

The Roman Republic

Focus Question: To what extent was the Roman Republic democratic?

Setup

“Historians, both contemporary and in the Classical Period, greatly debated the extent to which the Roman Republic was democratic.”

Polybius

“Polybius, a Greek historian who greatly admired the Romans, described the structure of the Roman Republic. He argued that the three elements of the Roman Constitution (the Consuls, Senate, and Assemblies) **effectively balanced political power** ensuring that no one group abused their authority. Most importantly, Polybius notes that the **ultimate authority to rule was held by the people**, making the Roman Republic not only highly democratic, but attractive to foreigners under Roman control.” (Doc. A)

Prof. Fergus Millar

“In focusing on the role of the Roman people during the Republic, Oxford professor Fergus Millar argued that **greater voter participation existed, the will of the majority was accepted**, and that the **citizens had the direct authority** to ensure justice, elect leaders, and make laws. The result of this role was that the Roman citizens were **more actively engaged in their society** and thus the Roman Republic was highly democratic.” (Doc. B)

Prof. Alan Ward

“In presenting an overview of different historical arguments, Professor Alan Ward disputed the fact that the Roman Republic was democratic. Ward cites the barriers of distance and wealth **deterred voter participation** in addition to the fact that **citizen voters had no real choice** in setting legislation or the candidates they could vote on. Therefore the Roman Republic only **maintained the appearance of democracy when in actuality it was controlled by a class of ruling elites.**” (Doc. C)

Overall Claim

While the Roman Republic is largely accepted as a standard of democratic rule because citizens were actively engaged and held ultimate political authority, the reality was that class, gender, and geographic obstacles limited actual individual participation. Thus the Roman Republic only appeared to be democratic when in fact it was being run by an aristocratic oligarchy who kept power over the majority of the population.