**Ch 2: Origins of American Political Thought**

**Classical Influences: Democracy and Republicanism**

**4 Where Did American Ideas About Government Come From?**

When the framers of the U.S. Constitution designed a new government, they didn’t start from scratch. They looked to the political ideas of the ancient world for inspiration. From the Athenians, they drew ideas about **direct democracy**, where citizens participated in decision-making. From the Roman Republic, they learned the value of **representative government**, the **rule of law**, and the concept of **civic virtue**, the idea that citizens should put the common good above personal interest.

These classical models influenced key elements of American government: the idea of popular sovereignty (power coming from the people), separation of powers, and a republic where laws govern society. Even today, these ideals continue to shape debates about citizenship, justice, and the role of government.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| **Direct Democracy** | A form of government in which citizens vote directly on laws and policies. |
| **Republic** | A government in which officials are elected to represent the people. |
| **Civic Virtue** | The idea that citizens should actively participate in public life and serve the common good. |
| **Rule of Law** | The principle that everyone, including leaders, must follow the law. |
| **Popular Sovereignty** | The belief that government authority comes from the people. |

**Active Learning Exercise: Classical Voices, Modern Reflections**

**Orienting Question:**

*What lessons did the founders take from the ancient world, and how do those lessons still matter today?*

**Objective:**

Students will examine quotes from ancient philosophers and compare their ideas to modern American government.

**Part 1: Quote Analysis (10–15 minutes)**

Give students the following quotes and ask them to interpret the meaning and relevance of each.

**Quote A: Pericles (Athens, 5th Century BCE)**  
*"Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people."*

* What does this quote suggest about Athenian democracy?
* How does this relate to the idea of popular sovereignty?

**Quote B: Cicero (Rome, 1st Century BCE)**  
*"The people's good is the highest law."*

* What does Cicero believe the purpose of government should be?
* How is this idea reflected in the U.S. Constitution or government?

**Quote C: Aristotle (Greece, 4th Century BCE)**  
*"If liberty and equality... are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government."*

* What does Aristotle argue is necessary for a successful democracy?
* How does this compare to modern debates about voter access and participation?

**Part 2: Compare & Connect (10–15 minutes)**

Students work in pairs or small groups to complete the following:

1. Match each classical quote to one of the key American ideals (e.g., rule of law, civic virtue, popular sovereignty).
2. Discuss: *Which of these ideas do you see in American government today? Which seems harder to achieve?*

**Review Questions**

1. What are the main differences between direct democracy and a republic?
2. How did the Roman Republic influence the U.S. Constitution?
3. Why did the founders value civic virtue, and how can it be encouraged today?
4. What is the rule of law, and why is it essential in a republic?
5. Give an example of how classical political ideas continue to shape American democracy.