



# ***UNIVERSITY OF THE PEOPLE***

***HIST 1421-01 GREEK & ROMAN CIVILIZATION - AY2024-T3***

***WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT UNIT 1***

***INSTRUCTOR: PRIYA SEHRAWAT***

## **Introduction**

Ancient Greece consisted of various city-states, two of the most famous being Athens and Sparta. Though they were both a vital part of Greek civilization, Athens and Sparta developed quite different governmental structures. Their political systems had some overlaps but differed more significantly in the rights afforded to citizens and the distribution of power.

## **How citizens participated in public affairs**

In ancient Athens and Sparta, the right to participate in politics and community decisions was limited to those considered citizens. Citizenship status was restricted to free adult men in Sparta, completely excluding women, slaves, and non-Spartans from any political influence or governance roles. Similarly in Athens, attaining full citizenship rights required male gender and freedom, denying public political participation to a large portion of the populace. Access to political power followed gender, social and citizenship qualifications set by each city-state (Brand, 2010). One major difference between Athens and Sparta was how people could participate in public life and political decision-making. Athens had an open democracy where all adult male citizens over 20 years old could not only vote on policies but also actively debate issues in the public Assembly. So Athenian commoners enjoyed extensive civic rights. On the other hand, Sparta operated more like an oligarchy with political participation limited almost exclusively to an elite warrior class of Spartiates, who made most decisions in secretive councils. Commoners and slaves were excluded.

## **Holding public office**

In Athens, most government positions like archons, legislators, and treasurers were elected annually and open to all citizens from different social classes. But Sparta entrusted key government roles only to a privileged few - two hereditary kings held supreme military power

and membership in the Council of Elders was reserved for males over 60 from elite Spartan families. In Athens and Sparta, all reputable citizens were expected to serve in public office. Athens imposed strict term limits to curb bribery, but its financial need for public works meant the affluent usually got elected. Sparta's councils were stacked with members of elite families. Though ostensibly a duty for all, holding office often followed class lines and wealth in both city-states. Access was thus not as egalitarian as rhetoric proclaimed (Cartwright, 2018).

### **Selection processes for office**

The procedure for selecting political leaders differed greatly too. In Athens rulers were chosen through majority votes in a public assembly. But Sparta employed a complicated system of separate votes within inner circles of elites, not a transparent voting process with citizen participation. For the highest positions like kings, membership was strictly hereditary from two royal families which held sole ruling rights.

### **Similarities in governmental features**

Despite major differences, Athens and Sparta had some comparable traits. Both operated under a mixed structure combining elements of monarchy (with executive heads like kings and chief magistrates), aristocracy (the elite Councils of Elders holding a share of power), and democracy (the people's assemblies). The two city-states also granted citizens a voice in approving or rejecting proposed laws even if they differed in the extent of participation allowed.

### **Areas of difference**

However, who held influence is where the Athenian and Spartan systems critically diverged. Athens extended genuine ruling power to all male citizens rather than limiting it to an exclusive inner circle. Sparta preserved nearly all authority in the hands of hereditary kings and an elite

minority. Athens also encouraged open lawful discussion of policies unlike Sparta's culture of secrecy even among its privileged classes. Finally, Athens valued the development of political rights and engagement by common citizens while Sparta focused on building military strength by concentrating power in trained warrior elites.

## **Conclusion**

Though Sparta and Athens were neighboring Greek city-states, they crafted quite distinct political systems with contrasting degrees of egalitarian civic participation and transparency. Athens emerged as an experiment in mass democracy for that era with political rights across classes of free men. Meanwhile Sparta sustained narrow authoritarian control by a minority of privileged rulers through limited power-sharing with citizens.

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References:

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