

Ancient Greece and Rome and Their Influence on Western Civilization

An Enduring Legacy

The American political system, like those of many other Western nations, is profoundly influenced by ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. Our ideas about democracy and republican government come from these ancient governments. Our values of citizen participation and limited government originate in these ancient societies.

Why were the founders of the United States so deeply influenced by ancient Greece and Rome?

They were steeped in, soaked in, marinated in, the classics: Greek and Roman history, Greek and Roman ideas, Greek and Roman ideals. It was their model, their example. And they saw themselves very much like the Greeks and the Romans, as actors on a great stage in one of the great historic dramas of all time, and that they, individually and as a group, had better live up to these heroic parts in which history had cast them. That's a powerful motivation.

—Historian David McCullough, in a speech at DePauw University

The founders of the United States had all received a classical education. As they were forming their own ideas about the world, they were learning about and absorbing the ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. It is no wonder that when they were building the foundations of American government, they looked to ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration.

Political Systems: Democracy in Athens

Ancient Greece was not a single, unified nation. The mountainous terrain of the Greek peninsula made travel and communication difficult. Therefore, local communities began to form their own political units, known as city-states. Separated from each other by the rugged terrain, each city-state developed its own kind of government. Some, like Corinth, were oligarchies; that is, they were ruled by a group of powerful leaders. Some city-states had mixed forms of government. Sparta, for example, had two kings, a council of 30 nobles, and an assembly of all Spartan males—which meant that Sparta blended elements of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy. But the city-state that influenced modern Western civilization the most was Athens, the birthplace of direct democracy.

Democracy developed in Athens in the 500s b.c.e. during periods of conflict and unrest. In attempts to achieve peace, reforming rulers gradually allowed citizens to take part in the city-state's government. A series of reforms took power from a handful of noble families and gave it to the citizenry.

The government of Athens included three major bodies: the Assembly, the Council of 500, and the People's Court.

- **The Assembly** All male Athenian citizens were members of the Assembly, which met regularly to discuss and vote on issues that affected every aspect of Athenian life. Citizens were paid for their participation in the Assembly, so that even the poorest citizens could take time from their work to participate in government.
- **The Council of 500** Each of the 10 tribes of Athens sent 50 citizens to serve on the Council of 500 each year. The Council's main function was to set the agenda for the Assembly, although it could issue some decrees on its own.
- **The People's Court** In the People's Court, juries of citizens listened to cases, determined whether their fellow citizens were guilty or innocent of breaking laws, and set punishments for those found guilty.

The democracy of ancient Athens was different from our democracy in two important aspects: participation and eligibility. Democracy in Athens was direct. Rather than choosing politicians to represent the citizens in government, Athenian citizens directly participated in government themselves. Eligibility for the political rights of citizenship was also greatly restricted. To have political rights in Athens, a person had to be an adult male whose parents were both Athenians. No women, immigrants, or slaves were allowed to be Athenian citizens.

Political Systems: The Roman Republic

While Athenians experienced direct democracy, the Romans developed a form of government known as a republic—a form of government in which elected officials govern the state and are responsible to the voters who elect them. Romans established a republic in 509 b.c.e. after revolting against a tyrannical king.

The Constitution of the Roman Republic Until 450 B.C.E., the Roman Republic had no written constitution. Instead, it had a complex set of unwritten laws and traditions that defined the political structure. In 450 B.C.E., Romans created their first legal code by formally writing down some of their laws, which collectively became known as the Law of the Twelve Tables. Having a written legal code was a victory for the plebeians, the ordinary citizens of Rome. The wealthiest Romans, known as patricians, had long kept Roman law secret from the plebeians, who had often been punished severely for laws they had not even known about. Having the law written down protected the rights of all citizens.

Major Offices The major political bodies in the Roman Republic included the office of Consul, the Senate, and the assemblies. Only men participated in government by holding office or by voting; women were excluded from formal political activity by law.

- **Consuls** The highest-ranking officials in the Roman Republic were the two consuls, who shared both civil and military power in Rome. They set taxes, initiated legislation, and commanded the army. The power of the consuls was limited in two ways, however. Each consul had the power to veto the other's actions—an early example of checks and balances. Secondly, consuls were elected annually by the Centuriate Assembly, so if they wanted to maintain power, they had to seek reelection each year.
- **Senate** The Senate was the most significant governing and advisory council of Roman government. During most of the republic, it consisted of roughly 300 influential men who controlled financial and foreign policy. The Senate could not formally make laws; instead, it issued decrees, which were then voted on by the Centuriate Assembly. However, the Senate's influence was so strong that the assembly often routinely approved decrees issued by the Senate. Roman senators usually held their positions for life.
- **Assemblies** There were a number of assemblies that performed many different roles in the Roman Republic. Two of the most significant assemblies included the Centuriate Assembly and the Tribal Assembly.
 - **Centuriate Assembly** The Centuriate Assembly was primarily a military assembly. It enacted legislation, decided whether Rome was at war or peace, and elected all officials who held military power, including the consuls. All Roman citizens were members of the Centuriate Assembly. The membership was divided according to economic status into nearly 200 groups called centuries. Members did not vote individually. Instead, they voted by century, with the wealthiest centuries voting first. Once a majority had been reached, voting stopped. The wealthiest centuries could form a majority in the assembly without the support of any other members, which gave them considerably more power in the assembly.
 - **Tribal Assembly** The Tribal Assembly elected officials who did not hold military power. It also conducted trials during most of the republic. Membership in the Tribal Assembly was distributed among the 35 tribes—groups into which all Roman citizens were placed according to where they lived. Like the Centuriate Assembly, members of the Tribal Assembly voted by group, with one vote for each tribe. Within the Tribal Assembly was a smaller body, called the Plebeian Council, which passed laws for the plebeians and elected plebeian officials.

Certain principles of the Roman political system are similar to those of the American system. Roman government was republican, in which the leaders were elected to their positions by citizens and were accountable to those citizens. During the time of the Roman Republic, the power of Roman leaders was limited. Not only did Roman consuls have to maintain the support of the Centuriate Assembly in order to hold their positions, but also the veto power of each consul made sure that neither could grow too powerful.

The Roman form of government did have some important differences from our own. First and foremost, the definition of citizenship was much more restricted. Only freeborn adult men born in Rome were eligible for citizenship. Women, residents of outlying Roman territories, foreigners, and slaves were not allowed to participate directly in the political system. In addition, members of the assemblies did not vote as individuals, but as groups. This gave more power in government to the wealthier classes and weakened the power of poorer Roman citizens.

Social Systems: Ancient Rome

Roman society was hierarchical, or arranged in an order by rank. It was possible to move between social ranks, although it was often quite difficult to do so. There was a large gulf between the upper and lower classes.

Upper Classes Belonging to the upper classes gave Romans a number of privileges and opportunities not available to other Romans. The upper classes consisted of the senatorial and the equestrian classes.

- **Senatorial Class** The senatorial class was the highest in Roman society, and membership in this class was determined by a man's political status. All men who served in the Senate were members of this class, as were their families. Senators had to prove they held a certain amount of property, and they were prohibited from earning money through trade or other business. Men of this class were allowed to wear a tunic with broad stripes as a visible sign of their rank.
- **Equestrian Class** To be a member of the equestrian class, a man had to prove he held a certain amount of property. This rank in society, therefore, was determined by a man's economic status. Equestrians often earned their money through successful business or trade. They were allowed to wear a tunic with narrow stripes as a visible sign of their rank. The equestrian class had its origins in the military, when only wealthy men in the army could afford to keep horses.

Lower Classes All other Romans—the vast majority—belonged to the lower classes. These classes included the commons, Latins, foreigners, freedpeople, and slaves.

- **Commons** Members of the commons were the highest-ranking people in the lower classes. All freeborn Roman citizens not already in the senatorial or equestrian classes belonged to this group, and the men in this group wore the toga as a sign of their rank.
- **Latins** Freeborn Romans who lived in far-flung military outposts were known as Latins. They enjoyed some legal rights but were not full Roman citizens. During the later years of the Roman Republic, this group was granted full citizenship, and the Latins became members of the commons.
- **Foreigners** This group included freeborn men and women who lived in territories controlled by Rome and who were not full Roman citizens. They were granted full citizenship in the 200s C.E. and became members of the commons.
- **Freedpeople** Women and men who had been slaves but had become free were called freedpeople. They had low social status and could not leave this class, no matter how wealthy they might become. After they became free, however, their status would not be passed on to their children, because the children of freedpeople were members of the commons.
- **Slaves** Members of this class were either born into slavery or sold into slavery. Unless slaves bought their freedom or were manumitted (granted their freedom by their slaveholder), they had no option to leave this social class. Slaves were the lowest-ranking people in the Roman Republic.

Gender Roles As in the Greek city-states, Roman society was also patriarchal. The father was the head of the family. He held authority over his wife and children as well as all servants and freedpeople who worked for the family. In addition, all property and land was under the authority of the father.

Women's ranks in society were based on those of their fathers and husbands. However, they did not enjoy all of the privileges, such as voting or holding public office, that their fathers and husbands did.

Acceptance of Inequality In Roman society, inequality was publicly recognized in many distinct ways. For example, men of the upper classes demonstrated their high rank by the clothes that they wore. Freedpeople conveyed their status through their names.

Another example was the system of patronage, which affected many aspects of Roman daily life. Under this system, wealthy patrons provided support to clients—either to individuals or to groups within the community. Patrons provided clients with protection, legal advice, or financial assistance. In exchange the client gave the patron something of value to that patron. For example, a politician might wish for his client to support him with his vote. A patron of the arts might wish for his client to dedicate a book or work of art to him. Being a patron enhanced the prestige of an upper-class person because of the public way in which the patron-client relationship was expressed.

Lasting Contributions to the Modern World

The ideas of ancient Greece and Rome have had a lasting impact on modern society, most notably in the realm of politics. The ancient Athenians gave us the ideal of democracy, in which citizens participate in their own government. Athenian citizens created their laws and sat in judgment of those who broke those laws. The Roman Republic gave us the concept of republican government, in which the leaders of government are elected by, and accountable to, the citizens.

These two ideals of democracy and republicanism became a great influence on the Western world during the 18th-century movement known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a time of great learning and intellectual development. Thinkers began exploring and challenging concepts that had previously been accepted as undisputed fact. What is the nature of being human? How should society be structured? What is the best form of government?

The founders of the United States were part of this movement. Grounded in a classical education, they were inspired by their understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman world when building the foundations of this nation. They held many of the values of these ancient civilizations in great esteem, but they were also aware of the limitations of ancient Greek and Roman governments. When creating the structure of the United States, they drew on the strengths of ancient Greece and Rome—namely, democracy and republican government—while making changes to improve the weaknesses of those ancient governments. For example, the founders expanded the definition of citizenship, so that the citizenry included a larger group of adult men. (They did not, however, extend citizenship to women or African Americans.) They also created more checks and balances in the political system to ensure that no single branch of government would become too powerful.

The movement toward democracy and republican government took hold in the decades after the founding of the United States. Some nations such as France and Colombia endured revolutions in their quest for democracy and republican government. In other nations, such as Great Britain, the movement toward greater democracy took place more peacefully. Although the way in which the modern world experiences democracy and republican government has changed from how it was in the ancient world, modern Western civilization owes a great debt to ancient Greece and Rome.

Enrichment Activity

1. List and discuss at least three contributions made by ancient Greece or Rome to modern Western civilization.
2. Draw a Venn diagram to illustrate the similarities and differences in the political systems of ancient Greece and Rome.