

Historical Influences on America's Constitutional Republic

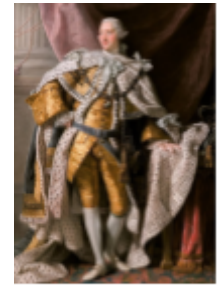
The Constitutional Framework of the United States

The United States of America is a **constitutional republic**, which means we live in a country where elected representatives govern according to our Constitution. The U.S. Constitution was created in 1787, becoming the supreme law of the land in 1788, when New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify it (Article VII). The men who wrote the Constitution are commonly called the “Framers.”



The Framers during the signing of the U.S. Constitution

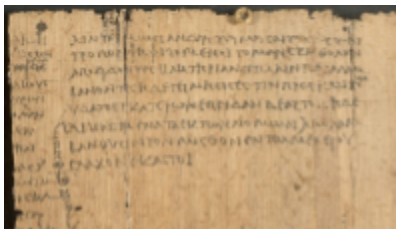
The Framers came from all over the United States and from many different backgrounds. These men were doing something the modern world had not seen, establishing a republic of, by, and for the people. Almost every country at the time of the writing of the U.S. Constitution was a monarchy. The Framers struggled with how much power to grant the new government. They worried if they gave it too little power, it would not be able to meet the challenges (examples: invasion by a foreign country, the ability to pay its bills) the country might face. If they gave the new government too much power, it could become tyrannical and be no better than King George III and the British Parliament. To help figure out which principles would be included in our government, the Framers looked to ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and the Judeo-Christian tradition.



King George III of Great Britain

Ancient Greece: Democracy is Born

The ancient Greeks established the world's first **democracies**. City-states, known as “**polis**,” were self-governing communities that existed all throughout ancient Greece. The largest polis, Athens, established a system where all adult male citizens regularly gathered in a **legislative body** called the Assembly to vote directly on important matters the city faced. Whether the issue was to pass a new law or go to war, every citizen present had the right to speak their views and vote on the matter, usually through a show of hands. While only adult male citizens had **voting rights**, civic participation was considered one of the most important



The original Constitution of Athens

responsibilities a citizen could fulfill. In addition to voting, serving on juries and volunteering for military service were other opportunities for **civic participation**. Some of these Greek city-states wrote down their customs, rules, and laws. This served as a **written constitution** for how the polis should be governed. When writing a book called *Politics* that many American Framers would one day read, well-known ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle researched and recorded the constitutions of about 158 city-states.

Ancient Rome: Republicanism on the Rise

According to history and legend, they established a republic after the ancient Romans overthrew their king in 509 BC. For ancient Rome, this meant a government founded on the idea that the people were the source of governmental power. In a **republican** form of government, the people give power to leaders they elect to **represent** them and their interests. The Roman

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Republic consisted of elected consuls and tribunes and an appointed body called the Roman Senate. Like the Greeks, ancient Rome had a strong tradition of **civic participation**. The Roman Republic evolved slowly, adding new governmental offices when necessary, and remained remarkably stable for many centuries. Much of its longevity is owed to the idea of **separation of powers**. The Romans deliberately did not concentrate too much government power into the “hands” of the few. In establishing their governmental structure, they worked to ensure all interests were represented, each part of the government had its own responsibilities, and checks and balances were in place. For example, the two elected consuls had veto power over each other's actions.



The ancient Roman Senate



The displaying of the Twelve Tables in ancient Rome

Ancient Rome had a long-standing class struggle with steep divisions between the wealthy and the poor. In the transition to a republican form of government, changes were made in the area of ancient Roman law. Previously, Roman society did not have any of its laws written down. Around 450 BC, ancient Rome wrote their laws on the “Twelve Tables” and put them on public display. This allowed all citizens to know their rights and provide an understanding of the laws to which they would all be held accountable. This, in turn, helped maintain a **rule of law**. Meaning the Roman Republic was a government of laws, not of men, and that everyone, regardless of position, was not above it.

The Judeo-Christian Tradition

In addition to ancient Greece and Rome, the Framers looked to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the religious ideas they were raised with, and that many of them followed, for the types of values a government should hold. In living up to the Declaration's reference to our **individual worth** in that “*all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,*” the Framers tried to establish a constitutional and political order that reflected this. In doing so, they developed a government and a legal system that takes the principles of liberty, equality, and **justice** seriously. Like the Romans, the Judeo-Christian tradition reflects the concept of **rule of law**, as seen in the Ten Commandments and their application.

When choosing a republican form of government, the Framers knew that **civic virtue** and the ethical ideals held in the Judeo-Christian tradition would have to be important bedrocks of our constitutional republic. Both the Ten Commandments and the moral and ethical teachings found in the Bible serve as important guidance for the qualities and virtues (**justice, personal responsibility**, kindness, wisdom, courage, etc.) citizens must possess to ensure the success of the republic. By encouraging citizens to participate in public life and contribute to the common good, the Framers sought to create a society that was prosperous, just, and worthy of the ideals in the Declaration of Independence.



Statue of the Ten Commandments

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Influencing the Framers

In almost all colonial homes, one would find a Bible and collections of work from writers such as Montesquieu, Cicero, and Aristotle. The Framers borrowed much from the ancient Greeks and Romans to create our constitutional republic. Some of our democratic principles are derived from ancient Greece, the most important of which is the people's role in governmental decision-making and civic matters. The essence of our constitutional republic is based on the best governmental practices of ancient Rome. Our representative government, our rule of law, and our belief in the separation of powers are derived from the Roman experience.

Though the Framers were not the first men to have democratic ideals or the first to establish a republic, they were the first to combine the best of these ancient civilizations into a cohesive governmental structure that relied on the moral and ethical ideals of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in establishing the oldest constitutional republic the world has known.



Portrait of
Montesquieu



Marble bust of
Aristotle

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