

Broadening our Study: Athens, Saratoga Springs, and Your Hometowns:
What questions do we want to ask – or, what do we need to know?¹

Saratoga Springs' charter reform:

- Which members of the group were the most outspoken?
- Did the representative know what he or she was talking about?
- Do citizens have all the facts about charter reform? about candidates for office?
- Do taxpayers/citizens look out for themselves or for the entire community?
- Whose should educate the voters – themselves, or the proposers of reform?
- Does "if it's not broke, don't fix it" constitute a good argument?
- Is it valid to base a charter on what "everyone else is doing"?
- Is the mayor attempting to usurp power?
- How do outside influences affect local government?
- How will elections work under the new system?
- What will be the impact on the budget?
- How else will the new system have an effect on the way the city operates?
- Is the change necessary and, if so, what will really change?

Saratoga Springs' local government:

- Who are the dominant players in a City Council meeting? Who plays a major role, and why? Who sets the agenda for the meeting, and is that empowering (or not)?
- Are the individuals who dominate also leaders? Do they have official leadership roles as elected officials, or are they just citizens from Saratoga or elsewhere?
- What role do the citizens play at a City Council meeting? Do they have ample opportunity to contribute to the dialogue?
- How would you define leadership in the context of this meeting?
- Do gender, age, race, experience, or party affiliation matter? Do any of these or other demographic factors seem to play a role in the influence of, or respect for, the participants in question?
- What are the key issues discussed? Are there other, less important issues, and if so, do they take on more importance because of when and how they are discussed?
- Does any of this look like how you imagine discussions in the *boule* or *ekklesia* of ancient Athens might have transpired?
- What are the rhetorical styles – types of speeches, and verbal flourishes – that people employ to persuade? and, in fact, does persuasion play a role in the meeting?

¹ These questions were formulated by Prof. Michael Arnush, Peer Mentor Susie Warden, and the members of the *Democracy Inaction* Scribner Seminar, fall 2006.

Final Project: An Analysis of Democracy in Your Hometowns

What questions do we want to ask – or, what do we need to know?

Definitions

- What defines your community? Is it a city, town(ship), village, or something else?
- How many people live there? Are there demographic data available – from a local census, for example – that will show gender, ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, political party or other distributions in your community?
- How old is your community? When was it founded, and by whom? Can you locate a reliable source for a summary of your town's history?

Management and Process

- How is your community run? Does it have a mayor, a city manager, a board of aldermen or (some) other official manager(s)?
- How many other chief magistrates does your community have? What are their responsibilities? Are there qualifications for the position(s), and what are they?
- If they are elected, how are they elected? If not, how are they chosen? How often do (s)elections occur, and who participates? Is it a general, community-wide election? If so, what percentage of eligible voters vote? Or, are the magistrate(s) (s)elected according to districts or other community divisions? Are there term limits?

Values, Power and Leadership

- What are the principal values in your community? What are some of the major issues your community faces?
- How does your community make decisions – e.g., how does it pass laws, or the budget? How often does your local government meet? Does the citizenry meet (if at all), and in what capacity? Who possesses political power – the elected officials, the citizens, or both? How do you define “political power”? Do the decisions of those with power benefit the entire community, or only subsets of its inhabitants? Are the decision-makers held accountable?
- Are your community's chief magistrates also the leaders of your community? If not, who does provide leadership?
- Is there a community charter? If so, when was it composed? Has it been ratified by the community by vote? Has it been revised at all, and if so, how and when?

The “Big Picture”

Parallels and Comparisons

- What are the parallels among ancient Athens, Saratoga Springs, and your community, in terms of (for example)
 - how does the *boule* compare with the City Council?
 - who took priority for speaking at the *boule*? at City Council meetings?
 - what are the floor rules, if any, for speakers? does anyone mediate?
 - what qualifications, if any, are needed to be a speaker?
 - what is the general conduct between politicians and citizen speakers?
 - what role do the community leaders play (e.g., Athenian *strategos* or *archon*; Saratoga Springs mayor)?
 - can citizens trust their representatives?
 - what is the relationship between art and politics?
- Where do the comparisons break down? What lessons can you draw from these comparisons – in your study of Athens, Saratoga Springs, and your community? Are comparisons between an ancient, slave-based, male-dominated *polis* and a modern, post-industrial, gender-neutral (we hope) valid? What other factors limit the legitimacy of such comparisons?

Sources

- What are the sources for all of your information? Are they objective and reliable – official community websites, archives, datasets, etc. – or are they subjective – local or regional newspapers, websites, pamphlets, etc.? If they are subjective, how will you assess their legitimacy as sources? What other sources might you examine?

Values

- What are the elements of the democracies of ancient Athens, Saratoga Springs and your community that you value?
- Is your community’s government effective or efficient? How do you measure effectiveness and efficiency?
- What is the value of learning about a democracy that is chronologically and geographically distant from you, the contemporary student?
- Should there be limits on democracy, or should the modern *demos* know no limits?
- Should democracy allow for modest reform, radical reform, or no reform at all?
- What can you as students in a Scribner Seminar contribute to the community’s dialogue on charter revision?