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Background Information: Athenian Democracy

One of the most remarkable advancements made in ancient Greece was the development of democracy in Athens. Athens held the first true democracy in history, where the citizens ruled themselves.

Athenian democracy was a direct democracy, meaning the people voted directly instead of electing representatives to vote on their behalf. Men over the age of 18 who had attended military training were able to vote. Many of the elite of Athens worried that by allowing the poor to vote, they would be giving up power to the poor.

One of the greatest leaders during the Athenian democratic period was Pericles. Some historians credit Pericles with being the founder of true democracy in Athens. In 431, shortly after the Peloponnesian War had broken out, Pericles delivered his famous Funeral Oration to commemorate those troops who had fallen in battle. It provides insight into how the ancient Athenians viewed their democracy.

While Pericles was a strong supporter of Athenian democracy, the Greek philosopher Socrates questioned the value of being involved in a political life. He felt that involvement in politics caused men to make compromises in their beliefs that he was unprepared to make. As a prominent citizen, he was called upon to fulfil minor political roles. On one such occasion, he was placed in personal danger by upholding his principles and refusing to participate in the arrest of an innocent man. In Plato's *Apology*, an account of the trial of Socrates, he implies that the nature of democracy leads to corruption and injustice.

Guiding Questions

1. According to the text, which Athenians were eligible to vote?

2. Summarize Pericles' views on democracy.

3. Summarize Socrates' views on democracy.