The ancient Greeks inhabited more than 1,000 city-states throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions. During the classical period (roughly, 500-300 BCE), a substantial portion of these city-states were governed by democracies (literally, “rule by the people”), whose defining characteristic was equality among and meaningful political participation by all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic status. In this course, we will conduct an in-depth exploration of this historically distinctive form of government, with particular attention to the best-known case: the city-state of Athens, which was governed democratically, with only two short interruptions, from 508 to 322 BCE.

Broadly speaking, this course comprises four parts. In the first, we will familiarize ourselves with the concept of democracy, as well as the historical context in which democracy first emerged. In part two, we will explore the history of democracy at Athens, with an emphasis on the development and functioning of democratic institutions, democratic ideology, and the exploitation by democracies of women, slaves, and foreigners. In part three, we will consider democracies outside Athens, as well as non-democratic regime types, such as oligarchy, tyranny, and the “Lycurgan” constitution at Sparta. In part four, we will turn our attention to the modern era. More specifically, we will compare Greek democracies to subsequent institutions that have been described as democratic (e.g., New England town hall meetings, the United States of America, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo); examine the impact of Greek democracy on the development of modern political thought; and use our knowledge of Greek political history to reflect on issues of contemporary importance, such as the relationship between democracy per se and other normative goals that we often conflate with democracy (e.g., liberty, equality, and toleration).

Some key questions that we will discuss include the following: What are the essential features of Greek democracy? Why did the Greeks believe that voting was undemocratic? To what extent did ancient democracy rely on the exploitation of slaves, women, and foreigners? How and why did Greek democracy differ from modern democracy? Is Greek democracy democratic, as we currently understand the term? Is modern democracy democratic, as ancient Greeks understood the term?