

## Roman Republic Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question:**  
*How democratic was the Roman Republic?*

### Materials:

- Roman Republic PowerPoint
- Copies of Roman Government Handout
- Copies of Documents A-C
- Copies of Guiding Questions
- Copies of Final Claim

**Note:** Prior to this lesson, students should have basic familiarity with the events and issues related to the rise of the Roman Republic.

### Plan of Instruction:

1. Use PowerPoint to establish a definition of democracy, review basic background information about the Roman Republic, and introduce the Central Historical Question.
  - a. Slide 2: Democracy. Review definitions of democracy. Individually, students read the definition of democracy from dictionary.com.
    - Students restate the definition in their own words.
    - Share out
    - Take-aways to set up the lesson: *Democracy can mean different things to different people. Some think of democracy primarily as a system of representative government in which people elect representatives. For others, democracy is more egalitarian, and means a system where all people are free and involved in the decision making of government. Today, we are going to explore parts of the political system of the Roman Republic and consider how democratic the Roman government was.*
  - b. Slide 3: The Roman Republic. *For hundreds of years, historians, political scientists, politicians and pundits have made connections between the political system of the United States and the Roman Republic. In particular, they've pointed to the concepts of checks and balances across different governing bodies, and democratic voting to elect government representatives.*

Hand out Timeline to review major events of the Roman Republic. *In 509 BCE, a group of Roman nobles upset with the abuse of power by King*

*Tarquin the Superb overthrew the Roman monarchy and founded the Roman Republic, which lasted for over 400 years.*

- c. Slide 4: Civil Unrest. *Much of the Roman Republic's political history was defined by a power struggle between the noble classes of patrician senators and knights, and the majority of the population, who belonged to the lower class, called the plebeians. The plebeians made up the Populus Romani, or the "People of Rome." They were also the majority of soldiers in the Roman army.*
  - d. Slide 5: Central Historical Question. *The Roman Republic is often held up as a model for the United States' political system. Historians continue to debate whether the Roman Republic was truly democratic. Today, we are going to explore Rome's political system, and in particular, investigate the question: How democratic was the Roman Republic?*
2. Pass out the Roman Government Handout. **Note:** You might skip this activity if your students are already familiar with the organization of the government of the Roman Republic.
- a. In pairs, students review the handout and consider the following questions: What were the three branches of the Roman government? Where do the "people" fit into all this? How important is social class?
  - b. After reviewing the hand out and questions, ask students: *According to this information, how democratic was the Roman Republic?*
  - c. In small groups, students pair-share responses.
  - d. Share out and discuss as a class.
3. Hand out Document A: Polybius
- a. Tell students that they are going to continue to investigate the question of how democratic the Roman Republic was by looking at a primary source.

Explain to students: *Some of the best primary sources on the Roman Republic come from Greek historians who interacted with the Romans during their rise to power over the Greeks. We are going to see what one of these ancient historians has to tell us about the Roman government, and examine how the historical context might have influenced his account.*

- b. In pairs, students read Document A and complete the Guiding Questions. Students share out responses.
  - Explain: *As we can see on the Timeline, Polybius was a Greek historian writing during the height of the Roman conquest of the Greek world. He provides a highly complimentary account of the government, claiming it combines the best features of monarchy (the Consuls), aristocracy (the Senate), and democracy (the Assemblies), with the people perhaps wielding the most power.*

- *His positivity may have been influenced by his encounters with the Romans. He witnessed Roman power firsthand when they conquered northern Greece and captured him in 167 BCE. His Roman captors treated him very well and he came to admire them. It is possible that Polybius's very positive depiction of the Romans was based on his own experience with Romans. The continued Roman conquests of Greece and Carthage as Polybius was writing also may have provided him with additional justification to view the Romans as supreme conquerors.*
4. Hand out Document B: Fergus Millar and Document C: Alan Ward.
- a. Point out: *As seen in the primary source, the Roman government is quite complex, and it is challenging to tell how democratic it truly was. To continue this investigation, we are going to look at two secondary sources from university professors to see what they have to say.*
  - b. In pairs, students read Document B and complete the Guiding Questions.
  - c. Share out responses.
    - Important to note: *Fergus Millar strongly believes in the democratic power of both Roman assemblies. Not only does he see the Tribal Assembly as the true legislative body of the Republic, he also claims voting in the Century Assembly was far more contested than most people believe, with rival elite politicians vying for the support of the common people in debate, much like how our political system functions today.*
    - *Millar primarily bases his argument on documentary evidence—records of Roman election speeches and our knowledge of the structure of the Roman constitution, which gave the supreme power to create laws to the people in the Assemblies.*
  - d. In pairs, students read Document C and complete the Guiding Questions.
  - e. Share out responses.
    - Important to Note: *Alan Ward provides an overview of what different historians have argued regarding democracy in the Roman Republic. In particular, Ward questions how many eligible voters actually voted in elections. He notes that because elections were held in Rome and irregularly scheduled, most Romans did not participate in them. He also points out the Roman citizens had “no role” in setting the legislative agenda or in selecting candidates.*
5. Final Discussion: *Was the Roman Republic really democratic?*
- a. *What evidence suggests that it was?*
  - b. *What evidence suggests that it was not?*

- c. *Which pieces of evidence do you find most persuasive? Why?*
  - d. *What other evidence might you want to examine? Why?*
  - e. *How do the claims and types of evidence in these documents relate to the different definitions of democracy discussed at the beginning of class?*
6. Have students complete the Final Conclusion writing assignment.

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## References

### Timeline

Halsall, Paul. "The Roman Republic: Checks and Balances." *Ancient History Sourcebook*. Retrieved from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/rome-balance.asp>.

### Document A

Paton, W. R. "Polybius: The Histories. 6 vols." *LCL*. Cambridge, Mass., and London (1927).

### Document B

Millar, Fergus. "The Crowd in the Late Republic." Ann Arbor, Thomas Spencer Jerome Lectures (1998).

### Document C

Ward, Allen M. "How Democratic Was the Roman Republic?." *New England Classical Journal* 31.2 (2004): 101-19.