



Britannica Blog | Like Britannica on Facebook | Follow Britannica on Twitter | Sign up for Britannica's RSS feed | Visit Britannica's YouTube channel | Image Map

- [Home](#)
- [About us](#)
- [Authors](#)
- [Britannica.com](#)

[Madison, Wisconsin: The Athens of the West](#)

[David Boaz](#) - February 28, 2011





The Wisconsin State Capitol, Madison (© Zane Williams—Stone/Getty Images)

College towns used to call themselves “the Athens of the West.” In [Nashville](#), home of my alma mater Vanderbilt University, they built a full-scale replica of the Parthenon. But these days [Madison](#), Wisconsin, has the best claim to the title.

Lots of [national media](#) have been comparing the protests against Gov. Scott Walker in Madison to the protests that ended Egyptian dictator [Hosni Mubarak](#)'s 30-year reign. And the protesters themselves have reveled in the imagery, waving signs [comparing Walker to Mubarak](#). Union activists want Americans to associate them with the immensely popular protests in Egypt and other Arab countries.

But how much similarity is there really? Time columnist Joe Klein [says](#) not much:

Revolutions everywhere—in the middle east, in the middle west. But there is a difference: in the middle east, the protesters are marching for democracy; in the middle west, they're protesting against it. I mean, Isn't it, well, a bit ironic that the protesters in Madison, blocking the state senate chamber, are chanting “Freedom, Democracy, Union” while trying to prevent a vote?

Indeed. The protesters in Egypt, many of them young and unemployed, finally found the courage to defy a brutal regime and demand freedom and democracy. No national unions supporting them, no President of the United States [and his political machine](#).

The Madison protesters, on the other hand, are [well-paid government employees](#) skipping work and turning out to oppose a budget reform bill that would require them to pay about 5.8% toward their pension (about the private sector national average) and about 12% of their health care benefits (about half the private sector national average) and restrict the collective bargaining powers of government-employee unions.

But the Madison protesters could still look abroad, to a historic and inspiring city, for a protest much like their own. In [Athens](#), Greece, once the cradle of democracy, we have recently witnessed repeated [protests](#) in the streets against austerity measures designed to stave off national bankruptcy. George Will [mocked](#) “what the media described as ‘anti-government mobs.’ Anti-government mobs composed almost entirely of government employees going berserk about threats to their entitlements!” A year ago, the Greek deficit was [estimated](#) at 12.7 percent of GDP, the national debt approaching 120 percent. Banks stop lending to countries at points like that, and even the spendthrift Greek government was forced to try to trim spending. The Greek journalist Takis Michas [told a Washington audience](#) last summer that the Greek political economy

is a form of capitalism where the bureaucracy and its allies consider the state their property, and use its mechanisms for personal enrichment.

In Greece, the fundamental principle that has been dictating economic and political development since the creation of the Greek state in the 19th century is political clientelism.

This is a system in which political support is provided in exchange for benefits.

In this situation, rent-seeking — the attempt by various groups and individuals to influence the location of political benefits — becomes paramount.

That sounds a lot like the relationship between government employee unions and state governments. In Wisconsin, the state that [first](#) gave government unions the right to bargain collectively, the Greek disease has reached crisis levels. Wisconsin faces a deficit estimated at [\\$2.2 billion](#) or more. [Wisconsin](#) and [Greece](#) have both used accounting gimmicks and fiddled statistics to conceal the state's real fiscal condition, though Greece's fraud reached stratospheric levels.

The protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya are against tyrannical governments; the protesters seek freedom and democracy. The protests in Athens and Madison are against the long-suffering taxpayers; the protesters seek to continue a political system that allows them privileged access to the public fisc.

Eat your heart out, Nashville and Lexington and Berkeley. Madison, Wisconsin, is truly the Athens of the West.

- [Bookmark on Delicious](#)
- [Digg this post](#)
- [Recommend on Facebook](#)
- [share via Reddit](#)
- [Share with Stumblers](#)
- [Tumblr it](#)
- [Tweet about it](#)
- [Subscribe to the comments on this post](#)
- [Print for later](#)
- [Tell a friend](#)

Posted in [Government](#), [History](#), [History & Society](#), [Politics](#)

2 Responses to “Madison, Wisconsin: The Athens of the West”

- [Aex koersen:](#)
[February 28, 2011 at 10:35 am](#)

Being presented with more choices, even good ones, can hinder effective action.

[Reply](#)

- [Obama No Longer Defending DOMA — IGF Culture Watch:](#)
[February 28, 2011 at 10:45 am](#)

[...] More. David Boaz on Madison, Wisconsin: The Athens of the West. [...]

[Reply](#)

Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website










[Subscribe](#) 

83rd Annual Academy Awards

Last night, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presented its annual awards at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood. Top honors went to [The King's Speech](#), which won the Oscar for Best Picture. [All About Oscar](#) provides the lowdown on all the major winners since the Oscar was first awarded in 1927/28,

and Britannica Blog provided a briefing on the [10 nominees for Best Picture](#).

Categories

- [5 Questions](#) 
- [Around the Web](#) 
- [Arts & Entertainment](#) 
- [History & Society](#) 
- [Picture of the Day](#) 
- [Science & Technology](#) 
- [Science Up Front](#) 
- [Special Features](#) 
- [Travel & Geography](#) 

Search

Recent Posts

- [The GOP Budget Battle Strategy](#) by Allan J. Lichtman
- [Madison, Wisconsin: The Athens of the West](#) by David Boaz
- [The House of Commons Under the Coalition](#) by Professor The Lord Norton of Louth
- [Frank Gehry: A Symphony in Steel \(Photo Essay\)](#) by Britannica Editors
- [Oscar's Favorites: Classic Movie Pictures](#) by Britannica Editors



Encyclo. Britannica
Britannica

@dcmagellan Thanks for the shoutout. Please tell your brother to be careful on Mactan Island. #justsayin
2 days ago · reply

Who said "Wit is the only wall / Between us and the dark"?
#quotes
2 days ago · reply

Oscars on your mind yet? We've got your classic movie photos to put you in the mood for Sunday:
<http://bit.ly/i8dd17>. #oscars
#movies
2 days ago · reply



Join the conversation

What is Britannica Blog?

Britannica Blog is a place for smart, lively conversations about a broad range of topics. Art, science, history, current events – it's all grist for the mill. We've given our writers encouragement and a lot of freedom, so the opinions here are theirs, not the company's. Please jump in and add your own thoughts.



Feedback: blogs@eb.com

© 2006-2011 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

[Britannica.com](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use/Legal Notices](#) | [Blog Archive](#) | [Contact Us](#)