How democracy worked

In a modern democracy, everybody has a say. But in Athens, only male citizens could vote. Women, foreigners and slaves were excluded. New laws and policies were drawn up by the 500 elected members of the Council. These were then debated in the Assembly, which met every ten days. At least 6000 citizens had to be present for a meeting to begin. If numbers were low, people were dragged in off the streets!

Greek society

In Athens, society was divided into groups – citizens, metics and slaves. Citizens, men with Athenian parents, had the most rights and could vote and speak in the law courts. Metics were men born outside the city. They had no say in the government. Most slaves were prisoners of war. They had no rights at all. Women were treated as non-citizens, with no right to express opinions of their own.

Ostracism

To remove corrupt or unpopular politicians, the Greeks used a system called ostracism. Each year citizens in the Assembly wrote the names of bad politicians on broken pieces of pottery called ostraka. If more than 6000 votes were cast against someone, he was banished for ten years. We still use the word ostracize to mean to leave out or exclude someone.