Types of Government in Ancient Greece

Monarchy

In a *monarchy* government, the power to make decisions is in the hands of one person, usually called a king or a queen. The word *monarchy* comes from the Greek root words *monos* (which means “one”) and *arkhein* (which means “rule”).

From about 2000 B.C.E. to 800 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by monarchs—usually kings (the Greeks did not allow women to have power). At first, the Greek kings were chosen by the people of the city-state. When a king died, another leader was selected to take his place. Over time, however, kings demanded that, after their death, their power be passed on to their children—usually to the oldest son. This is how monarchy governments continued to operate, and it is how most monarchies remaining today operate.

The kings of ancient Greece ruled by having total power to do the following:

- Make laws and set taxes
- Act as judges
- Oversee religious ceremonies
- Lead the army during wars
- Decide punishments for people who disobeyed the laws or didn’t pay taxes

Most kings had councils of advisors who helped them make decisions. Usually these advisors were educated, wealthy men from the city-state. Over time, these advisors decided that *they* should have more power than the king. They realized that they had strength in their numbers: they outnumbered the king. Eventually, these advisors overthrew the monarchy and took the power for themselves. By 800 B.C.E., most of the Greek city-states were no longer ruled by kings.
Types of Government in Ancient Greece

Oligarchy

In an *oligarchy* government, the power to make decisions is in the hands of two to three rich men, usually called oligarchs or kings. The word *oligarchy* comes from the Greek root words *oligos* (which means “few”) and *arkhein* (which means “rule”).

Between about 800 B.C.E. and 650 B.C.E., most Greek city-states were ruled by a small group of men. These men were called oligarchs, and they often ruled like kings who shared power together.

The oligarchs of ancient Greece used their power to make sure they could:
- Spend their days hunting or taking part in chariot races
- Host and attend parties

The oligarchs of ancient Greece also used their power to ignore the needs of the people. They ruled by:
- Passing laws that made the rich people richer
- Increasing taxes for poor people
- Using the army to force the people to obey their laws

Over time, hatred for the oligarchs grew. Eventually, the poor people turned to other leaders who promised to improve their lives. Typically, these new leaders were generals in the army who would use their soldiers to throw the oligarchs out of power. By 650 B.C.E., a stable oligarchy ruled only one city-state: Sparta, which was ruled by two kings who shared power.
Types of Government in Ancient Greece

Tyranny

In a *tyranny* government, the power to make decisions is in the hands of one person, usually called a tyrant or dictator, who has taken control illegally. The word *tyranny* comes from the Greek root word *tyrannos* (which means “supreme power”). Tyrants became known for holding power through cruel and unfair methods.

From about 650 B.C.E. to 500 B.C.E., people in some Greek city-states looked to men who claimed that they wanted to overthrow kings or oligarchs and to make life better for the people. These men became tyrants because they just took over power—usually throwing out the current leader with violence.

Even though they both have only one person who rules, a tyranny is different from a monarchy. Tyrants rule by *taking over power*. They are not given the right to have power (unlike a king who takes power because his father was also king). Most tyrants tried to scare the people into accepting their power. But there were several tyrants who actually did good things for the people. These tyrants ruled by helping the people:

- They promised the people more rights
- They lowered taxes
- They used their army to protect the people

Even though some tyrants used their power for good, there were always more cruel and harsh tyrants than good ones. This eventually caused the people in many city-states to revolt and use their strength in numbers to throw the tyrant out of power. By 500 B.C.E., a new form of government was created in the city-state of Athens. This type of government, called *democracy*, gave all of the power to the people. It would soon become one of the most popular and longest-lasting types of government—not only in Greece, but in the whole world.
Types of Government in Ancient Greece

Democracy

In a democracy government, the power to make decisions is in the hands of all of the people, who are called citizens. The word democracy comes from the Greek root words demos (which means “people”) and kratos (which means “power”).

Around 500 B.C.E., the people of the city-state of Athens became the first in Greece to try ruling themselves. This type of government lasted into the year 400 B.C.E. and continues in modern times—not only in Greece, but in countries all over the world.

In a democracy government, the people rule by voting. In ancient Athens, they had a direct democracy, which meant that the people ruled by:

- Every citizen could propose a new law
- Every citizen could vote on every law
- Every citizen was part of the jury who decided punishments

Ancient Greek democracy was different from democracy governments today. For example, in the United States, we have a representative democracy. In this type of government, people vote for representatives who then vote on laws for the people (these people are the members of Congress and the President in Washington D.C.).

Not all Greeks thought that democracy was a good idea. Sometimes people could “bribe” citizens to vote for a bad law. Also, it was possible for one citizen who secretly wanted extra power for himself to convince his friends to vote “yes” only for his ideas. Finally, there were some of the rich and educated citizens who thought that the poor people were too “dumb” to make their own decisions; these people thought that power should stay with the richest people in the city-state.