

Roman Government

Student Worksheet

Introduction:

The Roman government was organized by a constitution, much as the United States government operates under the Constitution. You'll learn about the Roman government by reading a few passages written by the Greek historian Polybius (who lived during the Roman rule of Greece). These passages describe the different parts of the government and how they worked together.

When studying ancient Rome, it's important to realize that there were two main periods: the Roman Republic (509 BCE–27 BCE) and the Roman Empire (27 BCE–393 CE). In this activity, you'll read writings from the Republic (the earlier period), and you'll learn about the roles of citizens during this period. If you were to read an excerpt describing the government during the Roman Empire (the later period), you'd find that the government left much less authority to the people and much more to the leaders.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at:

<http://www.socialstudies.com/ancientlinks.html>

Directions:

Polybius talks about the three divisions of government: the consuls, the Senate, and the people. Your first job is to find out what the roles of each part of the government were and to list these roles.

Polybius 6.11-18: The Constitution of the Roman Republic

<http://duke.usask.ca/~porterj/DeptTransls/Polybius.html>.

Scroll down to the second paragraph, which begins “The consuls, when in Rome....”
Read this paragraph. As you read it, look for specific roles of the consuls.

Here are some hints to help you read this paragraph:

- a tribune was an official who served the people's interest
- “have authority over the execution of the decisions of the majority” means that after the people vote on something, the consuls put the majority's vote into practice
- “autocratic” means complete authority
- a *quaestor* was an official who dealt with finances
- a monarchy is a government ruled by only one person (such as a king or queen)

1. List at least five roles of the consuls.

Scroll down to the third paragraph, which begins “The Senate, first of all....” Read this paragraph. As you read it, look for specific roles of the Senate.

Here are some hints to help you read this paragraph:

- the word “revenues” means money that is earned
- the word “expenditures” means money that is spent
- a *quaestor* was an official who dealt with finances
- in the sentence that begins “And indeed, if it should be necessary...,” “to impose duties” means to set taxes or tariffs (taxes on trade)
- an aristocratic government is one that is controlled by a small privileged group of people (generally wealthy people)

2. List at least five roles of the Senate.

Scroll down to the fourth paragraph, which begins “Given this, who would not reasonably inquire...” Read this paragraph. As you read it, look for specific roles of the people.

Here are some hints to help you read this paragraph:

- “conferring” means giving
- a capital case is a case that could result in the death penalty
- “ratifying of laws” means confirming laws so they’ll take effect

3. List at least five roles of the people.

4. The United States has a representative democracy, in which people elect leaders to act on their behalf. What line in this paragraph indicates that the Romans also had a representative democracy?

Copy that sentence here.

Here are some excerpts from the other paragraphs of Polybius's writing. Read them, and then answer the questions below.

Whenever the consul should set out on a military expedition invested with the aforementioned powers and with *imperium*, he appears to have absolute authority as regards the mission at hand, yet he requires the cooperation of both the people and the Senate, and without them he lacks sufficient power to bring his operation to a successful conclusion. For it is clear that supplies must always be sent to accompany his armies, but neither food nor clothing nor pay for the soldiers can be allocated without a decree of the Senate, with the result that the commander's plans are rendered ineffectual if the Senate chooses to be negligent or obstructionist.

(hints: “*imperium*” means complete power; “rendered ineffectual” means made ineffective; “obstructionist” in this sentence means the Senate tries to keep the commander's plans from happening)

The Senate, in turn, which enjoys so much authority, first of all must pay attention to the masses and court the favor of the people in matters of public concern. The most important and greatest inquiries into crimes against the state, and the penalties thereby adjudicated—those that involve the death sentence—cannot be carried out by it unless the people ratify its decisions...As a result of all of these factors, the Senate fears the people and is ever mindful of them.

(hints: “adjudicated” means judged; “ratify” means confirm)

Most important, it is from the Senate that judges are appointed in most public and private suits that concern charges of any weight. As a result, everyone, being bound to the good will of the Senate and fearing the possibility of needing its assistance, takes care with regard to obstructing or opposing its decisions. Similarly, as regards the desires of the consuls, the people are loathe to oppose them since all citizens, both privately and collectively, fall under their authority when in the field.

(hint: “loathe” means reluctant or unwilling)

Such then are the powers of each of the parts of government both to oppose one another and to work in conjunction. In unison they are a match for any and all emergencies, the result being that it is impossible to find a constitution that is better constructed.

(hint: “conjunction” means together)

5. Was there a system of “checks and balances” in the Roman government? Provide evidence to support your answer.

6. Why did Polybius (and other Romans) feel it was important to have three separate divisions of government?

7. Why do you think Polybius states that “it is impossible to find a constitution that is better constructed?” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.