Elitist Democracy and Democratic Advantage in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*

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**Abstract.** Thucydides criticizes Athenian democracy harshly, but he presents its advantages alongside its flaws. I argue that Thucydides’s appreciation for Pericles’s successful leadership encapsulates a recognition of a democratic advantage; Pericles was ‘a man of Athens’ - his success is owed Athenian democracy and was unlikely in a non-democratic regime. Two aspects of Pericles’s leadership highlight the democratic advantage: his unique military strategy and the way his reputation contributed to his election. Those, in turn, depend on features of Athenian democracy. First, novel policies or ones that require restraint are made possible by discussion before decision-making and the educational effect of democratic participation; Second Pericles’s reelection demonstrates the success of elitist democracy as meritocracy, the theory offered in the funeral oration. The discussion of these advantages does not settle the question of regime type, but it allows us to reach a different conclusion from that of Thucydides on the basis of his own data, provides insights into Thucydides’s scientific method and casts a shadow on contemporary debates about democracy.

Commentators from Hobbes to Popper are correct to characterize Thucydides as a critic of Athenian democracy (Balot 2006, Ober 1998, Hanson 1996, Jones 1958, de-Romilly 1963, Pope 1988). Many have associated him, alongside Alexis de Tocqueville, with the historical thesis that democracies are weak and inferior when it comes to foreign affairs (Desch 2002,

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2 For a more extensive Bibliography, presenting various contrasting views of Thucydides’s stance towards Athenian Democracy, see Ober (1998, 51n1).
Weingast and Schultz 2003). However, Thucydides was not a partisan anti-democrat, a mouthpiece for a particular faction in Athens; nor did he dismiss democracy off-hand as ineffective and lacking. Instead, he was a social-political scientist, with an interest in regime types and his criticism is best understood when it is taken into consideration as part of this larger enterprise (Ober 2006, 2010). Thucydides’s criticism of democracy needs to be re-conceptualized because it does not sit well a major part of his work: his admiration of Pericles’s leadership. In this paper I argue that Thucydides’s praise of Pericles’s leadership amounts to an appreciation of a democratic advantage. I establish that Pericles’s rule, contra Thucydides, was democratic since it satisfied a minimalist requirement of democracy: deposition by popular vote. I call this ‘elitist democracy’ and show how Pericles provides a theory of its advantage in the funeral oration, touting it for its meritocratic qualities. I argue that Pericles’s achievements reflect the democratic advantage in two ways: his brilliant military strategy and rise to power on the basis of his reputed merit are both successes of the democratic system and would be unlikely in a non-democratic regime of Thucydides’s times.

The tension between Thucydides’s criticism of democracy and his praise of Pericles escaped most scholars who consider him a critic of democracy. Yet it has both empirical and theoretical aspects. First, the allegedly fickle and incapable Athenian mob repeatedly elected Pericles, a wise and talented leader, and supported his unusual military strategy, in the face of short-term losses. Thucydides even goes so far as to say that they elected him,  

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3 Ober (2010) is a notable exception.
“understanding that he was the best man of all for the needs of the state” (2.65.4). How did democracy do so well, given its deficiencies? Thucydides, as a critic of democracy, has to explain the success of Pericles’s democratic rule. Second, Pericles himself not only supported democracy but also advanced a theoretical argument in its favor. Thucydides treats Pericles in general and his speeches in particular with a great deal of respect, despite the fact that they present an emphatic and passionate defense of democracy. Pericles, particularly in the funeral oration, does not merely defend democracy but also offer a theory of democratic advantage. Why would Thucydides provide such a strong theoretical argument in favor of the regime he thought disastrous?

Thucydides was aware of this tension and attempted to resolve it by treating Pericles’s rule as a special case, differentiating it from the democracy whose pathologies he diagnosed. Thucydides seemed to consider Pericles’s rule more like a non-democratic regime rather than a successful instance of democracy, though I argue that he shouldn’t have. In any case, Thucydides acknowledged that Pericles's rule had valuable features that could potentially be incorporated into the institutional design of a better regime (8.97.2). Furthermore, Thucydides's integrity and his strict adherence to the standards he set for his scientific enterprise committed him to present truths inconvenient to his theory. The result

4 I refer to passages in Thucydides’s work using the book and paragraph numbers as is conventional. The text I quote is, unless otherwise mentioned, Richard Crawley’s translation from the revised edition that appeared as The Landmark Thucydides (Strassler 1996).

5 For example, Pericles's speeches are the only assembly speeches not coupled with counter speeches of the opposite position, as was customary in the assembly.
allows us to examine his conclusions and reassess them in light of the evidence on which he based his own theory.

There are two aspects of Pericles’s rule that highlight democracy’s advantage: his unique military strategy and his political success in Athens. I call these ‘democratic’ advantages since they are closely related to Athenian democracy and democratic decision-making; consequently, they would have been unlikely in a non-democratic regime and represent the success of Athenian democracy. First, Pericles’s military strategy, celebrated by Thucydides, required an exceptional level of restraint on the part of the citizens as well as amenability to novel and uncommon ideas. Athenian democracy was uniquely suited for the strategy since it required discussion before decision-making and political participation, which has an educational effect on citizens. Second, Pericles’s rise to power, a fortunate event in the eyes of Thucydides, represents the success of democracy’s capacity to promote worthy individuals, which Pericles himself lauds in the funeral oration. According to Pericles’s theory, inclusive participation in political processes channels the ‘wisdom of the masses,’ feeding it into a reputational mechanism that picks good leaders and deposes incompetent ones. Pericles’s rise to power demonstrates the success of the meritocratic model the funeral oration presents. Pericles was, I hold, a ‘man of Athens’ – his success was the success of the city’s political system.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section discusses Thucydides’s interest in the comparative evaluation of regime types and his commitment to scientific standards. The third section deals with Thucydides’s criticism of democracy and his attempt to depict
Pericles’s rule as something other than democracy. I argue that Pericles’s rule should be seen as democracy, in ancient terms, since it lived up to the democratic threshold of deposition by a popular vote. The fourth presents the democratic advantage. I argue that Pericles is a ‘man of Athens’ – that his successes were tied to Athenian democracy. I elaborate on the ways in which Pericles’s military strategy and political success were related to democratic decision-making, arguing they would be unlikely in a non-democratic regime. The concluding section considers the implications of Thucydides’s argument to the study of political regimes in general and democracy in particular. I argue that the features identified as democratic advantages remain relevant to the study of contemporary regimes, even if they are not the best or only argument in favor of democracy.

Thucydides as a Social Scientist and the Study of Regime Type

Thucydides is often described as a critic of Athenian democracy. However, his criticism is best understood in the context of his scientific enterprise and his interest in the comparative evaluation of regime types. Thucydides belongs to the tradition of Greek political thought, from Herodotus to Aristotle, which takes a particular interest in the question of identifying and evaluating regime types. For Thucydides, the basic question of

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6 Pope (1988, 289) disagrees; he thinks Thucydides was not mostly concerned with regime types but with instances of violence and discord, hating the cynical and divisive abuse of politics by democrats and oligarchs alike: “He [Thucydides] opposed tyranny. Beyond this he did not commit himself on constitutional forms... He is neither oligarch nor democrat nor anywhere in between not only because he grew up before this dichotomy existed but also because its very existence implies discord and makes it impossible for a citizen to have a whole-hearted loyalty to his city” (289). However, such a commitment to the unity of the polis is not mutually exclusive with the effort to compare regime types and develop the best one for the
political theory is not the one Plato had, 'which is the best regime', but 'which regime makes the best tradeoffs between important values'. This question grew out of the harshly competitive political environment of the ancient Greek world, which spurred innovation in institutional design (Ober, 2008a, pp. 80-84).

Thucydides's interest in regime types fits well with the intellectual tradition of the ancient Greek world. Herodotus (1920) dedicates a significant portion of his *Histories* to a debate concerning regime types, where each alternative is presented by a speaker who enumerates its advantages and disadvantages (3.80-84). The Old Oligarch\(^7\) condemns democracy in general but conditionally praises the Athenian one. After Thucydides, Aristotle (1996), in his *Politics*, developed this intellectual tradition by devising a theoretical framework as well as extending the empirical body of knowledge.

Thucydides's interest in regime types is evident throughout his work (Ober 2010). It is made explicit when he discloses his judgment as to the best available regime of his day. Near the end of book 8, he praises the 'government of the Five Thousand' (8.97.1),\(^8\) a

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\(^7\) The Old Oligarch is the anonymous author responsible for a short treatise, found among the writings of Xenophon (Forsythe 2001). He is sometimes referred to as Pseudo-Xenophon (or Ps.-Xenophon). Citations from this text contain paragraph numbers.

\(^8\) "Of which body all who furnished a suit of armor were to be members, decreeing also that no one should receive pay for the discharge of any office, or if he did should be held accursed." (8.97.1)
broad-based mixed constitution,\(^9\) saying “it was during this first period of this constitution that the Athenians appear to have enjoyed the best government that they ever did, at least in my time” (8.97.2). He also compares democracies to oligarchies and makes evaluative judgments (8.89.3). More importantly, it is hard to understand his criticism of democratic decision-making without thinking that Thucydides was, in the very least, attentive to the question ‘which is the best regime.’

Thucydides's adherence to a scientific method is often noted in the literature (Edmunds 1975, Kagan 2004, Ober 1998, 2006, 2010, de-Romilly 1963, Croix 1954).\(^{10}\) Thucydides's authority is not due to his self-testimony (1.21) but rather it rests on the quality of his product. A testimony of Thucydides's commitment to his scientific method is his practice of reporting all facts alongside his theories, even when they seem to suggest other explanation. A prominent example is his discussion of the war's 'real' cause. He chooses to present in full what he takes to be the wrong account which was probably, perhaps to Thucydides's great frustration, a common view in those days (Kagan 2009). But Thucydides explains that that "it is well to give the grounds alleged by either side, which led

\(^9\) Jones (1958, 41) calls this mixed constitution "a regime which disenfranchised about two-thirds of the citizens, those who manned the fleet on which the survival of Athens depended" and sees Thucydides's support for it as part of his hostility to democracy. It is undoubted that the restriction on participation in the assembly contradicts a fundamental tenet of democracy, as presented in the funeral oration and in this paper. I call this regime 'broad-based' because of the large size of the assembly, compared with most oligarchies of the time. Though it is a point of controversy and Jones holds that "normal peace-time attendance may have been well over 5,000" (109), it seems unlikely that participation at the assembly exceeded 8,000 and the average seemed to have been closer to 6,000 (Ober 1989, 132-134). In any case, the mixed constitution is not democratic (unlike Pericles's rule) though it is possible that its broad base was meant to channel some of the democratic advantages that Thucydides saw in Pericles's rule.

\(^{10}\) In fact, Loraux (1986, 10) argues that his 'unchallenged scientific reputation' has stood in the way of research, preventing authors from appreciating the extent to which Thucydides was influenced by traditional forms.
to the dissolution of the treaty and the breaking out of the war” (1.23.5-6, emphasis added), explicitly expressing his commitment to full disclosure of the views he considered wrong and misleading. Immediately afterwards Thucydides embarks on the fulfillment of this promise with the stories of Athenian action against Corinth in Corcyra (1.24-55) and Potidaea (1.56-66), which the Spartans considered violations of the treaty of the Thirty Years’ Peace, plunging the region into the war (1.68,1.87,1.118). It is only afterwards that he goes on to discuss Athens’s growth in power (1.97-118), which he takes to be the real cause of the war (1.23).

The position was summarized by G.E.M. de Ste. Croix (1954, 3), “This [that the Athenian empire was unpopular] is what Thucydides wanted his readers to believe. It is undoubtedly the conception he himself honestly held. Nevertheless, his own detailed narrative proves that it is certainly false. Thucydides was such a remarkably objective historian that he himself has provided sufficient material for his own refutation.” Consequently, Thucydides’s commitment to scientific standards allows us to find evidence of a democratic advantage even if he did not think there was one.

Pericles’s Rule as Elitist Democracy

It is well established that for Thucydides, Pericles’s leadership was an important, perhaps essential, component of Athens’s military as well as political success (Ober 1998, 2001, Kagan 1991, 2009). In an oft-quoted passage (2.65), Thucydides diverges from the chronological narrative to praise Pericles’s leadership and achievements as a general and politician. Thucydides’s appreciation is far-reaching – he compliments Pericles for his leadership in times of both war and peace. He even defends Pericles’s refuted foresight that
the Athenians would have an easy victory in a war that proved devastating; and he blames Pericles's successors for the results, accusing them of deviating from Pericles's ways, in both content (his particular military strategy) and intent (his virtuous behavior, putting the good of the city above his own).

Thucydides's praise of Pericles has been tied, rightfully, to his criticism of democracy, as he contrasts Pericles's leadership with popular rule, saying that Pericles "was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude-in short, to lead them instead of being led by them" and most famously that "what was nominally a democracy was becoming in his [Pericles's] hands government by the first citizen" (2.65.8-9). Ober's (1998, 93) translation makes the point clearer, saying that under Pericles, Athens was becoming "in logos (words) a democracy, in ergon (fact) the rule (archē) of the foremost man." Remembering Thucydides's systematic suspicion of words,11 it seems like he is saying that Athens under Pericles was not a democracy after all because it was a democracy only in words, while it fact it was something else altogether – it was the rule of the foremost man.

But what is this 'rule of the foremost man,' which is not democracy? We can read 'the rule of the foremost man' literally, in which case we would conclude that the best man happens to be in control. In this case, it does not seem to be a regime type at all – it is a contingent, perhaps desirable, condition of any regime. A monarch, just like a

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11 On the distinction between erga (facts) and logos (speech/words) and its importance to Thucydides's work, see Ober (1998, 53-63).
democratically elected leader, may be the foremost man in his country or he may not (in which case he is usually called a tyrant). And indeed, this seems to be the distinction that Aristotle draws between ‘good’ and ‘corrupt’ regimes, dubbing the good solitary rule ‘kingship’ and the bad one ‘tyranny’. This reading would mean that Pericles’s rule was simply an instance of democracy in which a good leader was chosen incidentally as a rare instance where an inherently defect decision mechanism makes a good one. Thucydides’s criticism of democracy making is focused on the decision mechanism, not on final outcomes. Thus, his criticism is consistent with the faulty mechanism making a good decision by chance. He thought that the problems of democratic decision-making were apparent in the Mytilenean and Sicilian debates (3.37-48,6.24). Thucydides knows, as every decision theorist, that the final result is not all that matters – but the process by which we make decisions can be flawed even if it occasionally leads to good results and vice versa. Though in the Mytilenian debate the decision turned out to be right and in the Sicilian case it turned out to be wrong – both were made for the wrong reasons, and by a faulty mechanism. In both cases discussions was replete with misinformation and decisions were made by impassioned mobs (Ober, 1998, 94-121). Thus, it is consistent with Thucydides’s critical perspective to perceive the rule of the foremost man as an unrepresentatively successful decision of the Athenian assembly.

12 Notice that for Aristotle too the difference lies on the objectives of the ruler – in good ones the ruler (whether one, few or many) rules “with a view to the common interest” while in the corrupted form the ruling faction governs for its own private interest (Aristotle 1996, 71). Similarly, Thucydides accuses Pericles’s successors of the same kind of corruption: “What they did was the very contrary, allowing private ambition and private interest, in matters apparently quite foreign to the war, to lead them into projects unjust both to themselves and to their allies” (2.65.7).
However, I am inclined to reject this literal reading since it does not sit well with Thucydides’s scientific enterprise and his interest in regime types. More likely, Thucydides thought of the ‘rule of the foremost man’ as something other than democracy; indeed, it implies a rule that is antithetical to the rule of the many suggested by democratic ideas. He emphasizes that the people were not leading but were being led, contrasting it with the democratic aspiration of the people’s rule (Ober 2008b). Moreover, as mentioned before, Thucydides’s criticism of democracy goes to the heart of the democratic decision-making: the assembly. In light of this deep criticism, it seems strange that Thucydides would accept Pericles’s exceptional success as simply a streak of democratic luck without further explanation. A more plausible reading of the passage implies that Thucydides treated Pericles’s rule as something sufficiently different from a democracy, thus explaining the discrepancy between his criticism of democracy and Pericles’s successful rule.

If Pericles’s rule was not a democracy, what was it? It certainly did not resemble any other known regime type, tyranny least of all, and it does not seem like Thucydides was suggesting that it was any of the known regime types. Thucydides, then, saw Pericles’s rule as a unique instance of a novel pseudo-democratic regime. Though he had no name for it, it is presented by Pericles in the funeral oration and Thucydides had an appreciation for it. I call it ‘elitist democracy’, inspired by contemporary theories of democracy.

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13 de-Romilly (1963, 102,136-8) attributes to Thucydides an additional level of sophistication. She believes, like I do, that Thucydides had a complicated appreciation of democracy; that he was a ‘severe judge’ of democracy but not a partisan opponent of it (137). In his praise of Pericles and in the funeral oration, de-Romilly finds an appreciation “only to the most general principles of the Athenian constitution... as it stands in contrast to the other regimes in Greece” (137-8).
Nonetheless, I argue that even though it parted with some aspects of classic popular democracy, it is sufficiently close to its values and ideas that it should have been considered a democracy, even by Thucydides.\textsuperscript{14} If Thucydides didn’t see Pericles’s rule as a democracy, it is because he applied the term too narrowly. But whether he was right about the definition of democracy, Thucydides was right that there are important differences between Pericles’s rule and classic democracy that needed to be accounted for. The development of democratic theory since ancient times provides perspective and allows us to consider a range of different institutional arrangements as aspiring to implement the ancient, as well as the modern, ideal of democracy. Pericles’s rule, I hold, was one of those. Most importantly, the advantages that Thucydides saw in Pericles’s rule were tied to the popular aspects of that regime, since Pericles was a ‘man of Athens,’ as I argue in the next section.

Why should Pericles’s rule be seen as a democracy, even in Thucydides’s terms? Classical democracy is famous for being ‘direct’ democracy, as it focused on the assembly as the site of decision-making, where citizens vote directly on policy proposals. Nonetheless, as Ober (2008b) argues, Greek democracy attempted to institutionalize self-rule of the entire body of citizenry (the demos) and is not exhausted by a specific institutional design.

\textsuperscript{14} This view is not controversial and is adopted by many commentators, including Loraux (1984, 190), "we may dismiss from the outset the hypothesis according to which, under Pericles’ government, Athens did not really enjoy democracy. It is true that Pericles exercise de facto authority, but only within the democratic institution"; Kagan (1991, 63), "There can be no doubt that such a regime was a true democracy"; Edmunds (1975, 56), "Pericles’ control was that of a tyrant or a king over a subject population but was rather exerted by persuasion"; and Rhodes (1997, 466), "Formal constitution power will not have taken Perikles very far towards one-man rule... despite Thucydides, the Athenians in 430 did not ‘entrust the whole conduct of affairs to him.’"
Democracy is, therefore, “the regime in which the *demos* gains a collective capacity to effect change in the public realm” (7, original emphasis). As such, I take the concept of democracy to stretch across an array of particular political systems, variants of democracy. On the edge of the continuum there is a threshold, a defining feature that sets the criteria of entry to the realm of democracy. Minimalist conceptions of democracy mark the line between regimes that are not sufficiently democratic (like Thucydides’s preferred mixed regime) and full-blown democracy. Pericles’s rule is one such minimalist conception of democracy. I argue that the deposition of leaders is the democratic feature that marks the threshold and that Pericles’s rule is situated above it. I now show how Pericles’s rule reflects an interpretation of democracy’s ideal, self-rule of the people, through deposition of incompetent leaders.

Pericles needed to win over the citizens he ruled over and get their support *by a free vote*, and though he is described as effective in so doing, he is not immune to failure. Indeed, in the second year of the war he is fined and impeach him (2.65.3) and in many other occasions he is publically criticized and punished (2.21,2.59,2.65). Pericles’s vulnerability is a sign that however strong his sway over the citizens was, the vote had real meaning. Though Pericles was reelected shortly after his imposition, it is not unthinkable that had he been slightly less charismatic or in control over a longer period of suffering, he would have been ostracized and deposed like Themistocles, his predecessor and another Athenian leader Thucydides held in high regard (1.135-8). Pericles did not rule by hereditary right or because he was rich and noble – the source of his power was his ability to persuade people,
win over votes in the assembly and manipulate procedural rules from within the system.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, his was a \textit{popular} power: his legitimacy, as well as his efficacy, stemmed from the consent of the allegedly fickle Athenian crowd, as expressed by institutionalized vote.

In setting the threshold of minimal democracy, I draw on more contemporary work in democracy theory. Self-proclaimed minimal theorists of democracy, skeptical of the masses ability to make informed decisions, see deposition of leaders \textit{by means of a popular vote} as an essential, indeed defining, feature of democracy (Schumpeter 1950, Przeworski 1999). Though this concept is foreign to Thucydides’s writing, I believe it captures the original meaning of democracy even in his time. Moreover, as I will show in the next section, it is consistent with the theory of democracy that Pericles himself presents in the funeral oration, according to which there is a division of labor between elites who make policy proposals and the masses whose job is to judge them.

Thus, Pericles’s vulnerability to popular deposition makes him a democratic leader.\textsuperscript{16} This vulnerability is not only recognized by the historical researcher in hindsight but was known to Pericles, guiding his actions. This point is recognized by interpreters and

\textsuperscript{15} I’m referring to Pericles’s ability to avoid an assembly after the Spartan invasion of Attica in the first year of the war that was not resisted or retorted by the Athenian army by Pericles’s order (2.22). While it is unclear how Pericles was able to avoid summoning the assembly (Boegehold 1996), it seems plausible that he was able to take advantage of some ‘loophole’ in the system, yielding his authority in an uncommon, but not entirely defiant, manner. For an account of the unofficial workings of Athenian democracy in general and Pericles’s effective power in particular, see Rhodes (1997).

\textsuperscript{16} In addition to presenting a theory of democracy in the funeral oration (discussed below in detail), Pericles’s actions vindicate him as a democratic leader. He was responsible for leading a number of democratic reforms which enhanced the authority of the assembly and popular law courts, thus empowering citizens (Kagan, 1991, 47).
preservers of Greek tradition, as can be seen in Pericles’s depiction in Plutarch’s Moralia (1936):

“...and when entering upon any office whatsoever, you must ... call to mind those considerations of which Pericles reminded himself when he assumed the cloak of a general: ‘Take care, Pericles; you are ruling free men, you are ruling Greeks, Athenian citizens,’” (813D)

To summarize, Thucydides’s assertion that under Pericles Athens was a democracy only ‘in words’ seems like an attempt to explain democracy’s success despite his acute analysis of the flaws in its decision-making. Thucydides’s diligence in applying what he thought was a rigorous scientific standard compelled him to present the full story even when it did not fit his theoretical framework (Ober 1998, 2001, 2006). Pericles’s successful rule, understood as a democracy, presents us with possible evidence of some democratic advantages, i.e. benefits that are unique to democracy as opposed to other regimes. However, the relationship between Pericles’s success and Athens’s democratic regime needs to be demonstrated. In the next section I explore the two features of Pericles’s leadership that are founded in the democratic Athenian system: Pericles’s strategic military genius and his personal virtues.

The Democratic Advantage: Pericles as a Man of Athens

Was Pericles’s rule a triumph of Athenian democracy, or did he do well in spite of the political system he found himself? To answer this question, I examine two components of Pericles’s accomplishment: the unique military strategy he pushed for and his rise to power on the basis of his reputation as a great leader. I argue that the military strategy’s success
depended on the Athenian democratic regime, which allowed for innovation and restraint. Moreover, Pericles’s rise to power exemplifies the success of elitist democracy as a meritocratic system. Pericles, like his predecessor Themistocles, was ‘a man of Athens’. The expression comes from an anecdote told by Herodotus (1920):

"Timodemus of Aphidnae, who was one of Themistocles' enemies but not a man of note, was crazed with envy and spoke bitterly to Themistocles of his visit to Lacedaemon, saying that the honors he had from the Lacedaemonians were paid him for Athens' sake and not for his own. This he kept saying until Themistocles replied, 'This is the truth of the matter: if I had been a man of Belbina I would not have been honored in this way by the Spartans, nor would you, sir, for all you are a man of Athens.' Such was the end of that business." (8.125.1-2)

Themistocles's answer is facetious – but the expression seems to encapsulate the idea that the leaders of democratic cities owe their success, at least in part, to the city which allowed them to achieve greatness. Knowing the fate of Themistocles's political career, which ended in ostracism by the Athenians, his sarcastic response seems audacious and his remark is shown to be a double-edged sword: the democratic city that granted you honors and power can also deprive you of them. This crucial fact, the vulnerability to deposition by a popular vote, makes Themistocles and Pericles democratic leaders.

Pericles's genius military strategy. One of the reasons the Peloponnesian War lasted so long and became the subject of extensive analysis was the unique strategy employed by Athens (Kagan 2009). Instead of marching to meet the enemy in the battlefield, they adopted a strategy that required remaining behind the city walls while relying on the city's immense naval forces to hurt Sparta's allies, extract resources and maintain the empire (1.142-4,2.13-4,2.62). As long as the navy could move quickly to plunder enemy allies and
colonies, raise tributes from allies and make sure rebellions are quenched, Athens could remain prosperous and undefeatable. The strategy proved to be a ‘game changer’ – it thwarted the Spartans’ expectations for a quick victory (5.14.3) and allowed Athens to exploit its relative advantage as a naval empire. When the Spartans invaded Attica, Athens’s territory, they expected the Athenians to engage and be defeated in a land battle, as they did almost thirty years earlier in the first Peloponnesian War (1.107-8). Instead, the Athenians resisted the temptation to run and meet their enemy in the field and remained secure inside the walls, watching, as the Spartans ravaged their fields. The Athenians then responded by launching a naval attack on the enemy rear, relying on their capital and empire to sustain them in a prolonged war.

Pericles is commonly thought to have devised the strategy (Kagan 2009) and he certainly pushed for its implementation, repeatedly supporting it in the assembly in the face of difficulties and complications (1.142-4,2.13-4,2.21,2.55,2.61-2). Not only does Thucydides identify Pericles with this unique strategy, but Thucydides also praises Pericles for its adequacy as he says: “the correctness of his foresight concerning the war became better known after his death” (2.65.6, emphasis added). It is this uniqueness that gives force to the question: Could this strategy be applied in the non-democratic regimes of Thucydides's days? I argue that it could not, or in the very least – would not have been likely. My argument is based on democracy’s ability to facilitate restraint and novelty through the education of citizens and the trust the process of public deliberation creates between rulers and ruled.

First, the strategy demanded an exceptional level of restraint, which requires contemplating the exchange between short term loss and long term gain. As noted, the
Athenians were truly struggling to contain their anger and had to be repeatedly persuaded by Pericles (2.21-2.25,2.59,2.65). The strategy requires a sacrifice on the part of the people on the basis of future gain: they had to leave their homes before the enemy even engaged with the city, which was hard for them to do (2.16). Once the plague hit, it exacerbated the situation for them yet they had to stay put (2.52). Then, they had to remain within the city walls and away from their property, as they watched it being ravaged and destroyed by a hated enemy (2.21).

A dictator or an oligarchy could forcefully impose such a policy without having to explain themselves to the people in the way Pericles had to and without suffering the humiliation of dismissal that Pericles had to go through. However, the rulers of a non-democracy might actually want to explain their reasoning to the people. Restraint of this kind can only be exercised on the basis of understanding the trade-off between short-term losses and future gains, and trust in the leadership to follow through with the plan. These are usually not easily coerced, for coercion is based on threats. A despot can threaten to hurt and punish people who do not comply with his policy, but when they are bound to suffer whatever they do, the threat loses its power: people may prefer to take their chances, risking punishment when returning to their homes instead of dying from the plague in the crowded city.

But cannot a monarch or an oligarchy, which do not usually rely on discussion and consent, explain themselves when they want to? Authoritarian rule, especially an unlimited
one, is not ever precluded from addressing its citizenry when necessary. But can such a non-democratic ruler convince the people to follow through willingly? It is doubted that without democratic rule, the people would be responsive to explanations or have sufficient trust in the leadership to make the necessary sacrifices. This, I believe, is true for two reasons. First, democratic participation is an educational process for the citizens, facilitating understanding of the need for restraint and the rewards that could result from such restraint. Second, non-democratic regimes emphasize the conflict of interests between the ruling elite and the masses who are asked to make the sacrifice, making it harder to have faith in the leadership’s good intentions.

When discussing the education of the citizens of Athens it should be noted, as Thucydides’s criticism of the speeches in the assembly make clear, that the people of Athens did not understand the complexity of the Athenian strategy (Ober, 1998). However, there is no reason to ignore altogether the educational aspects of Athenian democracy. Complete comprehension is not what is needed but rather voluntary compliance, based on acceptance of the trade-off between short term losses and long term gains and trust in the rulers’ ability to follow through. Even if citizens remain as ignorant as Thucydides says they are, participating in assemblies has an educational effect on the citizens (Ober 1989, 159-—

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17 And indeed modern despotic rules, such as the ones that dominated the 20th century, invested heavily in domestic propaganda.

18 Modern authoritarian regimes often succeed in harnessing the faith of the masses with complex ideologies which lead people to believe that the leadership has a plan that is aimed for the good of the people or even the world. This requires an ideology that transcends the Old Oligarch’s claim that rich people are usually smarter and more virtuous. In the ancient world, the only non-democratic regime which seems to be able to enlist the people for the greater cause of the state is Sparta’s, but as discussed below – Pericles’s strategy seems particularly improbable under Sparta’s regime with its harsh education and emphasis on courage.
which helped them understand the benefits of restraint. Public discussion provides clarification of the benefits and the way they will be distributed across the population.

Moreover, public discussion enhances faith in the system by requiring that people be *persuaded*. Democracy has been criticized for its inefficacy because the lack of coercion in public affairs (Ober 2010). The need to persuade citizens for the implementation of public policy is seen as a hurdle to the timely and efficient implementation of policies. However, it is not a hurdle when trying to implement a policy which requires restraint. In fact, having a social structure that is relied on persuasion seems a necessity. Athens of the time was “a state that was outstanding in its capacity to elicit voluntary social cooperation in wartime both before and after the onset of the plague and the death of Pericles” (Ober 2010, 67). Persuasion is not just another means to achieve the same ends as coercion, but rather it has advantages: it allows implementing novel and untraditional policies. This is the practical meaning of Pericles’s famous claim in the funeral oration that “instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensible preliminary to any wise action at all” (2.40.2).

Relatedly, democratic education makes citizens more amenable to intricate and novel strategies. In the funeral oration, alongside a defense of Athens’s democratic regime, Perciles’s praises the “versatility” of the Athenian citizen (2.41.1). In a democracy, citizens go to the assembly regularly, listen to and engage in debates about strategies and the reasoning behind them even if those discussions are filled with misinformation and dominated by rhetoricians. They therefore become more open to thinking about novel and
unique strategies. Ober’s (2006, 13) interpretation suggests that “the democratic polis was a system of education and Athenians were highly educable.”

Contrast this with the strict education children were receiving in Sparta from an early age, or with the life of an oppressed citizenry under the rule of a tyrant; it seems unlikely that citizens thus educated could be mobilized to participate in such a non-traditional strategy. Pericles stresses the point himself in the funeral oration, “while in education, where our rival from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please” (2.30.1). The difference in education leads to the development of opposing characters. Thucydides explicitly recognizes this point, contrasting Athenian and Spartan character in his own voice, "But here, as on so many other occasions the Lacedaemonians proved the most convenient people in the world for the Athenians to be at war with. The wide difference between the two characters, the slowness and want of energy of the Lacedaemonians as contrasted with the dash and enterprise of their opponents, proved of the greatest service, especially to a maritime empire like Athens. Indeed this was shown by the Syracusans, who were most like the Athenians in character, and also most successful in combating them" (8.96.5, emphasis

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19 As Archidamus, Sparta’s wise king, says: “we are educated with too little learning to despise the laws, and with too severe self-control to disobey them, and we are brought up not to be too knowing in useless matters—such as the knowledge which can give a specious criticism of an enemy’s plans in theory, but fails to assail them with equal success in practice—but are taught to consider that the schemes of our enemies are not dissimilar to our own” (1.84.3). These are, of course, Thucydides’s words and they seem unlikely as the actual words of Archidamus. However, they represent Thucydides’s understanding of Sparta’s education and society.
added). Thucydides calls it 'character' but it is more plausibly attributed to the education and culture cultivated in different political systems. It is therefore not a coincidence that Thucydides mentions here Syracuse, a rivaling but democratic city, alongside Athens.

An aspect of the strategy's novelty is that the strategy can be, and indeed was, seen as cowardly: staying behind walls and avoiding contact with the enemy while they raze your fields is hardly a display of courage. Courage, especially in battle, was considered an important virtue in Greek culture since Homeric times. Enacting a policy that seems cowardly is therefore more difficult than other more straightforwardly bold alternatives and would be harder in traditional societies. Indeed, we are told that “it was naturally thought as a grievous insult, and the determination was universal... to sally forth and stop it” (2.21.2). It seems especially unlikely that such a strategy could be implemented under Sparta’s particular kind of oligarchy, Athens’s most prominent rival and role model for alternative regime type, where militaristic courage was given primacy as a virtue (Balot 2006, 37-41).

Pericles’s rise to power and democracy as meritocracy. Even if the policies of Pericles could be implemented in a non-democratic regime, is it likely that a person like Pericles,

20 The same kind of contrast between the two characters is presented by the Corinthian representative at the meeting of the Peleponnesian League, where he tried to convince the Spartans to go to war against Athens: "The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution; you have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention, and when forced to act you never go far enough" (1.70.2). This suggests that this was a widely-held opinion, a common wisdom about the two cities and their characters, and see also de-Romilly (1963, 138-9) and Ober (2010, 72-75). Edmunds (1975, 44-6, 89) believes that this contrast between characters, Athenian innovation versus Spartan traditionalism, is a central theme of the funeral oration and sees the distinction between characters reflected in other parts of the History.
with his personal virtues, would rise to power in a non-democratic regime? Thucydides's appreciation of Pericles's leadership raises the question: how did a skillful leader such as Pericles come to power? I argue that Pericles's rise to power in a success of elitist democracy, according to which leaders are deposed by the masses on the basis of their reputation. Interestingly, when Pericles's popularity drops, amidst the plague and great suffering, Thucydides does not say he was reelected because of his charisma, rhetorical skills or magical control over the demos. Instead, he says the Athenians elected him, “understanding that he was the best man of all for the needs of the state” (2.65.4). Thucydides seemed to believe that in the case of Pericles, it was not merely rhetorical skills that swayed the assembly, but rather the people’s faith in him on the basis of his past success. Thus, Pericles’s reelection raises the question: was it a coincidence that a worthy leader was elected because he was worthy? It is hard to answer this question with regards to Pericles’s reelection. However, given that Thucydides has Pericles himself provide a theory of democracy according to which this should happen, it is worthwhile exploring that theory.

Pericles’s theory of democracy is found in his famous funeral oration (2.35-46). In a compellingly beautiful piece of writing, which intends to represent what was probably a similarly persuasive piece of rhetoric, Thucydides presents Pericles praising Athenian democracy as a distinct regime. Before delving into the oration itself, it is interesting to

21 Pericles himself was "an Athenian aristocrat who possessed no great private fortune" (Kagan, 1991, 6). He therefore would have had a good chance to rise to power under an aristocratic regime that gave prominence to noble birth but not as much in oligarchies which distributed political power on the basis of money.
note that Thucydides, a critic of democracy, chose to put such an eloquent defense of
democracy in the mouth of the same leader he so favorably presents. Perhaps Thucydides
disagreed with Pericles's ideas but respected them enough to ‘allow’ Pericles to express
them in his History. It may also be the case, as de-Romilly (1963) argues, that Thucydides
had a more complex view of democracy and that he thought Pericles, at least the one in his
oration, had some valid points. This view is reinforced if one finds, as I do, the ideas
presented in the oration to be powerful beyond their historical context – they seem to be a
product of a genuine effort on the part of a political thinker. I find it hard to believe that
Thucydides could write these words without being even slightly moved by them or
recognizing their merit, however suspicious he may have been towards words in general.

The funeral oration presents a thoughtful and unique conception of democracy. The
oration is not a platitude about ‘citizen-rule’ but a careful exploration of the virtues of

22 Jones (1958, 42) sees the contradiction between Thucydides's stance and Pericles's words as evidence for
the authenticity of these words while Edmunds (1975, 145) deems it is a reason to reconsider Thucydides's
view on democracy. de-Romilly (1963, 136-8,376) argues Thucydides was sympathetic to the ideas
expressed by Pericles in the funeral oration, as she believes that Thucydides was critical of democracy,
especially of the radical democratic faction, but did not reject it all together. To de-Romilly, the tensions
between the funeral oration and classical democracy (to be discussed below) are consistent with
Thucydides’s criticism of Athenian democracy elsewhere, exposing his complicated stance and mixed feelings
towards it.

23 Loraux (1986, 172) analyses Pericles's funeral oration as part of the genre of funeral orations, and argues
that the funeral oration is "an aristocratic discourse." Due to the tensions found in the oration between
alleged praise of democracy and the aristocratic language employed in service aristocratic values, Loraux
concludes that "we must not, then, look for a theory of democracy in the funeral oration.... the funeral
oration must praise democracy and can do so only in noble language. These constraints are imposed both
by the political structures and by the genre” (220). I disagree that the 'aristocratic' sentiments are non-
democratic, as will be discussed below; my stance is closer to that of Jones (1958, 42) and Kagan (1991,
141-45). Edmunds (1975, 45) discusses directly the apparent contrast between the aristocratic language
applied in the oration and the aristocratic context of the concept of merit and concludes it is part of the
theme of the oration, that the city Athens is "an expression of individual will, of an aggregate of individual
wills, which produces a more powerful unity."
democracy as opposed to other common regime types of the time, and probably a response
to criticism, such as that of the Old Oligarch. 24 According to the theory, democracy enjoys
the advantage of inclusive political participation, allowing citizens of all classes to contribute to the city by voting in the assembly. But though everyone is included, people have different roles: elites have the duty to devise policy proposals while the population as a whole is charged with the responsibility of choosing the right ones, holding bad leaders accountable by deposing them when their policies fail. Thus, democracy employs a reputation mechanism that makes it meritocratic: “if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition” (2.37.1). 25

This is a crucial point for a defender of democracy, since critics of democracy (Thucydides not excluded) argued that democracy has the exact opposite effect: it tends to promote and benefit the unworthy (Balot 2006, 48-84). Consider the Old Oligarch, who thought democracy promotes the “welfare of the baser folk as opposed to that of the better class” (1.1) because the masses choose to benefit those who promote their interests, even if they are base (2.11). Therefore, the Old Oligarch concludes grimly, “It is the worst element which in every state favors the democracy - on the principle that like favors like” (2.17).


25 Compare with Ober’s (1998, 86) translation: “yet again in regard to acknowledged worth, it is a matter of individual reputation; the nature of a man’s public contribution is not decided in advance on the basis of class, but rather on the basis of excellence. And if someone is worthy and can do something worthwhile for the polis, he is not excluded by poverty, nor because of his obscurity [of birth].”
The Old Oligarch identifies merit with wealth, suggesting he would prefer the oligarchic rule which limits political participation to people with wealth. The Old Oligarch argues that wealth is a good proxy for merit, since “poverty acting as a stronger incentive to base conduct, not to speak of lack of education and ignorance, traceable to the lack of means which afflicts the average of mankind” (1.5).

Pericles shares the Old Oligarch’s concern for merit, and his defense of democracy seems to respond to such criticisms. He reminds us that wealth in the Old Oligarch’s argument is only important because, and only if, it tends to correlate with merit. Against this idea, Pericles suggests that poor or otherwise humbly born people can be of service to the state and should not be excluded from doing so. Pericles not only points to this comparative weakness of oligarchy, but goes on to suggest that democracy employs a different mechanism for promoting merit: reputation. We may be skeptical, with Thucydides, of the reputation mechanism; but we should also acknowledge that there is a powerful idea here that should be subjected to empirical tests under different circumstances. Moreover, if we take Thucydides’s perspective on Pericles’s rule as a great success in times peace as well as war, we should take Pericles’s continuous reelection as evidence that the reputation mechanism can work well.

26 This concern with excellence (arête) is part of the reason Loraux (1986, 186-7) attributes an aristocratic tendency to Pericles. See also Kagan (1991, 143).

27 As Ober (1989, 4-8) notes, this idea is central to the appeal of democracy in ancient times, and parallel arguments in favor of democracy that could be found in other places, such as Plato’s Protagoras.
Non-democracies lack social mobility – if you are born poor or humble, you are very unlikely to ever reach a position of power regardless of your skills. The Periclean model escapes class determination by opening the political space to inclusive participation. This inclusive attitude is praiseworthy; I would support it even if it would prove to lead to suboptimal results. From Thucydides’s point of view, adopted in this paper, it is a double-edged sword: it holds a potential to promote worthy individuals that would otherwise be excluded but also paves the road to populist opportunists. It is therefore crucial that Pericles offers a mechanism, albeit imperfect, for promoting merit. The success of such a democracy depends on the success of the mechanism – which is the object of Thucydides’s harshest criticism. Nevertheless, the idea invites further exploration and experimentation as to the conditions under which it may work better.

The Periclean model, as Thucydides painfully emphasizes, relies on the right kind of leadership as a crucial component. This, however, is only one part of a division of labor as the masses have a unique part to play, that of judges: “our ordinary citizens... are still fair judges of public matters; ... we regard the citizen who take no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, and we are able to judge proposals even if we cannot originate them; instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it

28 It is important to remember that the ‘inclusive’ character of Athenian democracy was limited, and did not include large portions of the population, namely women, slaves and other non-citizens. This exclusion is abhorrent and indefensible, though I do not believe it undermines the value of the theory behind Athenian democracy. I agree with Ober (1989, 7) that "to deny the name democracy to Athens' government, on the grounds that the Athenian did not recognize rights that most western nations have granted only quite recently, is ahistorical"; see also Kagan (1991, 48-9). Moreover, it seems that the argument in favor of inclusion and exclusion of different groups among the citizenry (e.g. rich and poor) is quite general and therefore holds when considering the entire population as citizenry.
an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all” (2.40.2, emphasis added). The assembly’s role is not reduced to approving whatever policy proposal leaders present to them; instead, their role is to approve the right proposals and keep track of who are the leaders who keep making them.\(^2^9\) Note that this idea corresponds to the minimal threshold of democracy that I elaborated earlier: deposition of leaders by a popular vote. As Ober (2010, 77) says, according to the Periclean theory (and contra Thucydides’s condemnation of democracy) “voters are not passive recipients of the rhetorical performance of public speakers. Rather they are expected to be active judges, fully capable of dismissing the incompetent” (emphasis added). Interestingly, this point is not unique to Athens as it is also made by Athenagoras, a democrat from the rival Syracuse: "if the best guardians of property are the rich, and the best counsellors the wise, none can hear and decide so well as the many; and that all these talents, severally and collectively, have their just place in a democracy" (6.39.1, emphasis added).\(^3^0\)

We may see some tension here between Pericles’s elitist democracy and the traditional definition of democracy in classical Athens, as Loraux (1986, 175) points out: the term isegoria, which refers to citizens’ equal right to speak in the assembly, is missing

\(^{29}\) This argument complements Ober’s (2008a, 2010) work on this topic. Ober argues that democracy’s advantage lies in a. utilizing the dispersed knowledge held by all members of society and b. its ability to solve collective action problems by aligning personal interests with the common good. Ober’s arguments fills in the story told here by Thucydides’s Pericles – it gives us reason to believe that the masses could play the role of deposing leaders well, since different people hold different kinds of information which can be useful and in judging leaders.

\(^{30}\) A similar argument is made by Cleon in the Mytilenaean debate, “the more simple sort generally make better citizens than the more astute... being impartial judges, not ambitious rivals, they hit the mark.” (3.37.3-4).
entirely from the funeral oration despite the fact it was an essential and sometimes defining component of democracy for Herodotus and Protagoras. However, Loraux's analysis, like Thucydides's, misses the richness of democratic theory. Loraux describes Pericles's allusions to the freedom of speech as 'vague' and puts forth that "the orator insists not so much on everyone's right to speech as on one's civic, even rational, duty to use the logos" (175, original emphasis). The passage Loraux refers to is nevertheless telling, because it explicitly points to the different role the masses can play in decision-making: "... we Athenians are able to judge at all events if we cannot originate..." (2.40.2, Loraux's translation). Loraux identifies democracy with the classical model and fails to see the Periclean model as a democracy. The same response settles another major complaint that Loraux levels against the funeral oration as a presentation of a theory of democracy, when she says that "[Pericles] also supports a division of tasks that effectively leaves the aristocrats with access to the principal positions of responsibility in the city" (184). Her assertion, I believe, is right; but I disagree that this outlook transforms the funeral oration into 'aristocratic discourse' thus refuting it as a democratic theory. Later, Aristotle (1996, 76-77) develops this argument when he considers the ‘wisdom of the masses.’ Aristotle mentions that the masses can play a part in ‘deliberative and judicial functions’ and that “if the people are not utterly degraded, although individually they may be worse judges than those who special knowledge, as a body they are as good or better” (77). For Aristotle, this

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31 Sometimes Loraux (1986, 199, 202) refers to the government praised by the funeral oration as 'aristocratic democracy' or 'watered-down democracy.' To the extent that the aristocratic component is merely a reference to Pericles's concern with excellence (arête) and not to privilege based on noble birth – my disagreement with her is mostly terminological.
was clearly a consideration in favor of democracy and though he wrote it a while after Thucydides wrote his *History*, it is a natural extension of the idea found in the funeral oration.

Ober (1998, 89) believes that the funeral oration presents a democratic ideal as well as its “potential instability,” where incoherent or ill-motivated leaders usurped the position of plan suggesters, as occurred during the Mytilenean and Sicilian debates (3.37-48,6.24). This weakness of the elitist model, which is not error-free, is one Thucydides was painfully aware of. Whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages is a complicated question, for which Thucydides provided an answer. Nonetheless, the argument in this paper is that in his work both advantages and disadvantages could be found, and the reader can therefore make his or her own trade-off between them.

Conclusion: Afterthoughts and Implications

Thucydides shows great concern to a peril of the ancient world that remains a major issue today: civil war. In a famous passage, he describes the evils and sufferings brought upon by “the march of the revolution”, precipitated by the ancient Greek world war (3.82). The list of evils is contrasted with their respective virtues, which provides an opportunity to learn something about Thucydides’s view on the virtues and vices of cities. Among the virtues he lists moderation, prudent hesitation and ability to see a question from all sides (3.82.4). While Thucydides was suspicious of democracy’s ability to exemplify these virtues, Pericles’s theory provides an account of how broad discussion before decision-making can promote them. The question remains: on what societal and historical circumstances, if any, democratic advantages prevail?
Thucydides’s answer to his research question is that democracy’s dangers outweigh its benefits. But his answer is tentative. His account provides the resources to reconsider the trade-off and reach different conclusions. The case for democracy can still be made, holding the relevant considerations mind and thinking that the dangers of democracy are not as bad as those of oligarchy or tyranny.

Adopting Thucydides’s approach, we take a comparative approach and ask: does democracy provide the tools to deal with the challenges of our current circumstances? Or is there any non-democratic regime that performs better? The exploration of democracy’s weaknesses and advantages enriches democratic theory and helps us learn how to sustain a successful and just democracy. Thucydides’s analysis points to the fact that democracies are prone to make mistakes of a certain type, warning us of the particular dangers of popular rule. He was troubled by the assembly’s tendency to make predictably bad decisions because self-interested usurpers manipulate the masses with their rhetoric, as they did in the Mytilenean and Sicilian debates (3.37-48, 6.24). Thucydides’s efforts to isolate the relevant social and structural factors that led to the Peloponnesian war and fall of the Athenian empire are driven by his wish that his successors be able to predict social reality and avoid such catastrophes (1.21). As such, it allows democratic sympathizers, then as now, to contemplate his body of work as a whole, searching it for different ways to circumvent the problems he flags (Ober 2001, 2006).

Thucydides’s standards for evaluating regime types, consistent with the traditional values of the ancient world, is not the best nor the most important defense we can offer today in favor of democratic rule. It is clear that democratic thought and practice has developed considerably since Thucydides; though some still argue for democracy’s
epistemic qualities, most contemporary arguments in favor of democracy are based on the legitimacy it confers on authority rather than its efficacy.

Nonetheless, the argument about democracy’s advantage continues today. Some criticize modern democracy for its ineffectiveness and weakness, often harnessing Thucydides to their intellectual pedigree. Against this idea, a burgeoning literature advances the idea of democratic advantage, arguing that modern democracies do better than their non-democratic counterparts in international competition (Weingast and Schultz 2003). Furthermore, there are those who argue that democracy has neither advantage nor disadvantage, and that regime type is irrelevant to the performance of states, specifically in wartimes (Desch 2002). Thucydides’s acute analysis has rightly made his History a subject of interest for many political scientists and theorists, working in many different fields. But the conditions of politics as well as the meaning of the democracy have changed so much since his day that any attempt to apply his theories and conclusions directly to present-day circumstances is unambiguously anachronistic.

And yet, many of his concerns remain relevant to modern versions of democracy as well as modern theories of democracy. The democratic advantage described in this paper stems from features that are still unique to democracies: inclusive political participation and discussion before decision-making. Likewise, Thucydides’s warnings remain pertinent to today’s mass democracies, where self-interested elites hold key media outlets and access platforms that provide them undue influence over public opinions. Democracies today are

similarly vulnerable to populist incitements. In recent history, it has happened that masses of people, manipulated by elites, supported irreversible and devastating measures such as initiating unjust wars. Even if democracy’s shortcomings are outweighed by its advantages and even if we think the best argument in favor of democracy is found elsewhere, it is important to study these dangers in order to have a fuller picture of democracy. We must work hard to avoid these pitfalls while harnessing democracy’s advantages to counterbalance them. If we learn something from Thucydides, it is this: there is no ideal regime, but some are worse than others. If we are committed to the idea of democracy, we need to work hard to make it work. There are guarantees that democracy will produce good outcomes.

Though Thucydides was critical of democracy, he had respect for it. In any case, we get from him a more complicated picture than one of simple criticism. As thinkers, historians and policy makers look to the Peloponnesian War learn from it, they should note the pitfalls of democracy that led to the destruction of the great Athenian empire. Nonetheless, the lesson to be learned is not that democracy is always bound to fail. Rather, it is that democracy has some inherent flaws that pose great danger to democratic societies. Citizens and leaders in democratic societies ought to be attentive to those and, if possible, avoid them. However content we may be in our present circumstances with the success of modern democracy, we should not be complacent. Democracies today, I believe, are still in danger of falling into the pits Thucydides so powerfully describes. His account does not provides those of us who favor democracy much more than Churchill’s reluctant defense of it as the worst regime type excepting all other forms that have ever been tried. It seems like an odd conclusion to draw from Thucydides’s work, and he might not have
accepted it, but I think he had the integrity to provide the resources to reach such a conclusion; and that, if not anything else, should be noted to his credit as a historian and an intellectual.
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