

The Roman Republic

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At about the same time that popular government was introduced in Greece, it also appeared on the [Italian Peninsula](#) in the city of Rome. The Romans called their system a *rēspūblica*, or [republic](#), from the Latin *rēs*, meaning thing or affair, and *pūblicus* or *pūblica*, meaning public—thus, a republic was the thing that belonged to the Roman people, the *populus romanus*.

Like Athens, Rome was originally a city-state. Although it expanded rapidly by conquest and annexation far beyond its original borders to encompass all the Mediterranean world and much of western Europe, its government remained, in its basic features, that of a moderately large city-state. Indeed, throughout the republican era (until roughly the end of the first century bc), Roman assemblies were held in the very small [Forum](#) at the centre of the city.

Who constituted the Roman *dēmos*? Although Roman [citizenship](#) was conferred by birth, it was also granted by naturalization and by manumission of slaves. As the [Roman Republic](#) expanded, it conferred citizenship in varying degrees to many of those within its enlarged boundaries. Because Roman assemblies continued to meet in the Forum, however, most citizens who did not live in or near the city itself were unable to participate and were thus effectively excluded from the *dēmos*. Despite their reputation for practicality and creativity, and notwithstanding many changes in the structure of Roman government over the course of centuries, the Romans never solved

this problem. Two millennia later, the solution—electing representatives to a Roman legislature—would seem obvious (see *below* [A democratic dilemma](#)).

As they adapted to the special features of their society, including its rapidly increasing size, the Romans created a political structure so complex and idiosyncratic that later democratic leaders chose not to emulate it. The Romans used not only an extremely powerful [Senate](#) but also four assemblies, each called *comitia* (“assembly”) or *concilium* (“council”). The [Comitia Curiata](#) was composed of 30 curiae, or local groups, drawn from three ancient *tribus*, or tribes; the [Comitia Centuriata](#) consisted of 193 centuries, or military units; the Concilium Plebis was drawn from the ranks of the plebes, or [plebeians](#) (common people); and the [Comitia Tributa](#), like the Athenian Assembly, was open to all citizens. In all the assemblies, votes were counted by units (centuries or tribes) rather than by individuals; thus, insofar as a majority prevailed in voting, it would have been a majority of units, not of citizens.

Although they collectively represented all Roman citizens, the assemblies were not sovereign. Throughout the entire period of the republic, the [Senate](#)—an institution inherited from the earlier era of the Roman monarchy—continued to exercise great power. Senators were chosen indirectly by the Comitia Centuriata; during the monarchy, they were drawn exclusively from the privileged [patrician class](#), though later, during the republic, members of certain plebeian families were also admitted.