The Government of the Roman Republic

Standard 1.2: The Government of the Roman Republic

Describe the government of the Roman Republic and the aspects of republican principles that are evident in modern governments. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T1.2]

FOCUS QUESTION: How did the Government of the Roman Republic Contribute to the Development of Modern-Day Democracy?

The Roman Forum was the center of the public sphere in Rome. Much of Rome’s political process took place here. "Roman Forum from Palatine Hill" by Chalaph is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Roman Republic lasted from 509 to 27 BCE. Its system of government included features that are part of the United States government today, notably its processes for political decision making based on mutually agreeable compromise (Watts, 2018, p. 7). At the same time, Rome during the Republic and the Roman Empire, had many undemocratic features, including a rigid class system, slavery, and the sanctioning of everyday violence. Additionally, women could not attend or vote in political assemblies nor hold any political office. So, what did liberty, government, and democracy mean and for whom did they exist during the Roman Republic and later the Roman Empire?

The modules for this standard explore this question by examining the role of Roman government in Roman society and Roman engineering; the widespread presence of slavery in Roman society as well of the resistance of slaves (both in the ancient world and in North America) to their oppression; and the lasting impact of the Latin language on the English language and the words we use to discuss citizenship, government and politics.

Building Democracy for All
1. **INVESTIGATE: Roman Government and Roman Engineering**

The government during the Roman Republic was neither a monarchy (rule by one) or a direct democracy (rule by all). There was a **constitution**. There were **written laws**. Disputes were settled in **courts**. There were **separate branches of the government** and most Roman male citizens had some voting power. And there was the belief in the overriding principle of **libertas** (liberty). As historian Mary Beard (2005) noted, “All, or most, Romans would have counted themselves as upholders of libertas” (p. 129)
Roman government functioned within the **strict class structure** of Roman society ([Roman Social Order](#)). The ruling class were known as the **Patricians**; the other social classes included **Plebeians, Freemen, and Slaves**. Patricians controlled the government. Plebeians were only granted a right to an Assembly after much conflict with the Patricians. Despite their protests, the Plebeians were granted limited rights. Like ancient Rome, the U.S. has ongoing struggles among social groups within its social, economic, and racial class structures. **Topic 4/Standard 13** examines the role money plays in U.S. politics and elections.

Rome established a **code of written laws** known as **The Laws of the Twelve Tables**. Carved into 12 stone tablets between 451 and 450 BCE, these codes set strict rules for Roman citizens, many of which would be considered incredibly harsh or barbaric today. The Twelve Tables was part of the "struggle by plebeian citizens for full political rights and for parity with the elite, partrician citizens who were generally loath to give up their hereditary monopoly of power" (Beard, 2005, p. 146). Writing down laws so they could be applied to every citizen was a new development in Roman society. Written laws could not be changed, meaning people had certain rights that could not be taken away from them.

The first legal codes in world history came from the ancient Middle East with the **Code of Ur-Nammu** being the first having predated the **Code of Hammurabi**, the most well-known by three centuries. The Great Tang Code was the earliest Chinese legal code that has been recorded completely. Written in 1804, the 2,281 articles of the **Napoleonic Code** ensured equality, universal suffrage, property rights and religious liberty to all male citizens of France. The **United States Code** is a collection of this country's permanent laws, but is so large that no one can for sure how many laws there are ([Library of Congress, March 13, 2013](#)).

The government of the Roman republic had a **system of checks and balances** that sought to balance three forces in Roman society:

1. representation and participation of the poor;
2. the power and influence of the elite; and
3. the need to enact swift decision making outside of representative government.

The U.S. adopted its own system of checks and balances to control the power of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (see the [resourcesforhistoryteachers wiki page on The American Political System](#)).

**Roman Engineering**

In addition to its government institutions and social class system, ancient Rome is known for its architecture, engineering, and technology contributions: roads, bridges, arches in buildings, domes, arenas and amphitheatres, baths, central heating, plumbing, and sanitation. These innovations were **government-funded public works projects** intended to further the power and control of the Republic and then the Roman Empire. Still, public works projects benefited people, a dynamic that is ever-present today where local, state, and federal government in the U.S. fund an enormous range of services that people need and demand.
**Roman aqueducts** are a notable example of government-funded technological innovation. Aqueducts delivered water over long distances using downhill gravity flows to public baths and fountains throughout cities and towns. The city of Rome had more than 480 miles of aqueducts that brought 300 million gallons of water daily. The word "aqueduct" comes from the Latin words "aqua" meaning water and "ducere" meaning to lead or to conduit. Aqueducts transformed Roman society, one blog referred to them as the "dawn of plumbing." To learn how aqueducts function, view the video: [Roman Water Supply](#) from Science Channel.
Government-funded public works projects have been central to the development of the United States from the beginning. The National Road, built between 1811 and 1837, was the first federally funded highway. New York State funded the building of the Erie Canal. The federal government heavily subsidized the first Transcontinental Railroad. Between 1933 and 1939, the Public Works Administration funded more than 34,000 projects as part of the New Deal. In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed legislation creating the Interstate Highway System. Beginning in the 1960s, the Internet itself had its origins as a Department of Defense research project.
Suggested Learning Activities

- **Write Your Definition of a "Law"**
  - How would you define or explain "what is a law?"
  - What do you think are the three most important laws in your life today? Why do you think so?

- **Propose a Change to Classroom Rules or School Codes of Conduct**
  - [The Laws of the Twelve Tables](The Laws of the Twelve Tables) were the Roman’s attempt to create a code of laws that applied to every citizen; today every classroom and school has codes of conduct that seek to create protocols for behavior that apply to every student.
  - After examining your classroom or school’s rules of student conduct and propose changes or additions; Explain the reasons for your proposal.
    - What changes would you make to current procedures for beginning a class, conducting daily learning activities, and ending class for the day?

- **State Your View about School Dress Codes**
  - In ancient Rome it was mandated by law that all male citizens wear togas of certain colors to public events: Plain white for ordinary citizens; Off-white with a purple border for magistrates and upper class boys; Bleached togas for politicians; Purple with gold embroidery for victorious generals and the emperor ([The Romans-Clothing](The Romans-Clothing)). Many schools today have dress codes mandating what students must wear.
    - Does your school have a dress code?
    - What are the arguments for and against school dress codes?
    - What recommendations would you make for the school's student dress code: what must students wear; what may students wear; what cannot students wear?

- **Build a Model of an Aqueduct**
  - Watch the TeachEngineering video [Construct an Aqueduct!](Construct an Aqueduct!) and then build your own working model.

- **Propose a Modern-Day Public Works Project**
  - Rome built roads, aqueducts and many other structures as government-funded public works project. What new public works project should local, state, or federal government provide for your community?
    - For examples read about [The Great Depression Top Five Public Works Projects of the New Deal](The Great Depression Top Five Public Works Projects of the New Deal):
      - Grand Coulee Dam
      - Hoover Dam
      - Great Smoky Mountain National Park
      - Overseas Highway from Miami to Key West
      - The Lincoln Tunnel

**Online Resources for Roman Government, Roman Society, and Roman Engineering**

- [Citizenship in the Roman Republic](Citizenship in the Roman Republic), Learning Plan, Los Angeles Unified School District
2. UNCOVER: Spartacus and Slavery in the Roman World, Toussaint L’Ouverture, and Black American Slave Revolts

Though slavery was widespread throughout the ancient world, ancient Rome was the society most reliant on slave labor with the highest number of slaves among its population. Estimates vary, but many sources estimate it was between one-fifth and one-third of the ancient Roman population that was enslaved.

The institution of slavery was interwoven into all areas of Roman life.

- Slaves were status symbols for the wealthy.
- Slaves were forced to do manual labor (e.g. farming) in horrible working conditions. Due to the constant warfare of the Roman empire it was hard for them to grow enough food to sustain everyone in the empire. To balance this, they often took the prisoners of war and made them grow food so they could continue to be at war.
- Slaves were forced to do household labor as cooks, waiters, cleaners, and gardeners.
- Slaves were forced to work on public works projects such as the construction of buildings and aqueducts.
- Slaves were also forced to be gladiators, and participate in ritualized public violence in
which men and women literally fought their deaths for the entertainment of spectators.

- Slaves were needed to keep Roman society stable because they were such a high percentage of the population.

Unlike the Atlantic slave trade centuries later, Roman slavery was not based on race. Roman slaves included prisoners of war, sailors captured by pirates, and enslaved individuals purchased outside Roman territory. Impoverished Roman citizens sometimes sold their children into slavery to make money. Slavery, as practiced in Rome and many other societies, contradicted the fundamental principles of freedom and liberty. It created lasting and unresolved philosophical and political problems in every democracy where it was practiced—including colonial North America and the United States before and after the Civil War.

Throughout history slaves have rebelled against those who enslaved them. The desire to be free, to have control over one’s life, is basic to being human. **Spartacus** was a gladiator and leader of a lengthy, though unsuccessful, slave revolt against the Roman Republic in 73 BCE.

**Toussaint L’Ouverture**, who has been called the Black Spartacus, was the leader of the Haitian Revolution, an uprising of African slaves on the island of Haiti that produced in 1804 the second
Resistance to slavery through slave revolts is a recurring theme in the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the American South before the Civil War. In the Jamaican Slave Uprising of 1760-61, one of the largest slave revolts of the 18th century, 1000 enslaved Africans rose up against their oppressors in a violent, bloody struggle. It was an powerful example of Black agency, but it is not included in many textbooks. "Masters and their captives struggled with one another continuously," noted historian Vincent Brown in his book Tacky's Revolt: A Story of an Atlantic Slave War (2020, p. 7). A more complete history demands us, in Brown's view, to "elaborate on the slaves' grievances and goals, or the connections among the various individuals and forces behind the insurrections" (2020, p. 13).

The United States also had slave revolts, as Henry Louis Gates (100 Amazing Facts about the Negro) has recorded: the Stono Rebellion (1739), the New York City Conspiracy of 1741; Gabriel’s Conspiracy (1800); the German Coast Uprising (1811), and the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831). Each is a compelling example of Black resistance to the cruelties of slavery. For as the 20th century revolutionist Frantz Fanon (1961) wrote in The Wretched of the Earth: “the famous dictum which states that all men are equal will find its illustration in the colonies only when the colonized subject states he is equal to the colonist” (p. 9).
Suggested Learning Activities

- **Compare and Contrast Slave Revolts and Rebellions** in Roman history and U.S. history
  - *Spartacus War: Story of a Real-Life Gladiator*, NPR Podcast (February 2, 2010)
  - View *From Slave to Rebel Gladiator: The Life of Spartacus*, TED-Ed (December 17, 2018)
  - *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt* - 500 slaves revolted near New Orleans in 1811
  - *Poetry of Resistance: How the Enslaved Resisted*, Zinn Education Project

- **Explore Interactive Online Resources**
  - *The Atlantic Slave Trade: 315 Years, 20,528 Voyages, Millions of Lives* - A visualization of voyages bringing slaves to Europe and the Americas, year by year.
  - *The 1619 Project*, New York Times, August 2019, the 400th Anniversary of the beginnings of American slavery

Online Resources about Slave Revolts

- *Roman Society and the Question of Race* is a short essay exploring race in the Roman slave system.
- *Reckoning with Legacies of Slavery and Slave Trade*, Slavery and Remembrance, Colonial Williamsburg
- *AP World History Period 2.2: States and Empires*
- *Slaves, the Labor Force, and the Economy*, Roman Empire in the First Century, PBS
- *Roman Slavery*, World History For Us All, UCLA
- Background Information on slavery in United States history:
  - *Slavery in Colonial North America*
  - *Beginnings of Slavery in North America in the 1600s and 1700*
  - *Debates Over Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War*
  - PODCAST: *The History of American Slavery*

3. ENGAGE: What Latin Words and Phrases Should Every Student Want to Know?

Why does the English language include so many words from Latin, a language that is hardly spoken in the United States? Dictionary.com has concluded that **60 percent of all English words come from Greek or Latin roots**; in science and technology, the figure is more than 90 percent. Ten percent of Latin words have come directly into English - terms like chivalrous, flux, rapport and taunt.

Knowing the meaning of Latin words and phrases is essential in everyday life. One would not want to sign a contract that had the phrase *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) or fail to accept someone's *mea culpa* (it was my fault). The term "**coronavirus**" is derived from the Latin word for corona (crown-like circle of light) + virus. A coronavirus has the appearance of a solar corona when seen
under an electron microscope (see Coronavirus Etymology on Wikipedia).

Latin is the language of law and government. Understanding Latin is key to understanding everyone's rights in the country's political and legal systems. *E Pluribus Unum* is a Latin phrase meaning from "out of many, one." It was adopted as the United States' motto in 1782 and first appeared on a U.S. coin in 1795. It was intended to convey the message that the United States is one country made from many diverse peoples and places. *E Pluribus Unum* was replaced by "In God We Trust" as a Cold War-era statement against communism.

![Image of E Pluribus Unum](https://example.com/image)

Hundreds of Latin language words and phrases that have made their way into the English language. The word *justice* had its origins in Latin *jus*, meaning "right" or "law." The English words "citizen," "civil," "civics," and "civilization" all come from the Latin words *civis* (city-dweller, citizen) and *civitas* (city). Then there is the word *pater* (father) which gives English the words paternal, patriot, and patriarchy. The words *segregate* and *desegregate* come from the term *segregatus* meaning to "set apart" or "separate from the herd." Many more important terms from Latin are listed in the [Glossary of Educational and Legal Terms for Middle and High School Students](https://example.com/glossary).

Latin is also used for mottos, such as the Massachusetts state motto, *Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem* (By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty). *Ars gratia artis* (art for the love of art) is the motto of the movie studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Latin words appear regularly in the news. *Quid pro quo*, meaning an exchange of something for something, became widely used during the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump's infamous phone call with the President of Ukraine. That phone call, and its surrounding events, established that the delivery of U.S. security assistance was contingent on Ukraine announcing an investigation into Trump's political rival, former Vice President Joe Biden and his son.
Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design a Coat of Arms Featuring a Motto in Latin**
  - Use the [Online Motto Generator](#) to select a motto to represent your family, class, or school.
  - Draw, design, or construct a [coat of arms](#).

- **Use Latin Words in Writing**
  - From a list of common Latin words and phrases (see examples below), in groups, design a video, skit, or digital story in which the characters use multiple Latin words in the narrative.
    - *Ad infinitum*: going on for ever and ever
    - *Bona fide*: in good faith
    - *Cum laude*: with honor
    - *De facto*: in fact
    - *Et cetera*: and the rest
    - *Per diem*: for/by each day
    - *Pro bono*: for good
    - *Alibi*: elsewhere
    - *Per se*: In itself
    - *Multi*: many
    - *Quid pro quo*: this for that
    - *Semi*: Half
    - *Verbatim*: word for word
    - *Versus*: against
    - *Affidavit*: he/she/it declared under oath

- **Send a Message in Latin**
  - Select a Latin phrase from this [website](#).
  - Express the phrase creatively using paper, colored markers and pencils, or online with a meme or poster.
  - Present the Latin message to the class, explain what it means in English, and display the phrases in the classroom or on a virtual bulletin board/class website.

Online Resources about Latin Language

- [History of Latin](#) timeline.
- [Interactive map](#) (flash-based) to see how the Romans conquered all of Western Europe and spread their language
- [Glossary of Latin Terms Used in Law and Government](#)
- [Dictionary of Latin Terms Used in Legal Doctrines and Rules](#)
- [Letters of the Roman Alphabet](#) and how to pronounce each letter.
- [Latin Derivatives](#)
- [How Did Latin Become a Dead Language?](#) shows its spread and its decline
- [See How English Words Are Derived from Latin](#)
Standard 1.2 Conclusion

The Roman Republic, like the government of ancient Athens, had political and social features that made their way into the new government of the United States. **INVESTIGATE** looked at the structure of Roman government and the central role that slavery played in Roman society. **UNCOVER** addressed the long history of slave revolts, including the roles of Spartacus, and much later, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian Revolution, and revolts of Black slaves in the American South before the Civil War. **ENGAGE** asked what Latin words and phrases should everyone know?


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