

Name: _____ Class: _____

Athens vs. Rome

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In 509 BCE, the Roman Republic overthrew its king and established a democracy. Around the same time, the Greek city-state of Athens transitioned to a democracy. In this text, Chaddie Kruger discusses the governments of these two societies. As you read, take notes on how Rome's democracy differed from Athens'.

- [1] At about the same time that Athens rejected tyranny¹ and chose democracy, Rome overthrew its last king and established its democracy. The Romans, however, limited the common man's participation much more than the Athenians did. During the Roman Republic (509-27 BCE), adult male citizens could vote and hold office, but members of the upper class were favored in elections.



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The Five at the Top

The Roman Senate consisted of approximately 600 members, all of whom had held one or more of the five major administrative positions: senator, consul, praetor, aedile, and quaestor. It was the senators' duty to advise the consuls,² decide foreign policy, and manage taxation. Remember the Athenian boule³ that served as Assembly advisors for one year? Roman senators usually were from the upper classes and held the office for life.

The two consuls were supreme commanders in both military and civic matters — much as the President of the United States is. To run for the office, a Roman had to be at least 42-years-old, and a consul had to wait 10 years after his term ended before running again for the office. The Romans named calendar years after the consuls, just as the Athenians designated years by the names of their archons.⁴

As for the other offices, the numbers varied, but in general, eight praetors served as judges, four aediles as city managers (overseeing water and grain supplies and public entertainment, for example), and 20 quaestors as financial officers. The minimum age requirements for these posts differed, unlike in Athens, where the minimum age for top administrative positions was 30.

1. **Tyranny (noun):** a cruel and controlling government rule
2. two yearly elected officials who ruled the Roman Republic together
3. a council of over 500 citizens who were appointed to run the daily affairs of the city
4. nine officials who administered the law in ancient Athens

- [5] To run for the office of consul, a person first had to serve as a praetor; to run for a praetorship, a candidate had to have been a quaestor. The mandatory succession from quaestor to consul was called the *cursus honorum* ("sequence of offices"), and each post was held for only one year. For these offices, as with the consulship, rules governed the number of years a citizen had to wait after completing one post before running for another.

The Other Three...

Ten tribunes protected the rights of the common people and enforced decrees⁵ that the Concilium Plebis ("Council of the People") passed. They could also veto⁶ decisions made by the Senate and magistrates⁷ that they considered unfair to the people. Tribunes served for one year and were chosen by the Concilium.

Censors were elected approximately every five years. Their term of office was 18 months, and their duty was to conduct an official census.⁸ They evaluated senators and could have them removed from the Senate for improper behavior.

Religious officials supervised the all-important state worship.

In a dire⁹ emergency, a dictator was appointed. He had absolute authority while in power. Because Romans despised the memory of their despotic¹⁰ kings, dictators ruled for only six months.

The Voters

- [10] Unlike the members of the Athenian Assembly, Roman citizens did not vote directly. Rather, citizen groups voted in two major assemblies, known as *comitia*, and the results were biased as to the well-to-do. For example, it was the responsibility of the *Comitia Centuriata* to choose the consuls, praetors, and censors. The voting groups, called "centuries," were organized according to wealth, and those with the richest members voted first. This meant that a majority of the total possible votes could be cast and counted before members of the less affluent¹¹ groups had even voted. It was the duty of the *Comitia Tributa* to elect the quaestors and aediles. The membership of this *comitia* was structured according to 35 geographical "tribes" and ultimately favored property-holders.

To be sure, the Athenians inspired the Romans, but, ultimately, the Romans did democracy their way!

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5. an official order issued by someone with legal authority
 6. to reject a decision or proposal
 7. officials or judges who administer the law
 8. a count of population and property evaluation in ancient Rome
 9. **Dire (adjective):** extremely serious or urgent
 10. **Despotic (adjective):** ruling with absolute power, often exercising it in a cruel or oppressive way
 11. **Affluent (adjective):** having a good deal of money or wealth

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. The Romans moved towards a more democratic society by spreading power among elected officials, but they favored the wealthy more than the Athenians did.
 - B. Rome wasn't a truly democratic society because Roman citizens were severely limited when it came to which officials they could vote for.
 - C. The Athenians had a very successful democratic society consisting of elected officials with limited terms.
 - D. The Romans made it so that an individual's wealth could not affect their ability to run for office or to vote for officials.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The Romans named calendar years after the consuls, just as the Athenians designated years by the names of their archons." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "The minimum age requirements for these posts differed, unlike in Athens, where the minimum age for top administrative positions was 30." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "For these offices, as with the consulship, rules governed the number of years a citizen had to wait after completing one post before running for another." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Unlike the members of the Athenian Assembly, Roman citizens did not vote directly. Rather, citizen groups voted in two major assemblies, known as comitia, and the results were biased as to the well-to-do." (Paragraph 10)

3. Which of the following describes the author's purpose in the text?
 - A. to highlight how Rome's democratic society was better organized than Athens' democratic society
 - B. to show which aspects of the Roman Republic's democratic society Athens copied for itself
 - C. to describe the organization of the Roman Republic's democracy and how it differed from Athens
 - D. to emphasize how neither Rome nor Athens had a perfect democratic society

4. How did Athens' democracy compare to Rome's?
 - A. Athens allowed the average citizen to participate more in their democratic society than Rome did.
 - B. The Athenians and Romans ensured that all of their citizens had an equal opportunity to vote and run for office.
 - C. Rome better distributed political power among various officials than Athens, which had fewer offices.
 - D. Both Athens and Rome gave more voting and political power to those who were wealthy and owned land.

5. What connection does the author draw between wealth and power in Rome's democratic society?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author discusses how the Roman Republic would become a dictatorship in the event of an emergency. Do you think losing your political voice is worth the protection a ruler with a great amount of power could potentially offer in an emergency? Why or why not?
2. In the text, the author compares consuls to the title of president. Can you identify any other similarities between democracy in ancient Rome and the United States? If so, describe them.
3. How did social status determine how much a Roman citizen could participate in their democratic society? Do you think people of wealth or status are more likely to rise to positions of power in your country? Do you think wealthy voters have a greater say in our society today? Why or why not?