The Roman Republic

The Roman Republic was the government under which Rome was ruled for much of its history, and it was a rather novel form of government. It evolved over a long period of time, but its unique structure of checks and balances helped to ensure that Roman citizens had a say in their government, and it has been a major influence on the constitutions of republican governments into modern times, especially the Constitution of the United States.

Before the Republic: The Monarchy

Legend holds that Rome was founded around 753 BC, and its founder, Romulus, served as its first king. Indeed, the city of Rome was originally a monarchy, with kings elected by the senate for a lifelong term. Much of what we know of this early period comes from later historians, especially Livy, who was writing centuries later, around 25 BC. Such historians mixed fact and legend, so much of what we know about the Roman monarchy and its transition to a republic may be legendary. Still, it seems that the Roman kings were absolute monarchs, with complete control over the military, the exclusive power to make laws and pass judgments, and the position of chief priest in Roman religious rites. Still, some of the basic elements of the republican system date back to the time of the kings. The Roman senate existed during the monarchy: the senate was made up of the three hundred most powerful and well-born men of the city, and acted as an advisory council for the king. When a king died, it was the senate that elected his successor. There also existed an early form of legislative assembly: the people of Rome were divided into thirty groups called curia, and the king could ask for the opinion of the Roman people by putting a matter up for vote before the Curiate Assembly. Each curia had one vote, though the king was free to ignore the will of the assembly. The Curiate Assembly also had some role along with the senate in choosing a new king when a previous one died.

The Foundation of the Republic

Slowly the power of the senate declined, and the monarchy became hereditary, passed down from father to son instead of being elected by the senate. But soon the kings overstepped the bounds of their power. According to Roman legend, in 509 BC the last king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, was overthrown after his son raped a Roman noblewoman named Lucretia. Lucius Junius Brutus, a Roman aristocrat, led the revolt. The revolt may have also been motivated by an attempt by the aristocracy and the senate to regain lost power. Still, after the king was overthrown, a consensus developed among Romans that it was too dangerous to concentrate power in the hands of one man, and that control of the government ought to be shared. The title of king (rex) was regarded with hatred and contempt among Romans for centuries to come. Instead, power was divided up. The religious duties of the king were bestowed upon priests, especially the chief priest, known as the pontifex maximus. The other powers of the king were given to elected officials, with each office meant as a check on the others.
The executive power, and control over Rome’s armies, was vested in the new office of the *consul*. There would be two consuls elected by the Roman people (through the assemblies) for a one-year term. They would share power and step down at the end of the year. In times of extreme emergency, the consuls could also appoint a *dictator*, one man who would have absolute control over the government and the armies, and who would be expected to step down as soon as the crisis was averted. In addition to consuls, other lesser public offices came into being, such as *quaestors* (in charge of financial administration), *aediles* (in charge of managing Rome’s public buildings and infrastructure and holding games and other events), and *praetors* (who acted as judges). Former consuls could be elected *censors*, who held a term of office of five years and were in charge of classing families as either *patrician* or *plebeian*, classing people into tribes and centuries, and determining who was eligible to serve in the senate.

The senate also had immense power during the republic. It was made up of patrician families, and anyone who held public office automatically became part of the senate after he completed his term of office. The senate could promulgate a *senatus consultum*, a recommendation to the consuls or the legislative assemblies that was usually acted upon. The senate controlled Rome’s treasury, and thus state money could not be used without their approval.

The Curiate Assembly that existed during the monarchy gave way to two separate assemblies, the Century Assembly (Comitia Centuriata) and the Tribal Assembly (Comitia Tributa). Every Roman citizen could participate in the assemblies, and it was these bodies that elected the public officials. Thus, every male citizen could vote in the selection of praetors, consuls, etc. The assemblies also passed laws and made judicial decisions. While the assemblies were meant as a check on the power of the consuls and the senate, they were also a check on one another. Those participating in the Century Assembly were classed as soldiers, and grouped into different units called centuries based on their property, which reflected the ranks they would hold in the army (which were also property-based). Each century had one vote, and since most citizens were classed in the larger lower-ranked centuries, while the wealthiest were thinly spread out in the multiple higher-ranked centuries, the wealthy tended to dominate the Century Assembly. The other assembly, the Tribal Assembly, functioned similarly, but instead of being grouped into centuries, the voters were grouped into tribes. Tribes were not ethnic groups or families, but units based on geographical location within the city of Rome, and thus rich and poor were mixed together in each tribe, meaning that the more numerous, poorer citizens dominated this assembly.

Rome was so successful, according to the Greek historian Polybius, who studied and wrote about Rome’s government, because it combined the three major types of government. Thus, while Greek city-states were monarchies, oligarchies, or democracies, Rome incorporated parts of each: the consuls represented the power of monarchs, the senate acted as an oligarchy, and the legislative assemblies filled the role of democracy. Each branch acted as a check on the others. Thus, for example, while Polybius believed democracy all too often degenerated into mob rule, the other branches of the Roman government kept the democratic assemblies in check. Most important to the Romans, the checks and balances in the government prevented one
man from gaining control over the government, thus preventing Rome from returning to a full monarchy.

The Struggle of the Orders

While Rome was now a republic, during this period a small part of the population had inordinate influence over the government. Only the patricians, the aristocracy of the city, could serve in the senate or hold political office. Roman society was divided into three classes of citizens. The patricians were at the top of society. These men were from Rome’s oldest and wealthiest families, and had great power in the city even under the kings. Below them was the equestrian order, also called knights. These were the Romans wealthy enough to buy and take care of a horse (and hence fight in battle on horseback), and were often wealthy merchants. Finally, there were the plebeians, the common people, who had no political or economic power except in their voting blocs within the assemblies. Lower than the plebeians were slaves and non-citizens, who had no political power.

The Struggle of the Orders (also called the Conflict of the Orders), a power struggle between the plebeians and patricians, resulted from the Roman class divide. In 494 BC, in the middle of a war, the plebeian soldiers went on strike and gathered on the Aventine Hill in Rome, threatening to secede and form their own city. They were angry at their lack of rights and power. They demanded that they get to elect their own representatives. The aristocracy gave in, and in return for the plebeians returning to battle, they were allowed to elect their own tribunes, who would have veto power over the laws passed by any of the assemblies. They also created the office of plebeian aedile. Plebeian aediles and tribunes had to be plebeians. The tribunes were also given the power to convene a new assembly, the Plebeian Council, which elected the plebeian aediles and tribunes and could pass laws that would apply only to plebeians.

Gradually more and more rights were granted to the plebeians. In 449 BC the plebeians were able to lobby for the creation of the Twelve Tables, bronze tablets erected in the city that clearly listed the law. Prior to this, the plebeians had no specific rights and laws were known only to the patricians, who could enforce them as they wished. Now the basic laws and rights of citizens were clearly spelled out for all to read. At the same time, more offices were opened up to plebeians, and in 367 BC plebeians were finally granted the right to hold the consulship. Another conflict arose over the authority of the patricians to veto any law passed by any of the assemblies. This was repealed due to pressure from the plebeians, though patricians could still preemptively prevent a law from being brought before the assemblies. While the rights of the plebeians increased, the wealth disparity in Rome grew. Plebeians were often indebted to patricians and could be enslaved if they were unable to pay back these debts. In 326 BC, debt enslavement was abolished. Still, the plebeians made a final threat to secede in 287 BC. The result was the lex Hortensia, which held that any laws passed by the Plebeian Assembly were binding upon all Romans, including the patricians, and that patricians could not prevent laws from being proposed in the assemblies.
With the Struggle of the Orders at an end, plebeians had gained the same rights to hold the same offices as the patricians, and had equal legislative power. Now, plebeian families rose to great political power within the Roman state. Many became just as rich and powerful as patrician families, and were distinguishable only by their less prestigious names. Such families often intermarried with patrician families. But aside from these few powerful plebeian families, the lot of most plebeians did not significantly change. It would take the Roman Revolution, sparked by the assassination of Tiberius Gracchus, to seriously change the structure of the Roman government and end the dominance of a few powerful families. This revolution, however, ultimately led to the collapse of the Roman Republic and its replacement by the absolute rule of the Roman Emperors, who became kings in all but name.

Summary

- Rome was originally ruled by kings with absolute power over the military, the laws, and religion. Still, during the monarchy the senate existed as an advisory body to the kings, and there existed the Curiate Assembly, which the king could consult to hear the will of the Roman people.
- In 509 BC, the last Roman king was overthrown by a rebellion of aristocrats led by Lucius Junius Brutus. They established a republic, in which no one man could achieve overwhelming power.
- The government of the republic was broken down into three main branches: the consuls, who held executive power and controlled the army; the senate, which represented the power of the patrician families and advised the other branches and controlled the treasury; and the legislative assemblies, in which laws were passed and public officials were elected.
- The branches were meant to act as checks on each other, but they also had internal checks within them: each consul was meant as a check on the other, and the different assemblies were meant to check one another.
- The Struggle of the Orders resulted from the fact that the patrician families controlled Rome’s government and were initially the only ones allowed to hold government offices. Gradually the plebeians used the threat of strike and secession to pressure the patricians into allowing them to hold public offices and to have their own officials and assembly.
- The Struggle of the Orders ended in 287 BC with the lex Hortensia, which abolished the last vestiges of patrician privileges and made the patricians subject to the laws of the Plebeian Council. Nonetheless, only a small group of plebeian families reaped the benefits of these changes, and they effectively became part of the aristocracy; most plebeians remained poor and lacking in effective political power.