How could the "uneducated people" rule themselves? The answer lies in the underappreciated tradition of participatory civic higher education.

To flesh out this answer, I want to begin in a slightly provocative place – and that is with two of Socrates' accusers, Meletus and Anytus. We know little about the two except that they were both staunch democrats. Anytus was involved in the restoration of the democracy after the reign of terror under the oligarchy of 404. Meletus' greater obscurity is itself indicative of the fact that he represented an average Athenian democratic viewpoint. In Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, we find Meletus defending a common-sense Athenian view of civic education through participation.[18] Asked by Socrates who educates Athens' youth, Meletus answers by naming in quick succession – as if it were obvious – the members of the jury, the Council, and the Assembly as the natural educators of young Athenians.[19] While Socrates' clever questioning is designed to corner Meletus into defending an absurd claim that Socrates was the only corrupter of Athens' youth, Meletus' viewpoint regarding the educative role of his fellow citizens is perfectly understandable and defensible as a statement of how Athenian democracy actually worked.[20]

Elsewhere in the *Meno*, Plato has Anytus defend a similar view in the context of a discussion about who can teach people to be good citizens.[21] There, with tongue in cheek, Socrates proposes the Sophists, but the radical democrat, Anytus, has had enough of Sophists, who he thinks corrupt the gilded youth of Athens and teach them clever skills to deceive their fellow citizens. Anytus and democrats like him were surely thinking of talented young aristocrats like Alcibiades, who had all the promise of a Pericles but none of his discipline or devotion to democracy. Alcibiades, whom Plato depicts as a student of Sophists in *Protagoras* and elsewhere as a companion of Socrates, had coaxed Athens into the disastrous Sicilian campaign and betrayed the democracy several times over during the war. Other Athenian aristocrats such as the shadowy figure of

18. On Meletus' answers as representing a widely-shared Athenian viewpoint, see Ober, "The Debate over Civic Education in Classical Athens," 180-181.

19. Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 24e-25a.

20. This seems to be the implication of Ober's work in *Democracy and Knowledge*.

21. Plato, *Meno* 89e-95a.

Antiphon – a sophist, logographer, and intellectual back-room dealer among the aristocrat clubs – had taken part in the oligarchic coup of 411, leading a violent propaganda campaign that set up the coup.[22] Of course, not all Sophists could be blamed for aristocratic chicanery. Protagoras had been a confidante of Pericles, who had recruited him to write laws for the Athenian colony of Thurii. In Plato's depiction of him, Protagoras could offer sophisticated defenses of the common-sense Athenian view defended by Meletus and Anytus. But after Alcibiades, Antiphon, and the Thirty, the uses to which aristocrats put Sophistic higher education had driven the movement into disrepute. With this background in mind, Anytus' skepticism of Sophists was perfectly understandable. Feigning surprise at Anytus' reaction, Socrates wants to know whom else a young man should seek out to learn how to be a good citizen. Like Meletus, Anytus responds as if the answer ought to be obvious: "I don't see why we need to name anyone in particular. The fact is, any good Athenian he meets, every single one, will make him a better citizen than Sophists ever could, as long as he follows his advice."[23] The exchange ends with Anytus warning Socrates himself that he ought to be careful about his habit of questioning the competence of Athenians to educate their sons in civic virtue. Plato positions Anytus here between the Sophists and Socrates as representing the common-sense democratic view, which holds that every Athenian citizen is a politically competent teacher.

In his famous funeral oration recorded by Thucydides, Pericles had articulated a grand version of this same common-sense view. In the speech, Pericles dismisses the potential objection that a body of amateur citizens could not possibly have sufficient political knowledge or time to participate and govern competently. "Each of us is perfectly capable of managing his own household and public affairs; and those devoted to private business can nonetheless acquire a full knowledge of politics." He then reminds Athenians of the value they place on civic participation. "Anyone who does not participate in public life: you call that, not a quiet life, but a useless one." Participation in politics was a social norm, and failure to do so brought public shame. He goes on: "We are all involved in either the proper formulation or at least the proper review of policy." Part of Pericles' implicit argument in the speech is that participation in democracy itself provided an education for all citizens. He concludes the speech by envisioning the whole life of the city of Athens as an educational institution:

22. On the identity of Antiphon the orator and Antiphon the sophist, see Michael Gagarin, *Antiphon the Athenian: Oratory, Law, and Justice in the Age of the Sophists* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002). A recent volume on the Sophists treats the matter as settled: Joshua Billings and Christopher Moore eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). On Antiphon's role in the oligarchic coup, see Thucydides, *History* 8.54, 65, 68.

23. Plato, *Meno* 92e. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of classical Greek texts are from the editions cited in the bibliography.

"In summary, I declare our city as a whole to be the school of Hellas."[24]

How Athenian Democracy Worked: Levels of Citizen Participation

So, how exactly did the common-sense view of Meletus and Anytus and the sweeping vision of Pericles work? Part of the answer lies in the exceptionally high level of democratic participation itself. The democracy required extraordinary levels of adult male participation across the socio-economic spectrum.[25] Out of a total population of perhaps 250,000 at its height in the fifth century, 30,000 to 50,000 adult males played an active role in governing the polis.[26] While

24. Thucydides, *History* 2.40-41. Translation modified.

25. Athenian democracy was not without its limitations. Women were excluded from democratic political institutions. They could not vote in the Assembly, serve on the Council or on juries. However, recent scholarship has shown that women played significant leadership roles in the religious sphere. Given the prominence of religion in Greek life from the everyday to high politics and the military, this sphere represented a significant space for female social and political agency. See Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Matthew Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001). That Athenians were aware of and considered the ramifications of excluding women from formal politics is evident in works of theatre such as Sophocles' *Antigone*, which dramatized for male Athenian audiences the perils of ignoring female voices who might defend the moral claims of religion and family. For a reading of Antigone's character as an "exemplar of democratic free speech," see Judith Fletcher, "Sophocles' Antigone and the Democratic Voice," in *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 168–184. Slavery was also endemic to the ancient world, and Athens was no exception. State-owned slaves worked the mines in Laurion, generating significant revenue for Athens at the height of its power. Wealthy Athenians relied on slave labor to generate significant leisure for sport, philosophy, and political leadership. For a review of the extensive scholarship on the link between slavery and democracy in Athens, see Peter Hunt, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 69-76. Despite these limitations, Athenian democracy was radical in terms of the level of direct power wielded by ordinary citizens and the inclusion of poor and middle-class citizens in the decision-making machinery of the polis. Indeed, ancient Athenian democrats would have viewed the inequities of power among citizens in modern representative democracies as morally defective limitations much as we regard ancient slavery and gender inequity as marks against ancient democracy. Recent work on deliberative democracy (discussed in the final section below) has demonstrated that the radical features of Athenian direct democracy can be integrated into modern representative democracy to create a hybrid political model that addresses both moral demands. These efforts meld the popular empowerment and class inclusivity of Athenian direct democracy with the liberal freedoms and gender and racial inclusivity of modern representative democracy.

26. The classic study for Athenian population estimates is A.W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1933). Subsequent work

certainly not all citizens participated equally, the method of appointment by lot for service on the Council and the jury courts ensured that a high percentage of Athenian citizens had to take on central administrative roles or render legal judgements of constitutional significance many times in their lifetimes. If we take the thirty-year period from 461 to 431 BCE, for example, 15,000 individual Council seats had to be filled. Given the lifetime limit of two terms, a bare minimum of 7,500 different individuals were required to serve on the Council in this period. Given deaths, the entry of new citizens, and the likelihood of at least some citizens only volunteering for selection once, the number of different individuals who served at least one year-long term on the Council was likely closer to 10,000. The math is even more stunning for participation in jury service. Over the same thirty-year period, 180,000 jurors had to be selected by lot. If we assume 20,000 of an estimated 50,000 total citizens volunteered for annual service, each citizen who volunteered would have had a 30% chance of being selected that year.[27] Over thirty years, the probability was that one would serve nine times and there was almost zero chance that any citizen who wanted to serve could not do so. Some citizens who served as jurors multiple times might hear hundreds of individual cases over a lifetime.

Beyond wide distribution of experience, significant knowledge and skill could be developed in the process of participation. Active citizenship meant receiving an ongoing education in practical administration and the values, norms, history, and theory of democracy. Council members, working in small teams, drafted decrees, made daily administrative decisions, delegated responsibilities to other individuals and entities, and directed complex projects involving the logistics of a maritime empire.[28] A year of Council service was an education in carrying out the duties of an executive officer. Jury service was both legal clinic and constitutional law seminar. Jurors listened to hundreds of prosecution and defense speeches in the law courts. They heard Athenian history recounted. Speakers explained the laws, their basis in democratic values, and expounded on the process of law-making itself through the jury trials. Serving a year as a juror was equivalent to

---

has refined and revised but not fundamentally altered Gomme's estimates: see Mogens Herman Hansen, *Demography and Democracy: The Number of Athenian Citizens in the Fourth Century BC* (Herning: Systime, 1986); Ben Akrigg, *Population and Economy in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 80, 141 works with the classic figures of 250,000 for total population and between 30,000 - 50,000 citizens.

27. Only citizens 30 and over could volunteer for service, which might have reduced the pool by approximately 30%, and not all of these would have volunteered. On estimates for jury participation, see Hansen, "The Concepts of *Demos, Ekklesia*, and *Dikasterion* in Classical Athens," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 50.4 (2010): 531. See also Hansen, *Demography and Democracy*, 9-13 and "The Political Powers of the People's Court in Fourth-Century Athens," in O. Murray and S. Price eds., *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford 1990), 222-224.

28. Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 118-167.

hearing hours of public lectures in law, legal theory, history, and moral philosophy. In the Assembly, orators acted as public experts – informal professors for the Athenian citizenry.[29] In juxtaposing so many of the opposing speeches made by Athenian politicians during the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides preserves a sense of the intellectual experience of the Assembly and the discipline required to listen to and judge between skillful and often equally compelling arguments.

From this perspective, it is no stretch for Anytus to assume that every Athenian citizen would have possessed a respectable level of political and ethical know-how. The overwhelming majority of citizens certainly would have had at least a functional knowledge of good city administration and a grasp of the constitutional implications of individual legal cases. And the experience of witnessing and living with the consequences of democratic decision-making and legal judgments would have provided a moral education to rival any ethics seminar. By comparison to modern democracies, the Athenian citizenry as a whole possessed an extraordinary amount of collective political expertise with each citizen holding a degree of individual expertise. Any one citizen who lacked knowledge in a specific area could easily find another citizen with the relevant experience and know-how.[30]

As alluded to earlier, the Sophist Protagoras had actually defended and given theoretical backing to the common-sense Athenian view in his time. His whole theory of society explained that human communities could not exist at all if it were not for a general and widely dispersed human capacity for moral and political judgement and the ability to teach it to others. A crucial point in Protagoras' argument is his claim that the city takes over educating its citizens when they are done with formal schooling. "But even when they do finish with teachers, society takes over; society makes them learn its laws and live their lives according to the standards set by those laws […] and it compels people to govern, and to accept government, according to those laws."[31] Here, Protagoras treats the very act of governing according to the laws – through participation in the institutions of democracy – as an educative experience.

The Populist Critique of Sophistic Higher Education

If Sophists such as Protagoras could contribute to democratic projects and articulate so clearly the popular democratic viewpoint, why had the movement fallen into such disrepute by the end of the fifth century? The answer holds one key to understanding the direction that higher education would take in the

29. On the advisory role of elite orators, see Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: History, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

30. Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 118-167 is particularly valuable on this point.

31. Plato, *Protagoras* 326c-d.

fourth century. Plato was most perceptive in depicting Anytus' outrage at Socrates' tongue-in-cheek proposal that the Sophists could teach civic virtue. For Anytus' reaction was indicative of a conflict that had arisen between democrats and aristocrats at the end of the fifth century – one to which both Plato and Isocrates were responding when they founded their educational institutions and embarked on their respective writerly careers. As Athens had stumbled into the disastrous Sicilian campaign and the democracy was twice overthrown and restored, the popular conception of participatory civic higher education had come into direct conflict with the effects of elite Sophistic education. Average Athenians had begun to recognize that the uses to which the Sophists' aristocratic students could put their training might undermine as often as reinforce the proper functioning of Athens' deliberative democracy. If democratic institutions had been designed to educate the citizenry through participation in debate and decision-making, expert orators could also manipulate the demos through soaring rhetoric or subtle argument. And since decisions in the Assembly and judgments in the jury courts had to be rendered on the same day that measures were proposed and defendants were prosecuted, skilled orators could exploit the short-time horizon between debate and decision. As Athenians grappled with the impact of the new Sophistic arts, they struggled to keep up with the force and pace of argument, a fact which led some populist politicians to admonish Athenians for a tendency toward passive consumption of rhetoric and argument.

In the 420s, for instance, a populist such as Cleon, who was wealthy by trade but did not come from the traditional political class, inveighed in the Assembly against the Athenians' growing fondness for oratorical display and their tendency to become enraptured by the brilliance of one speaker and then the next to the detriment of thoughtful reflection on policy. The deliberative and free-thinking society Pericles had praised at the beginning of the war was drifting toward intellectual indulgence, passive consumption, and indecision as average Athenians, untrained themselves in the Sophistic arts of eristic and rhetoric, lapped up speeches like "spectators at the Sophists' displays."[32] Whiplashed one way then the next by clever arguments, Athenians could make consequential foreign policy decisions on one day that would then be reversed the next – as the infamous case of Mytilene showed.[33] Mark Munn has noted insightfully that Cleon gave his speech admonishing Athenians in 427, the same year Gorgias delivered his famous speech to widespread acclaim in the Assembly. This was a high point in tastes for soaring rhetoric, and there was no small irony in the fact that Cleon delivered his rebuke

32. Thucydides, *History* 3.38.

33. After being persuaded to exact a harsh punishment of death and slavery upon the Mytileneans who had revolted, the Athenians reversed their decision after a second round of oratorical debate on the next day and had to send a second fleet to chase after the first one that had been sent to deliver their original judgment. Thucydides, *History* 3.49.

in brilliant oratorical form.[34] Athenians of his persuasion had to compete on the same stage and so, given their "lack of studied learning" (*amathia*), leveraged appeals to old-fashioned Athenian "good sense" (*sophrosyne*), decisiveness based in a constancy of moral sentiment, and respect for the collective wisdom of the laws rather than individual brilliance. As Cleon explained,

> Generally it is the ordinary folk who make better citizens compared with their cleverer fellows. The clever ones want to appear wiser than the laws and to win in any public debate, as if this was the most important way of displaying their intellect, and the result of such behavior is usually the ruin of their city. The ordinary folk, on the other hand, with no confidence in their own intelligence, accept the superior wisdom of the laws and do not presume the polished debater's ability to dissect a speech: but as impartial judges rather than competitors they generally reach the right conclusion.[35]

Cleon opens his speech with praise for the practical intelligence of the common man and the collective wisdom of the democracy's institutions. After initially praising the people's better qualities, he proceeds to deliver a remarkable example of Athenian *parrhesia*: a brutally frank critique of their enthrallment to the Sophistic arts. Cleon's views on the specific issue up for debate (how to punish Mytilene for its rebellion) would not carry the day on this occasion, but his praise of Athenian good sense and his broader critique would prove prescient in two ways.

In the near term, the Athenians decided, against Cleon, not to execute all the men of Mytilene and enslave the women and children. Ironically, they would resist Cleon's morally suspect recommendation on this occasion in favor of a more merciful and prudent course of action. In the long term, however, they would fall prey to the bad advice of other demagogues – foremost among them the charismatic young aristocrat Alcibiades. As a member of one of Athens' most distinguished political families, he had access to all the Sophistic training he would have needed to put a sophisticated finish on innate charisma and hone natural gifts in public speaking. Plato depicts him as a member of the elite crowd surrounding Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus at the home of Callias, and Xenophon shows him in eristic debate with his guardian, Pericles.[36] Alcibiades was an early associate of Socrates as well, but little of Socrates' Athenian *sophrosyne* seems to have rubbed off on him. Instead, he indulged his worst instincts in pursuit of a decadent vision of aristocratic *arête* and reveled in his ability to enthrall the Athenian Assembly. In 415, he persuaded the Athenians to undertake a disastrous campaign to conquer Sicily, leading to the total destruction of their navy and the death of tens of thousands of seamen and hoplite citizens.

---

34. Mark Munn, "The Sophists between Aristocracy and Democracy," in Billings and Moore eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Sophists*, 84-85.

35. Thucydides, *History* 3.37.

36. Plato, *Protagoras* 316a; Xenophon, *Conversations of Socrates* 1.2.40-46.

The Sophistic Paradox

At the end of the fifth century, after two oligarchic coups and a humiliating defeat in the war with Sparta, most average Athenians were fed up with the power of the Sophistic arts to deceive them and corrupt the privileged youth of Athens, who in their view ought to be contributing to democratic prosperity, security, and greatness rather than humiliation. Athenian democrats had made a bargain with their elite compatriots. So long as they used their talents, education, and expertise for the benefit of the democracy and the edification of its citizens, elites could compete for glory on the verbal battlefield of Athenian politics.[37] But Sophistically-trained aristocrats had broken their end of the bargain. As Athenians entered the fourth century, they faced a paradox raised by their open, free-thinking society and the intellectual dynamism of their democratic institutions. Freedom of speech in political institutions (*isegoria*) and a general culture of frank speech (*parrhesia*) had encouraged the rise of the Sophistic movement itself. At its best, Sophistic culture could lead to the ennobling rhetoric of a Pericles or the robust intellectual justification of democratic rule by a Protagoras. But now, little more than a century after the beginning of their great political experiment, average Athenians could see that their culture of openness and intellectual dynamism was devolving in public into a head-spinning game of verbal competition, which diminished the quality of deliberative debate and the aggregation of collective expertise, and in private into a shadowy elite underworld of amoral and clever schemers who were constantly threatening to overthrow the democracy. This Sophistic paradox reflected a broader paradox endemic to the liberal culture of democracy. The very values of free speech and thought that made democratic rule possible could be the source of forces that undermined it.[38] Navigating this paradox and reestablishing a durable equilibrium between a liberal intellectual culture and the common democratic cause would be the work of the next century and would shape the institutionalization of higher education.

37. On the contours and unspoken rules of this bargain, see Ober, *Mass and Elite*.

38. One might argue that Socrates, whose incessant interrogation of Athenian common sense and his popular association with the Sophistic movement put him squarely in democratic crosshairs, fell victim to the anxieties created by this Sophistic paradox. For an interpretation of Socrates' death that attempts to make sense of the jury's decision to convict him in light of political and cultural threats to the democracy, see Robin Waterfield, *Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

The Search for Deliberative Distance and the Unfinished Project of Athenian Higher Education

Both Isocrates and Plato recognized that a new educational orientation was needed that would create some distance between democratic deliberation and decision making. As the story of institutionalized higher education unfolded in the fourth century, they established a critical and sometimes heated dialogue among elite critics of existing democratic practice and between those critics and the broader citizenry. The inter-elite dialogue took shape in the form of the famous battle between Isocratean rhetoric and Platonic philosophy and would play out first in the schools and in written texts that were circulated among a limited circle of highly educated elites. In this way, early institutionalized higher education established a critical distance on the pragmatic immediacy of both elite Sophistic education and popular democratic education through participation. At the same time, Isocrates and Plato both wrote to influence the democracy from a position one step removed from direct political participation. Neither Isocrates nor Plato are known to have delivered speeches in the Assembly or the courts, but their teaching and writing influenced politicians and democratic discourse especially in the latter half of the fourth century.[39] Isocrates, who had praised the Areopagus' educative role in the early days of the democracy and advocated restoration of some of its powers in 355, saw Demosthenes advance and secure reforms that restored some of those powers.[40] Plato, who had imagined a formative role for military and civic training in the *Laws*, saw Lycurgus implement a strikingly similar program in the 335 institutionalization of the *ephebeia*.[41] After Athens' defeat to Philip of Macedonia at the battle of Chaeronea in 338, Lycurgus advanced his broader vision to reform the democracy in a Platonic vocabulary that suggested Plato's thought could be compatible with a certain vision of managerial democracy.[42]

Nevertheless, throughout the fourth-century institutionalization of elite higher education and the establishment of a critical dialogue on democratic practice, the primary mode of higher education for the vast majority of Athenian

39. Takis Poulakos, ed., *Isocrates and Civic Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Paul Cartledge, *Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Mark A. Ralkowski, *Plato's Trial of Athens* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

40. Isocrates, *Areopagiticus*. Hansen dates the reintroduction of the Areopagus' powers of investigation to the period after Isocrates' publication of *Areopagitcus* in 355. See Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 290–291. Allen supports Hansen's dating with additional compelling arguments. See Danielle Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 111, 199-200.

41. Plato, *Laws* 760b-763b, 765d-766c. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, 124.

42. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, 133-140.

citizens remained the fifth-century tradition of participatory civic higher education. Though the *ephebeia* attempted to formalize aspects of civic higher education that had been implicit in the functioning of the democracy, its primary focus in the last days of the democracy was on military training.[43] It was not until after the democracy fell and the *ephebeia* evolved into an institution for the preservation and propagation of Greek culture in the successor states of Alexander the Great's empire that the remnants of participatory civic higher education would find their way into the formal organization of the Hellenistic *ephebeia*.[44] Yet, by then, lacking the necessary political context for meaningful development, the popular Athenian tradition remained a mere formal echo of what had been an emerging possibility. The Hellenistic *ephebeia* would revert to the familiar cultural pattern of most ancient higher education. It became a finishing school for the elite.[45] The project and possibilities of institutionalized civic higher education for a mass of democratic citizens, which Athenians had begun to develop in the waning days of the democracy, would remain incomplete. Western higher education would develop along the elite lines established by Isocrates and Plato for the next two millennia. Popular higher education for democracy would remain a dormant ideal until its revival in the late eighteenth century and the age of popular revolutions across the Americas and Europe.

There is of course much more to say about the critical dialogue Isocrates and Plato established with Athenian democracy in the fourth century, but this article has focused on the tradition of participatory civic higher education because it suggests that higher education for democracy needs more than the critical philosophical tradition of Plato and the elite rhetorical-ethical tradition

---

43. See Pseudo-Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 42, which describes the *ephebeia* as a process of citizenship registration and confirmation followed by active duty military training under the guardianship of *sophronistai* or "moderators," who were well-regarded citizens chosen by the cadets' fathers and elected by the people for each tribe of cadets. Active duty involved a brief cultural tour of sanctuaries, followed by weapons training and guard duty for two years in the Piraeus and on the frontiers. Certainly, based on the content of the ephebic oath, moderators must have provided mentorship in the rights and duties of citizenship, but the real civic education would have come when *ephebes* completed active duty and began their participatory education in the Assembly, the Council, and, once they reached the age of 30, the jury courts. On the history of the ephebic oath, see P. Siewart, "The Ephebic Oath in Fifth-Century Athens," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97 (1977): 102-111. Siewart observes that fifth-century authors seem to have known a version of the oath, suggesting that the pre-history of the institutionalized *ephebeia* was linked to a broader process of initiation into the rights and duties of citizenship.

44. Marrou observed that the Hellenistic *ephebeia* was "organized like a miniature city, with an assembly, elected magistrates, debates, voting and so on." For his foundational discussion of the *ephebeia*, see Marrou, *Education in Antiquity*, 105-110.

45. Marrou, *Education in Antiquity*, 109; Éric Perrin-Saminadayar, *Éducation, culture et société à Athènes: Les acteurs de la vie culturelle athénienne (229–88). Un tout petit monde. De l'archéologie à l'histoire* (Paris: De Boccard, 2007), 51-52, 82-83.

of Isocrates. Addressing the populist challenge today requires drawing equally on the popular Athenian conception of participatory civic higher education. In essence, it means finishing the incomplete project of Athenian higher education for democracy.

Higher Education for Democracy Today: Four Recommendations Inspired by the Athenian Example and Contemporary Practice

The Athenian example suggests four areas for revitalizing higher education for democracy today. First, in countries such as the United States where higher education has become unaffordable and ranking systems incentivize low admission rates, both private and public institutions should prioritize affordability and accessibility. In countries where tuition remains affordable and access is more open, advocates of higher education for democracy must fight to keep tuition low by resisting corporatization and by forcefully defending the civic mission of higher education.[46] Given the great diversity of university systems and models in the United States and other Western democracies, a commitment to principles of affordability and accessibility is more important than one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions. Openness to different models for achieving the same end can encourage innovation. Systems that already have the benefit of strong public funding may prioritize serving more students. Other systems that face public skepticism about the cost of higher education can begin rebuilding trust by simplifying financial aid so that students understand their actual costs, which are often lower than published tuition.[47] Though limited in scalability, models that rely on endowments and work-to-study programs in order to provide a free university education may also be part of affordability solutions.[48] Specific solutions may vary, but the singular shift required is a reorientation

46. For relevant critiques of corporatization in U.S. higher education and its impact on the civic mission, see Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Robert J. Soucy, *A Critique of the Customer Model of Higher Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018); Howard Karger and David Stoesz, *Failing Universities: The Rise of Corporatization and the Decline of Higher Education* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

47. A recent report by Yale University noted that a majority of the public perceives the cost of university to be higher than what most students actually pay since only wealthier students pay the full advertised tuition at many American universities. *Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, April 10, 2026), 10, https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2026-04/Report-of-the-Committee-on-Trust-in-Higher-Education.pdf.

48. See, for example, Berea College in the U.S. state of Kentucky. *A Model for Working and Learning in Liberal Arts Colleges of the Future* (Berea, KY: Berea College, 2022), https://legacy.berea.edu/president/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/12/2022-10-25-BC-Whitepaper.pdf.

around a public service mentality that eliminates cost as the primary determinant of access and prioritizes civic education as a core mission of higher education. For higher education to serve democracy, all citizens must be able to afford a high-quality university education that does not constrain their intellectual freedom through economic fear and the burden of high long-term debt. The Athenian example is illustrative. For ancient Athenians, higher education emerged to meet the demands of democratic governance and evolved to address the internal challenges that threatened to undermine democracy. By the end of their democratic experiment, Athenians had recognized the urgent need to extend a formal institutional higher education to all citizens without exception, not just those who could afford it.

Second, in the spirit of public service, higher education must find more ways to engage directly with the public to create tangible value for democratic society. Supporting and cultivating the deliberative democracy movement that has taken root in some Western democracies is a promising avenue for productive engagement.[49] Deliberative democracy responds to a core discontent of modern representative democracy – citizen disengagement – by involving regular citizens in deliberative political processes that directly shape policy, elections, and governance.[50] Deliberative democracy traces its modern theoretical roots to the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas and others such as Joshua Cohen as well as work by Peter Dienel on planning cells in Germany and Ned Crosby on citizen panels (also called citizen juries) in the United States.[51] The movement has also

---

49. On the deliberative democracy movement, see David M. Farrell and Jane Suiter, *Reimagining Democracy: Lessons in Deliberative Democracy from the Irish Front Line* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Patrick Fournier, Henk van der Kolk, R. Kenneth Carty, André Blais, and Jonathan Rose eds., *When Citizens Decide: Lessons from Citizens Assemblies on Electoral Reform* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

50. Deliberative democracy – as distinct from representative democracy – can be defined as a political process whereby free and equal citizens are able to engage in informed deliberation, expressing views and preferences with adequate information, time, and opportunity, in order to reach mutually agreeable decisions that are collectively binding. The movement emerged in response to a core discontent of contemporary representative democracy: disengaged citizens increasingly alienated from political institutions dominated by elites who govern for special interests rather than in the public interest. Limited citizen engagement through infrequent elections further reinforces elite domination, which contributes to a rising trust gap between elites and ordinary citizens. Disengaged citizens, in turn, become low-information voters susceptible to populist demagoguery and political polarization. See Farrell and Suiter, *Reimagining Democracy*, 12-13; Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); James Bohman and William Rehg, *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

51. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), originally published as *Strukturwandel der*

drawn inspiration from ancient Athenian democracy, most notably in the use of sortition to constitute mini-publics.[52] As the movement has evolved, recent work has focused on citizen assemblies. The work of political scientists David Farrell and Jane Suiter to cultivate deliberative democracy through citizen assemblies in Ireland offers a compelling contemporary model of participatory civic higher education. Their project demonstrated that academics can play a leading role in designing and facilitating successful democratic processes and outcomes. In Irish citizen assemblies and the constitutional convention of the 2010s, regular citizens, academic experts, and elite politicians came together in an inclusive process that yielded real policy outcomes with broad public support.[53] This recent Irish example shows that modern democracies do not have to make a false choice between government by "out-of-touch" elites and government by "uninformed" common citizens – especially when higher education plays a constructive role in empowering regular citizens with the requisite knowledge, time, and space to deliberate. The deliberative democracy movement also suggests that modern representative democracies can successfully integrate features of direct democracy, building a hybrid twenty-first-century model that gives citizens more direct power, in line with the Athenian model, while addressing ancient democracy's limitations through modern commitments to gender and racial equality.

Third, higher education can play a leading role in facilitating democratic renewal, not only through specialized work by political scientists as in the Irish case, but also through teaching that educates students in the broader values and culture necessary to sustain democracy. Such teaching can include introducing students to concepts and principles such as deliberative democracy as well as other theoretical and disciplinary perspectives on democracy and the practices that have historically sustained it. From a curricular standpoint, general education requirements should include courses in civic engagement that connect democratic theory with practice outside the classroom. Experiential learning or internships in civic participation should be offered alongside career internships.[54] Community colleges may be well-positioned to offer continuing

---

Öffentlichkeit (1962) and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984–1987); Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, ed. Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 17-34; Peter Dienel, *Die Plannungszelle – Der Bürger Plant seine Umwelt – Eine Alternative zur Establishment-Demokratie* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1977); Ned Crosby, Janet M. Kelly, and Paul Schaefer, "Citizen Panels: A New Approach to Citizen Participation," *Public Administration Review* 46.2 (1986): 170-178.

52. David Farrell and Peter Stone, "Sortition and Mini-Publics: A Different Kind of Representation" in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Representation in Liberal Democracies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 228-246.

53. Farrell and Suiter, *Reimagining Democracy*, 19-32.

54. For example, Longwood University in the U.S. state of Virginia offers a civic experiential learning course that complements the general civic education curriculum. The

civic education beyond college to working adults.[55] For such efforts to succeed, colleges and universities must foster what The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has called a "whole-campus commitment to democratic citizenship."[56] Promising work is already underway on many campuses, but as the Athenian example suggests, long-term success will require elevating a broadly inclusive, participatory dimension of civic higher education and bringing it into critical dialogue with received models of elite civic higher education.

Indeed, higher education today must become a staunch defender of a fundamental democratic principle that elite classical traditions leave out. The right to self-determination, which ultimately means political power, does not depend on one's educational qualifications. When democratic elections generate results that threaten the independence of higher education and democratic institutions themselves, a robust commitment to democracy requires assessing election results as empirical feedback. The populist challenge is a wakeup call to revive the unfinished Athenian project of higher education for democracy as a means of furthering the core democratic principle of self-determination. Only by reviving this project can higher education defend its own intellectual freedoms and invite more people into the great conversation of higher education and democracy that began with the Greeks.

Bibliography

Abbott, A. Hungarian Government Takes Control of Research Institutes Despite Outcry. *Nature*. July 8, 2019. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02107-4.

Aggeler, M. Trust in US Institutions Has 'Never Been Lower' – Here's Why That Matters. *The Guardian*. June 11, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/jun/11/trust-us-institutions.

Akrigg, B. *Population and Economy in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Allen, D. *Why Plato Wrote*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

American Academy of Arts and Sciences. *Preparing Students for Civic Life: A Guide for Higher Education Leaders*. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025. https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2025_preparing-students-for-civic-life.pdf.

"Brock Experience" takes students into the field to grapple with a politically contentious issue in its local context. See American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Preparing Students for Civic Life: A Guide for Higher Education Leaders* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025), 11-12, https://www.amacad.org/sites/ default/files/publication/downloads/2025_preparing-students-for-civic-life.pdf.

55. The Maricopa County Community College District in the U.S. state of Arizona developed a free "Creating Community" workforce development tool that organizations have used to provide working adults with continuing education on the value and skills of democratic citizenship. See American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Preparing Students for Civic Life*, 15-16.

56. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Preparing Students for Civic Life*, 3.

Aristotle. *The Athenian Constitution*. Translated by P. J. Rhodes. London: Penguin Classics, 1984.

AStA University of Göttingen. *Resolutely Countering Attacks on the Freedom of Research and Teaching.* February 12, 2025. https://asta.uni-goettingen.de/en/2025/02/12/ resolutely-countering-attacks-on-the-freedom-of-research-and-teaching/.

Ballotpedia. *Ballotpedia's Polling Index: Congressional Approval Rating.* Updated March 5, 2026. https://ballotpedia.org/Ballotpedia%27s_Polling_Index:_Congressional_approval_rating.

Berea College. *A Model for Working and Learning in Liberal Arts Colleges of the Future*. Berea, KY: Berea College, 2022. https://legacy.berea.edu/president/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/12/2022-10-25-BC-Whitepaper.pdf.

Beck, F. A. G. *Greek Education: 450–350 B.C.* London: Methuen, 1964.

Billings, J., and C. Moore, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Sophists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Bohman, J., and W. Rehg. *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

Cartledge, P. *Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Cohen, J. *Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy*. In The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State, edited by A. Hamlin and P. Pettit, 17–34. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Committee on Trust in Higher Education. *Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University, April 10, 2026. https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2026-04/Report-of-the-Committee-on-Trust-in-Higher-Education.pdf.

Connelly, J. B. *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Crosby, N., J. M. Kelly, and P. Schaefer. Citizen Panels: A New Approach to Citizen Participation. *Public Administration Review* 46, no. 2 (1986): 170–178.

Daniels, R. J. *What Universities Owe Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

Dewey, J. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

Dienel, P. *Die Planungszelle – Der Bürger plant seine Umwelt – Eine Alternative zur Establishment-Demokratie*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1977.

Dillon, M. *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Dixon, E. What Could the Rise of the AfD Mean for German Universities. *Times Higher Education*. February 21, 2025. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/what-could-rise-afd-mean-german-universities.

Dover, K. J. *Introduction to Aristotle: The Athenian Constitution*. Loeb Classical Library 285. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Douglass, F. At the Dedication of the Manassas Industrial School (1894). In *Frederick Douglass: Speeches & Writings, 1881–1895*, edited by P. S. Foner, 872–878. New York: Library of America, 1992.

Farrell, D. M., and J. Suiter. *Reimagining Democracy: Lessons in Deliberative Democracy from the Irish Front Line*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Farrell, D. M., and P. Stone. *Sortition and Mini-Publics: A Different Kind of Representation*. In The Oxford Handbook of Political Representation in Liberal Democracies, edited by D. M. Farrell, J. Suiter, and C. Landwehr, 228–246. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Fletcher, J. *Sophocles' Antigone and the Democratic Voice*. In Interrogating Antigone in

Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism, edited by S. E. Wilmer and A. Žukauskaitė, 168–184. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Forrest, W. G. *The Emergence of Greek Democracy, 800–400 BC*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1966.

Fournier, P., H. van der Kolk, R. K. Carty, A. Blais, and J. Rose, eds. *When Citizens Decide: Lessons from Citizens Assemblies on Electoral Reform*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Friend, J. L. *The Athenian Ephebeia in the Fourth Century BCE*. Brill Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy 13. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Gagarin, M. *Antiphon the Athenian: Oratory, Law, and Justice in the Age of the Sophists*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

Gomme, A. W. *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1933.

Gutman, A., and D. Thompson. *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Habeshian, S. *College Costs the Biggest Barrier for Most Americans*, Survey Finds. *Axios*. April 17, 2024.

Habermas, J. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by T. Burger with the assistance of F. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.

———. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Translated by T. McCarthy. 2 vols. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984–1987.

Hansen, M. H. *Demography and Democracy: The Number of Athenian Citizens in the Fourth Century BC*. Herning: Systime, 1986.

———. The Concepts of Demos, Ekklesia, and Dikasterion in Classical Athens" *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 50, no. 4 (2010): 499–536.

———. *The Political Powers of the People's Court in Fourth-Century Athens.* In The Greek City from Homer to Alexander, edited by O. Murray and S. Price, 215–243. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

———. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

Harvard Committee on General Education. *General Education in a Free Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945.

Henderson, T. R. *The Springtime of the People: The Athenian Ephebeia and Citizen Training from Lykourgos to Augustus*. Brill's Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy 15. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Ignatieff, M. *An Authoritarian Came for My University. His Objective Was Clear*. The Washington Post. June 2, 2025. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/06/02/trump-harvard-attack-viktor-orban-ceu-hungary/.

Isocrates. *Areopagiticus*. Translated by G. Norlin. *Isocrates*, vol. 1. Loeb Classical Library 229. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928.

Jack, A. A. *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.

Jaeger, W. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Vol. 1: *Archaic Greece, the Mind of Athens*. Translated by G. Highet. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1945.

Jefferson, T. A *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* (1779). In The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 2, 1777–1780, edited by J. P. Boyd, 526–535. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950.

Jouvenal, J. *Trump Officials Accused of Defying 1 in 3 Judges Who Ruled Against Him*. The

Washington Post. July 21, 2025.
Kaiser Family Foundation. *Kaiser Family Foundation/CNN Working-Class Whites Poll*. September 23, 2016. https://www.kff.org/other-health/kaiser-family-foundationcnn-working-class-whites-poll-old-197757/.
Karger, H., and D. Stoesz. *Failing Universities: The Rise of Corporatization and the Decline of Higher Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.
Kimball, B. *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1986.
Markovits, D. *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.
Marrou, H.-I. *A History of Education in Antiquity*. Translated by G. Lamb. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956.
McNair, K. *Just 22% of Americans Say College Is Worth It if You Have to Take Out Student Loans.* CNBC. May 23, 2024.
Morton, J. *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021.
Munn, M. *The Sophists between Aristocracy and Democracy*. In The Cambridge Companion to the Sophists, edited by J. Billings and C. Moore, 69–97. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
Nietzel, M. T. *Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Sinks to a New Low*. Forbes. July 11, 2023.
Norlin, G. *General Introduction to Isocrates*. Vol. 1. Loeb Classical Library 209. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928.
Nussbaum, M. C. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
Ober, J. *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
———. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: History, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
———. *The Debate over Civic Education in Classical Athens*. In Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity, edited by Y. L. Too, 175–207. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
Papanikos, G. The Five Ancient Criteria of Democracy: The Apotheosis of Equality. *Athens Journal of Humanities and Arts* 9, no. 2 (2022): 105–120.
PEN America. *By the Numbers: The Trump Administration's Assault on Universities*. February 2025. https://pen.org/by-the-numbers-the-trump-administrations-assault-on-universities/.
Perrin-Saminadayar, É. *Éducation, culture et société à Athènes: Les acteurs de la vie culturelle athénienne (229–88). Un tout petit monde. De l'archéologie à l'histoire*. Paris: De Boccard, 2007.
Pew Research Center. *Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics*. September 19, 2023.
———. *7 Facts about Americans' Views of Money in Politics*. October 23, 2023.
Plato. *The Laws*. Translated by T. L. Pangle. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
———. *Protagoras and Meno*. Translated by A. Beresford. London: Penguin Classics, 2005.
Poulakos, T., ed. *Isocrates and Civic Education*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.
Pseudo-Xenophon. *The Constitution of the Athenians*. In *Xenophon: Scripta Minora*. Translated by E. C. Marchant and G. W. Bowersock, 474–507. Loeb Classical Library 183. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925.
Ralkowski, M. A. *Plato's Trial of Athens*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
Saad, L. Perceived Importance of College Hits New Low. *Gallup*. September 11, 2025.
Scholars at Risk. *Free to Think 2025: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring*

Project. New York: Scholars at Risk, 2025. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2025/.

Schrecker, E. *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

Siewert, P. The Ephebic Oath in Fifth-Century Athens. *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97 (1977): 102–111.

Soucy, R. J. *A Critique of the Customer Model of Higher Education*. New York: Peter Lang, 2018.

Stephens, N., and S. Townsend. *The Unseen Reason Working-Class Students Drop Out from College*. The College Puzzle (blog). March 5, 2019. https://collegepuzzle.stanford.edu/the-unseen-reason-working-class-students-drop-out-from-college/.

Thelin, W. How the American Working Class Views the 'Working Class.' *Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2019): 53.

Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by M. Hammond. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

U.S. House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol. *Final Report*. Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2022.

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. *Undermining Constitutional Limits: The Trump Administration's Unlawful Seizure of Congressional Powers, Defiance of Court Orders, and Intimidation Campaign*. August 2025.

Waterfield, R. *Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

———. *Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009.

Zoltán, K. Hungarian Academy of Sciences Stripped of Its Research Network. *Index*. July 2, 2019. https://index.hu/english/2019/07/02/hungarian_academy_of_sciences_research_network_taken_away_academic_freedom_ministry_of_innovation_and_technology/.