Myth-busting the Ancient Greece Government

Myth #1:
“Ancient Greece only had one form of government.”

Myth #2:
“The first time the world ever saw ‘democracy’ was with the Athenians.”

Students prove or “bust” 6 myths about government in Ancient Greece!

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Instructions:

1.) In this activity, students will explore 6 “myths” about the ancient Greek government, then will seek to either prove or “bust” each myth with evidence from research!

2.) Make copies of the student “myth” worksheets.

3.) Post the 6 myth sources around the classroom (or organize into 6 different stations).

4.) Explain to students that they are trying to either prove or debunk the 6 myths on this worksheet. Some will be true while some myths must be “busted.” For each myth, students need to include evidence to prove their statement. Students will need to investigate the resources around the room (or at each station) to solve each myth.

5.) The myth sources do not correspond with the correct myth on their worksheet. I have done this to provide an added challenge to students. Explain to students that they will need to read through their source to figure out what myth it goes with. I have found this way works a lot better too – it provides a much greater investigative quality to the activity.

6.) Be creative with how you move through the activity! If you students work better in groups – use groups! If they work well individually, let them go at it alone! Want to try a “free for all” where all students roam the room freely? Great! Want to time each “station” then have students rotate after 7–8 minutes? Great! These options allow you to easily fit the needs of your students!
Myth-busting the...

Ancient Greek Government

**Directions:** Below there are several “myths” regarding government in Ancient Greece. As you navigate throughout the room and analyze the information at each station, you must determine the validity of each myth below. Is the myth actually “fact” or can you “bust” the myth? Then, provide details from the station to verify and prove your statement!

**MYTH #1:**

“Ancient Greece only had one form of government.”

**This myth is...**

- [ ] Fact!
- [ ] Busted!

What is your proof to verify your statement?

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**MYTH #2:**

“The first time the world ever saw ‘democracy’ was with the Athenians.”

**This myth is...**

- [ ] Fact!
- [ ] Busted!

What is your proof to verify your statement?

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Name____________________________________________________________________________________________ Period ________
**MYTH #3:**

“Tyrants could be kind rulers.”

This myth is...

- [ ] Fact!
- [x] Busted!

What is your proof to verify your statement?

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**MYTH #4:**

“To Athenians, democracy only meant ‘the right to vote.’”

This myth is...

- [ ] Fact!
- [x] Busted!

What is your proof to verify your statement?

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**MYTH #5:**

“The Spartan government was a strict oligarchy that gave people no say in their government.”

This myth is...

- [ ] Fact!
- [x] Busted!

What is your proof to verify your statement?

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**MYTH #6:**

“The Greek philosopher Aristotle actually thought an oligarchy to be the best form of government.”

This myth is...

- [ ] Fact!
- [x] Busted!

What is your proof to verify your statement?

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Sparta was less interested than Athens in following the will of the people. The people were supposed to be working for the good of the state. However, just as Athens experimented with a novel form of government, Sparta's system was also unusual. Originally, monarchs ruled Sparta, but over time, Sparta hybridized its government:

- The kings remained, but there were 2 of them at a time so one could go to war while one stayed home and cared for the people and the city-state
- There were also 5 annually-elected ephors who shared power with the Kings
- The ephors did not have to kneel down before the Kings of Sparta and were held in high esteem by the citizens since they kept a watchful eye on the Kings
- An assembly of the people (all men over age 30) approved laws
When we think of tyrants, we think of oppressive rulers who ignore the rights of the people. In ancient Greece, tyrants could be benevolent (kind-hearted) and were often supported by the people (although usually not the aristocrats). However, a tyrant did not gain supreme power by constitutional means; nor was he the hereditary monarch. Tyrants seized power largely by winning the support of the people. Therefore, in order to win (and keep) the support of the people, tyrants were often kind to the populace. Tyrants gave gifts of money and property, and they made promises to ordinary Greeks in order to keep their support!
The great philosopher Plato was the first to compare a “democracy”, which is the system of "rule by the people", to the alternative systems of monarchy, oligarchy and tyranny. However, even though the Greeks were the first to describe the process, it was the ancient Indians who are believed to have established the first democracies. The Indians created democracies before the 6th century BCE while Athens is believed to have created the system around the 5th century BCE.

While virtually all citizens were allowed to participate in the democracy, citizens did not include women, children, slaves, or “aliens” (or those who were from another polis). This means that the majority were excluded from the democratic process.
Myth-busting the...

Ancient Greek Government

The very important Greek philosopher Aristotle distinguished between good and bad forms of ruling, whether it was rule by one (monarchy), a few (oligarchy or aristocracy), or many (democracy).

The types of government relevant to ancient Greece are listed as three: Monarchy, Oligarchy (generally synonymous with rule by the aristocracy), and Democracy. Aristotle divided each into good and bad forms. Democracy in its extreme form is mob rule. Tyrants are a type of monarch, except they have their own self-serving interests. Tyrants, Aristotle claimed, would only “look out for themselves and ignore the polis.” To Aristotle, oligarchy was the best. Why? Because it was rule by the wealthy. Since the wealthiest “had the most to lose”, Aristotle believed they would do everything they could to protect the polis. On the contrary, a mob would “not know what to do” when given so much power.
In ancient times, the area that we call Greece was many independent, self-governing city-states. The technical, much-used term for these city-states is **poleis** (the plural of **polis**). We are very familiar with the governments of the 2 leading poleis, Athens and Sparta, however each polis had a unique government.

Most poleis began in Greece as monarchies and eventually transitioned to oligarchies (rule by a few members of the elite). Some then transformed into tyrannic forms of government and even a few evolved into democracies. Athens was famous for its democracy while Sparta was known for its oligarchy. City-states like Argos were known for their tyrannic form of government, however it eventually adopted democracy. Corinth had a monarchy government that eventually evolved into a harsh tyranny.

Despite different governments, many poleis joined together voluntarily for protection against the Persians. Athens served as the head of the Delian League while the Spartans led the rival Peloponnesian League.
Myth-busting the...

Ancient Greek Government

Democracy means “rule by the people.” Today, we view that to mean that the people choose their political leaders through voting in elections. The classical Athenians might not have even recognized “voting” as a right in their democracy.

In fact, the right to vote was very restricted in Athens. The vast majority of people were not given this right. Additionally, Athenian democracy included appointment of citizens to office and active participation in the running of the country.

In Athens, though, “voting” was a very small part of what it meant to have a democracy. Citizens didn't just elect their favorites to represent them. They sat on court cases in very large numbers, perhaps as high as 1500 and as low as 201. The Assembly, which held 6,000 citizens, required Athenians to be actively involved in the issues affecting the community. Orators used speeches and meetings to persuade others to become involved in serious matters or to gain support on certain issues. In fact, a citizen in Athens who was not actively involved in their community or did not serve as an orator was branded as an “idiotai” - the root of the word “idiot!”
**Myth-busting the...**

**Ancient Greek Government**

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**MYTH #1:**

“Ancient Greece only had one form of government.”

- This myth is...  
  -Fact!  
  -Busted!

**What is your proof to verify your statement?**

**MYTH E:** Athens’ government was a democracy, where the people ruled, while Sparta had an oligarchy, or a government with a few rulers.

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**MYTH #2:**

“The first time the world ever saw ‘democracy’ was with the Athenians.”

- This myth is...  
  -Fact!  
  -Busted!

**What is your proof to verify your statement?**

**MYTH C:** While most believe it was Athens who had democracy first, historians believe the ancient Indians were actually the first to have a democracy.
<table>
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<td><strong>MYTH B: While most think of tyrants as mean or harsh rules, they often gave money and gifts to the people in order to gain their support.</strong></td>
<td><strong>MYTH F: Voting was a small part of the Athenian democracy. Citizens served on juries for court cases, read speeches, and participated in the Assembly.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>MYTH A: While their leadership was under an oligarchy and was ruled by the elite, people did get a say in the assembly. All male citizens over 30 years old served in the assembly.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>MYTH D: Aristotle did not like a monarchy; he actually preferred an oligarchy. He thought the wealthy had the most to lose, so it was best if they ruled.</strong></td>
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