My project this summer, an investigation both of citizen participation in direct democracy in ancient Athens and a study of the town meeting form of government in contemporary Maine, was inspired by the belief that studying the demokratia (from the Greek demos, meaning “the people” or citizens in common, and kratos, power) of the classical Athenians can offer us lessons for how we think about democracy, nationally and locally, in the modern era. Some of the similarities between the two are striking. A respect for law, open discourse, notions of political freedom and equality, and the extension of political citizenship to the lowest socioeconomic classes of society are familiar to us. Yet, our modern system most radically differs from the ancient formula in the fact that government at the federal, state, and most local levels is representative.

In contrast, Athens developed an elaborate set of institutions that led to the direct participation of a broad and socioeconomically diverse selection of the population in deliberative bodies that allowed citizens as a group to not only ratify fixed legislative proposals (as in the modern referendum) but to develop, amend, and debate them in a public setting. According to democratic ideology, a landless thete or wage-laborer in the city had an equal opportunity to attend, vote, and speak in the assembly as did the wealthiest landowners.

A large part of my summer research, which I hope to convert into an honors project in the fall, has been spent with secondary scholarship to discover whether the ideology and theory of democracy that we find in extant classical texts, such as the Aristotelian Athenian Constitution, the Old Oligarch’s Constitution of the Athenians, and the speeches of the political orators holds up to the reality of politics as historically practiced in Athens. While the references in extant classical literature to subjects such as assembly attendance rates, socioeconomic composition of deliberative bodies, and demographics are relatively slim, modern studies in archaeology, epigraphy, and the introduction of modern social science modeling into the field of Classics proved helpful on those subjects. Works that I studied this summer, such as Josiah Ober’s Mass and Elite and Democracy and Knowledge, P.J. Rhodes’ works on the Athenian Council of 500, as well as M.H. Hansen’s numerous institutional analyses of Athenian government offer a picture of a democratic Athens that truly did promote broad and consistent geographic and socioeconomic participation within political institutions.

Rather than contrast these institutions with the U.S. federal government, which has a similar competence as the Athenian assembly, ruling on taxation, foreign policy, and public finance, but with a widely different structure, I decided to look closer to home. Maine’s town meeting system is a form of government where the town’s citizens, at one scheduled meeting per year, introduce, debate, and ratify new ordinances. The residents, at a face-to-face meeting, serve as a legislature in a similar way to the Athenian assembly, even if the topics they discuss are of a different scale than war and peace. Scientifically studying each of the over 300 towns that still use the system was not an option, so I opted for a more focused approach, studying the scholarship and history behind meetings, and focusing on specific towns, such as ones with publicly available records over the last decade. Although the number of towns with summer meetings was admittedly small, those that I was able to attend offered qualitative perspectives on how direct democracy works in practice.

Joining the topics together provided insights in multiple ways, but two were most striking to me. The first was to use the (better documented) development of the town-meeting in New England towns to shed light on the poorly documented genesis of democracy in Athens, recognizing that certain social conditions in the Athenian sub-localities of demes may not have been entirely different from those that surrounded participatory town government in the 1700’s. The second was to think about the town meeting, like the Athenian assembly, as an educative event, serving to promote both the spread of information, as well as to promote and develop certain habits of democratic discourse in the modern day. The work that I began this summer to understand the ways in which citizens are educated and acculturated into their roles as political actors, especially in classical Athens, will be incredibly useful in the honors project on the subject that I hope to continue in the fall.

I’d like to thank my advisor, Professor Robert Sobak of Classics for his guidance and direction during our meetings this summer. The subject of direct democracy, both modern and ancient, is an immense topic, and both his perspective on the subject and his constructive criticism of my work were invaluable to me.

Faculty Mentor: Robert Sobak
Funded by the Stahl Summer Research Fellowship