HIST 1421-01 Greek and Roman Civilization

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Written Assignment Unit 1

**Introduction**

Athens and Sparta were among the most prominent city-states in ancient Greece, each developing distinct political structures and social systems. Athens is celebrated as the cradle of democracy, where citizens actively participate in the political process. In contrast, Sparta was a militaristic society, with stringent control and rigorous military training central to civic life. This paper explores how citizens in Athens and Sparta obtained the right to participate in public life and make decisions affecting the community, who held public office, the rules governing the selection of public office holders, and the similarities and differences in the governmental structures of the two city-states. The analysis draws on historical texts and scholarly research to provide a comprehensive understanding of these ancient political systems.

**Obtaining the Right to Participate in Public Life**

Athens: In Athens, citizenship was granted to free-born male Athenians. The right to participate in public life was deeply tied to one's status as a citizen. Citizenship required that both parents be Athenian, and it was typically restricted to those who had completed military training. Participation in the Assembly (Ekklesia) allowed citizens to engage in decision-making processes directly, reflecting the democratic nature of Athenian society.

Sparta: In Sparta, the criteria for citizenship were more stringent. Only men who completed the rigorous education and training program known as the Agoge were granted full citizenship, known as "Spartiates." These citizens had the right to participate in the Apella, the Spartan assembly, and were expected to contribute to military service throughout their lives. Women and non-Spartiates (perioeci and helots) were excluded from political participation (Cartledge, 2003).

**Selection of Public Office Holders**

Athens: Public office in Athens was often filled by a combination of elections and lotteries. High-ranking officials, such as the strategoi (military generals), were elected by the Assembly. However, many other public officials were chosen by lot, a process that aimed to prevent corruption and ensure a broad representation of citizens in governance.

Sparta: In contrast, Spartan public offices were typically filled by appointment or hereditary succession. The two kings of Sparta, who shared executive authority, were hereditary monarchs. Other important officials, such as the Ephors, were elected annually by the Apella. The Gerousia, or Council of Elders, comprised members who were elected for life, typically based on their reputation and experience.

**Rules Governing the Selection of Public Office Holders**

Athens: The selection of public office holders in Athens was governed by strict rules to ensure accountability and fairness. Officials were subject to scrutiny before taking office (dokimasia) and after their term (euthyna). This process was designed to maintain integrity and public trust in the democratic system.

Sparta: In Sparta, the selection rules were less democratic but emphasized the candidates' fitness for office based on experience and merit. The dual kingship was hereditary, but the Ephors and members of the Gerousia were chosen through elections that valued wisdom and leadership qualities. The Ephors, in particular, held significant power and could check the kings' authority.

**Similarities and Differences in Governmental Structures**

Similarities: Both Athens and Sparta had assemblies that allowed citizens to participate in decision-making, reflecting a form of direct engagement in governance. Each city-state also had a council (the Boule in Athens and the Gerousia in Sparta) that played a crucial role in policy-making and administration (Pomeroy et al., 2018).

Differences: The most significant difference lies in political participation and office selection. Athens' democracy emphasized broad citizen involvement through direct participation and the use of lotteries to fill many public offices. In contrast, Sparta's oligarchic system limited political power to a select group of elite citizens, with a strong emphasis on military prowess and hereditary rule. The Ephors' powerful role in Spartan politics also marked a stark contrast to the more distributed power structure in Athens (Cartledge, 2001).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, while both Athens and Sparta developed systems that allowed for citizen participation in governance, their approaches were fundamentally different. Athens' democratic model promoted inclusivity and direct involvement, whereas Sparta's oligarchic and militaristic system prioritized control and stability. These differences reflect the unique cultural and social priorities of each city-state, offering valuable insights into the diverse political landscape of ancient Greece. Understanding these systems highlights the historical significance of these city-states and their lasting impact on political thought and practice.

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References

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