

# How Republics Succeed, Falter, And Fail



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*12-07-2024 ~ The United States today faces inherent challenges that have weakened the republic, making lessons from the Roman Republic even more necessary to avoid greater political instability.*

The U.S. enjoys many strengths that give it an edge over other republics, such as a decentralized and innovative economy that draws global talent and unmatched military strength. Yet the Roman Republic, which had its own comparative advantages, ultimately fell to autocratic rule, and the U.S. faces a similar fate if it fails to protect institutional integrity and unchecked power continues to grow.

Reform is crucial to the continuity of republican governance, yet history shows it is often compromised by entrenched power. Political dysfunction and the growing influence of corporate interests threaten to undermine the foundational principles of the U.S., posing a risk to its long-term stability.

From its inception, the United States has struggled to address its internal contradictions in ensuring fair treatment for its inhabitants. Autocratic tendencies also emerged early, with second President John Adams's [Alien and Sedition Acts](#) targeting political dissent, immigrants, and free speech. Abraham Lincoln later [expanded executive power](#) during the Civil War, bypassing Congress to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, the most contentious and significant political question since the country's founding. Despite such departures from Constitutional procedure—sometimes for good reasons—the system's checks and

balances ultimately resisted later executive overreach, like FDR's [failed Court-Packing plan](#).

Individual political challenges to republican systems are concerning, but the erosion of republican culture also leads to irreversible shifts in the political framework. Political bribery, unchecked imperialism, and government serving corporate interests over citizens combine to steadily capture the system. A select group of actors has crafted a continuous, increasingly scripted cultural-political spectacle, contributing to civic decline. As a result, the public has reduced active participation in governance in exchange for the passive right to cheer or criticize from the sidelines.

The fall of the Roman Republic, which endured for centuries before giving way to tyrants and emperors, offers useful context—lessons on not only what values to uphold but also on how reform attempts can backfire. Half-hearted efforts to fix inequality and instability often strained the system, pushing it closer to dysfunction and leading it to autocracy. Understanding Republican Rome's successes and failures offers lessons for addressing today's challenges.

A balanced republican political system encourages elites to compromise, build consensus, and compete for public approval, qualities the early Roman Republic struggled to develop after its establishment in 509 BC.

The Senate, dominated by the patrician aristocracy, functioned as an advisory body in theory, but in practice, it [exercised significant control](#) over finances, foreign policy, and much of the legislative process. Nonetheless, there was strong competition among patrician families for the two annual consulship positions. These roles, filled through the *cursus honorum* (course of honor), ensured that two capable leaders rose to the position in an established hierarchy, and shared short-term executive authority, limiting any concentration of power.

Consuls often entered the Senate or assumed other political positions after their terms, where they could be prosecuted for misconduct. This rotation and accountability meant leaders' interests lay in the smooth running of the state, rather than amassing personal prestige for their role or for past glories.

The design of Roman statues also supported this culture, celebrating the civic virtue of individuals over personal achievements. Statues portrayed aging and imperfections, in deliberate contrast to the [idealized perfection](#) of Greek art. The

Republic also barred actors from government, viewing their imitation of life as deceptive and unworthy of public office.

Like other effective republican city-states, Republican Rome thrived on political engagement, though participation was uneven. The Republic's [seasonal political process](#), shaped by agricultural cycles, military campaigns, and religious festivals, advantaged wealthy landowners who could afford to leave their estates for politics, perpetuating uneven and inconsistent efforts to address problems. Political advancement in turn often hinged on military successes, making military campaigns common and sometimes pursued for personal ambition rather than strategic necessity.

Yet this seasonal structure still created predictable opportunities for many citizens to travel to Rome to participate in political affairs, ensuring concentrated and focused decision-making during key periods. It also provided ways to reduce the power imbalance between the patricians and plebeians, or commoners. The [Conflict of the Orders](#) (5th to 3rd centuries BC) brought about significant gains for plebeians. Mass strikes disrupted Rome's economy and soldiers refused to fight, forcing reforms such as the creation of another legislative assembly, [the Concilium Plebis](#), alongside the [Comitia Tributa](#).

Additionally, after 451 BC, legal safeguards via the Twelve Tables and the establishment of the Tribunes of the Plebs—two annually elected magistrates with executive power to protect plebeian interests—were also won.

During the 4th century BC, plebeians gained greater social mobility, including the right to intermarry with patricians, opening access to [the consulship](#), Senate, and [positions of religious authority](#). After 338 BC, the Latin Rights extended certain privileges to non-Roman communities in Italy, such as intermarriage and participation in commerce. While full citizenship came gradually, these measures [integrated new populations](#) while preserving the identity of Roman citizens.

Despite the Republic's growing wealth and territories, inequality remained rife. Plebeians were the backbone of the army and bore the brunt of imperial expansion but reaped few rewards. Longer military service in support of campaigns left them unable to tend to their farms, indebting many. Patricians often capitalized on this by purchasing their lands, while the use of [enslaved labor](#) from conquests diminished plebeians' bargaining power as essential workers.

Many moved to Rome, swelling the urban poor.

Earlier republics, [including Rome, had periodically erased debts](#) and eased slavery to reset economic balances, but such measures waned in the Late Republic. Expansion also strained governance, as new territories were home to communities who had fewer rights than Roman citizens and [paid heavily in taxes](#), further exposing the Republic's systemic inequities.

Policies aimed at addressing inequality often ended up exacerbating it. The Lex Claudia ([218 BC](#)), for instance, barred senators and their sons from owning large commercial ships to prevent them from dominating Rome's expanding maritime trade. But this mostly benefited wealthy plebeians and other elites who could afford their own fleets, widening economic disparities.

Richer plebeians also disproportionately benefited from privileges [like access to higher office](#), enabling only some to join the senatorial elite. Meanwhile, the [equestrian order](#) emerged as a distinct wealthy class rooted in Rome's cavalry. Though largely lacking formal political power, members enjoyed elevated benefits and economic strength that deepened Rome's social stratification.

Many new elites became populist reformers, or [populares](#) ("for the people") who were opposed to the senatorial elite, known as [optimates](#) ("best men"). Distinctions between the two groups [were not always strict](#)—the *populares* included both new aristocratic elites and sidelined senatorial factions seeking to [reclaim influence](#) lost to dominant *optimates*. The motivations of *populares*-aligned politicians ranged from genuine reform [to self-serving opportunism](#), and they used plebeian support to shift the power dynamic in their favor. [Alliances were fluid](#), showing how Roman politics often prioritized status and influence over rigid ideology.

Elite infighting further motivated the plebeians to demand greater equality by leveraging their numbers and citizenship powers. Political gridlock became more frequent, and violence escalated. Prominent pro-plebeian leaders like Tiberius Gracchus (133 BC), Gaius Gracchus (121 BC), and Publius Clodius Pulcher (52 BC) were assassinated, alongside many of their supporters. In this way, Roman politics devolved into a zero-sum struggle where the defeated often faced death.

The use of violence and intimidation to damage plebeian interests, coupled with ongoing inequality, made them more inclined to [break with political customs and](#)

[precedents](#) when it suited their cause. Power was increasingly extended in executive positions, with *populares*-aligned Gaius Marius [holding seven consulships](#), and citizen soldiers showing increasing loyalty to individual commanders rather than the state.

Marius's eventual defeat by patrician-allied Lucius Cornelius Sulla led to a dramatic overcorrection. During his dictatorship (82–79 BC), Sulla's constitution aimed to curb instability by empowering [the old aristocracy and Senate](#), severely weakening the tribunes, and restricting the [powers of citizenship](#).

The emboldened aristocracy did little to address underlying economic inequality. Ambitious figures like Pompey, through military power, and Marcus Licinius Crassus, through immense wealth, exploited these tensions to consolidate power and play kingmaker. Sulla's reforms ultimately collapsed under Julius Caesar, whose plebeian-friendly policies bypassed the Senate by leveraging popular assemblies, exposing the new fragility of Rome's legal system.

The [growing glorification of individual leaders](#) reached a turning point when Caesar became the first living Roman to appear on a coin, a stark departure from tradition. After being declared dictator for life, his assassination by senators angered the public and triggered a power struggle and civil war. This ultimately led to the rise of Caesar's adopted heir, Octavian, who centralized authority in 27 BC and later became known as Augustus.

A facade of republican governance was maintained, but many Romans, associating it with chaos and instability, willingly traded their political rights to escape oligarchic rule, violence, and uncertainty. When rumors spread of Octavian relinquishing his special powers, public sentiment opposed the idea. With the establishment of the Roman Empire, an urban proletariat dependent on state-sponsored food distribution and entertained by spectacles like gladiator games became increasingly pacified under the strategy of "bread and circuses," solidifying the new order.

A reshuffling of the nobility, suppression of opposition, and unchecked territorial expansion fueled instability in Republican Rome. However, persistent inequality remained the Republic's core weakness for its 500-year existence, coupled with flawed attempts to address it.

These pose lessons for the U.S. today. Inequality remains a core challenge in the

U.S. Once marked by strong social mobility, at least for white residents, it [has declined since the 1940s](#), initially due to the end of the post-war boom but now reflecting deeper systemic flaws. Compared to the EU, U.S. social welfare lags, while policies like corporate bailouts underscore how citizens bear the debt burden while large corporations profit from government intervention and lucrative contracts. A [culture of consumerism](#) encourages U.S. citizens to take on debt, [mirroring the problems of the Roman Republic](#), instead of building a more efficient economic system.

Though there are notable similarities between Republican Rome's challenges and those faced by the U.S., the latter faces its own unique set of issues. In Rome, the wealthy were directly involved in political life, using their influence to shape decisions. In contrast, U.S. elites exert control through representatives, who, while not typically from the uppermost of the wealthy social classes, are incentivized to serve their interests. This indirect control reduces the accountability of the elite, as their influence is masked by the modern U.S. political structure and hidden from public view. Though corrupt or inefficient politicians can be removed or prosecuted, those truly pulling the strings remain largely untouched, allowing the pay-to-play political system to continue unabated.

Rome's political processes grew opaque and less respected, a trend increasingly seen in contested U.S. elections in recent decades. While skepticism arose among Democrats after George W. Bush's controversial victory [in 2000](#) and Trump's [2016 win](#), these doubts remained within institutional boundaries. However, election denial escalated dramatically with [Trump's response to Joe Biden's 2020 victory](#), and the ensuing 2021 insurrection marked a major challenge to the peaceful transfer of power and trust in electoral integrity.

Restoring trust in the process requires clear rules on voting, role assignment, and transparency in procedures. Laws crafted through open processes rather than private deals are crucial, allowing citizens to view the electoral process and governance as fair, smooth, and rooted in mutual understanding.

However, the dangers of unrelenting public political engagement have become more pronounced. Modern technology enables 24/7 politicization, and constant campaigning distracts from governance and risks citizen burnout. Public apathy allows organized elites to dominate politics, and, [according to legal scholar Ganesh Sitaraman](#), expanding the electorate can even amplify factional power

since only well-resourced groups can effectively mobilize and strategize.

The U.S. judiciary remains distinct in its reliance on common law, a system shared by a few English-speaking countries, allowing adaptability through evolving precedents as new cases are brought forward. The use of juries places foundational responsibility on citizens' moral and legal judgment, ensuring public participation. However, this system [is increasingly vulnerable to politicization](#), as judicial appointments and voting processes for judges and other judicial/law enforcement positions risk undermining impartiality and fairness.

The Founding Fathers meanwhile opposed political parties, fearing factionalism would fracture national unity. Today, the two major parties and their supporters increasingly treat politics [as a sports rivalry](#), prioritizing spectacle over policy debate. Both parties leverage entertainment for engagement—Ronald Reagan became the first actor-president in 1981, followed by entertainer Trump in 2017, while Democrats have [consistently relied on the power of celebrity](#) to attract voters. This reliance on high-profile public figures allows citizens to disengage, as these amplified individuals are granted tacit approval to shape policy—even when they lack the expertise to do so—reducing the public's role in democratic governance to passive spectatorship.

Violent rhetoric undermines the culture of compromise essential to republics. While Trump is [commonly associated](#) with this trend in the U.S. (and remains its most persistent voice), [Democrats have also contributed](#). Political violence, once largely directed at major figures in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, [now increasingly threatens local officials as well](#).

Comments about the existential danger posed by political opponents have been consistently undercut by post-election embraces. President Obama [welcomed Trump to the White House](#) after the latter's election victory in 2016, [just as Biden did in 2024](#), while Trump also softened his tone toward them after victories. These radical shifts in messaging reveal the performative nature of politicians' language and weaken the credibility of political discourse.

A healthy republic resorts to war as a last option, relying on public support and deliberation. Yet although Congress holds the constitutional authority to declare war, it has not done so [since 1941](#). Instead, executive war powers have expanded through the abuse of emergency provisions, sidelining public influence in

decisions of war and peace. Numerous presidents have labeled major recent wars like Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan as mistakes, eroding trust in leadership to responsibly conduct war.

The Trump administration now faces the challenge of addressing immigration and undocumented populations. Past policies like Reagan's Amnesty Bill and Obama's executive action for so-called Dreamers caused friction and had far-reaching political consequences. Immigration was a [central issue in the 2024 election](#), with Trump likely to enjoy strong support for a crackdown on undocumented people.

Solutions, however, must go beyond piecemeal fixes or mass deportations, which risk violating human rights and republican ideals. Similarly, less draconian approaches, such as those pursued under Biden, also fail to resolve the core issues of immigration reform and enforcement. Rome offers a cautionary tale: patricians and plebeians showed rare unity in the Late Republic when they united against Gracchus after he [pledged to extend citizenship](#) rights to other populations. The issue demonstrates the need to widen responsibility. The U.S. economy [benefits from labor tied to undocumented populations](#), and the root causes of migration, including [decades of U.S. intervention in Latin America](#), must also be acknowledged.

The U.S. was originally founded as a republican league of states but quickly recognized the need for national unity to ensure defense and economic unity. Over time, the growing centralization of [authority in Washington](#) eroded the balance of this system and led to fears of ever-expanding executive power, particularly over matters of war. This consolidation of power enabled a more assertive and interventionist foreign policy, allowing the federal government to project power globally.

Yet U.S. states retain significant rights, functioning in a federated system with distributed powers that allow states to [experiment with their own agendas](#). The areas in which they can do so include health care reforms, voting rights, and working together to counterbalance federal authority.

American citizens also benefit from strong protections enshrined in the Bill of Rights, which, despite historical flaws in terms of racial and gender equity, established safeguards against government overreach. However, a hesitance to fully leverage these rights remains, partly due to ignorance. Rights intended to



benefit all citizens, such as the right to bear arms, or judicially determined issues like access to abortion, frequently evolve [into sources of contention](#), framed as victories for one side rather than universal benefits. This risks turning benefits into partisan battlegrounds, undermining their broader societal purpose. Many rights Americans enjoy were secured not by courts interpreting the Constitution but through legislative action driven by social movements, showing that the true source of rights lies within the collective efforts of citizens and lawmakers.

U.S. presidents have been generally unable to radically alter the nation's political system, though the Jacksonian era proves there are exceptions. Andrew Jackson's presidency (1829-1837), as well as the years immediately before and after, solidified the two-party system, expanded the use of veto power, and centralized executive authority, reshaping the role of the presidency. Jackson, a populist, challenged corrupt elites and the political establishment but also aggravated tensions between the federal and state governments. Democratic participation was broadened, but it was limited to white men, and resulted in officeholders being replaced with people loyal to individuals, with support for the continuity of slavery and the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans.

Concentrating authority away from the executive in a few oversight bodies or enlarged bureaucracy can also backfire, often encouraging corruption rather than transparency. For example, legislative reforms for campaign finance in the 1970s, intended to increase transparency, [inadvertently fueled an increase](#) in lobbying, attack ads, and exploitation of the electoral process. This shift, intended to curb corporate influence, instead deepened it, allowing corporations and interest groups to find new ways to wield power. The Founding Fathers, while focused on preventing tyranny through checks and balances, could not foresee the enormous role that corporate interests would play in shaping political outcomes, creating a system where legal monetary contributions increasingly dictate policy.

The U.S. faces a major struggle in adapting its republican system to the realities of the 21st century. While executive power has been pivotal in addressing monumental issues, such as the abolition of slavery, it also carries a risk of abuse. Efforts to forcefully reform republics from the top down, like those seen in Rome, often impose rigid systems that fail to meet society's evolving needs. On the other hand, an over-reliance on populist people power without the necessary safeguards can lead to impulsive decisions and destabilized governance.

Rejecting populism does not equate to diminishing civic engagement; rather, it calls for more sophisticated participation for constructive political processes. U.S. citizens retain significant power, including the right to gather, protest, and exercise free speech and association. Realizing the full potential of these rights and their responsible use requires a deeper understanding of the political system and a commitment to responsible use. This can be achieved by learning from other countries that cultivate republican values through education and habits from a young age, supported by public funding, and promoting political legitimacy through transparency and participation. Ignoring the need to address the decline in civic culture and public understanding of the system of government will further weaken the foundation of democratic practices.

Reforming the U.S. republic is essential, but institutions like the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), despite their efforts to bridge divides, have been [criticized for being compromised](#) by corporate interests, which exposes the system's vulnerability to such interference. Over time, bipartisanship has become entrenched as a long-term alignment in support of big-money interests and [an imperialist foreign policy](#), sidelining efforts for systemic change and diverging sharply from the best aspects of the early U.S. vision.

Contrastingly, the current discourse around reform is often filtered through partisan lenses, populism, or authoritarian impulses, with many advocating for quick fixes rather than substantive solutions. Meaningful reform, however, will be a slow and contentious process, and progress will remain elusive without addressing the root causes of major problems and accepting a collective responsibility to solve them.

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