# What Are Republics, Exactly? It’s A Good Time To Learn


*11-13-2024 ~ Republican ideals have evolved over millennia, shaping governance across the globe. Modern republics continue to adapt, but face challenges in upholding their foundational principles.*

The 2024 U.S. presidential election was framed as a crucial test for the nation’s political system, with ongoing concerns over oligarchy, mob rule, a breakdown of equal protection under the law, and the ultimate power of citizens to determine the fate of the nation.

Republics have suffered total collapses throughout history, and there’s no reason why the United States should be immune. The fear of that often prompts a superficial reference to the final fall of the Roman Republic or the end of Greek democracy.

But there’s a deeper history: Republics came into being far earlier in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations. And we can draw from a much wider range of examples to learn from as we try to understand the challenges and the opportunities.

A true republic is a political system without monarchy or concentrated political power in any office, branch, or individual. Elected officials represent citizens to make decisions on their behalf, with separate branches of government providing checks and balances. While many associate republics with direct democracy in our times, there’s a much wider array of power structures that developed in the formative era of republics.

The 20th century established republics as the global standard, with monarchies declining after World War I and most former European colonies declaring

independence as republics following World War II. Fascist and communist countries, which centralized power in individuals or ruling parties, also reduced in number.

Despite their concentration of power, however, many fascist and communist states claimed the title of republics, and while 149 countries out of 193 identify as republics today, far less uphold republican principles and blend them effectively with democracy. Examining the historical evolution of republics highlights those best positioned to serve as the most resilient modern examples.

Republics require regular gatherings and assemblies, making them difficult to establish in sparsely populated agrarian societies, while empires generally concentrate power too heavily for self-rule to gain traction. It was in smaller city-states, particularly trade-focused ones, where citizens could form factions, exchange ideas, and influence government decisions and rules for commerce.

Some of the earliest experiments with republican governance appeared in ancient Sumerian city-states (4500–2000 BC), centered in modern-day Iraq. Kings acted more as neutral arbitrators rather than rulers, sharing power with aristocratic families and groups, as well as common citizens. In Kish, citizens could appoint a new king during crises, while in Uruk, assemblies of townsmen and elders had to ratify major military decisions.

The Sumerian city-states fell to the Akkadian and Babylonian Empires by 1750 BC, but Phoenician city-states, emerging about 250 years later in what is now Lebanon, revived republican ideals. Here, monarchical power was often shared with a merchant class and citizen council. Egyptian records dating to the mid-14th century BC describe Phoenician cities sending delegates to represent citizens rather than monarchs, with mentions of alliances and aid requests by the "men of Arwad" and "elders of Irqata."

By the 6th century BC, the Phoenician city of Tyre had functioned for seven years without a monarch, governed instead under *suffetes*, or judges, elected for short terms. In Chios, a "people's council" allowed citizens to debate laws and hold officials accountable. However, beginning in the 9th century BC and continuing over the next few centuries, Phoenician city-states were successively conquered or subjugated by the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Macedonian Empires.

Like other civilizations, Phoenicians established colonies and trading posts.

Carthage, founded by Tyre in 814 BC in modern Tunisia, grew into a powerful city-state with its own republican features. By the early 7th century BC, two elected *suffetes* from aristocratic families replaced the monarchy. They governed alongside an aristocratic Senate, while newer merchants could gain influence and a popular assembly allowed citizens input on major decisions. Military and religious leaders also held considerable power.

Republican ideals weren't confined to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. Buddhist texts like the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta* mention Indian republics called Gana-Sanghas in the 6th century BC. Some adopted republican styles of government, while others formed republican confederations, like Sumerian and Phoenician city-states, to make decisions collectively and protect against larger threats. The Indian republics were gradually absorbed by the Maurya Empire (321–185 BC) and other entities.

Ancient Greek city-states also developed republican ideals. Sparta was governed by a constitution and popular assembly as early as 600 BC, though it remained largely monarchical. Athens established a direct democracy in 507 BC, known as *demokratia*, meaning "people" and "rule." Greece's slave-based economy allowed some citizens time to participate in politics, though this limited political fairness. In 431 BC, Attica, the region surrounding Athens, had an estimated population of 315,000, of which only 172,000 were citizens, and just 40,000 male citizens could vote.

Still, Athens's democratic system allowed these citizens to frequently debate, deliberate, and vote. They were overseen by the Council of Five Hundred, which was chosen annually by lot to draft laws and manage administration. However, following Athens's Golden Age, 4th century BC Greek critics like Plato and Aristotle, and later historians like Polybius in the 2nd century BC, criticized the system for inefficiency and vulnerability to charismatic leaders to sway public opinion, leading to volatile policy shifts.

They emphasized balancing public, aristocracy, and monarchical roles to avoid the typical political cycle of chaos and order: first, a strong leader unites a restive society under a monarchy, which evolves into tyranny. It is overthrown and replaced by an aristocracy, which reduces into oligarchy. Democracy eventually replaces it but deteriorates into mob rule, restarting the cycle.

Invasions further weakened Greece's republican and democratic systems, including in 338 BC, when Greece fell under the control of the Macedonian Empire, ending the independence of many city-states. Despite this, Greek states formed republican confederations to protect against threats, including the neighboring Roman Republic. The term *republic* derives from the Roman *res publica*, meaning "public affairs," emphasizing shared governance, civic participation, and checks and balances. Since its founding in 509 BC, the Roman Republic's political structure had evolved considerably. Polybius expressed appreciation for Rome's system, where two tribunes were elected annually to represent the common citizens, while two consuls were elected and held executive power, checked by an aristocratic senate.

Romans were skeptical of Greek democracy, especially in Athens, due to its instability, infighting, and mob rule. Carthage's republic seemed overly commercial and lacked the civic loyalty the Romans valued. This loyalty was central to Rome's military, staffed by a citizen army motivated by shared rewards. In contrast, Carthage's strong, citizen-led navy protected trade routes, but its reliance on mercenaries for land campaigns made them costly and unpredictable.

These factors reduced the ability to push back against Roman rule. By 146 BC, Rome defeated both Greece and Carthage, cementing its dominance and expanding political system. Polybius suggests that Rome's success over Carthage was partially due to its powerful, aristocratic Senate, while Carthage's policies were increasingly shaped by popular influence. He believed that Rome's decisions were made by elites versus the influence of the masses in Carthage.

Yet by this time, Rome was approaching its Late Republic phase. The scholar Harriet Flower's research argues that the Roman Republic wasn't a single entity but a series of six republics, each with unique political characteristics. Others have also challenged the notion of a single Roman Republic, placing Republican Rome into three main periods characterized by changing centers of power.

The Early Republic (509–367 BC) was marked by tensions between patricians (aristocratic elites) and plebeians (common citizens). The struggle for plebeian rights led to significant reforms, including the establishment of tribunes, elected by the *Concilium Plebis* to represent common interests, and often from the plebeian class.

During the Middle Republic (367–133 BC), the Licinian-Sextian laws of 367 BC were passed to again alleviate tensions between patricians and plebeians, limiting patrician land ownership, providing debt relief for plebeians, and ensuring that at least one of the two consuls was a plebeian. However, political power increasingly concentrated in the Senate, undermining these reforms.

During the Late Republic (133–31 BC), Rome's military success over rivals coincided with the growing influence of ordinary citizens in the judicial system, especially as jurors. Yet the republic was plagued by social conflict, corruption, and civil unrest. Sulla's march on Rome in 88 BC and his curtailing of the tribunes' power exemplified rising instability. After, figures like Pompey in the '70s BC and Julius Caesar in 59 BC began consolidating power, further undermining republican values. In 27 BC, Augustus formally transitioned Rome into an empire, while maintaining the illusion of republican traditions.

Roman orator Cicero, a prominent defender of the Republic, inadvertently accelerated its demise through his support for Augustus, endorsement of dictatorial powers, and willingness to suspend legal norms during crises, showing the dangers of sacrificing republican ideals to manage turmoil. For the next few centuries, republican ideals were largely sidelined.

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD saw feudalism and monarchies spread across its former territories and peripheral regions. This instability nonetheless allowed new republics to emerge, such as Venice, founded in 697 AD. It maintained a 1,100-year run as a republic through a political system that encouraged merchant participation and representation, shrewd diplomacy, social mobility, community cohesion, and an extensive trade network. It was eventually conquered by France in 1797.

During the Italian Renaissance (14th to 17th centuries), urbanization, advancements in communication, and Enlightenment ideals enabled the rise of new city-states. Merchant classes and other groups established republican systems as alternatives to European monarchies elsewhere as well. However, they were ultimately absorbed by empires, partly due to their inability to exploit the expanding Atlantic trade routes that reduced the importance of the Mediterranean.

Republics were not confined to Europe. The Kongsi Republics in modern-day

Malaysia, particularly the Lanfang Republic declared in 1777, arose when Chinese settlers recruited by local sultans for mining formed companies to safeguard their interests. Over time, they evolved into self-governing territories with elected leaders and various levels of democratic governance. The Lanfang Republic was eventually defeated by Dutch colonial forces in 1884, with the rest absorbed through treaty or militarily defeated by the century's end.

The establishment of the United States marked the reemergence of the large-scale republican state. In 1787, after the Revolutionary War, the U.S. formally became a constitutional republic, aiming to eliminate monarchy while avoiding a chaotic direct democracy. The Founding Fathers created a mixed system, balancing public participation with safeguards against aristocracy and emphasizing consent of the governed (though limited to white male landowners). The debates over constitutional amendments and expanding democracy continued for decades, paralleling similar discussions in post-Revolutionary France after 1789.

Today, many republics exist, but their authenticity and stability can be compromised. Being conquered imposes outside authority, while others pursue foreign expansion themselves, centralizing control and subjugating other territories. Republics such as those in 16th century Netherlands, 17th century England, and 18th century U.S. and France grew into empires or reverted to monarchies, adapting in ways whose lessons are still relevant today. These expansionist policies, often justified as essential for wealth and security, led to the abandonment of certain republican and democratic principles.

Republics can also shift toward authoritarianism, with modern policymakers perceiving more open democratic systems as unstable and vulnerable to manipulation. In recent years, China and Russia have seen reductions in public accountability, civil liberties, meaningful political participation, and concentrations of power behind Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. In North Korea, power has been concentrated in the leader's office since its founding, with leadership passed within the Kim family. Similarly, a dynasty has developed under the Aliyev family in Azerbaijan since the 1990s, with concerns that Turkmenistan may follow.

Countries with strong presidential systems, common in the Americas, risk concentrating power in the executive branch. Fixed terms limit the removal of

unpopular leaders, since, unlike in parliamentary democracies, no "confidence vote" mechanism exists for crisis situations. Partisan loyalty can also weaken checks and balances, and coups can be common.

Alliances and federations of Greek city-states like the Achaean and Lycian Leagues, as well as the Native American Iroquois Confederacy, formed assemblies and councils for representation and collective decision-making, influencing models like the U.S. Constitution and European Union (EU). The statement that the U.S. is "a republic, not a democracy" reflects the original aim to keep political power within the states rather than the federal government. However, authority has increasingly centralized in Washington, D.C., reducing state sovereignty, tensions mirrored in the EU between individual states and Brussels.

Political apathy and extremism can also stem from the influence of billionaires and corporations over the political process, government corruption, and the erosion of social mobility. Social media platforms offer the chance for heightened political participation, but are increasingly vulnerable to disinformation spread by big tech and political actors, revealing new ways in which democracies can veer toward mob rule.

The diversity of republics today reflects their historical variety, with countries still navigating the governance structures in their own contexts. Kazakhstan, initially authoritarian, has seen some shift toward a more balanced system with a more powerful parliament following popular protests in 2022, though it remains less democratic. Similarly, Singapore, often described as authoritarian, is still considered a republic due to some checks and balances, maintaining a blend of controlled leadership and political structure.

An informed and engaged citizenry, supported by a strong economic base, is essential for a successful republic. Citizens must feel the benefits of their system, and these must endure through fair elections, the rule of law, and due process. Effective foreign policy also relies on wide-ranging trade networks and adaptable alliances, while maintaining a strong military and avoiding military overreach or falling into the trap of foreign conquest.

Historically, empire and monarchy have been more common than republics, shaping world order through hierarchical and anarchic systems. Within the global UN framework, which is designed to support the sovereignty and equality of

nations (a principle rooted in republican ideals), republics can govern more democratically by collaborating in a way similar to ancient confederations. The Achaean League and Lycian League consisted of states with varying political systems cooperating within a loose, republican-style confederation. Modern blocs like the EU, ASEAN, and African Union allow countries to work together under common principles and boost their voice in the international system.

Changes in domestic politics have meanwhile seen the growth of direct democracy in the 2010s, as more referendums and popular votes of legislative and constitutional issues emerged globally, but especially in Europe. While larger republics like the U.S., Germany, and India still avoid national-level votes on major issues, direct democracy is increasingly apparent at regional and local levels. Challenges remain in terms of deliberation and integration, as states like California and Arizona have seen ballot initiatives often rushed, leaving limited time for meaningful debate.

Modern citizens' assemblies, based on those originating thousands of years ago, have also elevated these referendums in recent years and provided an alternative to traditional political processes. They have influenced major policy changes, such as climate policies in France to abortion laws in Ireland, with assemblies, typically convened by legislative bodies in partnership with nonprofits, designed to reflect demographics. While they have led to concrete policy shifts, some recommendations have not been adopted, with lawmakers citing the importance of expert-led decision-making.

With the U.S. election behind us, reassessing republican ideals, both domestically and globally, is crucial. As the GOP potentially gains control over all three branches of government in a divided nation, how it implements policies will either ease concerns or amplify them. The future of republicanism depends on the U.S. shaping its domestic agenda for the common good and using its influence on the global stage in line with democratic principles.

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