

Government and Society

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Roman government was made up of three parts that worked together to run the city.
2. Written laws helped keep order in Rome.
3. The Roman Forum was the heart of Roman society.

The Big Idea

Rome's tripartite government and written laws helped create a stable society.

Key Terms

magistrates, p. 303
 consuls, p. 303
 Roman Senate, p. 303
 veto, p. 304
 Latin, p. 304
 checks and balances, p. 305
 Forum, p. 305



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TAKING NOTES

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes about how government, written laws, and the Forum contributed to the development of Roman society.

If YOU were there...

You have just been elected as a government official in Rome. Your duty is to represent the plebeians, the common people. You hold office for only one year, but you have one important power—you can stop laws from being passed. Now city leaders are proposing a law that will hurt the plebeians. If you stop the new law, it will hurt your future in politics. If you let it pass, it will hurt the people you are supposed to protect.

Will you let the new law pass? Why or why not?

BUILDING BACKGROUND Government in Rome was often a balancing act. Like the politician above, leaders had to make compromises and risk the anger of other officials to keep the people happy. To keep anyone from gaining too much power, the Roman government divided power among many different officials.

Roman Government

When the plebeians complained about Rome's government in the 400s BC, the city's leaders knew they had to do something. If the people stayed unhappy, they might rise up and overthrow the whole government.

To calm the angry plebeians, the patricians made some changes to Rome's government. For example, they created new offices that could only be held by plebeians. The people who held these offices protected the plebeians' rights and interests. Gradually, the distinctions between patricians and plebeians began to disappear, but that took a very long time.

As a result of the changes the patricians made, Rome developed a tripartite (try-PAHR-tyt) government, or a government with three parts. Each part had its own responsibilities and duties. To fulfill its duties, each part of the government had its own powers, rights, and privileges.

Magistrates

The first part of Rome's government was made up of elected officials, or **magistrates** (MA-juh-strayts). The two most powerful magistrates in Rome were called **consuls** (KAHN-suhlz). The consuls were elected each year to run the city and lead the army. There were two consuls so that no one person would be too powerful.

Below the consuls were other magistrates. Rome had many different types of magistrates. Each was elected for one year and had his own duties and powers. Some were judges. Others managed Rome's finances or organized games and festivals.

Senate

The second part of Rome's government was the Senate. The **Roman Senate** was a council of wealthy and powerful Romans that advised the city's leaders. It was originally created to advise Rome's kings. After the kings were gone, the Senate continued to meet to advise consuls.

Unlike magistrates, senators—members of the Senate—held office for life. By the time the republic was created, the Senate had 300 members. At first most senators were patricians, but as time passed many wealthy plebeians became senators as well. Because magistrates became senators after completing their terms in office, most didn't want to anger the Senate and risk their future jobs.

As time passed the Senate became more powerful. It gained influence over magistrates and took control of the city's finances. By 200 BC the Senate had great influence in Rome's government.

Assemblies and Tribunes

The third part of Rome's government, the part that protected the common people, had two branches. The first branch was made up of assemblies. Both patricians and plebeians took part in these assemblies. Their **primary** job was to elect the magistrates who ran the city of Rome.

FOCUS ON READING

If you were outlining the discussion on this page, what headings would you use?

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

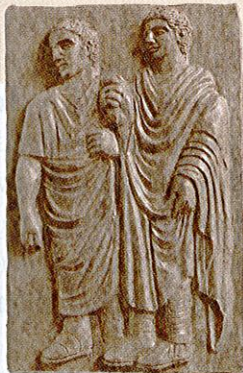
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Government of the Roman Republic

QUICK FACTS

Magistrates

- Consuls led the government and army, judged court cases
- Served for one year
- Had power over all citizens, including other officials



Senate

- Advised the consuls
- Served for life
- Gained control of financial affairs



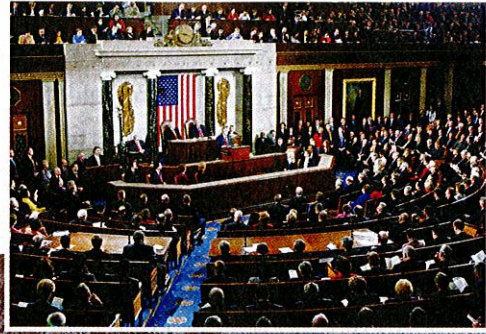
Assemblies and Tribunes

- Represented the common people, approved or rejected laws, declared war, elected magistrates
- Roman citizens could take part in assemblies all their adult lives, tribunes served for one year
- Could veto the decisions of consuls and other magistrates



Do as the Romans Do

The government of the Roman Republic was one of its greatest strengths. When the founders of the United States sat down to plan our government, they copied many elements of the Roman system. Like the Romans, we elect our leaders. Our government also has three branches—the president, Congress, and the federal court system. The powers of these branches are set forth in our Constitution, just like the Roman officials' powers were. Our government also has a system of checks and balances to prevent any one branch from becoming too strong. For example, Congress can refuse to give the president money to pay for programs. Like the Romans, Americans have a civic duty to participate in the government to help keep it as strong as it can be.



ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING INFORMATION

Why do you think the founders of the United States borrowed ideas from Roman government?

THE IMPACT TODAY

Like tribunes, the president of the United States has the power to veto actions by other government officials.

The second branch was made up of a group of elected officials called tribunes. Elected by the plebeians, tribunes had the ability to **veto** (VEE-toh), or **prohibit**, actions by other officials. Veto means “I forbid” in **Latin**, the Romans’ language. This veto power made tribunes very powerful in Rome’s government. To keep them from abusing their power, each tribune remained in office only one year.

Civic Duty

Rome’s government would not have worked without the participation of the people. People participated in the government because they felt it was their civic duty, or their duty to the city. That civic duty included doing what they could to make sure the city prospered. For example,

they were expected to attend assembly meetings and to vote in elections. Voting in Rome was a complicated process, and not everyone was allowed to do it. Those who could, however, were expected to take part in all elections.

Wealthy and powerful citizens also felt it was their duty to hold public office to help run the city. In return for their time and commitment, these citizens were respected and admired by other Romans.

Checks and Balances

In addition to limiting terms of office, the Romans put other restrictions on their leaders’ power. They did this by giving government officials the ability to restrict the powers of other officials. For example, one consul could block the actions of the other.

Laws proposed by the Senate had to be approved by magistrates and ratified by assemblies. We call these **methods to balance power checks and balances**. Checks and balances keep any one part of a government from becoming stronger or more influential than the others.

Checks and balances made Rome's government very complicated. Sometimes quarrels arose when officials had different ideas or opinions. When officials worked together, however, Rome's government was strong and efficient, as one Roman historian noted:

“In unison [together] they are a match for any and all emergencies, the result being that it is impossible to find a constitution that is better constructed. For whenever some common external danger should come upon them and should compel [force] them to band together in counsel [thought] and in action, the power of their state becomes so great that nothing that is required is neglected [ignored].”

—Polybius, from *The Constitution of the Roman Republic*

READING CHECK Finding Main Ideas

What were the three parts of the Roman government?

Written Laws Keep Order

Rome's officials were responsible for making the city's laws and making sure that people followed them. At first these laws weren't written down. The only people who knew all the laws were the patricians who had made them.

Many people were unhappy with this situation. They did not want to be punished for breaking laws they didn't even know existed. As a result, they began to call for Rome's laws to be written down and made accessible to everybody.

Rome's first written law code was produced in 450 BC on 12 bronze tables, or tablets. These tables were displayed in

the **Forum**, Rome's public meeting place. Because of how it was displayed, this code was called the Law of the Twelve Tables.

Over time, Rome's leaders passed many new laws. Still, throughout their history, the Romans looked to the Law of the Twelve Tables as a symbol of Roman law and of their rights as Roman citizens.

READING CHECK Drawing Inferences Why did many people want a written law code?

Primary Source

HISTORIC DOCUMENT

Law of the Twelve Tables

The Law of the Twelve Tables governed many parts of Roman life. Some laws were written to protect the rights of all Romans. Others only protected the patricians. The laws listed here should give you an idea of the kinds of laws the tables included.

[from Table I] If anyone summons a man before the magistrate, he must go. If the man summoned does not go, let the one summoning him call the bystanders to witness and then take him by force.

[from Table III] One who has confessed a debt, or against whom judgment has been pronounced, shall have thirty days to pay it. After that forcible seizure of his person is allowed . . . unless he pays the amount of the judgment.

[from Table V] Females should remain in guardianship even when they have attained their majority.

[from Table IX] Putting to death of any man, whosoever he might be, unconvicted is forbidden.

—Law of the Twelve Tables, translated in *The Library of Original Sources* edited by Oliver J. Thatcher

A Roman who did not appear before a government official when called or did not pay his debts could be arrested.

Women—even as adults—were legally considered to be children.

No one in Rome could be executed without a trial.

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

How are these laws similar to and different from our laws today?

History Close-up

The Roman Forum

The Forum was the center of life in ancient Rome. The city's most important temples and government buildings were located there, and Romans met there to talk about the issues of the day. The word *forum* means "public place."

The Roman Forum

The Roman Forum, the place where the Law of the Twelve Tables was kept, was the heart of the city of Rome. It was the site of important government buildings and temples. Government and religion were only part of what made the Forum so important, though. It was also a popular meeting place for Roman citizens. People met there to shop, chat, and gossip.



The Glory of Rome's Forum

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The Temple of Jupiter stood atop the Capitoline Hill, overlooking the Forum.

Important government records were stored in the Tabularium.

Roman citizens often wore togas, loose-fitting garments wrapped around the body. Togas were symbols of Roman citizenship.

Public officials often addressed people from this platform.

ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING VISUALS

What can you see in this illustration that indicates the Forum was an important place?

The Forum lay in the center of Rome, between two major hills. On one side was the Palatine (PA-luh-ty-n) Hill, where Rome's richest people lived. Across the forum was the Capitoline (KA-pet-uhl-yn) Hill, where Rome's grandest temples stood. Because of this location, city leaders could often be found in or near the forum, mingling with the common people. These leaders used the Forum as a speaking area, delivering speeches to the crowds.

But the Forum also had attractions for people not interested in speeches. Various shops lined the open square, and fights between gladiators were sometimes held there. Public ceremonies were commonly held in the Forum as well. As a result, the forum was usually packed with people.

READING CHECK **Generalizing** How was the Forum the heart of Roman society?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW In this section you read about the basic structure of Roman government. In the next section you'll see how that government changed as Rome's territory grew and its influence expanded.

The Senate met here in the curia, or Senate House.

Section 2 Assessment

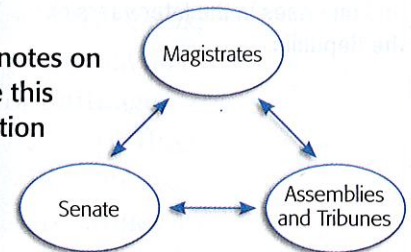
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ONLINE QUIZ

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- Identify** Who were the **consuls**?
 - Explain** Why did the Romans create a system of **checks and balances**?
 - Elaborate** How do you think the **Roman Senate** gained power?
- Recall** What was Rome's first written law code called?
 - Draw Conclusions** Why did Romans want their laws written down?
- Describe** What kinds of activities took place in the Roman **Forum**?

Critical Thinking

- Analyzing** Review your notes on Roman government. Use this diagram to note information about the powers of the parts of Rome's government.



FOCUS ON SPEAKING

- Choosing a Topic** You've just read about Roman laws and government. Would anything related to these topics make good subjects for your legend? Write some ideas in your notebook.