

Athens – Limited Democracy

Athens had an extraordinary system of government, whereby all male citizens had equal political rights, freedom of speech, and the opportunity to participate directly in the political arena, the assembly or council. In the 4th and 5th centuries BCE, the male citizen population of Athens ranged from 30,000 to 60,000 depending on the period. The assembly met at least once a month, more likely two or three times, on the Pnyx hill in a dedicated space which could accommodate around 6000 citizens. Nine presidents elected by lot and holding the office one time only organized the proceedings and assessed the voting.

An important element in the debates was freedom of speech which became, perhaps, the citizen's most valued privilege. After suitable discussion, temporary or specific decrees were adopted and laws defined. The assembly also ensured decisions were enforced and officials were carrying out their duties correctly.

Only male citizens who were 18 years or over could speak and vote in the assembly, while the positions such as magistrates and jurors were limited to those over 30 years of age. Therefore, women, slaves, and resident foreigners were excluded from the political process.

Although active participation was encouraged, attendance in the assembly was paid for in certain periods, which was a measure to encourage citizens who lived far away and could not afford the time off to attend. It has been estimated that only 3,000 or so people actively participated in politics. Of this group, perhaps as few as 100 citizens - the wealthiest, most influential, and the best speakers - dominated the political arena both in front of the assembly and behind the scenes.

Roman Republic – Republic/Aristocracy

Over several centuries Rome expanded its territory and found ways to govern that better represented the will of its citizens. The Romans wanted a government that did not rely on one ruler such as a king. They established a new form of government – a republic. In a republic, citizens who have the right to vote and select their leaders. The leaders rule in the name of the people.

In the Roman Republic, the most powerful part of the government was the senate. The Roman senate was the basis for our own legislative branch of government – the branch that proposes and votes on new laws. At first, the senate was made up only of 300 upper-class men called patricians. A patrician was a member of a wealthy family in the Roman republic. Ordinary citizens were known as plebeians. In the early republic, plebeians could not hold office or be senators.

The Roman Consuls: two chief officials called consuls led the government. The consuls were the chief executives of the government. They were responsible for enforcing the republic's laws and policies. The consuls were elected by the assembly of citizens. You could only be a consul for one year, then you had to be elected by the people again. Before 367 B.C., plebeians could not be consuls. The senate advised the consuls on foreign affairs, laws, and finances, among other things.

The Roman system of government might seem a little strange to us, but for them it worked for almost 500 years. The republic was run by the Senate. The senate passed all laws and collected all

taxes. All members of the Senate were of the Patrician or wealthy landowner class.

A senator was selected by the Consuls and remained a senator for life. The Consuls also selected the new members of the Senate if a senator died. To become a consul, you had to be elected by a majority of the popular vote from all citizens of Rome. **The senate advised the consuls on foreign affairs, laws, and finances, among other things.**

Here are a few more examples of people involved in the Roman Republic Government:

- **Tribunes** - Tribunes were the representatives of the Plebeian Council. They could veto laws made by the Senate.
- **Governors** - As Rome conquered new lands, they needed someone to be the local ruler. The Senate would appoint a governor to rule the land or province. The governor would be in charge of the local Roman army and would also be responsible to collect taxes. Governors were also called proconsuls.
- **Aedile** - An Aedile was a city official who was responsible for the maintenance of public buildings as well as public festivals. Many politicians who wanted to be elected to a higher office, like consul, would become aedile so they could hold big public festivals and gain popularity with the people.
- **Censor** - The Censor counted the citizens and kept track of the census. They also had some responsibilities to maintain public morality and to look after public finances.

Roman Empire – Autocracy

After two decades of civil war, Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, returned to Rome a hero. The people celebrated, hoping for the return of the stability that had been the Republic. While initially shying away from honors and power, Octavian, who would soon become known by the name of Augustus (a name meaning “sacred” or “revered”), would increasingly assume authority far beyond the intent of the Senate who had inadvertently granted it. One historian raised the question: was Augustus a “tyrant” who quietly took away Roman liberty, or a generous statesman who shared power with the Senate with the consent of the people of Rome? As an emperor, Augustus would set the stage for all of those who would follow him.

While many of the structures that had existed under the old Republic remained, such as the Senate, they existed in name only. In a kingdom, a king had to answer to an assembly (England had a Parliament; France had the Estates General, for example). Often, these assemblies controlled the finances of the kingdom, but in Rome the emperor could collect and spend as he wished. Emperor Nero, always in need of funds, would cry conspiracy, seize the property of an unsuspecting senator and

murder him. After Augustus, the Senate would never again have any real authority - only to endorse the wishes of the emperor. While Augustus and his successors would treat them with a modicum of respect, the real power was in the hands of the emperor, and to insure his own safety, he relied on his personal bodyguard.

With the consent of the Senate, Augustus slowly assumed the sole leadership of the Empire. The Senate bestowed on him, and thereby his successors, certain powers for life. With his new powers, he could veto the actions of the magistrates (whom he would later appoint), and, in order to control those around him, he controlled the imperial patronage - no one could "run" for office without his consent. He also interfered with the religion of the empire. He rebuilt decaying temples, resurrected old religious ceremonies, and assumed the title of Chief Priest. In short, the emperor's word became law.

The life of an emperor would not always be filled attending lavish ceremonies, directing military campaigns and dictating laws. He would often sit on the throne, paranoid, fearful of those closest to him. Of the first twelve emperors - four would die naturally (although some question one or two of these), four would be assassinated, two would commit suicide, and two would be murdered by poison or suffocation.