

J.S. Mill the Democrat: Connecting Mill, Athens, and Election Reform


A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Government from  
The College of William and Mary

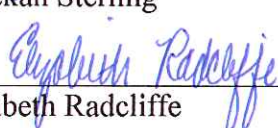
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## Part 1: Introduction

Amid one of the most prolific 19<sup>th</sup> century debates on election reform, and more generally democracy, John Stuart Mill defined himself firmly on the side of universal suffrage and democratic rights for all. In addition to being a politician, and one of the first to publicly declare his support for full universal (including female) suffrage, Mill was also famously a political theorist and philosopher. While most well-known for his staunch defense of freedom in his *On Liberty*, Mill also wrote extensively on the theory and practice of democracy. His *Considerations on Representative Government* was a culmination of his most mature thoughts on government and included a defense of representative government as the ideal form, plural voting, an open ballot, and electoral reform. While Schneewind is correct in his assessment of Mill as “not a profoundly original thinker,” Mill remains one of the most important defenders of others’ ideas and innovations and one of the most influential liberal thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Whether practically in Parliament, or socially in meetings with his friends and contemporary thinkers, Mill was always able to articulate justifications for his, and others’, ideas. This paper will explore one debate that has cropped up since the beginning of critical examination of Mill’s political theory: is Mill a democrat?

Before moving to an examination of the literature surrounding Mill as a democrat, it is important to understand exactly *how* Mill is (or isn’t) a democrat to determine the basis of his thoughts on government. Fundamentally, Mill is a utilitarian. Utilitarianism, at its base, is a moral philosophy which states that what is ‘good’ is that which produces the greatest amount of

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<sup>1</sup> J.B. Schneewind, introduction to *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1968), ix.

happiness for the greatest number of people.<sup>2</sup> While Mill leaves room in his view of utilitarianism for “higher pleasures,” he still maintains the core tenets of utilitarianism: consequentialism, where only the ends (not the means) matter, hedonism, which defines the ‘good’ as that which brings pleasure (which is the only intrinsic good) and ‘bad’ as that which brings pain, and unbiasedness, or the idea that everyone’s happiness is equally valuable.<sup>3</sup> This fundamental belief of Mill’s helps to illustrate why he believes in an instrumental justification of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Rather than other democratic theorists which maintain that we ought to have democracy because of a fundamental belief in equality, liberty, life, or other rights, Mill maintains that democracy is the best form of government because it brings about these good outcomes. These positive consequences of democracy, as will be examined further in this paper, include education through democratic institutions, greater freedom through legitimate means of holding power, and support for all groups of individuals.

This inversion of democratic justification has led some to question Mill’s commitment to democracy; however, the greater concern for Mill as a democrat is his conception of egalitarianism. Most democratic thinkers maintain the fundamental equality of men at birth. Mill, on the other hand, believes that not all men are strictly equal at birth. Rather, he holds that all have the ability, and ought to have the opportunity, to become equal. In this way, Mill believes in the perfectibility of individuals and holds that all can be modeled to excellence. This is part of the reason that Mill lends his support to democracy, for it is the best form of government to bring individuals to their highest potential.

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<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 7, 8, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Christiano, "Democracy", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu.

How one interprets these theoretical characteristics of Mill determines whether one will see Mill as a democrat or as something else. This has given rise to a great debate on whether Mill can be reasonably considered a democrat and it has caused authors to settle, rather predictably, into two camps: first are those who view Mill as an aristocrat, bureaucrat, or generally anti-democratic, and second, is a group of authors who defend Mill's ideas and writings as democratic. While more modern authors are more willing to describe Mill as a democrat, older writers have criticized Mill's weak support for democracy with a trope describing Mill as an "aristocrat hiding in democrat's clothing." While this question has been pushed to the side for some,<sup>5</sup> others have tackled the argument directly.

Authors in the first category, who see Mill as something other than a democrat, include J.H. Burns (1968) and R.J. Halliday (1976). Burns discusses Mill's abandonment of the secret ballot, his argument for plural voting with "education qualifications," and Mill's favor for a new form of electoral systems as three policies which illustrate Mill's lack of commitment to democratic ideals.<sup>6</sup> Burns finishes his chapter by saying that "a consistent viewpoint unites Mill's political thought from start to finish; but it is not, in the strict sense he would himself have adopted, the viewpoint of a democrat." Halliday, similarly, references these aspects of Mill's democratic theory and uses them to call Mill out as a pessimist, a bureaucracy supporter, and ultimately an "aristocrat."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Halliday, like Burns, criticizes Mill's support of "proportional representation and ... a system of transferable votes" as a "demonstration of how

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<sup>5</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002). Her defense of Mill is not directly concerned with defending him as a democrat, rather she is more concerned with understanding Mill as a thinker and defending the salience of representative government more generally.

<sup>6</sup> J.H. Burns. "J.S. Mill and Democracy, 1829-61," In *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J.B. Schneewind, 280-328. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1968), 324.

<sup>7</sup> R.J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 130, 133, 138.

the aristocratic principle could be incorporated legitimately into a representative system.”<sup>8</sup>

Halliday claims that Mill’s intention is to prevent a working-class majority, and ends his chapter saying that “[Mill] had no enthusiasm at all for popular assemblies elected by numerical majorities and was constantly haunted by the fear of a working class despotism.”<sup>9</sup> These authors use Mill’s advocacy for anti-egalitarian policies, such as open ballot and plural voting, to evidence their claim that Mill is an elitist who fears a working-class majority and thus wants to institute reforms which prevent the poor from having a powerful majority in an assembly.

Other, more modern, authors, however, claim that Mill is in fact a democrat and those who believe otherwise are over-simplifying or mis-interpreting Mill’s consequentialism and conception of equality. These authors include Rosen (2013) and Varouxakis (2017). Rosen, rather than take on Mill’s *Considerations* as it has been done before, argues that it ought to be seen as a “method of reform” rather than as a “typology of constitutions.”<sup>10</sup> Rosen suggests that the *Considerations* should be seen as Mill’s attempt to “bring together liberals and conservatives to pursue reform in an ideologically divided society.”<sup>11</sup> Rosen also uses this idea to combat Burns’ notion that Mill’s viewpoint “is not...the viewpoint of a democrat.”<sup>12</sup> Rather, he suggests “that there is nothing in Mill’s method of reform that prevents him from [adopting the viewpoint of a democrat], and, at another point, rejecting it.”<sup>13</sup>

Varouxakis takes this a step further claiming that to really understand Mill, one must understand that he believed that “no single group should be allowed to rule society, no matter

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 136, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Rosen, *Mill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> J.H. Burns. “J.S. Mill and Democracy, 1829-61,” 328.

<sup>13</sup> Rosen, *Mill*, 70.

how qualified or well-meaning.”<sup>14</sup> This understanding of Mill is what allows the compatibility of Mill’s ideas on proportional representation and plural voting with democracy. Varouxakis also indicates that if “elitism” is defined in a certain way, then Mill can be called an elitist; however, that definition would have to be the following: “there were gradations of knowledge, cultivation, or/and expertise, and that the best possible people should be placed in the best possible positions, with the ultimate aim of raising...everyone to the best level of education, cultivation and expertise they could achieve...”<sup>15</sup> This definition illustrates the oversimplification that earlier writers put on Mill and the different interpretation that one can have of Mill’s conception of egalitarianism. The authors who see Mill as a democrat view his conception of egalitarianism and justification for democracy through a lens which allows them to disregard the unequal aspects of the policies he sets forth in exchange for a deeper understanding of Mill’s fear of stagnating society; for these authors, Mill is a democrat because he believes that it creates the best outcome even if there must be some artificial inequality to maintain the conditions required for societal-wide prosperity.

While I agree with Rosen and Varouxakis that Mill ought to be considered a democrat, I argue for the democratic nature of Mill in two innovative ways: first, I hold that Mill is a democrat but only a democrat in principle, and second, I use Mill’s appreciation of Athenian democracy as evidence to show his support for democracy in principle. In essence, I will show that Mill’s appreciation for the guiding principles of the participatory democracy in Athens implies that his own beliefs regarding the principles of democracy are positive and supportive. I will illustrate what I mean by “in principle” in a following section using a passage of Mill and a

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<sup>14</sup> Georgios Varouxakis, “Mill on Democracy Revisited,” In *A Companion to Mill*, ed. Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller, (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 469.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



reexamination of Mill's most controversial policy: plural voting. I will also make the idea of "Athenian appreciation" clear in two ways throughout this paper: explicitly in Mill's own words, and implicitly in the goals and policies that Mill sets forth for his own society and government. I will use four main principles of Mill's writings on government and of the Athenian democracy to organize my argument, each of which, I argue, illustrate Mill's dedication to democracy and represent a commonality between Mill's theory on representative government and principles embodied in Athenian direct democracy. The principles are as follows: knowledge, prevention of consolidated power, participation, and freedom.

Connecting Mill, who is in favor of a representative, indirect democracy, and Athens, a fully participatory, direct democracy, poses the question: if Mill appreciates Athens to such a large extent, why does he advocate for an indirect, instead of a direct, democracy? Mill believes that "all can not, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business."<sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that Mill subscribes to representative government; it is not because it is theoretically superior, but rather, because the issue of scale (a long-identified problem for direct democracy) prevents full size, modern nation-states from adopting fully participatory democracy. I maintain that this is not an issue for my argument, because I hold that indirect, representative governments and direct, participatory governments are both types of democracy in that they both ensure that the sovereign, or "ultimate controlling power," of government is the people.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while it can be argued that

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<sup>16</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (onwards denoted simply by *Considerations*), (Rockville: Serenity Publishers, 2008), 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

Mill would prefer direct democracy in theory, it would not be a useful exercise because it would not be applicable to modern society in any way at any time.<sup>18</sup>

Before moving to the principles underlying Mill's theory of democracy and Athenian institutions, I will first provide a brief background on Mill's connection to Athens and why some refer to Mill as a "Greek intoxicated man."<sup>19</sup> I will then provide a further explanation of how Mill is a democrat "in principle" and how Athens failed to be a democracy "in practice." I make this concept clearer using the example of Mill's policy of plural voting, and how this ceases to be undemocratic in the long run. Following this, I will examine the four principles embodied by Mill and Athens: knowledge, power, participation, and freedom. I will conclude with a few peripheral upshots and how the conclusions of this paper can be used to better society today.

## **Part 2: Mill and Athens**

Mill, in his *Autobiography*, describes at length his childhood education including his instruction in the language, history, and people of Greece. He says that "I have no remembrance of the time when I began to learn Greek. I have been told that it was when I was three years old."<sup>20</sup> At just three years old, Mill was already being taught Greek. Furthermore, from his "eighth to [his] twelfth year," Mill recalls that the Greek books he read were "Illiad and Odyssey through; one or two plays of Sophocles...all Thucydides; the Hellenics of Xenephone; a great

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<sup>18</sup> As will be explained more later in this paper, while this paper is showing Mill's appreciation for democracy in principle, which would imply that it ought to examine his desire for the theoretically superior direct democracy, I maintain Mill's use of representative government because it allows for the potential use of Mill's system in a long-run, ideal society. Examining Mill as a democrat through the lens of direct democracy only disregards the possibility of ever see Mill's ideas come to fruition in modern society because of the inherent limitation of fully participatory democracy. The more interesting and beneficial study is of Mill's appreciation for democracy through representative government, the only type of democracy still possible in modernity.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Packe. *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1954), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 5.

part of Demosthenes...and Aristotle's Rhetoric."<sup>21</sup> Finally, at the age of twelve, Mill began to read books that were "not for the language merely, but also for the thoughts."<sup>22</sup> This is notable not only for the young age at which Mill began this study of the Greek language, but also for the large and varied extent of Greek authors and thinkers that Mill was studying. Mill learned from the Greeks not only political and moral philosophy, but also poetics, rhetoric, and the Socratic method. This study of the Greeks indicates not only how well-informed Mill was on the Ancient Greek world, but also how ingrained it was in him and his ideas for modern society.

At the age of twelve, when Mill finally began reading Greek works for more than just the language, he also began to study Plato extensively. This would continue throughout his life and would culminate in translating and commenting on several of Plato's dialogues.<sup>23</sup> In addition to Plato, Mill also studied Aristotle, Demosthenes, and other prominent Athenians which not only gave Mill a distinctly Greek education, but also provided him with ideas and principles that would follow him the rest of his life and show up in his various books and letters.

Mill's in-depth education in the Greek world also motivated his interest in defending Athens as a democracy. Using his life-long education in Athens, or Greece more generally, and the knowledge gained from Plato, Mill was able to accomplish one of the most important (yet generally unknown) contributions of his life: the fight to reclaim Athens as a democracy and cement the positive meaning of the very term, democracy. One of the most important figures in this fight, along with Mill, was George Grote. As a prominent writer, historian, and politician, Grote is responsible not only for influencing Mill to think about Athens in a radically new way, but also influencing the *entire political and philosophical community* to follow suit. Following

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 16.

the publication of William Mitford's work,<sup>24</sup> which was "full of errors and fuller of anti-democratic prejudice,"<sup>25</sup> on the history of Greece, it was up to Grote to correct these errors with a large "respect for the law of evidence."<sup>26</sup> This meant that Grote was responsible for correcting the history of Greece, but also for producing a history that was more favorable to the democrats of his time.

An important aspect of the acceptance of Grote's reconstruction of a democratic Athens was Mill's defense of Grote in various reviews. In his initial review of Grote's work, Mill says the following of Grote's self-assigned task to "embody in his own mind, and next to lay out before his readers, the general picture of the Grecian world."<sup>27</sup>:

In this undertaking there is work for a succession of thinkers; nor will it be brought to completeness by any one historian or philosopher. But the qualifications of Mr. Grote, and the contents of these two volumes, give assurance that he will be remembered not only as the first who has seriously undertaken the work, but as one who will have made great steps towards accomplishing it.<sup>28</sup>

It is clear that Mill had a strong professional respect for Grote and his writings but Mill also had a close personal friendship with Grote throughout his life. Even as boy, Mill's debating society would meet at Grote's house, sometimes with Grote in attendance, to discuss works on various topics. And although a closer acquaintance to Mill's father, Mill maintained that he was still a close associate with Grote himself.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mill expresses that he read Mitford at a young age, although he says that his "father had put me on my guard against the Tory prejudices of this writer, and his perversions of facts for the whitewashing of despots, and blackening of popular institutions." (Mill, *Autobiography*, 10)

<sup>25</sup> F.E. Sparshott, introduction to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XI - Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), xxviii.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 302.

<sup>27</sup> Mill, "Grote's History of Greece [1]," *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XI - Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*, 275.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 274-275.

<sup>29</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 47.

Mill greatly admired Grote and his work detailing the history of Greece; however, these men did more than expand on and clarify a historical period. Rather, they helped to change the entire conception of the word democracy. In her review of Hansen, Urbinati paraphrases him saying “it was actually the [English Utilitarians] who gave positive meaning to democratic government and dared to make Athens a model for the moderns.”<sup>30</sup> She goes on to say that “Mill did not want to redeem only Athens but democracy itself from its traditionally bad reputation.”<sup>31</sup> Urbinati and Hansen are making it clear that English Utilitarians (Mill and Grote) went beyond “saving” Athens to actually changing the way the word “democracy” was interpreted. Without these individuals, the use of the very term would be dramatically different today. Given this fight to change the understanding of the term democracy and the historical context surrounding Mill’s life, education, and defense of Athens as a truly democratic city-state, I maintain that using Athens to indicate Mill’s approval of democracy, the thesis of this paper, is valid. However, as I will show in the following section, Mill’s approval of Athens was not full and complete; rather, I argue that his approval was in their democratic *principles* only.

### **Part 3: Athens and Mill in Practice and in Principle**

In a more obscure work entitled “State of Society in America,” Mill reviews several works that discuss the democracy of and society in the United States. Although much less influential and popular than Mill’s reviews of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, this work is important to this essay for one reason: it forces one to question Mill’s views on Athens. In discussing a work on America by Colonel Hamilton entitled *Men and Manners in America*, Mill

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<sup>30</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

quotes a lengthy passage from Hamilton's work which ends by saying that "the history of the United States, so far as we have proceeded, we will be regarded by future political philosophers, as furnishing another example [of democracy], not less striking than those of Athens and Rome."<sup>32</sup> To this Mill responds:

There are two or three obvious mistakes in this reasoning, Athens and Rome were not democracies, but altogether, and exclusively, governments by a leisured class: their experience, therefore, though it throws light upon many of the effects of free institutions in general, cannot be quoted as evidence on the subject of democracy.<sup>33</sup>

At first glance, this statement seems to be clear evidence that Mill did not see Athens as a democracy and that there was nothing, regarding democracy, from Athens worth salvaging. However, upon closer inspection, it appears there is more going on beneath the surface. Furthermore, this deeper meaning can be used to better understand Mill's appreciation for Athens and provide a much-needed caveat to the perfect light that Athens can sometimes be presented in.

To get to this deeper meaning, one must first understand how democratic Athens truly, and *practically*, was in its own time. Athens was not a perfect society. It is infamously known to have held slaves and oppress women and foreigners by not giving them equal political or social rights. Ober says:

Athenians remained attached to practices that were morally indefensible and economically unproductive. Classical Athens never approached its threshold of optimal performance in part because the Athenians failed to promote political equality beyond the ranks of native males. Much dispersed and potentially useful social and technical knowledge remained publicly inaccessible because the Athenian male citizens refused to accept women as full participants in the participatory political order, were too slow to naturalize long-term residents as citizens, and remained committed to slaveholding.... These failings must be weighed heavily when judging Athens as a moral community, and

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<sup>32</sup> Mill, "State of Society in America," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XVIII – Essays on Politics and Society Part I*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 110.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

they arguably contributed to Athens' eclipse in the late fourth century by the national empire of Macedon.<sup>34</sup>

This understanding of Athens is not merely a modern realization. Urbinati maintains that Grote's interpretation of Athens also included an understanding of Athens' moral failings:

Mill's and Grote's reinterpretation of the polis spoke to the moderns in a language that was neither mythological nor eulogistic. The Athens they depicted was neither tumultuous nor totalitarian, nor, on the other hand, was it a divine realm of perfection.<sup>35</sup>

This refined, moderate understanding of Athens, thus, requires a moderate and critical understanding of Mill's appreciation for Athenian institutions.

Although identifying Athens as a flawed democracy is a crucial component in using Athens as an example in any way, there still exists a tension in Mill's thought: at points, Mill appreciates Athens for its democratic institutions, yet he clearly stated that Athens is not a democracy and it should not be used as "evidence on the subject of democracy." Furthermore, Mill defends democratic interpretations of Athens, such as Grote's, and specifically cites Athens in a fight for democracy.

How, then, can one make sense of Mill given this tension, and doesn't this hinder my argument that Mill is a democrat given his appreciation for Athens? To clear the tension in Mill's thought, I suggest a more nuanced understanding of Athens as a democracy: Athens was not *practicing* a democracy, rather the "Athens" that Mill appreciates is an Athens in *principle* only. As was pointed out by Ober and Urbinati, Athens was flawed; no women could participate, slaves were held, foreigners had restricted rights. In this way, Athens was not a true democracy. Additionally, Mill gets at another flaw of the Athenian system as it was actually *practiced*:

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<sup>34</sup> Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>35</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 15.

Athens was ruled by a leisured class.<sup>36</sup> This could be interpreted in the same ways as previously identified, women and the poor had restricted rights; however, another interpretation gets at a different problem of Athens in practice. Because one had to be in attendance at the assembly, or other institutions, to vote and participate, it excluded labourers that had to work in order to maintain a living. This allowed for the rich and higher classes to hold greater power in society and government and an ability to participate at a higher rate. With this in mind, one can reevaluate Mill's appreciation for the Athenian institutions *in principle* only. This is what Mill is getting at when he says that the Athenian experience can throw "light upon many of the effects of free institutions in general."<sup>37</sup> When Mill is appreciating the Nomothetai, the Athenian use of the ballot, the high level of open participation, or the instructive nature of Athenian institutions, he is not making a judgment about Athens *in practice* but only *in principle*. This kind of conclusion also allows for greater understanding of Mill and his views on democracy outside of Athens.

### Plural Voting and Mill in Principle

The idea of principle over practice doesn't only apply to Mill's thoughts on Athens; rather, one can also see the democratic nature of one of Mill's most "antidemocratic" policies when viewed in the light of principle rather than practice. This policy is plural voting, and for Mill it is the idea that those who are more educated, or have greater "mental superiority," should have more votes in an election than others.<sup>38</sup> This, seemingly obviously anti-democratic policy has been used by most critics as evidence that Mill is not committed to democracy. If he were,

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<sup>36</sup> Mill, *State of Society in America*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 106.



then he would avoid a policy so anti-egalitarian that it seems to defeat the entire purpose of including all voices in the political process.

In an attempt to clarify his idea, Mill says:

in all human affairs, every person directly interested...has an admitted claim to a voice, and when his exercise of it is not inconsistent with the safety of the whole, can not justly be excluded from it. But (though every one ought to have a voice) that every one should have an equal voice is a totally different proposition.<sup>39</sup>

For Mill, the idea of plural voting is an important way to overcome issues of representative government, such as sinister interests, by ensuring that “the judgment of the higher moral or intellectual being is worth more than that of the inferior...”<sup>40</sup> To compensate for this potential anti-democratic nature, Mill says that “the plurality of votes must on no account be carried so far that those who are privileged by it, or the class (if any) to which they mainly belong, shall outweigh by means of it all the community.”<sup>41</sup> Mill has been greatly criticized by democrats for his endorsement of plural voting (although he did change his position on the topic later in life), and it is easy to see how this voting scheme is anti-egalitarian. Some have characterized Mill’s acceptance then rejection of plural voting as a failing in the practical nature of the voting scheme; Urbinati says:

[Mill] mitigated his enthusiasm for the mechanism when he realized it could be used to protect property interests, rather than an open race for the selection of virtuous and competent representatives...However, Mill’s increasing doubts concerned the effectiveness of plural voting, not its logic.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>42</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 94-95.

I disagree with this argument, however, and suggest that the best way to understand Mill's view on plural voting is to flip this argument and establish plural voting as a short-term, practical requirement in a flawed democratic society.

I argue that, much like the idea that Mill's appreciation of Athens is in principle not in practice, Mill's appreciation for plural voting was due to its ability to increase the voice of individuals with "higher moral or intellectual" worth; however, the necessity to give greater voice to these individuals would diminish with the establishment of some equalizing force to bring all individuals to a high level of moral or intellectual worth. For Mill, this came in the form of a national education system. He says that

If [plural voting] ever overcomes the strong feeling which exists against it, this will only be after the establishment of a systematic National Education by which the various grades of politically valuable acquirement may be accurately defined and authenticated. Without this it will always remain liable to strong, possibly conclusive, objections; and with this, it would perhaps not be needed.<sup>43</sup>

While most read this and see that Mill contends that he wants plural voting to overcome the feelings against it and thus eventually become implemented, I maintain that what is most important is the final statement: "it would perhaps not be needed." Thus, in the long-term with a "National Education" system, society would no longer need plural voting. Furthermore, given Mill's other reforms, universal education would be bolstered by the educative quality inherent in properly constituted political institutions. This further increases the levels of moral and intellectual worth of individuals living in Mill's ideal society and reduces the need for plural voting. Additionally, Mill's notion of human perfectibility furthers the notion that all could rise to be of equal excellence and intellectual worth.

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<sup>43</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 165.

Given this understanding of plural voting and the Athenian democracy, where does it leave Mill's commitment to democracy? This means that Mill is a democrat, but a democrat only in principle, only in the long-term, only in the ideal. Mill doesn't trust democracy to be democracy in practice; it is for this reason that he denies that Athens is a democracy and defends the use of plural voting to overcome the practical inadequacies of democracy in practice. This understanding of Mill also illuminates why Mill's thoughts on government and society are so extensive and interconnected. Mill's "ideal" system only works when his views on freedom of speech, individuality, the existence of a legislative commission, proportional representation, and national education are all given. With a missing link, the system fails, thereby requiring Mill, if he is going to describe a complete system, to stay in the principled, "long-term" world, for his system is unlikely to work in practice (at least at first). Furthermore, this helps to illustrate why Mill is not only a democrat "in principle," he is also a democrat "in the long run." Mill's plans for democracy are not entirely infeasible or practically impossible (if they were, it would make more sense to favor an equally infeasible form of government in modernity such a pure direct democracy), rather, many other aspects of the government and society would also have to be implemented to turn Mill's democracy into a reality.

With a greater understanding of Mill, Athens, and my argument, I will now turn to the principles which underlie the democratic nature of Mill and the democracy of Athens. Illustrating Mill's appreciation for Athens within each of these four themes, or principles, could occur in any order as they each live on their own as unique, although related, aspects of Athens and Mill's theory. However, I order the principles in the way that I do for two reasons: first, this is the order, in general, by which Mill moves through these topics, and second, the first two principles, knowledge and power, can be thought of as Mill expressing the issues found in modern,

majoritarian electoral systems, and the latter two principles, participation and freedom, as the means or motivating forces to a solution, which, for Mill, is proportional representation. For Mill, political institutions that lack educative qualities and allow for power to be consolidated are an issue for modern democracies. As I will show, Mill believes that proportional representation, and greater democracy in general, helps to solve these issues and further promotes greater participation and freedom.

## **Part 4: Knowledge and its Importance to Democracy**

I will begin this section with an examination of an explicit reference that Mill made to the educative quality of Athenian institutions. I will then continue to an examination of an implicit connection between Mill's criteria for judging governments and the Athenian tribal system, as well as to Plato's *Protagoras*, in order to illustrate the inherent appreciation that Mill has for the institutions of Athens. Using Mill's criterion, or principles, of good government, which on their own help to illustrate the democratic nature of Mill, and these explicit and implicit connections, I will show how Mill can be viewed as a democrat.

### Education in Athenian Institutions

In the chapter "That the Ideally Best Form of Government is Representative Government" of his *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill discusses the problems associated with a government run by a "good despot" and makes an argument for the superiority of representative government. Additionally, Mill talks about the importance that knowledge should play in a society and how a government should create institutions which utilize and improve the moral and intellectual qualities of its citizens; this is, at least in part, why Mill

maintains that representative government is the ideal form of government. It is at the end of this chapter that Mill says,

Notwithstanding the defects of the social system and moral ideas of antiquity, the practice of the dicastery and the ecclesia raised the intellectual standard of an average Athenian citizen far beyond any thing of which there is yet an example in any other mass of men, ancient or modern. The proofs of this are apparent in every page of our great historian of Greece; but we need scarcely look further than to the high quality of the address which their great orators deemed best calculated to act with effect on their understanding and will. A benefit of the same kind, though far less in degree, is produced on Englishmen of the lower middle class by their liability to be placed on juries and to serve parish offices, which, though it does not occur to so many, not is so continuous, nor introduces them to so great a variety of elevated considerations as to admit of comparison with the public education which every citizen of Athens obtained from her democratic institutions, makes them nevertheless very different beings, in range of ideas and development of faculties, from those who have done nothing in their lives but drive a quill, or sell goods over a counter.<sup>44</sup>

In order to fully understand this quote, one must first understand Mill's principles for a good government, why he views representative government as the best form of government, and what the Ecclesia and the dicastery are, and how they functioned as a part of the Athenian society.

The first criterion, or principle, of good government that Mill identifies is the ability of a government to increase the good qualities held by its people; he says that a government is good to "the degree in which it [the government] tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually, since, besides that their well-being is the sole object of government, their good qualities supply the moving force which works the machinery."<sup>45</sup> The second principle/criterion is the quality of the institutions of the government inasmuch as they are able to effectively and efficiently use the good qualities of the people. Mill gets at this when he discusses the "quality of the machinery itself" saying that judgment should be based on "the

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<sup>44</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 48

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

degree in which it [the government] is adapted to take advantage of the amount of good qualities which may at any time exist, and make them instrumental to the right purposes."<sup>46</sup>

Mill uses these criteria to justify that representative government, correctly constituted, is the best form of government. To get at this idea, Mill starts by examining whether a “good despotism” would be the ideal form of government. For Mill, this type of government fails because a “good despotism means a government...in which all the collective interest of the people are managed for them, all the thinking that has relation to collective interests done for them, and in which their minds are formed by, and consenting to, this abdication of their own energies.”<sup>47</sup> When this type of government is directly compared to a representative form, Mill discovers that representative government is a superior form of government because "human beings are only secure from evil at the hands of others in proportion as they have the power of being, and are, *self-protecting*."<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Mill says "they [human beings] only achieve a high degree of success in their struggle with Nature in proportion as they are *self-dependent*, relying on what they themselves can do, either separately or in concert, rather than on what others do for them."<sup>49</sup> In this way, Mill believes, based on the principles of good government outlined previously, that “good despotism” fails because it prevents people from doing, and having the power to do, things for themselves. In this way, as Brady points out, representative government is a demanding form of government which requires the participation of active persons who must be ready and willing to take on the responsibilities of a representative system in order to prevent it from deteriorating into tyranny.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Brady, introduction to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XVIII - Essays on Politics and Society Part I*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1977), xxxvii.

The last part of background knowledge necessary to fully understand this passage is an explanation of the ecclesia and the dicastery. These are Athenian institutions which Mill says are responsible for educating the citizens of Athens. The ecclesia, or the Assembly, is where 6000 Athenians would gather 30-40 times a year to make decisions.<sup>51</sup> It is important to know that the Assembly is commonly understood to represent the entire body of people; however one must also keep in mind that, as Hansen says, “Athens was a radical democracy in which power was exercised by an Assembly in which the majority were *thetes*.”<sup>52</sup> The *thetes* were the lowest property class in Athens and was made up by day labourers.<sup>53</sup> This is an important consideration because, as will become clear, even the lowest class was educated by the institutions inherent in the functioning of the government. The other institution that Mill makes reference to is the dicastery, or the “People’s Court.”<sup>54</sup> While this refers to any court of law in the entire legal system established in Athens, Mill was likely referring to the “great jury courts that were the hallmark of the democracy.”<sup>55</sup> What made these courts the “hallmark” of Athens is two-part: that the entire system was run by amateurs and that 6000 citizens made up the pool to be selected as jurors.<sup>56</sup> Both of these illustrate the importance of ordinary citizens which gained knowledge from the institutions themselves, especially when one considers that most of the jurors for any given case at any given time were generally the poorest citizens in Athens.<sup>57</sup>

With a greater understanding of Mill’s principles for good government, his justification for why representative government is the best form of government, and the ecclesia and the

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<sup>51</sup> Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 142.

<sup>52</sup> Morgens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, trans. J.A. Crook. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1999, 126.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 30

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 180, 181.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

dicastery, one can return to the original passage above to understand Mill's commitment to democracy. The educative quality which Mill gives to the Athenian institutions connects them to the principles of good government; the ability of the ecclesia and the dicastery, which Mill ascribes to them, to utilize the moral and intellectual sentiments effectively and to increase them in Athenians allows one to say that Mill himself would judge Athens as a "good" government. This appreciation for Athens, a democratic society which included many ordinary and poor citizens into its institutions, illustrates Mill's approval of and commitment to democracy. Further, this quote helps to illuminate that Mill is not the elitist that many accuse him of being. That the Athenian Assembly and court system included so many individuals from lower property classes helps to illustrate the inclusivity of Athenian democratic institutions. Additionally, the educative quality of the institutions shows that even those of the lowest class who couldn't afford formal education or tutors, could still learn by attending the assembly or serving as a juror thereby increasing the overall knowledge of the Athenian society, a quality that Mill clearly appreciated given this passage and his principles of good government. Mill's appreciation for the democratic institutions as the bedrock of education in Athens can also be seen through Mill's connection to one of Athens most famous thinkers: Plato.

### Knowledge, Protagoras, and Democracy

Mill's principles of good government have previously been discussed within the context of democracy's power to educate its citizens, which, for Mill, is why democracy is a superior form of government even when compared to a good despot. This is a clear subscription to the superiority of democracy over other forms of government; however, Mill's commitment to democracy can be taken further when described in context with another Athenian characteristics



not previously discussed: the teachability of “citycraft”<sup>58</sup> described in Plato’s *Protagoras*. The challenge with showing implicit appreciation for Athens within Mill’s work is proving a firm connection between Mill and the Athenian characteristics which I argue Mill was influenced by when writing his own theories on government and democracy. I plan to illustrate the connection here using Mill’s *Autobiography* which details his intense and lifelong study of the Ancient world, and his work discussing, translating, and summarizing Plato’s dialogues. Given a successful connection, I argue that there is sufficient evidence to say that Mill was influenced by and appreciated Athenian, and thus democratic, characteristics. Therefore, one is led to conclude that Mill could be considered a democrat.

*Protagoras*, suspected to be one of Plato’s earliest works,<sup>59</sup> depicts Socrates recounting a story in which he has a conversation with a Sophist, or a foreign teacher/tutor stereotypically described as a thief and disliked and untrusted by much of the Athenian public, named Protagoras. Over the course of the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras the men discuss topics such as the composition of virtue, whether justice and holiness are the same, the virtues of poetry, and whether pleasure is good and displeasure evil. The first topic of discussion, however, and the most prominent for this paper is whether excellence in politics (later generalized to civic virtue) is teachable from one man to another. Socrates maintains that political virtue is not teachable, saying:

But hitherto I had imagined that what you profess to teach is not capable of being taught, or delivered from men to men. For the Athenians, who are a wise people, if in their assembly they are deliberating on ship-building, send for the ship-builders to advise them, and will hear nobody else; if about building a house, they will listen to nobody but architects; and if any one else, however noble or rich, attempt to speak, they scoff and drive him away. But when the discussion is upon anything which concerns the general

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<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Hubbard and Karnofsky, 150.

<sup>59</sup> Mill, “The Protagoras,” *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XI - Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*, 42.

management of the state, they listen to persons of all ranks and professions without distinction, and never think of reproaching any man for presuming to advise on the subject when he has never studied it, or learned it of a master.<sup>60</sup>

Protagoras, however, holds that civic virtue is, in fact, teachable and gives a narrative regarding how Zeus gave humans “Shame and Justice, in order that there might be mutual bonds among men, and that society might be possible,” and when asked if he should give Shame and Justice only to some men or to all, Zeus said to give it to all.<sup>61</sup>

Protagoras furthers his argument by saying that no man pretends to be unjust, rather unjust men pretend to be just, as what is expected is for all men to be just.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Protagoras uses a theoretical society built on flute-playing to illustrate how even the worst flute-players in a community built around music are still better than those outside of the society altogether. Protagoras says:

if society could not exist unless all could play on the flute, and if all were taught to play, and reproached if they played ill, instead of being envied for playing well--(as at present men are not envied for being just and virtuous, since it is every man's interest that others should be just and virtuous, for which reason we are all eager to teach justice and virtue to all men)--do you suppose that the sons of good flute-players would be better players than other men? Not so. Whoever had the best natural disposition for music would be the best player: a good player's son would often play ill--the son of a bad player, well; but all would be competent players, compared with those who knew nothing of music whatever. In like manner all civilized men, even the most unjust, if compared with men among whom there is no training, no tribunals, no laws, with the wild men of whom poets tell us, would appear a perfect master in virtue...<sup>63</sup>

Through this thought experiment, Protagoras seeks to show that all are teachers of virtue, for all are trying to teach each other to play in order to maintain a society. It is for this reason, then, that Socrates finds no teachers of virtue. To illustrate this point, Protagoras says “because all are teachers of virtue, you will not allow that any are so: just as if you were to inquire in this city

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 51.

who teaches Greek, you would find nobody.”<sup>64</sup> Socrates thinks that all are allowed to participate in the assembly with regard to a general question of state because no one could be expected to have advanced knowledge, through training with a teacher, on civic virtue; however, what he misunderstands is that *all* are trained through a teacher for *all* are teaching *all* others the craft of civic virtue.

Protagoras’ stance on this issue illustrates a democratic view that professes that all should be included in the political process as all are equally capable of having and learning virtue. This is in comparison to Plato’s Socrates whose claim suggests a less democratic form of government, a government of the few, as only select individuals can hold the virtue required to have political excellence. If Protagoras’ view could be connected back to Mill, there is reason to believe that Mill would be a democrat. Fortunately, as I have already identified, there are aspects of Mill’s life that connect him back to Plato: Mill translated *The Protagoras* himself (his translation was used for each passage above) and his life-long education in the Greek world helps to connect him back to the ideas found in *The Protagoras*.

In Mill’s *Autobiography*, he discusses the point where his father drew his attention to the insight that could be gathered regarding Athenian institutions, and Mill says that “it was at this period that I read, for the first time, some of the most important dialogues of Plato, in particular the Gorgias, the Protagoras, and the Republic. There is no author to whom my father thought himself more indebted for his own mental culture, than Plato, or whom he more frequently recommended to young students. I can bear similar testimony in regard to myself.”<sup>65</sup> This passage is crucial to connecting Mill and *The Protagoras* because it not only illustrates Mill

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 15-16.

familiarity with Plato at a young age, but also uncovers Mill's personal feeling of indebtedness towards Plato's thinking. This does not mean that Mill believed everything that Plato said; in fact Mill says that "I have felt ever since that the title of Platonist belongs by far better right to those who have been nourished in, and have endeavored to practice Plato's mode of investigation, than to those who are distinguished only by the adoption of certain dogmatical conclusions, drawn mostly from the least intelligible of his works..."<sup>66</sup> This illustrates that Mill, considering himself in debt to Plato, was a larger follower of Plato's method rather than Plato's ideas.

This Greek education alone, however, does not connect Mill to Protagoras' words; yet, Mill does say leading up to his "abstract" of *The Protagoras* that "when [Protagoras] is suffered to state his sentiments at length, what he utters is by no means either absurd or immoral, but, on the contrary, sound and useful good sense."<sup>67</sup> It seems clear, then, that Mill, forced to pick a side, would be inclined to join Protagoras over Socrates. This sentiment is furthered by the previous conclusion that Mill is likely not a follower of Plato's ideas, but rather the Platonic method. Urbinati also agrees that Mill would fall in line with Protagoras; using this connection, she describes "two crucial aspects of political life under a free government: first, the utility of competence for the public good, and second, the educational function of public participation."<sup>68</sup> These democratic values professed in *The Protagoras*, as well as the connection between Plato and Mill identified here, help to cement Mill's appreciation of Athens and his democratic tendencies.

It is certain that Mill had an intimate and deep connection to Plato's works; it also appears that if he had to fall in line with either Plato's Socrates or Plato's Protagoras, Mill would

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, "Essays on Philosophy and the Classics", 44.

<sup>68</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 53.

be inclined to agree with Protagoras. This means that, given Mill's own discussion of the best form of being representative government and the inherent references discussed in this section, that Mill can be placed on the side of democracy. The next way that I illustrate how Mill can be considered a democrat is through a common Athenian and Millian principle: power and precautions against powerful groups. This is another principle that Mill uses to emphasize the downfall of modern representative systems as they allow for groups to consolidate power and use that power against smaller, less powerful groups. Commitment to this principle, even though seemingly anti-democratic means, shows Mill as a democratic thinker.

## **Part 5: The Prevention of Consolidated Power**

Varouxakis, in an effort to affirm Mill as a democrat, argues that “a key to understanding Mill's pronouncements on democracy...was his strong attachment to the idea that no power, value, group, or idea should be allowed to preponderate exclusively in any society and that instead a healthy level of diversity and antagonism had to be kept up, artificially if necessary, in order to prevent societies from stagnating.”<sup>69</sup> What Varouxakis is getting at is Mill's commitment to ensuring a wide variety of opinions, preventing “sinister interests” from overpowering the “general interest,” and providing a system of representation that does not give all power to a single group but rather fosters better policy through antagonistic and competitive groups. In this section, I will examine two direct, explicit references that Mill makes in appreciation of Athens for their ability to achieve the kinds of goals that Varouxakis identifies. Additionally, I will connect Mill's discussion on interests and a working-class majority to the collective, yet fractured Council of 500 and the Tribal system in Athens.

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<sup>69</sup> Varouxakis, “Mill on Democracy Revisited,” 454.

## Constitutional Precautions and the Nomothetai

In his chapter “On the Proper Functions of Representative Bodies,” Mill discusses the meaning of representative government as “the whole people...exercise through deputies periodically elected by themselves the ultimate controlling power.”<sup>70</sup> However, Mill goes on to say that a proper representative government does not leave all decision making power in a single body directly responsible to the people; he says:

The British government is thus a representative government in the correct sense of the term; and the powers which it leaves in hands not directly accountable to the people can only be considered as precautions which the ruling power is willing should be taken against its own errors. Such precautions have existed in all well-constructed democracies. The Athenian Constitution had many such provisions, and so has that of the United States.<sup>71</sup>

On first examination, this passage seems clearly anti-democratic and contradictory; Mill is at one point wanting to give ultimate power to the people, yet very quickly takes it back by praising governments that do not leave power in the hands of bodies accountable to the people. Before being able to fully understand this seemingly contradictory and possibly anti-democratic passage, two ideas of Mill must be made clear: first, his theory of interests, and second his conceptual difference between controlling the business of government and actually doing the business of government. Once the contradiction and anti-democratic appearance of the passage is corrected, I will then explore Mill’s connection to Athens with an example of one such “provision” that Mill is praising.

Mill’s theory of interests is a major aspect of his theory of government, and it also is a crucial component of what makes Mill a democrat. Mill, contrary to popular belief, was a major

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<sup>70</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 59.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

proponent of legislating with regard to the “general interest.” While similar to Rousseau’s conception of the “general will,” Mill’s conception of the general interest does not entail the metaphysical issues of a will that each person has but does not know that they have. Rather, Mill’s “general interest” is the policy or action which promotes the most good for society on the whole. Sinister interests, on the other hand, are “interests conflicting more or less with the general good of the community,” or “the danger of class legislation, of government intended for...the immediate benefit of the dominant class, to the lasting detriment of the whole.”<sup>72</sup> In this way, Mill is seeking a government which can legislate in the general interest therefore bypassing the danger of sinister interests and making it so that “no class, and no combination of classes likely to combine, shall be able to exercise a preponderant influence in the government.”<sup>73</sup> This is arguably the most important part of a correctly constituted representative government for Mill because sinister interests are the largest danger that Mill feels is likely to harm a society.<sup>74</sup>

Based on the importance of the general interest and the principles of good government discussed earlier, Mill creates a distinction between “talking” and “doing,” or “controlling the business of government and actually doing it.”<sup>75</sup> For Mill, “talking” involves the responsibility to deliberate about the problems important to society, but not actually coming up with the policies that will be used to fix these social or economic issues. This task, according to Mill, should be given to a popular assembly. However, also part of this assembly’s duty would be to decide, or “control,” who would be the ones actually coming up with the solutions for the problems that the assembly discusses.<sup>76</sup> Because “the work” of government is a type of “intellectual work,”

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 78, 83.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

according to Mill, it must be done “only by experienced and exercised minds” and “minds trained to the task though long and laborious study.”<sup>77</sup> This is why Mill calls for a legislative Commission charged with making the laws where the individuals that make up this Commission are selected by the representative assembly. Thus, Mill’s ideal legislature<sup>78</sup> would be split between elected officials, directly responsible to the people, who deliberate and control the legislative process and a legislative Commission, selected by the assembly, tasked with writing laws which are then voted upon by the assembly (part of their “control” over the laws). This split indicates not only Mill’s precaution against giving complete power to the people, but also the importance that Mill places on competency (represented by the Commission) in government in order to bring about laws which aim at the best long-term solutions.

With this clarity, one can return to the quote to fully understand what Mill is saying and why it does not force him out of the democratic camp. Mill is concerned with giving all power to a body directly responsible to the people because the people, a combined group of individuals generally concerned with only their sinister interests and lacking the competency of trained experts, will not be held to legislating in the general interest. Rather, a body directly accountable to the people will take on and advocate for policies merely concerned with the majority interest and against what is best for society long-term. Thus, Mill’s concern about not giving complete power to a body of the people is not anti-democratic; rather he is attempting to prevent a class-majority from directing the entire legislation of a country away from the long-term general interest, and thus, is democratic in the sense that he wants to ensure what is best for the entire society.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> This distinction is not one between legislative and executive. Rather Mill’s “talking” versus “doing” is within the legislative part of the government. He is splitting the power of the legislature between representatives and, in a sense, a bureaucracy held responsible to/controlled by the representative assembly.



Further, one can see from Mill's distinction between 'talking' and 'doing' that the concern raised in the passage is not anti-democratic, for Mill still maintains that a body accountable to the people should have a crucial role in government; that role is deliberation. Urbinati discusses the power of talking when she says "focus on deliberation allows us to perceive participation and representation not as two alternative forms of democracy but as related forms constituting the *continuum* of political action in modern democracies."<sup>79</sup> This helps to bring Mill's stance on restricting the power of the people's role in politics in line with a democratic commitment by providing a strong and productive role for talking rather than merely holding power through writing laws. In this way, Mill is not curtailing the power of people at all; in fact, Mill is in favor of strengthening the power of people's voices through proportional representation (as will be discussed later). Furthermore, Mill wants to maintain the power of the people through their exacting control over the Commission by being able to dictate who is in the Commission and having the final say on what becomes law.

This balance of power also exists in Athens. In the previous passage, Mill mentions that the "Athenian Constitution had many such provisions" to leave power in bodies not directly accountable to the people; what provisions is he referring to? This question is answered later in the same chapter when Mill describes the actual creation of a legislative Commission which fits the role of "doing the work of government" described previously. In the following passage, the "provision" that Mill is referring to is a Commission which would draft the laws, but not actually enact the laws<sup>80</sup>:

The necessity of some provision corresponding to this was felt even in the Athenian Democracy, where, in the time of its most complete ascendancy, the popular Ecclesia could pass psephisms (mostly decrees on single matters of policy), but laws, so called,

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<sup>79</sup> Urbinati, "Representation as Advocacy: A Study of Democratic Deliberation," *Political Theory* 28, no. 6 (2000) 759.

<sup>80</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 67.

could only be made or altered by a different and less numerous body, renewed annually, called the Nomothetae, whose duty it also was to revise the whole of the laws, and keep them consistent with one another.<sup>81</sup>

To understand what Mill is getting at when he expresses his appreciation for the existence of the “Nomothetae,” or Nomothetai, I will further explain the origin and purpose of the Nomothetai before connecting this passage back to the previous passage as it is an extension of the same concepts.

Following the restoration of full democracy in 403, the Athenians decided to revise the laws that had existed up to that point and decide if any new laws should come into existence with the rebirth of the democracy. In order to do this, they established two legislative boards: one was entrusted with the responsibility of collecting all previously existing legislation and the second board was to “perform a ‘test’ of all the laws” by holding a hearing and voting on whether the law should be accepted or not.<sup>82</sup> This set the stage for all future legislation to be either laws, or “general norms” applying to all people for all time and made by a board of nomothetai, or decrees, which were passed in the assembly as “individual norms” that only applied to individual persons or as temporary measures.<sup>83</sup> In addition to the difference in the type of content of each type of legislation, the processes of passing decrees versus laws was also very different. Passing a decree was the same as it had always been: all that was required was an individual proposing some policy in the assembly and a simple majority voting in favor of the proposal.<sup>84</sup> The process to pass a law, however, was much more stringent.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>82</sup> Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 163.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>84</sup> Of course, the Council of 500 still maintained the power to set the agenda which may have prevented an individual from proposing any law at any time.

The initial phase required an individual, either during the first assembly meeting of the year where all the current laws were put up for acceptance or during any other assembly meeting of the year, to propose an alternative to an existing law (the thesmothetai could also initiate this process of reviewing an existing law).<sup>85</sup> First, the individual who wishes to propose the new law was required to publish it “before the Monument of the Eponymous Heroes in the Agora.”<sup>86</sup> Once the new law is proposed, it is then up to the assembly to decide if the revision is needed, and, if so, who will be the five advocates of the existing law. The proposed law is also read aloud in the Assembly to give an opportunity for debate there. At a following meeting of the Assembly, it is decided how many members of the nomothetai there will be, and on the morning of the date decided on for consideration of the new proposal that number of nomothetai are selected “by lot from those who have sworn the Heliastic Oath.”<sup>87</sup> The legislative process then runs like a trial with the individual who proposed the new law acting as the prosecutor of the old law, and the pre-selected advocates of the old law acting as the defense. After both groups have spoken, the nomothetai vote and if the majority vote for the new proposal it then becomes law.<sup>88</sup>

While Mill did not have such an extensive understanding of the Nomothetai as scholars do today,<sup>89</sup> he did understand that it was a check on the power of the Assembly, or Ecclesia, to pass laws that may harm the general interest. The long process of passing a law in the Nomothetai, compared to the old style of legislation, ensured that a proposal was enacted for its ability to help the entire society rather than merely on a faction’s ability to push legislation

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<sup>85</sup> Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 166.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>89</sup> Hansen says that “the legislative commissions proposed by John Stuart Mill in *Representative Government* as an attempt to balance the powers of the elected parliament were inspired by the Athenian fourth century Boards of *Nomothetai* which Grote, erroneously, had projected back into the age of Perikles (Grote (1848) 19-26)” (Hansen, *The Tradition of Ancient Greek Democracy and its Importance for Modern Democracy*, Copenhagen: 2005, 35-36)

through the Assembly. A priori, it can be thought that, given a strong enough faction or a particularly divisive issue, a law, in the old style of legislating, could be passed by its factional support and not because of its ability to help all Athenians. This provides justification for the Nomothetai and Mill's Commission, as a law must be evaluated at multiple stages over a longer period of time or by a group of experts committed to the general interest. The nomothetai process gives individuals greater opportunity to evaluate the law, come up with better arguments for and against it, and discuss its potential impacts with their fellow Athenians. Because the legal process wasn't completed in a single session of the Assembly, there was far more discussion and thought put into a law's ability to help the common good.

This check by the nomothetai on the assembly can be connected to Mill through Grote.

Grote says:

And there can be no doubt that the nomothetae afforded much greater security than the public assembly, for a proper decision. That security depended upon the same principle as we see to pervade all the constitutional arrangements of Athens; upon a fraction of the people casually taken, but sufficiently numerous to have the same interest with the whole, -not permanent, but delegated for the occasion, - assembled under a solemn sanction, and furnished with a full exposition of both sides of the case. The power of passing psephisms, or special decrees, still remained with the public assembly, which was doubtless much more liable to be surprised into hasty or inconsiderate decision than either the dikastery or the nomothetre.<sup>90</sup>

Grote points out that greater security was given to the well-being of society by forcing decisions on laws through the nomothetai instead of allowing the "hasty or inconsiderate" assembly to make final decisions. Urbinati says of this examination that "Mill profited from Grote's analysis."<sup>91</sup> This analysis allowed Mill to illustrate the necessity of some other body, not help directly responsible to the people, in order to secure the nation from sinister interests and

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<sup>90</sup> Grote, *History of Greece*, Volume V, 374.

<sup>91</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 62.

incompetent law-makers. In this way, as Urbinati says, “the legislative commissions were meant to play the same supervisory role as the nomothetai in Grote’s reconstruction.”<sup>92</sup>

Both Mill’s Commission and the Nomothetai prevent consolidated power to enact laws by splitting up the roles of government between doing and controlling. In this way, one can see Mill’s commitment to democracy goes beyond simply providing all power to the people in an arbitrary way; rather, Mill is concerned with the true purpose of democracy: ensuring that all are given the opportunity to participate and have a role in the actions of government. Without precautions against giving all power to a single body directly responsible to the people, a single group or majority could control all aspects of a government to the detriment of other members of society. This commitment to the general interest, despite having to restrict the “power of the people,” is what helps to justify the view of Mill as a democrat. Additionally, because Mill goes about providing for the general interest through a restriction on the people, this greater understanding of Mill helps to show why some interpret Mill as anti-democratic despite his commitment to the general interest. While this shows one of the most important ways in which Athens prevented sinister interests from pervading on the good of the whole, it is not the only way. Rather, the Athenian system also provided a means to accomplish the same goal through cooperation amongst individuals.

### Cooperation and the Council of 500

I have already discussed two interconnected passages from Mill’s discussion on constitutional precautions, an Athenian example of one such precaution: the Nomothetai, and how this helps to prevent the consolidation of power within a group of individuals sharing the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 63.

same sinister interest. In this section, I will continue with this same overall theme; however, now I will stress a similarity between Mill's thought, and one of Grote's arguments about the Tribal system in Athens and the Council of 500. This section will also use an argument from Paga regarding the importance of tritty-level "civic-centers" which brought together individuals from various backgrounds into a single area. Before moving into Mill's implicit appreciation for the tribal system of Athens, I will provide a description of exactly how the Tribes of Athens operated and originated.

The Athenian revolution occurred in 508/7 when Isagoras called on the Spartans to help him consolidate power and remove his political rival, Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes, realizing that Isagoras was getting the upper hand in his rivalry, decided to bring the people into his party by proposing democratic policies<sup>93</sup>; this is what led to Isagoras calling for his removal. Once the Spartan King, Cleomenes, arrived and Cleisthenes had successfully been exiled, the Athenians took it into their own hands and revolted against the Spartan intruders.<sup>94</sup> After expelling the Spartans, the citizens of Athens called Cleisthenes back into Athens and he instituted the democratic reforms that he had previously proposed. One of these reforms included a new Tribal System.

The new tribal system created ten tribes which, unlike the previous Solonian tribes based on family relations, were artificial constructions made by Cleisthenes.<sup>95</sup> The tribes were artificial in the sense that there was no underlying rationale for their organization, rather they were completely man-made. The one criteria by which they were organized was that Cleisthenes

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<sup>93</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. David Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5.66.

<sup>94</sup> Josiah Ober, "The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.: Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy," In *Athenian Democracy*, ed. P.J. Rhodes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 260-262.

<sup>95</sup> Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 140.

ensured that each tribe was composed of about the same number of men and each tribe had men from across the geographic area of Attica. Using the already established idea of demes, the smallest political division in Athens, each was then split up into one of three different ridings: inland, coast, and city. Each tribe was then given a group of demes from each of these ridings, or trittys.<sup>96</sup> In this way, the Athenian tribal system can be thought of by starting with 10 tribes; then, within each tribe were three trittys, and within each tritty were several demes. These tribes became extremely important to the political organization of Athens, and, more specifically, to the organization of the Council of 500, another reform of Cleisthenes.<sup>97</sup> This Council was made up of 50 men from each of the 10 tribes, and was in charge of setting the agenda for the Assembly.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, the Council also had important day to day functions including discussing foreign policy.<sup>99</sup> In this way, the Council played a crucial role in making policy and running the Athenian state. Additionally, the tribes were used to fill other positions such as the Strategoi, or the Generals, where there would be 10 members, one from each tribe.<sup>100</sup> This system impacted all aspects of the Athenian political system which is why it is so crucial to understand exactly what the results of instituting such a system were for the Athenian people.

This structure results in two overall consequences: prevention of consolidation of power and prevention of regional factionalism. Grote illustrates these consequences when he says:

The demes which Kleisthenes assigned to each tribe were in no case all adjacent to each other; and therefore the tribe, as a whole, did not correspond with any continuous portion of the territory, nor could it have any peculiar local interest, separate from the entire community. Such systematic avoidance of the factions arising out of neighborhood will appear to have been more especially necessary, when we recollect that the quarrels of the

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<sup>96</sup> Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 48.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>98</sup> Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 142.

<sup>99</sup> Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 264.

<sup>100</sup> Hansen, *Then Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 106; David Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 264-265.

Parali, the Diakrii, the Pediaki, during the preceding century, had all been generated from local feud... Moreover, it was only by this same precaution that the local predominance of the city, and the formation of a city-interest distinct from that of the country, was obviated; which could hardly have failed to arise had the city by itself constituted either one deme or one tribe. Kleisthenes distributed the city (or found it already distributed) into several demes, and those demes among several tribes; while Peirarns and Phalerum, each constituting a separate deme, were also assigned to different tribes; so that there were no local advantages either to bestow predominance, or to create a struggle for predominance, of one tribe over the rest. Each deme had its own local interests to watch over; but the tribe was a mere aggregate of demes for political, military, and religious purposes, with no separate hopes or fears, apart from the whole state.<sup>101</sup>

I have already show the close relationship, personal and professional, between Grote and Mill; thus it is certainly not unreasonable to see in Mill's work a hope for the same consequences as those recognized by Grote, which came out of the creation of the Cleisthenic tribes. These consequences were such that the tribes prevented consolidated power by ensuring that "there were no local advantages...of one tribe over the rest," and obfuscated regional factionalism by ensuring that "the tribe...did not correspond with any continuous portion of territory."<sup>102</sup> These were important ways in which the tribes of Athens prevented one group/region from gaining too much power over other groups.

In addition to the ways in which the tribal system prevented power consolidation already described by Grote, the tribal system also reduced group advantages through another means: common identity and cooperation. Paga describes the existence of "theatral areas or 'civic centers'" across Attica that brought individuals together in deme or trittys-level theaters across Attica. These were important for establishing greater cooperation amongst Athenians as they served as a venue "for discussion and organization on a trittys level."<sup>103</sup> With the existence of these theatral areas, "men sharing a common trittys would be forging connections across

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<sup>101</sup> George Grote, *History of Greece*, Volume 4, 133-134.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Jessica Paga, "Deme Theaters in Attica and the Trittys System," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, 79 (2010): 351-384, 380



demes...further contributing to the loosening of traditional or aristocratic ties and reducing the reliance on a strict attachment to a single locality and single deme populace.”<sup>104</sup> Given the existence of these further ties across citizens on various geographic levels, it can be seen how a common identity was forged across classes and geographic differences as a result of the tribal system in Athens.

The common force between the consequences of the tribal system and the way in which the Athenian system avoided consolidated power in the legislative process, using the *Nomothetai*, is the promotion of the general interest. Grote promotes this idea repeatedly saying that a tribe could not “have any peculiar local interest, separate from the entire community,” that with the tribal system “the formation of a city-interest distinct from that of the country was obviated,” and that the tribe had “no separate hopes or fears, apart from the whole state.”<sup>105</sup> The tribal system clearly sought to promote the general interest, indicating that Mill very likely had it in mind when discussing his support for governing in the general interest.

Mill’s appreciation for Cleisthenes and his reforms can also be seen, more explicitly, in Mill’s review of Grote’s *History*. Mill says “after Solon..., the first great constitutional change was the reformation of Cleisthenes, an eminent man, to whose character and historical importance no one before Mr. Grote had done justice.”<sup>106</sup> This passage not only illustrates Mill’s support for Athens and Cleisthenes, but also shows, once again, Mill’s strong connection to Grote and his agreement with Grote’s characterization of Cleisthenes and his reforms.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 380.

<sup>105</sup> George Grote, *History of Greece*, Volume 4, 133-134.

<sup>106</sup> Mill, “Grote’s History of Greece [II]”, *Collected Works*, 327.

Mill is concerned by the power of any group going too large, it is for this reason that he maintains several means to check the power of groups. Establishing a powerful body, such as the legislative Commission, to check the majority and ensure that they legislate in the general interest is crucial to Mill in order to ensure a well-ordered democracy. Furthermore, it is because of Mill's long study of Greece and Athens, through Grote, that he can identify factions as a potential issue of democracy and understand the necessity of creating institutions which force legislating in the general interest. This understanding of the general interest and Mill's appreciation for the Tribal system and Nomothetai helps to illustrate Mill's commitment to democracy. These institutions illustrate the importance of the general interest and the democratic principle, which applies to both Athens and Mill, of doing what is in the best interest of the community as a whole rather than for any one group. To ensure that the general interest is cared for, the power of any group must be precautioned against growing too large indicating the importance of institutions discussed in this section.

While this section has illustrated some of the potential issues found in modern society, legislating for sinister interests, allowing groups to become too powerful, and a lack of cooperation amongst a society, there must still be an examination of potential solutions to curb this danger. In the following section, I will explain and argue for the necessity of proportional representation over modern electoral systems. This solution promotes greater participation and freedom, which I argue further strengthens the case for Mill as a democrat.

## **Part 6: The Power of Participation**

When Hansen remarks on the level of participation which occurred in Athens, he says:

The level of political activity exhibited by the citizens of Athens is unparalleled in world history, in terms of numbers, frequency and level of participation...Most notable of all in comparison with modern democracy is the level at which ordinary folk took part; they were not confined to choosing the decisionmakers but, in the hundreds and thousands, prepared decisions, made them, and administered them in person.<sup>107</sup>

It is this kind of participation that Athens is most remembered for, and the high level of openness which Mill admires. The fact that any male citizen could participate in the institutions of Athens is what allowed for its greatness, and this fact is one that Mill wants to see in his model government. In this section, I will begin with a passage from Mill illustrating his admiration for the openness of participation in Athens. I will then express how Mill incorporates this into his own ideas for government, including his advocacy for Hare's system of proportional representation, to show Mill's commitment to one of the most crucial elements of democracy: participation from all individuals in society. First, however, I will describe proportional representation, one of the most important contributions made to electoral theory in the history of democracy.

Mill, in a discussion about equal representation through electoral systems, says:

real equality of representation is not obtained unless any set of electors amounting to the average number of a constituency, wherever in the country they happen to reside, have the power of combining with one another to return a representative. This degree of perfection in representation appeared impracticable until a man of great capacity...Mr. Thomas Hare- had proved its possibility by drawing up a scheme for its accomplishment.<sup>108</sup>

The system Mill is referring to, which lives as a predecessor to modern Single Transferable Voting systems,<sup>109</sup> is Hare's system of Proportional (or Personal) Representation and is best described in three parts: first, the system established a quota such that if a candidate receives that number of votes he is automatically returned to the assembly, second, it introduced a preferential

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<sup>107</sup> Morgens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy*, 313.

<sup>108</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 90.

<sup>109</sup> For more information about Modern STV see Bartholdi and Orlin (1991) and Tideman (1995).

voting system where an elector ranks candidates (as many as they want) and if the first candidate has already reached the quota the vote is then transferred to the second ranked candidate and so on, third is the elimination of only local candidates such that an elector may vote for any candidate throughout the country.<sup>110</sup> As the above passage suggests, Mill had a great fondness for the man, Hare, and his system, proportional representation, and it is the solution that Mill had long been looking for to solve the issues of majoritarian systems and, more generally, modern representative democracy.

### Open Participation and Athens

During Mill's discussion of Hare's new system for electing representatives in the chapter "Of True and False Democracy; Representation of All; and Representation of the Majority Only," Mill describes the "old democracies" and expresses his admiration for their ability to allow input from all male citizens in all matters of the state. He says:

In the old democracies there were no means of keeping out of sight any able man: the bema was open to him; he needed nobody's consent to become a public adviser. It is not so in a representative government; and the best friends of representative democracy can hardly be without misgivings that the Themistocles or Demosthenes whose councils would have saved the nation, might be unable during his whole life ever to obtain a seat.<sup>111</sup>

In saying this, Mill not only expresses his appreciation for the "old democracies," but also implies his discontent for the modern electoral system which prevent some who "would have saved the nation" from ever obtaining a seat in parliament. This discontent is in reference to majoritarian electoral systems<sup>112</sup> which do not open themselves to all as possible representatives

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas Hare, *A Treatise on the Election of Representatives, Parliamentary and Municipal* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1859).

<sup>111</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 95.

<sup>112</sup> Majoritarian systems are electoral systems, which exist in most modern democracies and existed in Mill's Britain, that are based in the power of the majority. They are generally characterized by single member districts,

because they rely on first-past-the-post voting and require individuals to vote for local candidates. Mill says that “democracy, as commonly conceived and hitherto practiced, is the government of the whole people by a mere majority of the people exclusively represented. . . . This is the inevitable consequence of the manner in which the votes are now taken. . . .”<sup>113</sup> It is for this reason that Mill advocates for the electoral system proposed by Hare: no longer would individuals be stuck with “the assortment of two or three perhaps rotten oranges, which may be the only choice offered to him in the local market,”<sup>114</sup> and would, instead, allow all individuals the equal opportunity to be represented properly and have their voices heard.<sup>115</sup>

This praise of Athens’ openness helps to illustrate Mill’s commitment to democracy in two ways: it shows his approval of the democratic notion of equality to address political assemblies that existed in Athens, *isegoria*,<sup>116</sup> and his refutation of the modern electoral system due to its inability to ensure equal voice and representation to all individuals in society. In Athens, all male citizens had the opportunity to speak and participate; not only this, but Athenian institutions also encouraged participation through the idea of rotation which required new individuals to be included in the various democratic bodies of Athens. Mill’s discontent comes from the exclusion that modern electoral systems cause; representative government, under majoritarian systems, prevents participation by lacking mechanisms which encourage participation and by possessing mechanisms which discourage participation. Mill appreciated the openness in Athens and wanted more of it in modern societies; it is for this reason that he advocates for policies that encourage increasing the voices of all members of society and ensure

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first-past-the-post voting, and two-party systems. They also serve as the contrast to proportional representation electoral systems.

<sup>113</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 85.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>115</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 80.

<sup>116</sup> Morgens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy*, 81

that all have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way: one such policy is proportional representation under Hare's system.

### Proportional Representation, Voice, and Rotation

Mill identifies several relevant consequences resulting from the implementation of proportional representation that relate to the power of participation: first, proportional representation increases the power of all voices in society, second, it ensures that all are represented equally, and third, Hare's system increases the quality of the candidates by making representatives advocates for their constituencies. To further express Mill's appreciation for democracy and Athens, I will begin with a discussion of the Athenian concept of rotation and connect it to Mill's consequences of proportional representation.

The idea of rotation is best embodied by Aristotle, in the *Politics*, when he says "all should rule over each, and each in his turn over all."<sup>117</sup> This idea, along with short tenure of office, can be seen throughout Athenian institutions as a key way to ensure that all individuals got a chance to participate in the organs of government.<sup>118</sup> In fact, rotation can be seen as the practical embodiment of maximum participation because, as Hansen says "all must be able to participate: but in a literal sense that principle was unattainable...so it could only be translated into relative reality in the form that all must be able to participate turn and turn about..."<sup>119</sup> This feature of Athens allowed for the closest to maximum participation that could ever be achieved. One example of the large amount of rotation used in Athens is in the leadership of the Council of 500: each tribe's contingent had to serve as prytaneis for one tenth of the year. Of that fifty-

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<sup>117</sup>Aristotle, "The Politics," in *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1317b19-20 [154].

<sup>118</sup> R.K. Sinclair, *Democracy and participation in Athens*, 68.

<sup>119</sup> Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 313; R.K. Sinclair, *Democracy and participation in Athens*, 69.

member contingent, one man was selected, by lot, to be the epistates. The epistates served for one night and one day as the “head of state” relative to other city-states. Additionally, it was only possible to be the epistates for one time during a lifetime. This amount of rotation led to the result that “every fourth adult male Athenian citizen could say, ‘I have been for twenty-four hours President of Athens’ – but no Athenian citizen could ever boast of having been so for more than twenty-four hours.”<sup>120</sup> Rotation, in this way, can be seen as one of the most important ways to maintain and increase participation in the political system and ensure that democracy derives from all people, rather than a single group executing the powers of the same office through their entire lives.

To examine whether Mill would have had the concept of rotation in mind when thinking about the consequences of proportional representation, one can look again to Grote and his *History*. Grote refers to the concept of rotation at two different points: first, in a general discussion of political change in Greece where he says,

we are first introduced to a community of citizens, according to the definition of Aristotle, - men qualified, and thinking themselves qualified, to take turns in command and obedience: the collective sovereign, called The City, is thus constituted.<sup>121</sup>

The second place that rotation is reference is in a discussion of the Council of 500; Grote says:

[the Council of 500]’s sittings become constant, with the exception of special holidays, and the year is distributed into ten portions called Prytanies, the fifty senators of each tribe taking by turns the duty of constant attendance during one prytany, and receiving during that time the title of The Prytanies: the order of precedence among the tribes in these duties was annually determined by lot.<sup>122</sup>

The first quote connects Mill, through Grote, directly back to Aristotle and his characterization of democracy as taking “turns in command and obedience.” This is exactly what rotation is, and

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<sup>120</sup> Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy*, 313-314.

<sup>121</sup> Grote, *History*, Volume 3, 17.

<sup>122</sup> Grote, *History*, Volume 4, 138.

the idea of rotation is further developed by Grote, in exactly the same way as Hansen showed above, through the Council of 500 and the rotation of the prytaneis. Taking turns in power, then, can be seen as an integral part of the Athenian system both ideologically, through Aristotle's writings about democratic theory, and in the institutions themselves, through the Council of 500.

With the connection between rotation and Mill's work established, I will now reexamine Mill's arguments for proportional representation. The first consequence that Mill identifies is that proportional representation would give all a voice in an assembly. Urbinati describes the power of proportional representation to empower voices when she says that "universal suffrage guaranteed that all citizens are treated equally, proportional representation tried to ensure that their views are respected;"<sup>123</sup> this is such because "proportional representation, ideally, ensures that *every voice* will be heard."<sup>124</sup> Urbinati bases this on Mill's comments regarding the proper representation of minorities which Mill says is required for a "real democracy."<sup>125</sup> It is important to note, however, that Mill is not advocating for the minority to have greater decision making power than the majority, rather, he is chiefly concerned with ensuring that all have a voice as that is paramount in getting to the truth and bettering society; Urbinati says "[proportional representation] does not give minorities *more* than their numerical due. Its aim is to guarantee that all have the same chance to be represented... Thus proportional representation grounds democratic legitimacy, which demands that citizens have an equal opportunity to express themselves."<sup>126</sup> Mill believes that it is only through proportional representation that society can ensure that all have a voice in government.

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<sup>123</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 80.

<sup>124</sup> Urbinati, *Representation as Advocacy*, 770.

<sup>125</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 89.

<sup>126</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 80.



The second consequence that Mill identifies concerns the equality that all electors will possess under Hare's system. He says that "every member of the House would be the representative of a unanimous constituency."<sup>127</sup> A system that establishes all electors, and representatives, as equals would greatly resemble the consequences of Athenian rotation and its idea of *isegoria*. Compared to a majoritarian system where some electors have no one in office that represents them (if your candidate loses, your vote is lost entirely), a system which includes preferential voting and a quota ensures that no vote is lost and that all are placed on equal footing. For Mill's representative system, equality of this sort is required; without it, there is no way to ensure that all can participate in the representative system, a requirement for a strong democracy.

The final consequence which upholds the principles of equality and proper representation that Mill discusses is the increased quality of the candidates that would be made possible as a result of the new electoral system. Mill addresses this in two ways: first, he says that "when the nominee of the leaders would have to encounter the competition not solely of the candidate of the minority,<sup>128</sup> but of all the men of established reputation in the country who were willing to serve, it would be impossible any longer to foist upon the electors the first person who presents himself with the catchwords of the party in his mouth,"<sup>129</sup> and the second way in which better candidates would be created is through the better alignment between representatives and electors. To this second consideration, Mill says "every one of the electors would be personally identified with his representative, and the representative with his constituents."<sup>130</sup> Urbinati also considers this when she establishes her alternative, the advocate, to the traditional dichotomy of the

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<sup>127</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 91.

<sup>128</sup> The present way of things.

<sup>129</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 93.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

representative as trustee or as delegate. Urbinati claims that “advocates are expected to be passionate and intelligent defenders” not blind partisans.<sup>131</sup> This greater role for the representative intensifies the connection between the voter, who has “voted for him” over all others “in the whole list of candidates for Parliament,” and allowed the voter to participate at a higher level and secured him a much higher quality of representation than he could ever achieve under a majoritarian system.<sup>132</sup>

Mill’s advocacy for proportional representation ensures that all have a voice, an equal opportunity to be represented, and a high level of representation in government. This is clearly democratic in itself; however, its democratic nature is furthered when considered in connection with Athens and the idea of rotation to ensure all have the chance to participate. Rotation ensures the maximization of participation, as does proportional representation through the election of “individual” representatives (Hare actually refers to his system as “personal representation” rather than as proportional representation).<sup>133</sup> Each voter selecting his own representative, as an advocate, helps to bridge the gap left by the inherent decrease in participation left by moving from a direct, fully participatory democracy to a representative system. This appreciation for proportional representation and Athenian levels of participation is what helps to define Mill as a democrat; Mill not only believes that greater participation will lead to better consequences, through educative institutions, but also finds the means to implement those high levels of open participation through proportional representation.

Mill, and Hare’s system, provide for a dramatic increase in participation in order to further the positive consequence derived from democracy. However, proportional representation

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<sup>131</sup> Urbinati, *Representation as Advocacy*, 775.

<sup>132</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 92.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Hare, *A Treatise on the Election of Representatives, Parliamentary and Municipal*, xxii.

does not only increase participation; it also furthers liberty in society. Mill hopes to extract increased freedom through democracy and, more specifically, through Hare's system which, as will be discussed in the following section, further addresses concerns that Mill is anti-democratic or elitist.

## **Part 7: Freedom as Nonsubjection**

This section relies on a fundamental understanding of Mill's theory of liberty as freedom from subjection, rather than the traditional understanding as noninterference. As such, I will begin this section by providing Urbinati's argument for a reevaluation of Mill's theory of liberty. I will then move to an explicit reference that Mill makes to Athens in order to defend Mill against a common argument made against him by those who contend that he is not a democrat: the open ballot. Following this explicit reference, I will then discuss an implicit connection between another consequence of proportional representation identified by Mill and the Athenian use of selection by lot. This is all in service of illustrating Mill as a democrat through his commitment to ensuring freedom for all those living in society and increase freedom through a greater number of democratic institutions.

For Urbinati, Mill's liberty is more than simply negative liberty; rather, she holds that Mill was more concerned with freedom from the arbitrary will of another.<sup>134</sup> This meant that Mill was concerned with interference from *certain* external sources, rather than *all* external sources; legitimate reductions in freedom, then, were not reductions in freedom at all.<sup>135</sup> Freedom, for Mill, required that an individual be given conditions that allowed for the flourishing of his

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<sup>134</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 155.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 156, 171.

individuality, not merely being left alone.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, an individual is only free when he is able to share his opinions openly; Urbinati says that “Mill believed that actions were free to the degree that they could be *seen* by others and *done* before others’ eyes...”<sup>137</sup> In this way, it is easy to see the crucial connection between freedom as nonsubjection and a deliberative democracy; democracy is impossible without the freedom to speak and act publicly. Urbinati is unique in the Mill literature because she is the first to argue for a reinterpretation of Mill to include a different, more complex conception of his liberty that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy of positive and negative. With this understanding of Mill’s theory of liberty, I will continue to show Mill’s connection to a democratic framework beginning with a refutation of the anti-democratic nature of Mill’s stance on the open ballot.

### The Open Ballot and the General Interest

The open ballot has long been a concern for Mill scholars as a sore spot for his commitment to democracy.<sup>138</sup> Urbinati notes that “the scholarly literature has either neglected Mill’s defense of the open ballot or used it to stress his antidemocratism.”<sup>139</sup> However, analyzing Mill more deeply will reveal that he is in fact a democrat; further, his defense of the open ballot is not a means to handcuff the rights of the working class or nonelite, but rather a means to defending the general interest of society. Additionally, the democratic nature of Mill’s defense of

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 165, 170.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>138</sup> One such author is R.J. Halliday. He says that “Mill was quite happy to repeat his belief that although they were ashamed of being so, the English working classes were ‘generally liars’; a belief he had first expressed in 1859 as part of an argument against the secret ballot in his pamphlet ‘Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform’. This kind of high-minded yet gloomy pessimism helps to account for two of the most distinctive features of Mill’s political thinking: his cautious pragmatism which earnestly sought to avoid extremes, and his persistent desire for special expertise, whether expressed in the general form of a clerisy or in the particular voice of those instructed in science.” (R.J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill*, 130)

<sup>139</sup> Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 104.

the open ballot can also be understood through the lens of Athens and a commitment to ensuring freedom from the arbitrary will of others. Mill says:

As little can it be doubted that the ballot, so far as it existed, had a beneficial operation in the Athenian constitution. Even in the least unstable of the Grecian commonwealths, freedom might be for the time destroyed by a single unfairly obtained popular vote; and though the Athenian voter was not sufficiently dependent to be habitually coerced, he might have been bribed or intimidated by the lawless outrages of some knot of individuals, such as were not uncommon even at Athens among the youth of rank and fortune. The ballot was in these cases a valuable instrument of order, and conduced to the Eunomia by which Athens was distinguished among the ancient commonwealths.<sup>140</sup>

Here, Mill is describing the necessity of the ballot in the old democracies because the greatest danger to voting in ancient Athens was that someone could force another to vote in a certain way. Grote reinforces this idea with respect to the idea of ostracism. Ostracism was a process whereby the people could vote to exile an individual for ten years; however, it only occurred if an initial vote to begin the process of ostracism (the actual vote would occur later) was approved and, at the later date, if an individual received 6000 votes. If the ostracism occurred and a man received the required number of votes, he would be exiled for ten years. Grote says that "a number of citizens, not less than six thousand, voting secretly and therefore independently, were required to take part, pronouncing upon one or other of these eminent rivals a sentence of exile for ten years."<sup>141</sup> Grote also says

‘No law shall be made against any single citizen, without the same being made against all Athenian citizens; unless it shall so seem good to six thousand citizens voting secretly.’ Such was that general principle of the constitution, under which the ostracism was a particular case.<sup>142</sup>

Together these quotes illustrate the importance that the secret ballot played in Athens. While the Athenians did not exclusively vote in secret,<sup>143</sup> when it was a particularly important vote, such as

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<sup>140</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 122.

<sup>141</sup> Grote, *History*, Volume 3, 146.

<sup>142</sup> Grote, *History*, Volume 4, 156.

<sup>143</sup> For example, the open ballot, through raised hands, was used extensively in the assembly to cast votes.

in the case of ostracism, the Athenians ensured that there was no one coercing the vote to go one way or another; as Grote puts it, the Athenians wanted to ensure that the vote was “independent.” This evidences Mill’s claim of the necessity of secret voting in the old democracies to reduce coercion and ensure that a fair vote was held.

While most of Mill’s contemporaries supported the secret ballot because it prevented authority figures like bosses or landlords from forcing others to vote for a specific candidate or party, Mill believed that this type of coercion had declined in modern society to a sufficient point that it was no longer the biggest electoral issue. This is unlike what is being illustrated in the above passage where Mill is suggesting the necessity of the secret ballot in “old democracies,” for there is a distinct possibility of an Athenian voter being coerced into voting in a way that goes against their will. Instead, just after the above passage, Mill opines the rise of sinister interests as the larger problem in modern society saying:

in more advanced states of modern Europe, and especially in this country, the power of coercing voters has declined and is declining; and bad voting is now less to be apprehended from the influences to which the voter is subject at the hands of others, than from the sinister interests and discreditable feelings which belong to himself, either individually or as a member of a class.<sup>144</sup>

Mill believes that sinister interests are leading people to vote selfishly, as the ballot prevents others from checking up on their fellow country man. This inclination to vote in a sinister interest, opposed to the general interest, is what Mill is so concerned about in modernity. Mill says that “in any political election, even by universal suffrage..., the voter is under an absolute moral obligation to consider the interest of the public, not his private advantage, and give his vote, to the best of his judgment, exactly as he would be bound to do if he were the sole voter,

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<sup>144</sup> Mill, *Considerations*, 123.

and the election depended upon him alone."<sup>145</sup> Mill believes, then, that the only way to ensure that a citizen votes in the public interest is to have them vote, not in secret, but in public: "it is at least a *prima facie* consequence that the duty of voting, like any other public duty, should be performed under the eye and criticism of the public..."<sup>146</sup>

In this way, Mill sees voting as a public, other-regarding act, and, therefore, if someone abuses the system by voting with sinister interests the people's liberty has been curtailed because they are now subjects to the individual not voting in the general interest. Urbinati discusses this same issue in terms of protecting the freedom of all individuals in society. She suggests that because freedom, for Mill, requires that one not be forced to live under the decisions of another arbitrarily, voting must be a public duty. This, in turn, requires that votes must be cast with virtue in mind, and thus voting must be done publicly to allow for interaction between like and unlike minded individuals. For Mill, this is what will generate the most democratic society and will ensure that the general interest is considered.

Thus, while the open ballot is primarily justified by concern for the general interest, one must also take into consideration the effect that the secret ballot can have on the freedom of individuals in society. To maintain a free state, then, all must act in accordance with the general interest and with an aim to not harm others with their vote. Ensuring this only comes with the implementation of the open ballot. While this policy may harm some because it will allow others to coerce them into voting a certain way, it provides a much larger benefit by ensuring that people are thinking, and voting, in the general interest with others holding them responsible for their actions. Freedom isn't only provided by the implementation of the open ballot, rather,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

freedom is also increased through proportional representation. Further, that similar consequence can be seen through the lens of Athenian sortition. This connection will be examined in the following section.

### Freedom, Elections, and Sortition

Many of the consequences of proportional representation that Mill identified have already been discussed; however, one that has not yet is the guarantee that, under proportional representation, no one would be “nominally represented by some one whom he had not chosen.”<sup>147</sup> Because the representative must achieve a quota from throughout the entire country and the voter can preference multiple candidates (in case the first does not reach the quota, the voter will then be “represented” by his second choice), all individuals can be sure that there is someone who will represent their interests in parliament. As a result, Mill says that “every member of the House would be the representative of a unanimous constituency.”<sup>148</sup> In this section, I will argue that this has a crucial connection to both Mill’s conception of freedom as nonsubjection and the Athenian institution of sortition.

Majoritarian voting curtails freedom by forcing some people to be governed by someone whom they did not vote for; when people’s votes are ‘wasted,’ they have no representative and are subjected to the arbitrary will of the representative selected by other electors. Mill illustrates the amplification of this infringement on freedom when he discusses the idea, which lives at the heart of majoritarian voting systems, that a majority of a majority is a minority; Mill says:

Democracy, thus constituted, does not even attain its ostensible object, that of giving the powers of government in all cases to the numerical majority. It does something very different; it gives them to a majority of the majority, who may be, and often are, but a

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.



minority of the whole...Suppose, then, that, in a country governed by equal and universal suffrage, there is a contested election in every constituency, and every election is carried by a small majority. The Parliament thus brought together represent little more than a bare majority of the people. This Parliament proceeds to legislate, and adopts important measures by a bare majority of itself. What guaranty is there that these measures accord with the wishes of a majority of the people? It is possible, therefore, and even probable, that the opinion which has prevailed was agreeable only to a minority of the nation, though a majority of that portion of it whom the institutions of the country have erected into a ruling class...Any minority left out, either purposely or by the play of the machinery, gives the power not to the majority, but to a minority in some other part of the scale.<sup>149</sup>

What this passage illustrates is the poor job that modern majoritarian systems do at representing minority groups, and even some majority groups, throughout the country. Each one of the groups that lost representation and gave that power “to a minority in some other part of the scale” has lost their freedom due to the electoral institutions themselves. It is for this reason, and others, that Mill advocates for Hare’s system of personal representation. Additionally, this freedom from being ruled by someone whom an elector did not vote for, harkens back to Mill’s defense of the public ballot. Just as it is an infringement on freedom, for Mill, to be a subject to someone who did not vote in the general interest, being a subject of a representative that one did not vote for is also an infringement on one’s freedom.

Mill’s devotion to ensuring and increasing freedom illustrates why proportional representation is so important to enact, but it also points to the Athenian institution of sortition. Sortition, or selection by lot, is the idea that chance determined who would be in an official position within the government, not election. This process was used to determine who would fill a position in governmental organs such as juries, the nomothetai, magistrates, and the Council of 500. The few magistrates that were elected rather than selected by lot included the generals and various financial positions, like the treasurer of the Military Fund and the Board for the Theoric

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 87.

Fund.<sup>150</sup> These elected positions were generally ones that required specialized knowledge or some other expertise;<sup>151</sup> Hansen says, for example, “the Athenians naturally had no desire to fight under a general picked out of the hat.”<sup>152</sup> Despite those few officials being decided by election, rather than by lot, sortition remains one of the most important institutions of Athenian politics.

Sortition gave everyone who wanted to be considered for a position an equal opportunity to be selected for that position; beyond this however, sortition also ensured that no one had to live under the arbitrary will of another. Sortition was capable of doing this for two reasons: first, because there were no elections and sortition was based on a random draw (there were no “votes” lost arbitrarily on a losing candidate), and second, sortition helped to reduce and spread the power of magistrates.<sup>153</sup> Just as Mill wanted to ensure that the representatives in his assembly didn’t have too much power, sortition ensured that all had the power to obtain a seat and advocate for themselves and others (for example, in the Council of 500) or perform the task that they were chosen to complete (like the magistrates).<sup>154</sup> Sortition ensured that no Athenian lived under the arbitrary will of another, in the same way that Mill hoped that proportional representation would increase the freedom of modern citizens.

Grote discusses the use and importance of sortition multiple times in his *History*, especially its use in the Council, or Senate, of Five Hundred. He says:

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<sup>150</sup> Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 160.

<sup>151</sup> Grote also acknowledges this same point. He says “the principle of sortition, or choice by lot, was never applied, as I have before remarked, to all offices at Athens, - never, for example, to the strategi, or generals, whose functions were more grave and responsible than those of any other person in the service of the state, and who always continued to be elected by show of hands” *History*, Volume 5, 276)

<sup>152</sup> Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 160.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*.

It now comes before us, under the name of Senate of Five Hundred, as an active and indispensable body throughout the whole Athenian democracy: and the practice now seems to have begun (though the period of commencement cannot be decisively proved), of determining the names of the senators by lot.<sup>155</sup>

Grote also says

I am also inclined to believe that the Senate of Five Hundred, as constituted by Kleisthenes, was taken, not by election, but by lot, from the ten tribes, - and that every citizen became eligible to it.<sup>156</sup>

Together, these passages illustrate that Mill would have had knowledge of the extensive use of lot in the Athenian political system. This allows one to connect Mill to Athens, and because Mill seeks to have the same consequences for a society under proportional representation as Athens under sortition one can see that Mill appreciated and sought to implement institutions which would bring about these common societal consequences. This commonality, along with Mill's general commitment to freedom as nonsubjection, help to further the case for viewing Mill as a democrat. Additionally, this section helps to illustrate Mill's commitment to finding solutions for modern government and society by increasing the importance of democratic principle such as participation and freedom. Hare's system, beyond most other policy suggestions, was one of Mill's favorite and among the most promising. In the concluding section of this paper, I will discuss a few consequences of my argument as well as suggest how this paper can be used to progress society today.

## **Part 8: Conclusion**

In this paper, I argued that Mill is a democrat due to the appreciation, both implicitly and explicitly, that Mill gives to the Athenians. This appreciation lived under four democratic

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<sup>155</sup> Grote, *History*, Volume 4, 135.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

themes: knowledge, prevention of consolidated power, participation, and freedom. Within each of these, I showed that there is reason to see Mill as a democrat both in the policies that he himself presents and through his appreciation for democratic institutions of Athens. However, rather than simply say that Mill is a democrat, I suggested a restriction on this interpretation inasmuch as Mill's stance on democracy requires that society be an ideal one; Mill is seen thus as a democrat *in principle*. While this may diminish the extent to which Mill can be considered fully a democrat, I maintain that it would be incorrect to completely dismiss Mill as an aristocrat altogether as other authors have.

While this paper has centered around the question "Is Mill a Democrat?" there are several other upshots of this paper. First, a result of this paper is the affirmation of Mill's claim that representative government is the ideally best form of government. Based on the connections drawn between Athens and Mill's views on government, representative government (under the modern constraints of scale) should be considered the best form of government. Additionally, part of accepting the argument made in this paper requires an acceptance of Mill's principles of good government which form the basis of Mill's argument for the superiority of representative systems.

Second, this paper requires the conclusion that participation leads to a higher quality of government understood in Mill's terms. For Mill, a "better government" would be one that maximizes competency, ensures that legislation is made in the general interest, and increases freedom for all. Given the arguments made in this paper and the supremacy of democracy, this only occurs with high levels of participation. It is therefore not surprising that Mill argues for universal suffrage and expansions for institutions which better utilize the participation of ordinary people, such as proportional representation.

Finally, the argument made in this paper relies on the supremacy of proportional representation for modern democracy. I explored various positive consequences that would follow from Hare's system, and multiple problems that majoritarian voting systems possess. This paper, therefore, illustrates the strong benefits received by a society that adopted an election system similar to the one proposed by Hare. Unfortunately, I hold that until society today recognizes the benefits provided by election reform, whether from a proportional representation system or some other system, and implements such a system, we will not be able to easily progress as a democratic society. For someone like Mill, writing over 150 years ago, to recognize the inherent issues with current electoral systems and suggest a realistic and promising reform, and yet for modern society to be completely unable to see these advantages and implement it is disappointing to say the least.

This paper allows for individuals today to see the positive consequences of democracy that result when it is properly constituted. Additionally, this paper is unique in that it revolves around several issues that have not changed considerably from the time of the main subject matter: J.S. Mill. Because Mill was discussing democratic theory, election reform, and other principles that have not changed in the 150 years that followed his publication of *Considerations*, his suggestions and ideas remain as plausible, if not excellent, ways to better our society and our lives. Individuals today should not be afraid to look back on the ideas and theories of philosophers from years ago, their proposals remain relevant and their principles are eternally useful. In this way, modern society should take what has been said by Mill, and other democrats of his age, to heart and seek the means to institute the reforms that were so important in his day. If we fail to do this, or to even critically examine the works of those who have come before us, our society is destined to sink into the stagnation so feared by Mill.

Mill is one of the most prominent, influential, and wide-ranging philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did he write on a myriad of topics including poetics, political economy, ethics, religion, society, history, political theory, his writing in each of those topics was also *important*. His *Principles of Political Economy* served as the textbook in the subject of Economics for decades, Mill's *Utilitarianism* is still used today as one of the premier texts on the subject, and, of course, his *On Liberty* is a staple of the liberal tradition. Not only these texts, but also his political speeches in Parliament, reviews of other works, and, his writings on government and electoral systems are still influential today. Mill will forever be an influential democrat; however, I maintain that Mill, properly and fully understood, must also be used as a guide to changing and bettering society today.

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