

1.2

The Government of the Roman Republic

The Roman Republic's government included features that are part of U.S. government today. Activities examine the role of government in Roman society and Roman engineering; the widespread slavery in Roman society as well of the resistance of slaves (both in the ancient world and in North America) to their oppression; and the lasting impact of the Latin language on the terms we need to know to talk about and understand the law, legal rights, government, and politics.

Standard 1.2: The Government of the Roman Republic

Describe the government of the Roman Republic and the aspects of republican principles that are evident in modern governments. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T1.2]

FOCUS QUESTION: How did the Government of the Roman Republic Contribute to the Development of Modern-Day Democracy?



The Roman Forum was the center of the public sphere in Rome. Much of Rome's political process took place here.

["Roman Forum from Palatine Hill"](#) by Chalaph is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

The Roman Republic lasted from 509 to 27 BCE. Its system of government included features that are part of the United States government today, notably its processes for political decision making based on mutually agreeable compromise (Watts, 2018, p. 7). At the same time, Rome during the Republic and the Roman Empire, had many undemocratic features, including a rigid class system, slavery, and the sanctioning of everyday violence. Additionally, women could not

attend or vote in political assemblies nor hold any political office. So, what did liberty, government, and democracy mean and for whom did they exist during the Roman Republic and later the Roman Empire?



["Roman Forum, Rome, Italy"](#) by Eustaquio Santimano is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Modules for this Standard Include:

[1. INVESTIGATE: The Structure of Roman Government](#)

- Special Topic Box: Roman Engineering and Public Works Projects
 - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: The Internet as a Public Utility
 - TEACHER-DESIGNED LEARNING PLAN: How Ancient Rome Impacts Our Lives Today
2. [UNCOVER: Spartacus and Slavery in the Roman World, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Black American Slave Revolts](#)
 3. [ENGAGE: What Latin Legal and Government Terms Should Every Student Need to Know?](#)

1. INVESTIGATE: The Structure of Roman Government

The government of the Roman Republic was neither strictly a monarchy (rule by one) or a direct democracy (rule by all). It had democratic features but was essentially a "fundamentally undemocratic society dominated by a select caste of wealthy aristocrats" (Brown, 2016, para. 2).

In drafting the Constitution and envisioning a democratic society for the United States, the American founders focused on the following features of the Roman Republic. Rome had a **constitution**. There were **written laws**. Disputes were settled in **courts**. There were **separate branches of the government** and most Roman male citizens had some voting power. Finally, there was the belief in the overriding principle of **libertas** (liberty). As historian Mary Beard (2005) noted, "All, or most, Romans would have counted themselves as upholders of libertas" (p. 129).

American System -- based on balance of powers/functions		
Executive	Legislative	Judicial
President	Congress	Supreme Court

Note: The only legitimate interest is that of the people

Roman System -- based on balance of interests		
Monarchical	Aristocratic	Democratic
2 Consuls + other magistrates	Senate	Assembly of Tribes Tribune
Directed government and army Acted as judges Could issue edicts Acted as chief priest	Controlled state budget Could pass laws	Approved/rejected laws Decided on War Tribune could veto actions of magistrate Acted as final court
Basis of power: possess imperium, the right to rule need for leadership	Basis of power: members were richest men in Rome.	Basis of power: provided most of the soldiers
Limits on power: one year term each could veto	Limits on power: could not control army needed majority as soldiers.	Limits on power: Could not suggest laws often paid as clients by the elite

"[The Roman Republic: Checks and Balances](#)", Public Domain

Roman government functioned within the **strict class structure** of Roman society ([Roman Social Order](#)). The ruling class were known as the **Patricians**; the other social classes included **Plebeians**, **Freemen**, and **Slaves**. Patricians controlled the government. Plebeians were only granted a right to an Assembly after much conflict with the Patricians. Despite their protests, the Plebeians were granted limited rights. Like ancient Rome, the U.S. has ongoing struggles among social groups within its social, economic, and racial class structures. [Topic 4/Standard 13](#) examines the role money plays in U.S. politics and elections.

Rome established a **code of written laws** known as [The Laws of the Twelve Tables](#). Carved into 12 stone tablets between 451 and 450 BCE, these codes set strict rules for Roman citizens, many of which would be considered incredibly harsh or barbaric today. The Twelve Tables was part of the "struggle by plebeian citizens for full political rights and for parity with the elite, patrician citizens who were generally loath to give up their hereditary monopoly of power" (Beard, 2005, p. 146). Writing down laws so they could be applied to every citizen was a new development in Roman society. Written laws could not be changed, meaning people had certain rights that could not be taken away from them.

The first legal codes in world history came from the ancient Middle East with the [Code of Ur-Nammu](#) being the first having predated the [Code of Hammurabi](#), the most well-known by three centuries. The [Great Tang Code](#) was the earliest Chinese legal code that has been recorded completely. Written in 1804, the 2,281 articles of the [Napoleonic Code](#) ensured equality, universal suffrage, property rights and religious liberty to all male citizens of France. The [United States Code](#) is a collection of this country's permanent laws, but is so large that no one can for sure how many laws there are ([Library of Congress, March 13, 2013](#)).

The government of the Roman republic had a **[system of checks and balances](#)** that sought to balance three forces in Roman society:

1. representation and participation of the poor;
2. the power and influence of the elite; and
3. the need to enact swift decision making outside of representative government.

The U.S. adopted its own system of checks and balances to control the power of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (check out the *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page on [The American Political System](#)).

The ruins of Pompeii, the city destroyed in 79 C.E. by the eruption of the Mount Vesuvius volcano, offer another and in this case media-based political connection between ancient Rome and contemporary politics. Excavating parts of the buried city, archeologists found inscriptions (like a modern-day political poster or sign) inviting people to vote for a local political candidate ([Electoral Inspirations Discovered Inside a House](#), Archaeological Park of Pompeii, October 5, 2023). Political inscriptions were often found on the outside of buildings, but this one was inside suggesting the room was a place where events and meetings were held to support a candidate for office.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Write Your Definition of a "Law"**
 - How would you define or explain "what is a law?"
 - What do you think are the three most important laws in your life today? Why do you think so?
- **Propose a Change to Classroom Rules or School Codes of Conduct**
 - [The Laws of the Twelve Tables](#) were the Roman's attempt to create a code of laws that applied to every citizen; today every classroom and school has codes of conduct that seek to create protocols for behavior that apply to every student.
 - After examining your classroom or school's rules of student conduct and propose changes or additions; Explain the reasons for your proposal.
 - What changes would you make to current procedures for beginning a class, conducting daily learning activities, and ending class for the day?
- **State Your View about School Dress Codes**
 - In ancient Rome it was mandated by law that all male citizens wear togas of certain colors to public events: Plain white for ordinary citizens; Off-white with a purple border for magistrates and upper class boys; Bleached togas for politicians; Purple with gold embroidery for victorious generals and the emperor ([The Romans-Clothing](#)). Many schools today have dress codes mandating what students must wear.
 - Does your school have a dress code?
 - What are the arguments for and against school dress codes?
 - What recommendations would you make for the school's student dress code: what must students wear; what may students wear; what cannot students wear?

Special Topic Box: Roman Engineering and Public Works Projects

In addition to its government institutions and social class system, ancient Rome is known for its architecture, engineering, and technology: roads, bridges, arches in buildings, domes, arenas and amphitheatres, baths, central heating, plumbing, and sanitation. These innovations were **government-funded public works projects** intended to further the power and control of the Republic and then the Roman Empire. Still, public works projects benefited people, a dynamic that is ever-present today where local, state, and federal government in the U.S. fund a wide range of services that people need and demand.



[Aqueduc romain du Mont Chemin](#) by Sylenius is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

[Roman aqueducts](#) delivered water over long distances using downhill gravity flows to public baths and fountains throughout cities and towns. The city of Rome had more than 480 miles of aqueducts that brought 300 million gallons of water daily. Rome today still uses an [aqueduct built during the Roman Empire](#).

The word "aqueduct" comes from the Latin words "aqua" meaning water and "ducere" meaning to lead or to conduit. Aqueducts transformed Roman society, one blog referred to them as the "[dawn of plumbing](#)." To learn how aqueducts function, view the video: [Roman Water Supply](#) from Science Channel.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Roman aqueducts are a notable example of government-funded public works projects and government-funded technological innovations, activities that have been central to the expansion of the United States from the beginning of the nation, including:

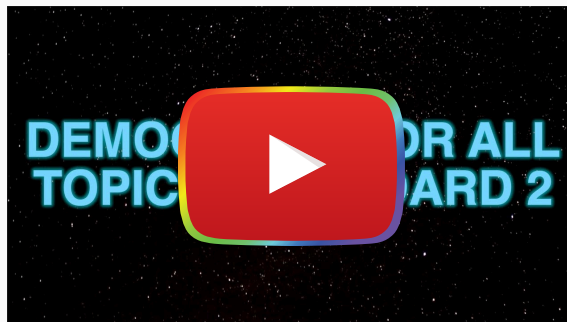
- [The National Road](#) (also known as the Cumberland Road), built between 1811 and 1837, was the first federally funded highway.
- New York State funded the building of the [Erie Canal](#) between 1817 and 1825.
- The federal government heavily subsidized the first [Transcontinental Railroad](#).
- Between 1933 and 1939, the Public Works Administration funded more than 34,000 projects as part of the New Deal. For examples read about [The Great Depression Top Five Public Works Projects of the New Deal](#):
 - Grand Coulee Dam
 - Hoover Dam
 - Great Smoky Mountain National Park
 - Overseas Highway from Miami to Key West
 - The Lincoln Tunnel
- In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed legislation creating the **Interstate Highway System**. [Ike's Interstates at 50](#) from the National Archives (2006) offers more information the national highway system.
- Beginning in the 1960s, the **Internet** had its origins as a Department of Defense research project ([The History of the Internet in a Nutshell: 1969 - 2009](#)).

Latin words appear regularly in the news. *Quid pro quo*, meaning an exchange of something for something, became widely used during the 2019-2020 impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump's infamous phone call with the President of Ukraine. That phone call, and its surrounding events, established that the delivery of U.S. security assistance was contingent on Ukraine announcing an investigation into Trump's political rival - former Vice President Joe Biden, and his son. Latin is also used for mottos, including the Massachusetts state motto, [Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem](#) (By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty) and *Ars gratia artis* (art for the love of art), motto of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie studio.

Media Literacy Connections: The Internet as a Public Utility

In ancient Rome, the government provided public services such as roads, schools, waste management, and plumbing that its citizens needed and demanded. Many Americans are now debating whether **the Internet**, too, should be provided by the government as a **public utility** rather than a private service. If the Internet had been invented at the time of the Roman Republic, do you think the government of the Roman Republic would have made the Internet a public utility?

- [Activity: Evaluating Whether the Government of the Roman Republic Would Have Made the Internet a Public Utility](#)



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Build a Model of an Aqueduct**
 - Watch the TeachEngineering video [Construct an Aqueduct!](#) and then build your own working model.
- **Propose a Modern-Day Public Works Project**
 - Rome built roads, aqueducts and many other structures as government-funded public works project. What new public works project should local, state, or federal government provide for your community?

Teacher-Designed Learning Plans: How Ancient Rome Impacts Our Lives Today

The following learning plans were developed by Erich Leaper, 7th-grade teacher at Van Sickle Academy, Springfield Massachusetts during the spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The plans offer one week of remote instructional activities and learning for students. They address both a Massachusetts Grade 7 and a Grade 8 curriculum standard as well as Advanced Placement (AP) Government and Politics unit.

- [Ancient Rome Our Lives Pt.1](#)
- [Ancient Rome Our Life Pt. 2](#)
- [Ancient Rome Our Life Pt. 3](#)

These plans can be adapted and used for in-person, fully online, and blended learning formats. Note: There are some minor spacing issues due to moving the material from Nearpod to the PDF version.

- Massachusetts Grade 7
 - Describe the contributions of Roman civilization to architecture, engineering, and technology (e.g., roads, bridges, arenas, baths, aqueducts, central heating, plumbing, and sanitation).
- Massachusetts Grade 8
 - Describe the government of the Roman Republic and the aspects of republican principles that are evident in modern governments.
- Advanced Placement: United States Government and Politics
 - Unit 1: Ideas of Democracy

Online Resources for Roman Government, Roman Society, and Roman Engineering

- [Citizenship in the Roman Republic](#), Learning Plan, Los Angeles Unified School District
- [The Pantheon](#) interactive panorama
- [Colosseum in 360 degrees](#) using Google Earth
- [Government of the Roman Republic](#)
- [Roman Republic](#), Stanford History Education Group
- [Republic to Empire: Government in Ancient Rome](#), National Geographic
- [Slavery and Social Classes in Ancient Rome](#)
- PRIMARY SOURCE: [The Great Tang Code's "Ten Abominations"](#). Earliest Chinese legal code in complete form
- [Oregon NOW Model Student Dress Code](#)

2. UNCOVER: Spartacus and Slavery in the Roman World, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Black American Slave Revolts

Though slavery was widespread throughout the ancient world, ancient Rome was the society most reliant on slave labor with the highest number of slaves among its population. Estimates vary, but many sources estimate it was between one-fifth and one-third of the ancient Roman population was enslaved.



Photo of "[Roman collared slaves - Ashmolean Museum](#)" by Jun is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

The institution of slavery was interwoven into all areas of Roman life.

- Slaves were status symbols for the wealthy.
- Slaves were forced to do manual labor (e.g. farming) in horrible working conditions.
- Due to the constant warfare of the Roman empire it was hard for them to grow enough food to sustain everyone in the empire. To balance this, they often took the prisoners of war and made them grow food so they could continue to be at war.
- Slaves were forced to do household labor as cooks, waiters, cleaners, and gardeners.
- Slaves were forced to work on public works projects such as the construction of buildings and aqueducts.
- Slaves were also forced to be gladiators, and participate in ritualized public violence in which men and women literally fought their deaths for the entertainment of spectators.
- Slaves were needed to keep Roman society stable because they were such a high percentage of the population.

Enslaved workers lived short, grim lives in brutal conditions. Archaeologists exploring the ruins of the city of Pompeii found a "bakery-prison" facility where slaves were forced to live and work, behind bars ([Life for the Lowest Class in Ancient Pompeii? It was Awful](#). The New York Times, December 15, 2023).

Unlike the [Atlantic slave trade](#) centuries later, **Roman slavery was not based on race**. Roman slaves included prisoners of war, sailors captured by pirates, and enslaved individuals purchased outside Roman territory. Impoverished Roman citizens sometimes sold their children into slavery to make money.

Slavery, as practiced in Rome and many other societies, contradicted the fundamental principles of freedom and liberty. It created lasting and unresolved philosophical and political problems in every democracy where it was practiced—including colonial North America and the United States before and after the Civil War.

Throughout history slaves have rebelled against those who enslaved them. The desire to be free, to have control over one's life, is basic to being human. [Spartacus](#) was a gladiator and leader of a lengthy, though unsuccessful, slave revolt against the Roman Republic in 73 BCE.



"Spartacus' death" by Hermann Vogel
[Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain](#)

[Toussaint L'Ouverture](#), who has been called the Black Spartacus, was the leader of the Haitian Revolution, an uprising of African slaves on the island of Haiti that produced in 1804 the second independent republic in the western hemisphere (the United States was the first) (learn more from [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page [Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution](#)).



"Général Toussaint Louverture"
[NYPL Digital Gallery/Public Domain](#)

Resistance to slavery through **slave revolts** is a recurring theme in the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the American South before the Civil War. In the [Jamaican Slave Uprising of 1760-61](#), one of the largest slave revolts of the 18th century, 1000 enslaved Africans rose up against their oppressors in a violent, bloody struggle. It was a powerful example of Black agency, but it is not included in many textbooks. "Masters and their captives struggled with one

another continuously," noted historian Vincent Brown in his book [Tacky's Revolt: A Story of an Atlantic Slave War](#) (2020, p. 7). A more complete history demands us, in Brown's view, to "elaborate on the slaves' grievances and goals, or the connections among the various individuals and forces behind the insurrections" (2020, p. 13).

The United States also had slave revolts, as Henry Louis Gates ([100 Amazing Facts about the Negro](#)) has recorded: the Stono Rebellion (1739), the New York City Conspiracy of 1741; Gabriel's Conspiracy (1800); the German Coast Uprising (1811), and the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831). Each is a compelling example of Black resistance to the cruelties of slavery. For as the 20th century revolutionist Frantz Fanon (1961) wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "the famous dictum which states that all men are equal will find its illustration in the colonies only when the colonized subject states he is equal to the colonist" (p. 9).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Compare and Contrast Slave Revolts and Rebellions** in Roman history and U.S. history
 - [Spartacus War: Story of a Real-Life Gladiator](#), NPR Podcast (February 2, 2010)
 - View [From Slave to Rebel Gladiator: The Life of Spartacus](#), TED-Ed (December 17, 2018)
 - [Did African-American Slaves Rebel?](#) 5 Greatest Slave Revolts in the United States, Henry Louis Gates, *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro*
 - [American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt](#) - 500 slaves revolted near New Orleans in 1811
 - [Poetry of Resistance: How the Enslaved Resisted](#), Zinn Education Project
- **Explore Interactive Online Resources**
 - [The Atlantic Slave Trade: 315 Years. 20,528 Voyages. Millions of Lives](#) - A visualization of voyages bringing slaves to Europe and the Americas, year by year.
 - [The 1619 Project](#), *New York Times*, August 2019, the 400th Anniversary of the beginnings of American slavery

Online Resources about Slave Revolts

- [Roman Society and the Question of Race](#) is a short essay exploring race in the Roman slave system.
- [Reckoning with Legacies of Slavery and Slave Trade](#), Slavery and Remembrance, Colonial Williamsburg
- [History of Haiti: Toussaint L'Ouverture in Power: 1492-1801](#), Brown University Library
- [AP World History Period 2.2: States and Empires](#)
- [Slaves, the Labor Force, and the Economy](#), Roman Empire in the First Century, PBS
- [Roman Slavery](#), World History For Us All, UCLA
- Background Information on slavery in United States history:
 - [Slavery in Colonial North America](#)
 - [Beginnings of Slavery in North America in the 1600s and 1700s](#)
 - [Debates Over Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War](#)
 - PODCAST: [The History of American Slavery](#)

3. ENGAGE: What Latin Legal and Government Terms Should Every Student Need to Know?

Why does English include so many words from Latin - a language that is hardly spoken in the United States?

Knowing the meaning of Latin words and phrases is essential in everyday life. You would not want to sign a contract that had the phrase **caveat emptor** (let the buyer beware) or fail to accept someone's **mea culpa** (it was my fault).

E Pluribus Unum is a Latin phrase meaning from “**out of many, one.**” It was adopted as the United States' motto in 1782 and first appeared on a U.S. coin in 1795. It was intended to convey the message that the United States is one country made from many diverse peoples and places. *E Pluribus Unum* was replaced by “In God We Trust” as a Cold War-era statement against communism.



Latin Words in Everyday Language

Many more terms from Latin are listed in the [Glossary of Educational and Legal Terms for Middle and High School Students](#).

Latin is also used for mottos, including the Massachusetts state motto, *Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem* (By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty). *Ars gratia artis* (art for the love of art) is the motto of the movie studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Latin Words in Law and Government

Latin is the language of the law, courts, and government so understanding Latin is key to understanding your and everyone else's rights in political and legal systems. Do you know the meaning of **affidavit** (a statement given to a court that the writer swears is truthful), **bona fide** (a offer made in good faith); **alibi** (evidence one was somewhere else when a crime was committed); **prima facie** (clear or self-evident when looking at the facts); **voire dire** (meaning to "tell the truth" and used in the selecting of members of a jury for a trial) or **subpoena** (a command to appear in court with penalties for not doing so)?

Learn more Latin terms using in law and government at these sites:

- [Glossary of Latin Terms Used in Law and Government](#)
- [Dictionary of Latin Terms Used in Legal Doctrines and Rules](#)
- [How Latin is Used in Today's Legal Terms](#)

What law and government Latin words and phrases do you think all students ought to know or be required to know to graduate from high school?

What Latin terms might help students engage legally and ethically in making critically informed decisions as members of in democratic society?

As a civic engagement activity, create a kid-friendly TikTok video, meme, or other product that responds to these two questions.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design a Coat of Arms Featuring a Motto in Latin**

- Use the [Online Motto Generator](#) to select a motto to represent your family, class, or school.
- Draw, design, or construct a [coat of arms](#).

- **Use Latin Words in Writing**

- From a list of common Latin words and phrases (see examples below), in groups, design a video, skit, or digital story in which the characters use multiple Latin words in the narrative. We have added student-accessible definitions for each term.
 - *Ad infinitum*: going on for ever and ever
 - *Bona fide*: in good faith
 - *Cum laude*: with honor
 - *De facto*: in fact
 - *Et cetera*: and the rest
 - *Per diem*: for/by each day
 - *Pro bono*: for good
 - *Alibi*: I, she/he, them/they were elsewhere
 - *Per se*: In itself
 - *Multi-*: many
 - *Quid pro quo*: this for that
 - *Semi-*: Half
 - *Verbatim*: word for word
 - *Versus*: against
 - *Affidavit*: he/she/it declared under oath

- **Send a Message in Latin**

- Select a Latin phrase from this [website](#).
- Express the phrase creatively using paper, colored markers and pencils, or online with a meme or poster.
- Present the Latin message to the class, explain what it means in English, and display the phrases in the classroom or on a virtual bulletin board/class website.

Online Resources about Latin Language

- [History of Latin](#) timeline
- [Coding as the New Latin? Can Code Clubs Provide a New Pathway for Low-Income Children and Help Close the Digital Divide?](#) *Connected Learning* (August 3, 2020)
- [Interactive map](#) (flash-based) to see how the Romans conquered all of Western Europe and spread their language
- [Letters of the Roman Alphabet](#) and how to pronounce each letter.
- [Latin Derivatives](#)
- [How Did Latin Become a Dead Language?](#) shows its spread and its decline
- [See How English Words Are Derived from Latin](#)

Standard 1.2 Conclusion

The Roman Republic, like the government of ancient Athens, had political and social features that made their way into the new government of the United States. **INVESTIGATE** looked at the structure of Roman government and the central role that slavery played in Roman society. **UNCOVER** addressed the long history of slave revolts, including the roles of Spartacus, and much later, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian Revolution, and revolts of Black slaves in the American South before the Civil War. **ENGAGE** asked what Latin words and phrases should every student be required to know to graduate from high school?



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