

**Back in the Day . . .**

Although it may seem like ancient Rome ended long ago, an empire that large and lasting does not fall without leaving its mark on the world. Many of the ideals of the Roman Republic have been evident throughout European history, and when Europeans came to North America, they, too, looked to the ancient republic for guidance. The United States government today is still greatly influenced by ancient Rome's political system and philosophy.

While the United States is a democracy, it is a representative democracy—or a republic. There is another kind of democracy, a direct democracy, in which each citizen votes on laws. In the United States republic, Americans elect all sorts of officials, such as senators, congressmen, state legislators (lawmakers), mayors, and others. These elected representatives vote on the laws for their constituents, or the people they represent. This aspect of the Roman Republic forms a basis for U.S. government. There are other similarities between ancient Rome and the United States.

The Framers of the U.S. Constitution drew inspiration from many sources. They valued the democratic principles and emphasis on citizenship practiced in ancient Athens. They paid careful attention to the European philosophers, who valued “natural rights.” They even drew inspiration from the power-sharing of the Native American Iroquois Confederacy. However, they called the government they created a *republic*—a name borrowed from ancient Rome.



The United States Capitol in Washington, DC. Many of the building designs in the U.S. capital were inspired by Roman structures.

**Common Roots**

Rome and the United States have a similar founding. At first, both were controlled by a monarch who was overthrown by frustrated citizens. The seven kings of Rome were elected by the people to rule for life, so they did not pass the throne and its power to their descendants like most monarchs. Wealthy men formed the Roman Senate, which advised the king. The Roman Senate did not have much power without the king's consent. The last king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, was overthrown in 509 BCE. Then, instead of a king, two consuls were chosen to serve as the leader for a year. The Roman Senate still acted as the main council and voted on decisions.

Similarly, early American colonists overthrew their monarch, King George III of England. After a long revolution, American leaders formed a government that gave overwhelming power to states under the Articles of Confederation. This form of government did not function very well, so leaders went back to the drawing board and wrote the United States Constitution. The Constitution formed a stronger national government and separated its powers of government into three distinct branches. The legislative branch, which makes laws, includes Congress—both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The executive branch, which carries out and enforces laws, includes the president, vice president, and many government agencies. The judicial branch, which interprets laws and determines innocence or guilt when crimes occur, includes a system of courts. The highest court in the United States is the Supreme Court.

### **Checks and Balances**

Although the Romans never had a written constitution like the United States, they did have separate branches of government similar to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the American system. Have you ever heard of checks and balances? These are ways that each branch of government can limit or stop the other two branches. With checks and balances, no single branch of government can get too powerful.

Who used checks and balances first? You guessed it: the Roman Republic. When the Roman Republic was first set up, two men called consuls were in charge, and they controlled the army, passed laws, set tax rates, and decided if the republic should go to war. They were in power for just one year. Each consul could veto, or refuse, a decision by the other.

The consuls did not act alone. Each of the individual consuls was advised by senators, who were wealthy Roman men. The Roman Assembly, a group of male Roman citizens, elected senators and prefects, who ran daily events in the city. Tribunes were elected by the Roman Assembly and represented the interests of poor citizens. Though the Roman Republic did not have the same branches of government as the United States does today, the republic still had a system of checks and balances in place.

### **Who Has Power in a Republic?**

The United States government, like the Roman system of representative government, also holds leaders accountable. Presidents and members of Congress can be removed in elections or, in the case of the president and federal judges, removed from office through impeachment. Because of this, citizens have the ultimate power in a republic.

In spite of the many good things about Roman and U.S. government, not everyone benefitted from the system. For examples, slaves and women had few rights and limited power. For a long time in both cultures, only certain people—men—were given any form of power. The people have the power in a republic, but it can take effort for all people to gain equal influence.

### What About the Vote?

Ancient Rome and the modern United States seem to share the same system of voting, but the differences become clear after learning about each culture.

Initially, only patricians, or elite people, were allowed to vote or be in the Roman Senate.

People could vote for leaders, but the system did not distribute votes fairly because rich Romans had more votes than other Romans. As time went on, however, more groups of Roman citizens were given the right to vote. Similarly to Rome, the authors of the United States Constitution said that government was for all men, but they really meant all educated, white, male landowners.

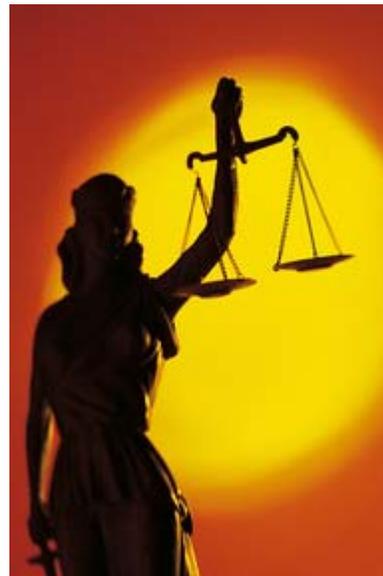
That's quite a bit different than "all men," and certainly not "all people." Over the course of U.S. history, all adult citizens eventually won the right to vote and run for office.

In the United States, each citizen over the age of 18 can cast one vote per election, no matter how rich or poor the person is. All eligible citizens can vote in local, state, and federal (national)

elections, most of which are direct elections, which means that the candidate who gets the most votes from citizens wins.

Votes for president, however, are cast by members of the Electoral College. Each state has a certain number of electoral votes based on its population. State electors vote for president based on which candidate was chosen by most voters in the state. Because of this, it is possible for a candidate to win a nationwide majority of the popular vote—the total number of votes cast by all citizens—but not the majority of Electoral College votes. Americans have been upset on the occasions when this has occurred.

A main difference between ancient Rome and the United States today is that voting in the United States is based on citizenship and population, whereas in Rome it was partially based on wealth. Many Americans worry, however, that



The Roman Republic believed that jury trials should begin by presuming innocence, not guilt.

allowing people to give large donations to support a political candidate gives rich Americans far more power than middle-class or poor Americans.

### **Justice in the Courts**

Roman law has continued to influence justice in the United States. One key idea in American courts is that a person accused of a crime is innocent until proven guilty. The person does not have to prove he is innocent, as he would in many countries. Instead, a jury must have proof that a person is guilty. Romans also considered this presumption of innocence a basic principle of law, and they also held trials by jury.

Both governments stated that all citizens have the right to equal treatment. Both established that unreasonable laws can be rejected. And both required that a person accusing someone of a crime must have proof.

The system of government that runs a country helps form the basis and strength of that country. Ancient Roman culture and the culture of the United States today share some similarities, especially in terms of government: the strong governments of both were and are important in the lives of the citizens of each country. Republics are complicated, however, and they can be—like any democracy—inefficient. Still, in their desire to avoid their voices being silenced by a monarchy, the framers of the United States Constitution found inspiration and wisdom within ancient Rome's government.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** A republic is a form of government without
  - A.** a legislature
  - B.** a monarch
  - C.** judges
  - D.** voters
  
- 2.** Which role did consuls fill within the Roman government?
  - A.** They ran daily events in the city.
  - B.** They passed laws and decided on tax rates.
  - C.** They represented the interests of poor Roman citizens.
  - D.** They vetoed decisions made by the Roman Assembly.
  
- 3.** The United States has a government similar to that of ancient Rome. Which of the following is true *only* under the current government of the United States?
  - A.** People accused of crimes are presumed innocent.
  - B.** Separate branches of government make, enforce, and interpret laws.
  - C.** Each citizen has one vote.
  - D.** Voters elect leaders to represent them in government.
  
- 4.** In both ancient Rome and the United States, some groups of people were, at times, excluded from voting. How were those exclusions similar? Why do you think these rules changed over time? How would life in the United States be different today if these rules had never changed? Use information from the passage to support your answer.