

Citizenship in Athens and Rome: Which Was the Better System?

About 500 BCE, on the Greek and Italian peninsulas of the Mediterranean Sea, a new idea began to take shape. This was the notion that people were **citizens** of a state or empire, and that being a citizen meant not only meeting certain responsibilities, but also enjoying certain rights. Before this time, in places like Egypt, Babylonia, and ancient China, individuals were generally regarded as **subjects**, not as citizens. Power was largely in the hands of a pharaoh, king, or emperor and the thousands of administrators who carried out the ruler's command. But by the sixth century BCE, a new idea was emerging: that ordinary people should play a more significant role in the life of the state.

Citizenship is a status, or standing, given by a government to some or all of its people. In the modern world, citizenship often involves a balance between individual rights, such as the right to vote, and individual responsibilities, such as the duty to serve one's country. This balance has been called the **social contract theory of citizenship**. The individual does his or her part; the nation or state does its part.

It is probably accurate to say that in the **city-state** of Athens, the emphasis was more on citizen responsibility than citizen rights. The great Athenian leader Pericles said that Athenians who did not fully participate in voting, political debate, and holding office were "useless." The Greek **philosopher** Aristotle did him one better by declaring such Athenians to be beasts. It seems that many Athenians agreed. Participating in government and making the city-state

work was simply what good citizens should do. Citizenship was an action verb.

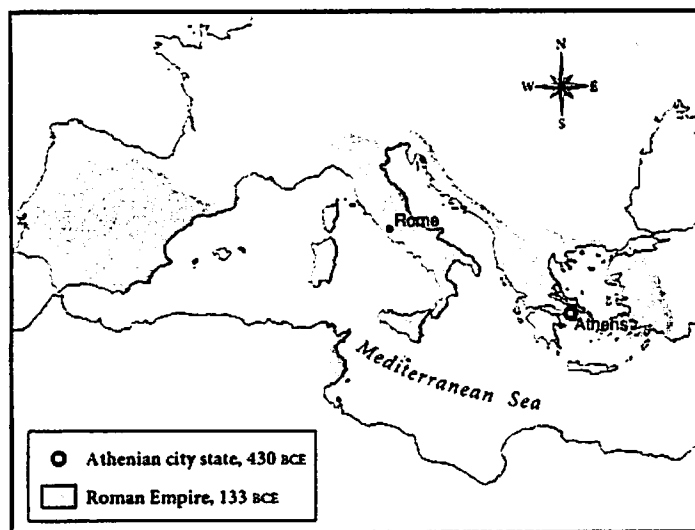
In Rome, the idea of a good citizen was a bit different. During the years of the Roman Republic, from 509 BCE until roughly 27 BCE, Roman citizenship qualifications and rights fluctuated but hovered around those described in this Mini-Q. Unlike Athenians, a Roman citizen was judged more by how he behaved with his family, his neighbors, and his property. A Roman citizen who did not participate in local government

would not likely have been called a beast.

It is important to note that comparing Athens and Rome is in some ways like comparing a flea and an elephant. Athens in 400 BCE had a population of about 300,000, including slaves. The Roman Empire had an estimated population in

1 CE of about 45,000,000, perhaps 15 percent of the world's population. Athens, a land-locked city-state, was about the size of Rhode Island. The **Roman Republic** (see map) was huge.

In Athens and Rome, citizenship was something to be honored and protected. Not everyone could have it, and those who did had a special relationship to the state. The documents that follow should help deepen your understanding of how Athenians and Romans viewed the matter. Imagine life as a citizen of Athens and as a citizen of Rome. Then address the question: *Citizenship in Athens and Rome: Which was the better system?*



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Document A

Source: Chart created from various sources.

Athens and Rome: Who Could Be a Citizen?

	<u>Athens</u>	<u>Roman Republic</u>	<u>Requirements</u>
Free, native-born adult males	Yes	Yes	Athens: If parents were free-born Athenians Rome: If parents were married in certain areas of Roman Empire
Free, native-born adult females	No	Yes	Rome: But had limited rights. Could own property, but could not vote or hold public office.
Free, native-born male children	No	Yes	Athens: First, had to complete education and two years of military training before being granted citizenship Rome: At birth, if parents were citizens
Female children	No	Yes	Rome: At birth if parents were citizens
Slaves	No	No	
Freed slaves	No	No	
Sons of freed slaves	No	Yes	

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Document Analysis

1. What was required for an adult male to become a citizen of Athens? A Roman male?
2. Could women become citizens in Athens and Rome? Could slaves?
3. In which society were children granted citizenship?
4. In your opinion, which system, Athens or Rome, was more generous in granting citizenship to its people? Explain.

Document B

Source: From a speech titled *"The Polity of Athenians"* by The Old Oligarch, circa 424 BCE.

Note: The identity of The Old Oligarch (an oligarch is a person of power) is unknown.

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"I shall say that at Athens [...] it is the poor which mans the fleet and has brought the state her power, and the steersmen and the boatswains and the shipmasters and the lookout-men and the shipwrights – these have brought the state her power much rather than the ... best-born and the elite. This being so, it seems right that all should have a share in offices filled by lot [lottery] or by election, and that any citizen who wishes should be allowed to speak.... For if the poor and the common people and the worse elements are treated well, the growth of these classes will exalt [glorify] the democracy...."

Document Analysis

1. What is The Old Oligarch's main idea when he says it is the steersmen and the shipwrights (shipbuilders) who have brought the city-state power?
2. What is the significance of the fact that Athenians allowed a poor and common man to win a position in the government by lot?
3. Do you think that election by lottery was a wise practice by the Athenians? Explain.

Document C

Source: From a speech by Claudius, Emperor of Rome, 48 CE and other varied sources.

In Athens, once citizenship was granted, citizens enjoyed equal rights and full political participation. In the Roman Republic, not all citizens received the same rights or the same political participation. But there is a reason for this. Hear first the words of Emperor Claudius responding to criticism for giving citizenship to the people of Gaul (modern-day France) soon after conquering them:

“What was the ruin of Sparta and Athens, but this, that mighty as they were in war, they spurned from them as aliens [foreigners] those whom they had conquered? Our founder Romulus, on the other hand, was so wise that he fought as enemies and then hailed as fellow-citizens several nations on the very same day.”

In other words, the Athenians were more stingy with their citizenship. The Romans more freely gave it away. But they gave it away in measured amounts.

For example:

1. *Latini* – people from regions outside Rome but on the Italian peninsula – were granted a class of citizenship with the right to do business and to travel and live within the Empire but not to an official Roman marriage.
2. *Foederati* – citizens of states with treaty obligations with Rome – were given limited rights in return for performing military service.
3. *Peregrini* – foreigners in conquered lands – could be given full or partial citizenship. Claudius did give citizenship to the people of Gaul after he conquered them.

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Document Analysis

1. According to Claudius, what was the ruin of Athens?
2. How might Claudius argue that giving citizenship and high office to conquered Gauls would be good for Rome?
3. The document says that the Romans sometimes gave away citizenship rights in measured amounts. Use an example to explain what this means.
4. How could you use this document to argue that Rome had a better system of citizenship than Athens?
5. How could you use this document to argue that Athens had a better system of citizenship than Rome?

Document D

Source: Diodorus Siculus, *History, Book XI*, written between 60 and 30 BCE.

And the law is as follows: Each citizen wrote the name of the man who in his opinion had the greatest power to destroy the democracy; and the man who got the largest number of ostraka was obliged to go into exile from his native land for a period of ten years.

The Athenians, it appears, passed such a law, not for the purpose of punishing wrongdoing, but in order to lower through exile the [position] of men who had risen too high. Now Themistocles, having been ostracized in the manner we have described, fled as an exile from his native city to Argos....

Note: Only one ostraka, or ostracism, was permitted in Athens per year.

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Source: Peter Walsh, "In the Realm of the Censors: From the Coliseum to Capitol Hill," *Boston Review*, February 1991.

In conducting the census of the Roman population, the censors (they were elected in pairs) not only counted Rome's citizens but ... ranked them into distinct classes.... The censors' ranking, based on wealth, heritage [family standing], administrative competence, marital status, and physical and moral fitness, determined the citizen's political privileges, his level of taxation, and his military service. Anyone who didn't meet the standards of the censors could be demoted in rank. If the offender was a senator, this meant expulsion from the Senate.

Note: The Roman census was conducted every five years.

Document Analysis

1. What did it mean when Athenians ostracized a fellow citizen? What was the purpose?
2. Do you think ostracism was a good idea? Explain.
3. How did Rome control the privileges and benefits of citizenship?
4. Do you think giving the censors the power to rank and re-rank citizens into different classes was a good idea? Explain.
5. Judging from the two passages in this document, who had the better system of citizenship, the Athenians or the Romans? Explain.

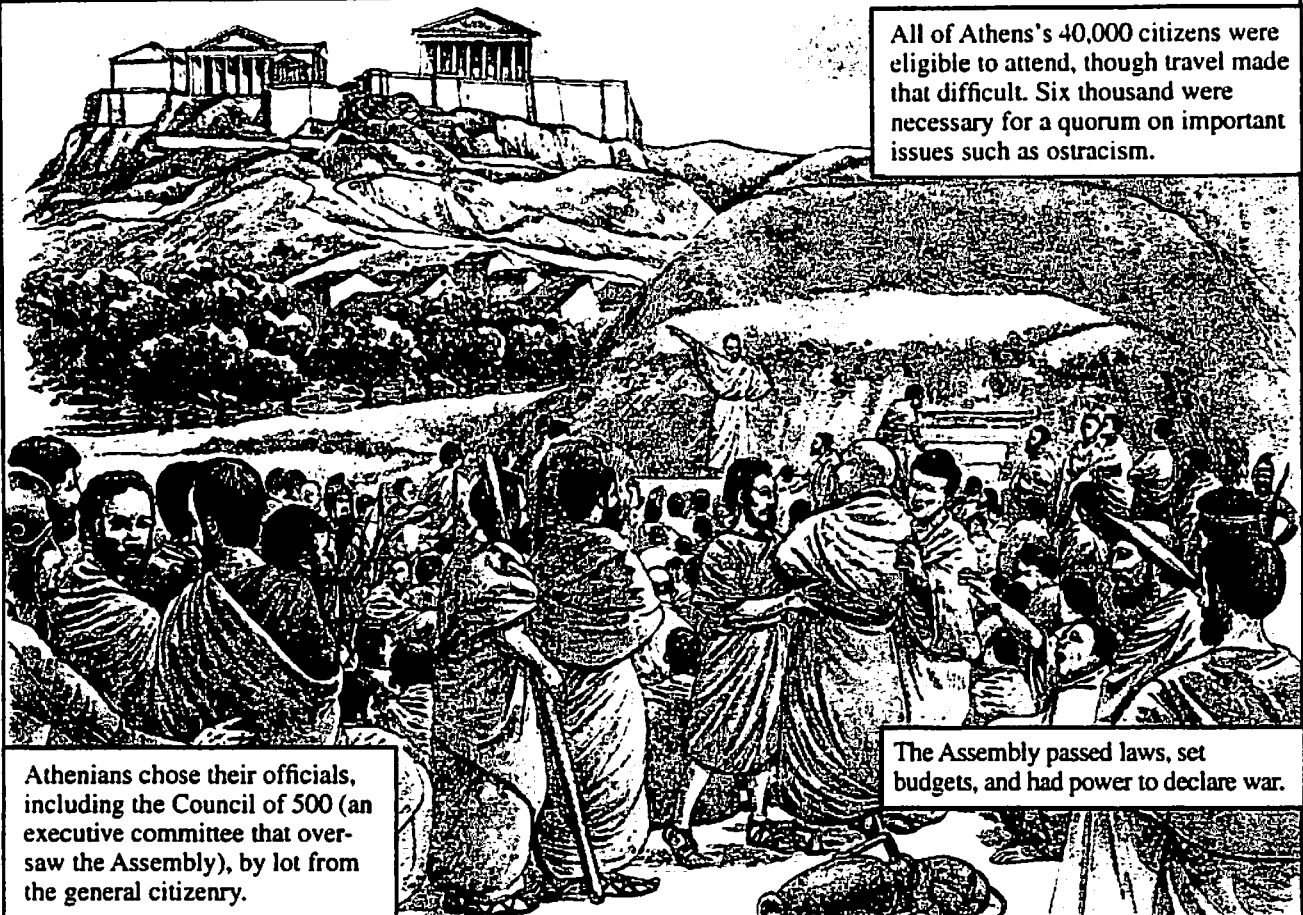
Document E

Source: Illustration from *The Greek World* by Anton Powell, Routledge Press, 1987.

The Athenian Assembly

The Athenian Assembly met 40 times a year on a hillside called Pnyx, near the Acropolis. The site had excellent acoustics.

All of Athens's 40,000 citizens were eligible to attend, though travel made that difficult. Six thousand were necessary for a quorum on important issues such as ostracism.



Athenians chose their officials, including the Council of 500 (an executive committee that oversaw the Assembly), by lot from the general citizenry.

The Assembly passed laws, set budgets, and had power to declare war.

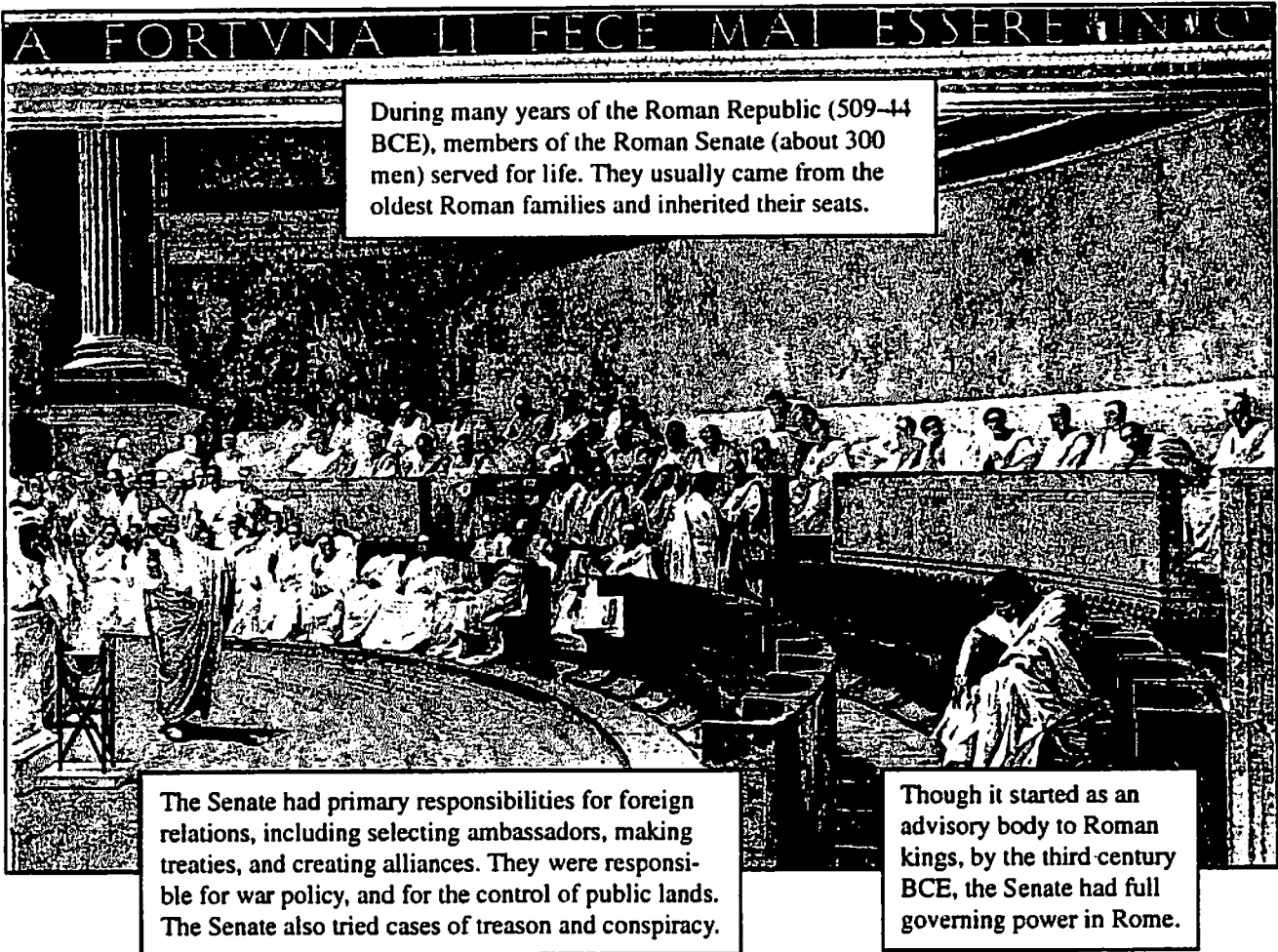
Document Analysis

1. What percent of adult male citizens in Athens could vote in the Assembly? What percent were eligible to become members of the smaller Council of 500?
2. Judging by the illustration and the quorum requirement, what generalization can you make about the attendance of Athenian citizens at Assembly meetings?
3. What does it mean that the Council of 500 was chosen "by lot"? Was that a good idea?
4. Assume that the scene in the drawing is reasonably accurate. Does it strengthen or weaken an argument that Athens had a better system of citizenship than Rome? Explain.

Document F

Source: A fresco of the Roman Senate painted by Italian artist Cesare Maccari in the 1880s.

The Roman Senate



During many years of the Roman Republic (509–44 BCE), members of the Roman Senate (about 300 men) served for life. They usually came from the oldest Roman families and inherited their seats.

The Senate had primary responsibilities for foreign relations, including selecting ambassadors, making treaties, and creating alliances. They were responsible for war policy, and for the control of public lands. The Senate also tried cases of treason and conspiracy.

Though it started as an advisory body to Roman kings, by the third-century BCE, the Senate had full governing power in Rome.

Document Analysis

1. How many served in the Roman Senate? How many could serve in the Athenian Assembly? (see Doc E)
2. How long was the usual term of service in the Roman Senate?
3. Compare the social class make-up of the Roman Senate and the Athenian Assembly (Doc E). What does this comparison tell you about the political power of the average citizen in each society?
4. Compare the two images in Documents E and F. In your opinion, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the Athenian Assembly and the Roman Senate? Explain.