

Was athens really
more democratic than
sparta



Athens and Sparta were undeniably the two greatest cities in Ancient Greece, yet the method by which they ruled and governed their people varied greatly. Both Athens and Sparta ruled using some elements of democracy and a superficial observer may assert that Athens was the more democratic of the two. However, upon further observation one could state that Sparta was in fact as democratic as its contemporary rival. This essay will systematically discuss each theme of their differing societies, analyzing and comparing them as the essay progresses.

To add validity to the arguments presented, this essay will use both ancient sources such as Aristotle and Xenophon, as well as the findings of modern debates and scholarship. The conclusion will succinctly summarize the arguments and analysis of the essay. The first and greatest difference in democratic style was the structure and make-up of the government itself. The government of both Athens and Sparta had several common or similar institutions that this essay will compare in terms of democratic value.

The first of these institutions are the archons of Athens and the kings of Sparta. The institution of the archon evolved from being 'elected under qualifications of birth and wealth' (Aristotle Athenian Constitution, 3) to being a paid position elected by Pericles's lot, meaning that 'every citizen had an equal chance of holding political office' (Bury, 1975, p. 216).

Pericles's was the purest form of lot, in that there was no election to decide which men were eligible. The introduction of pay to the position allowed no reason for confining the archonship to the richer classes.

In the same way that the post of archon became more open, the post also lost a lot of its power such as increasing the number of archons to nine and reducing the abilities of the Areopagus which was inevitably made up of ex-archons. The final state of the Archons was one of much less unchecked power; many of its powers of judiciary were diluted to the popular courts and other powers conferred to the Ten Generals. In direct contrast to the archon, who was supposedly the executive of Athenian democracy, the Spartans had monarchical kings.

The kings of Sparta were made up of two men from the two historically powerful families; the Agidae and the Euryontidae. The kings power, much like the archons, was reduced over time ' during that epoch which, throughout Athens generally, monarchies were giving way to aristocratic republics' (Bury, 1975, p. 91). They were supreme commanders of the army, priests and judges in family matters and public roads. They also formed part of the Gerousia, which will be discussed later. Dual kingship meant that they formed a natural check on each other, in addition to this; they could be vetoed by the Gerousia and the Apella.

Both offices held vaguely similar powers and duties in religion, military and governance but what is obvious is that the post of Archon was certainly more democratic. Its process of selection was purely democratic in that almost any male citizen could hold the post whereas the kingship, although not immensely important, was only afforded to the rich and powerful families and the position unfairly guaranteed entry into the Garusia which, as will be discussed, held ' a great influence on political affairs' (Bury, 1975, p. 2). The most important bodies of government in Athens were the assembly

(Ecclesia) and the council (Boule), their counterparts in Sparta were the Apella and the Gerousia respectively. This essay will now compare the more exclusive of the four, the Boule and the Gerousia. The Athenian Boule was given part of the powers taken from the Areopagus under Pericles and maintained many powers of their own. They held influence in every sector of Athenian society such as the economy, military and religion.

The most important function of the Boule was to set the agenda of and submit motions to the Ecclesia and for this reason they set the political direction of Athens, making them reasonably important. The Boule of 500 men was first an elected post but then changed to be chosen by lot from each of the 10 ten tribes, but until pay was introduced (and even after) we can see that the Boule was 'socially unrepresentative' and that 'membership of the Boule was associated with higher social rank than we should have expected had the system been really random' (Boardman, 1986, p. 159).

However, this view is hard to sustain 'for demographic reasons to see how this could happen in practice' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 63), each member could only serve twice and selection by lot is inevitably random. Other posts of responsibility such as tax officers were chosen from the Bouleutai by lot. The leader of the Boule, the Prytanis, rotated daily and held powers over the treasury and acted as the city's representative. The Boule's counterpart in Sparta was the Gerousia. Duties of this council included preparing motions or rheterei for the Apella and holding 'enormous judicial powers' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 68).

They could veto any motion passed by the Apella as well as directly challenge the authority of the king, in this sense they were the most powerful body in Sparta. The Gerousia consisted of 30 men, 2 of them were the reigning kings. The remaining 28 had to be male citizens of at least 60 years of age. These elders are elected by the general assembly as 'the best and most prudent of the good and wise' (Plutarch, Lycourgos). However 'the councilors were elected by the people, they were not elected from the people' (Bury, 1975, p. 92) as they tended to disproportionately originate from the two royal families.

From looking at the councils of Sparta and Athens we see that in terms of power the Gerousia is the stronger of the two, acting as a supreme check on the kings, offering advice to the 5 Ephors and deciding the political agenda. However, the Boule is more accessible to the people, being chosen by lot and although both institutions are susceptible to oligarchical tendencies and bribes, the Boule with its rotating Prytanis and fairer ways of selection is the more democratic of the two. The third and final common institution was the general assembly, the Ecclesia in Athens and the Apella in Sparta.

The Ecclesia was the voting body of the Athenian democracy in that its vote was final. It served as an arena for heated debate and 'all serious business, and much we would consider minor business for committees, including numerous decisions involving money, came before the assembly' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 61). It was a highly democratic body in that every male Athenian citizen was a part of it, including the thetes who were men with very little wealth and property.

The position was also paid so that poverty did not 'bar the way, but a [poor] man is able to serve the city, despite his lack of authority' (Thucydides 2. 7. 1). Thucydides is both praising and criticizing the workings of the assembly saying that it is both accessible to the poor but also hints that this may not necessarily be a good thing as the poor may not be as educated or as politically minded as the more wealthy citizens. In addition to this the assembly-place did not have the capacity to house the full estimated 50, 000 citizen body, meaning that democracy was limited to who could attend. Some members who lived furthest away may attend only infrequently whereas those who lived in close proximity would be able to sustain a high attendance.

This is the double edged sword of direct democracy that it had 'no direct participation without actual physical presence' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 63). This however is only a practical problem and in theory the assembly was possibly the most democratic governmental body in history. Despite this, we see ambitious citizens becoming skilled orators or rhetors in order to influence the assembly especially those 'under the two great fourth century educators, Plato and Isocrates' (Boardman, 1986, p. 272). These men usually had access to teaching that the less affluent did not, adding a slight element of oligarchy to the assembly.

The power of the assembly had another dimension in that its effect was immediate, whilst modern day democracies may take months to pass legislation; they met 3 or 4 times a month meaning that it was able to act in response to most major events. The least democratic power of the assembly was the ability to remove a citizen's right to live in the city, he would remain

a citizen but would be unable to attend assembly meetings. This measure was open to abuse such as in the case of Aristides in which votes on ostracism were influenced.

Although this is a fictional account, it gives 'support for the fact that the illiterate participated in ostracisms' and that ballot papers were mass produced (Dillon and Garland, 2000, p. 135). The Spartan opposite of the Ecclesia was the Apella. All Spartan men over the age of 13 who had completed the 'agoge' (Xenophon 2. 1-8) were members or Spartiates for life and in this sense it was democratic in the Athenian sense. The assembly had the duty of making decisions 'shouting and not by voting' (Thucydides I. 87. 1-2).

This in itself is a contested issue as on a basic level it awards power to the man with the loudest voice and is easily susceptible to bias by the Spartan who is judging the 'acclamation' (Croix, 1972, pp. 348-9). However, it is argued that it adds a sense of democratic anonymity to the voters (Lewis, 1977, p. 42). The Spartan assembly in reality had nowhere near as much power as the Ecclesia, its decisions could be vetoed by the Gerusia which also prepared the assembly discussion. The assembly did not debate, merely thought and decided on decrees introduced by the council.

The Spartan nature of obedience 'discouraged insubordination of any kind' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 67) Meaning that the Spartiates were less likely to challenge the authority of the council and therefore had less influence on matters which affected them. From the above comparison it is clear that the Athenian assembly is the cornerstone of its radically democratic government

and that the Spartan assembly is considerably limited in the shadow of its Athenian counterpart and the ' ideal of accountability to the people is conspicuously absent' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 67).

The Spartan constitution adds another executive group to the procedures of government, the Ephors. The Ephors were possibly the most democratic and characteristic part of the Spartan system. The Ephors were in essence ' overseers' of the kings (Bury, 1975, p. 92) and the magistrates of the civil courts able to ' fine whomever they wish, and have the authority to exact immediate payment' (Xenophon Constitution of the Spartans, 8. 2-4). Plato described them as a ' bridle' on the other powers of Sparta (Plato Laws, 691d-692a). They were chosen by lot, one from each of the five demes.

This institution is democratic in the sense that any man could become an Ephor and that it served as a barrier to tyranny by the kings in both civil and military matters, but the judicial powers it held were possibly too great for just five men. The Athenians needed military commanders and for this it is hard to be democratic. The Ten Generals were elected based on expertise and, unintentionally, charisma and oratory skills. These men had influence in the assembly and were often ' very rich and aristocratic', something that Athenian ' democratic theory sought to avoid'. Osbourne, 2000, p. 66), Thucydides described it as, in the case of Pericles, ' rule by the first citizen' (Thucydides, 2. 65), an idea that the Athenians were keen to evade as it is undemocratic. In summary of the governmental institutions of both cities we can see that the Athenian style is the most democratic. The assembly held the majority of the power and was also shared by every Athenian citizen, the council which oversaw this assembly was also democratic as it was chosen

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by lot. The archons, less powerful than they once were, were made more democratic.

The only possible exception is that of the ten generals. Despite Athens being the more democratic, there is the further question of whether radical and direct democracy is in fact effective and efficient; the nature of rotating positions and selection by lot means that both inexperienced and sometimes negligent citizens are in positions of power. Even those who are capable do not stay in a position long enough to become experienced at it. This could be attributed to the Greek 'distrust of individuals with official power' and the fear of the emergence of a tyrant (Bury, 1975, p. 66).

When observed alongside the Athenian system, the Spartan system was undeniably more effective as a 'highly developed warrior society' (Bury, 1975, p. 69) but was not as efficient as a people's democracy on the political plane. However, Sparta was indeed a society of equals which will be discussed next. Looking past political systems, we can observe themes in Sparta which are more democratic in the sense of equality than in Athens such as the treatment of women and the process of education, but this essay will also briefly look at slavery and the judicial system in order to finally conclude on the essay title.

Women held two different roles in the two city states but there is also an underlying attitude toward them. In Athens, women were citizens and only children born to two married citizens could claim citizenship, this places a value on marriage that shows women were thought of as important.

However, women in Athens held limited rights in comparison to men, they

were unable to attend the assembly, unable to trade or own property. They were in fact items traded by men, this is shown by the wedding procedure which sees the father giving his daughter for the 'legitimae ploughing of children.

So there was a clear, undemocratic divide between men and women.

(Osbourne, 2000, p. 156) We also see women described by the tragedians as 'nothing' (Sophocles, Tereus fr. 583). In addition to this, the 'balance in ancient Athens was shifted away from the family and toward the community' (Boardman, 1986, p. 256) and there was no place for women in the centre of the community, the agora. When compared with Sparta we see that Athens is less liberal with regards to women.

Women were still seen as facilitators of population growth but they were given a lot more freedom, Aristotle talks of 'this licence of the women' (Aristotle Politics 1269b39-1270a31, II, ix) in a derogatory manner, showing the innate sexism of Greece but also shows that women in Sparta had some freedom, probably due to the absence of the men during war time and the fact that the Spartan military relied on strong women to give birth to strong children, as Lykourgos says that spartan women are the only ones who 'give birth to men' (Plutarch Lykourgos, 14. -8). In fact, by the third century 'two fifths of the land was in their hands', showing how powerful the women of Sparta could become. This attitude toward women places Sparta ahead of Athens in terms of equality. Slaves played a key part in the economy of both Sparta and Athens. Slaves were not able to vote in either society but Athenian slaves were afforded a large degree of freedom. Athen's relied on

slaves to the extent that one may not 'strike them' and they would 'not stand out of the way for you' (Pseudo-Xenophon, On Athens, 1. 10).

Slavery in Athens can be described as an 'unequal but personal alliance based on mutual interest and close intimacy' (Osbourne, 2000, p. 158). In Sparta however, slaves or helots were more akin to serfs in that they worked the land and paid tribute to the Spartiates. There were revolts of the helots and stories of their mistreatment by the Spartans (Myron, Apud Athenaeus, 14, 647d). The slaves of Athens and helots of Sparta were not considered as citizens, thus this is undemocratic and neither society treated them as equal human beings in reality.

To summarise the essay, the main points of conflict will be repeated and analysis of which society is the more democratic will be reached. As we have seen, the separate institutions of the Athenian and Spartan government share many commonalities, but the Athenian's approach to democracy is so radical that it really cannot be compared to Sparta. The Ecclesia, the council and the popular courts are all more representative of the people than the Apella, Gerousia and the Ephors.

The mixture of selection by lot and the strong influence of the general assembly means that power is really in the hands of the Athenian demos whereas the Spartiates wield much less power in the face of the executive of Sparta. Whether or not the Athenian approach is sustainable is the topic for another discussion but we can assert that the all encompassing machinery of Athenian government is more democratic than the democratic oligarchy hybrid of Sparta.

Sparta does however show more signs of social equality, helots have more freedom of location and work; women are given more freedom also. Equal education and the traditional ways of Spartan dining also show equality amongst men devoid of wealth disparity, but democracy in definition is purely political and for this reason Athens is the more democratic.