

## 10-2 Republican Government

According to ancient Roman tradition, the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, legendary descendants of the survivors who fled burning Troy after the Trojan War, founded Rome. Modern historians agree with tradition that the city-state of Rome was founded by the voluntary unification of seven agrarian villages in approximately 753 B.C.E. According to Roman history written much later, the town was under Etruscan rule until 509 B.C.E. In that year a rebellion ousted the last king, and the city became a *res publica*—a state without a monarch, ruled by a combination of the Senate and the citizens of Rome (*Senatus et Populus* in the original Latin).

How did the new republic govern itself? The Senate comprised the upper class, the [patricians \(\(patres\) The upper governing class in ancient Rome.\)](#) (from the Latin *patres*, “fathers”: PAH-trays), who made up perhaps 5 to 10 percent of the total population and had considerable power even under the Etruscan king. The [plebeians \(\(plebs\) The common people of ancient Rome.\)](#) (pleh-BEE-ans), or commoners (from Latin for “the mass”), comprised the other 90 percent and were represented in political affairs by delegates to the elective General Assembly. The executive branch comprised a small staff of officials who were elected by the Senate and Assembly for short terms. The chief executive power resided in two [consuls \(Chief executives of the Roman republic; chosen annually.\)](#), elected from among the members of the Senate for one-year terms that could not be repeated. Each consul had veto power over the other. When one consul was in the field as leader of the republic’s forces, the other was the head of the civil government at home. Below the consuls in authority were the [censors \(Officials with great powers of surveillance during the Roman republic.\)](#), always drawn from the ranks of the senators. The censors (from *census*) were originally tax assessors, but later they came to have the power to supervise the conduct and morals of their fellow senators. The tiny Roman bureaucracy also included a few other offices, which were dominated by the patricians until a series of plebeian revolts—or threats to revolt—gradually opened them up to the commoners.

Originally, the General Assembly was intended to be as powerful as—and perhaps more powerful than—the Senate, which had only advisory powers. But soon after the foundation of the republic, the Senate obtained decisive power while the Assembly became a seldom-summoned rubber stamp. For two centuries the plebeians made considerable progress in their struggle to attain equality.

By about 250, the Roman political structure seemingly offered a nice balance between the aristocrats and the common people. The chief officers of the plebeians were the [tribunes \(The chief representatives of the plebeians during the Roman republic.\)](#). There were about ten tribunes, and they had great power to speak and act in the name of the common

Romans. At first, the tribunes were chosen from among the common people and were their true representatives. Later, however, after about 200, the tribunes were offered membership in the Senate, and as they sought to become censors and consuls, they came to identify increasingly with the interests of the patricians and less with those of the plebeians. This development was to be fateful for the republic.

After the passage of the Hortensian Law (named after the consul of the day, Hortensius) in 287, plebeians and patricians had equal voting rights and supposedly equal access to office. But in practice this nod toward democratic principles was not authentic. Members with a combination of wealth and aristocratic birth retained control of the Senate. Democracy would eventually fail in Rome, just as it had in Athens.

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