

Document A: Polybius (Modified)

The following excerpt is the description of the Roman constitution provided by the Greek historian Polybius in his book The Histories written between 167-119 BCE, a period of rapid Roman expansion. Polybius greatly admired the Romans, and the purpose of his work was to describe how Rome came to dominate the world.

The Roman constitution has three elements. Each of them possesses independent powers, and their share of power has been so well regulated that no one can say for sure whether the constitution is an **aristocracy** or democracy or **despotism**.

The Consuls (**magistrates**) lead the military and are the supreme masters of the government. They bring matters requiring debate before the Senate. They also call together the people's Assemblies, and carry out whatever the majority of the Assemblies decide. They have absolute authority in running the military and fighting wars and can spend as much public money as they choose. Seeing these powers would justify our describing the constitution as a despotism.

The Senate proposes laws and has the control of the treasury. It also handles all crimes requiring an investigation. In addition, if it is necessary to send diplomats to a foreign country to make peace or to proclaim war, this too is the business of the Senate. As a result, many foreign kings imagine the constitution is a complete aristocracy because nearly all the business they had with Rome was settled by the Senate.

After all this, someone would naturally ask what part is left for the people in the constitution. There is, however, a part left to the people (the Assemblies), and it is a most important one. It is the people in the Assemblies who grant office to those that deserve it through the elections. The Assemblies also have the final say in passing or repealing laws, and most important of all it is that they make the final decision on the question of peace or war. These considerations again would lead one to say that the chief power in the state was the People's, and that the constitution was a democracy.

Vocabulary:

aristocracy: form of government in which power is held by the nobility
despotism: form of government where a ruler holds absolute power
magistrates: local officials who administer the law

Document B: Professor Fergus Millar (Excerpted from Original)

The following text is from The Crowd in the Late Republic, written by Professor Fergus Millar in 1998. The book focuses on the role of Roman people in the government during the final decades of the Roman Republic. Millar is a British historian and professor of Ancient History at Oxford University.

The constitution of the Roman Republic made it a variety of democracy. Every adult male citizen, unless specifically disqualified, had a vote, and there was no formal exclusion of the poor. Free slaves could also vote. . . .

The system within which they voted was characterized by the feature that all voting, without exception, took place within subgroups (Tribal or Century Assemblies). Within each subgroup, the principle of the majority vote prevailed. The vote of each subgroup . . . was determined by the majority of group votes. . . .

The formal powers of the citizen as voter were divided into three categories. First, there was a **residual** role of the assembly to meet as criminal courts. . . . Then there were elections, conducted by either the Century Assembly or the Tribal Assembly. . . .

The most fundamental of all the rights of the people was, however, the fact that they, and they alone, could **legislate**. Proposals for laws could be put before them only by a limited group of elected annual magistrates. . . . The normal assembly for the passage of laws was the Tribal Assembly. . . . The exclusive right of the assemblies to pass legislation is by far the strongest reason why, in purely formal terms, the Roman Republic has to be characterized as a democracy.

Source: Fergus Millar, The Crowd in the Late Republic, 1998.

Vocabulary:

anomalous: different from what is standard or expected
legislate: make laws

Document C: Professor Alan Ward (Excerpted from Original)

The following passage is from an article titled "How Democratic was the Roman Republic?" written by Alan Ward and published in 2003. Ward is a historian and was a professor at the University of Connecticut.

If all citizens or their democratically elected representatives in a state have no likelihood of being able to cast their votes regularly, then those who cannot are effectively **disenfranchised**. . . . Under those conditions, one unrepresentative group of voters can easily dominate **sovereign** popular institutions . . . so that the wishes of the people as a whole are not expressed. That was very much the case in Rome after the early Republic. . . .

There were very practical barriers to fair and **equitable** voting in the popular assemblies. For example, all voting had to be conducted in Rome. Once Roman territory had expanded . . . it was mostly the well-to-do rural voters and their clients who could afford the time and expense to come to Rome to vote.

How easily a small number of urban residents registered in a rural tribe could determine the vote of that tribe is clear from the small percentage of citizens who actually voted. [Historian] Ramsay MacMullen persuasively argues that only 2% of Roman citizens usually voted, which makes any notion of **direct democracy nugatory**. . . .

Also, in Republican Rome, the secret ballot did nothing to change the undemocratic situation in which the voters faced only the legislative and electoral choices presented by the higher magistrates. . . . The voters had no role in selecting candidates for office or in proposing legislation in any assembly. The magistrates and tribunes, with or without a prior recommendation from the senate, were the only ones who could place legislation before the voters.

Source: Alan Ward, "How Democratic was the Roman Republic?" 2003.

Vocabulary:

disenfranchised: deprived of the right to vote
sovereign: possessing ultimate power
equitable: fair
direct democracy: form of government in which citizens vote directly on laws and government actions
nugatory: useless, meaningless