

What is republican government?

Purpose of Lesson

This lesson introduces several more ideas which were important to the Founders when they created our government. When you finish this lesson you should be able to explain these ideas. You should also be able to explain why they were important to the Founders and how they are important to Americans today.

Terms to know

Roman Republic
aristocrats
republican government
common welfare
civic virtue
dictator
separated powers
balanced powers

The Founders were influenced by their study of history

Over 2,000 years before our nation began, there existed in ancient Europe a government which greatly influenced the ideas of the Founders. This was the **Roman Republic**, which lasted from 509 B.C. to 27 B.C. Its capital was Rome, which was located in what is now called Italy. Some of the ruins of the buildings of this ancient government can still be seen in Rome today.

The Founders were influenced by what historians had written about the people and



How could a government that existed over 2,000 years ago influence the development of our Constitution?

the government of the Roman Republic. They read that during the Republic, the Roman people governed themselves without a king. The common people and the **aristocrats** (wealthy upper class) shared the power to govern. The people chose leaders to make and administer laws for their country.

The Founders called the government of Rome a **republican government**. They defined a republican government as a type of government in which

- the citizens have the power to govern,
- the citizens give power to leaders they elect to represent them and to serve their interests, and

- the representatives are responsible for promoting the **common welfare** (the good of the entire community).

The Founders thought that republican government was possible in Rome only because of the **civic virtue** of the Roman citizens. Civic virtue meant that both citizens and their leaders lived modest lives. They worked hard and they put the common welfare above their own selfish interests. They believed that the benefits of republican government were that

- the laws made by representatives elected by the people would be fair and would serve the common welfare rather than the selfish interests of one group, and
- people would have greater freedom and be able to live secure and comfortable lives.

The Founders thought a republican form of government was the best form of government they could create for themselves. Then they would have the same

benefits they thought the ancient Romans had enjoyed.

Cincinnatus: A model of civic virtue

In the year 460 B.C., Rome was in great danger. An army from the east was burning and plundering the countryside. The defending Roman army was surrounded on all sides by its enemies. The leaders of the government of Rome decided to ask Cincinnatus, a skilled military leader, to help them during this crisis. Messengers were sent asking him to serve as **dictator** (supreme ruler with unlimited power) for as long as the crisis would last.

Cincinnatus was a hard-working farmer with only four acres of land. When the messengers found him, he was quietly plowing the fields. Because he loved his country, he left his plow to go to Rome to lead the army. In a battle that lasted two days, his army defeated the enemy and saved the country. Cincinnatus was honored and praised by his



How did Cincinnatus demonstrate civic virtue?

people. But when the battle was over, he did not try to remain as a dictator of his country. He did not want continued fame. Instead, he returned to his home and his life as a farmer and a citizen.

By returning to his home, Cincinnatus showed that he valued being a citizen of Rome more than he valued fame and personal power. He respected the government of Rome. He did not want to use his popularity to take power away from the representatives elected by the citizens. This was an example of the civic virtue that the Romans were known for during the period of the Republic.

Examining civic virtue

The Founders thought civic virtue was important to make our government work properly. Civic virtue means that people should put the common welfare above their own interests.

The Founders believed that sometimes people might not be willing to give up their own interests. However, they hoped that people would still be kind to others, be willing to help them, and be concerned for their welfare. They thought the family and religion were very important in teaching children to behave in a way that considered the interests of others.

When should you give up your own interests for the common welfare? This is a difficult question that each person has to answer for himself or herself. The following exercise will help you learn how to deal with the question.

Problem solving

Individual interests and the common welfare

Examine the problem of individual interests and the common welfare by discussing such questions as the following. This might be done in groups of about five students. After discussing the questions, a spokesperson for each group should explain its answers to the rest of the class.

1. Describe a person you know or a leader in our nation who you think has civic virtue. Explain what that person did to cause you to think so.
2. Explain some situations in which you think you should put the common welfare above your own interests.
3. Explain some situations in which you might not want to put the common welfare above your own interests.
4. Explain some things a government could do that would be for the common welfare.
5. Explain some situations in which people might disagree about what is best for the common welfare. What should be done when there are such disagreements? Why?

How should a republican government be organized?

The Founders also learned about republican government from Montesquieu (1689-1755). He was a French writer the Founders admired so much that they often called him "the celebrated Montesquieu." They thought he was an expert on what republican government should be like. Montesquieu believed that the best way to



Why was Montesquieu important to the Founders?

make sure a government would serve the common welfare was to do the following things.

- **Separate the powers** of government among the different branches, or parts, of the government so that no one branch would have all the power. Each branch should represent the interests of a different group in society.
- **Balance the powers** among these branches so no one branch would have so much power it could control the others.
- Give each branch ways to **check** the use of power by the other branches.

Montesquieu and many others believed that no single branch could control the entire government if its powers were separated, balanced, and checked. Then no single branch could use the government for its own selfish purposes. The result would be a government that would promote the common welfare.

How were the values of republican government promoted?

The Founders believed the values of republican government were that citizens and their leaders should lead modest lives and work hard. They thought that people should care about the common welfare.

Americans were taught these values in many ways. Parents taught these values to their children. Teachers taught them in school. Ministers taught them in church. Leading citizens of the country were expected to set good examples. These republican values were a part of the customs and traditions of the people.

The ideas and values of the Roman Republic were also promoted throughout America in the stories that people read. People were also reminded of them in the design of public buildings similar to those of ancient Rome.

The Founders thought it was important to teach and promote civic virtue among citizens. They believed that the Roman Republic had failed in the end because its citizens lost their civic virtue. They had promoted their own selfish interests at the expense of the common welfare.

By the time of the American Revolution, the Founders believed strongly in the ideals of republican government. They thought that Great Britain was violating these ideals. They claimed the British government was guilty of serving selfish interests at the expense of the common welfare. It had violated those rights it was the purpose of good government to protect.

After the Revolution, the Founders were able to establish their own government. They tried to make sure this government would not violate their rights. An essential step, they thought, was to create a constitutional government. You will learn what a constitution and a constitutional government are in the next lesson.

Reviewing and using the lesson

1. What is republican government?
2. Why did Montesquieu believe that the powers of republican government should be separated among different branches or groups in the government?

3. What was the purpose of balancing the powers among different groups in the government? Why should each group be given ways to check the power of the other groups?
4. Why was Cincinnatus considered a model of civic virtue?
5. Why do you think many people thought that republican government was not possible if the citizens did not have civic virtue?
6. How was civic virtue promoted among the Founders?



Why do you think religion was so important during the colonial period?