

What Did the Founders Learn about Republican Government from the Ancient World?

Purpose of Lesson

In this lesson you learn how the Founders were influenced by the ideas of classical republicanism: the importance of the Roman Republic and the moral ideal of civic virtue. You examine how these ideas shaped their thinking about what kind of government they wanted to create for the United States.

When you finish the lesson, you should understand not only the principles of classical republicanism but the difficulties the Founders encountered in attempting to apply those principles to the new American nation. You also should understand how classical republicanism differed from the natural rights philosophy in its account of human nature and individual rights. You should be able to explain how James Madison was able to adapt the ideas of classical republicanism, democracy, and civic virtue to American circumstances.

Terms to Know

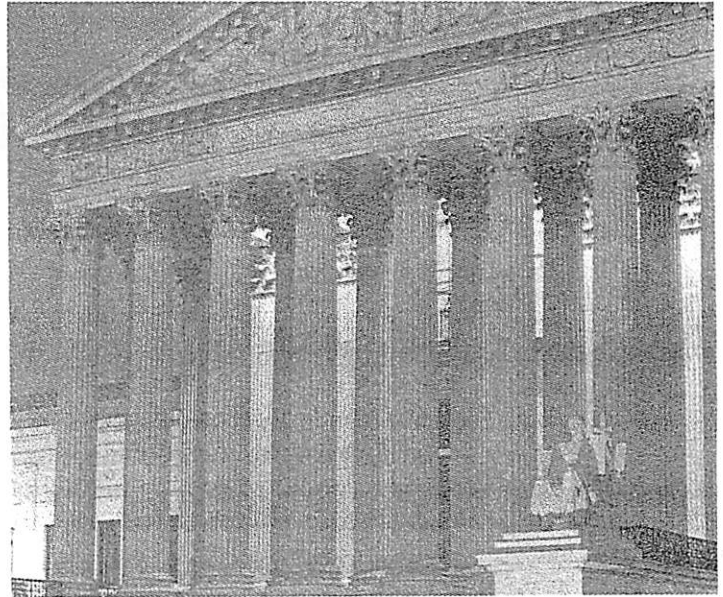
civic virtue	established religion
classical republicanism	factions
common good	representative democracy

What ideas about government did the Founders find in classical republicanism?

Most of the public buildings and monuments in Washington, D.C., and state capitols across the nation are built in the "classical" style. This architectural tradition symbolizes our nation's indebtedness to the world of ancient Greece and Rome, especially to their ideas about government.

The Founders had studied the history of the classical periods of ancient Greece and Rome. The society that had the greatest influence on their ideas was that of the Roman Republic, which lasted for almost 500 years—509 B.C. to 27 B.C. Many philosophers and historians believed the Roman Republic had provided Roman citizens with the most liberty under government that the world had ever known. It also was believed widely that the Roman Republic promoted the common

good, that is, what was best for the entire society. The theory based on this form of society became known as **classical republicanism**.

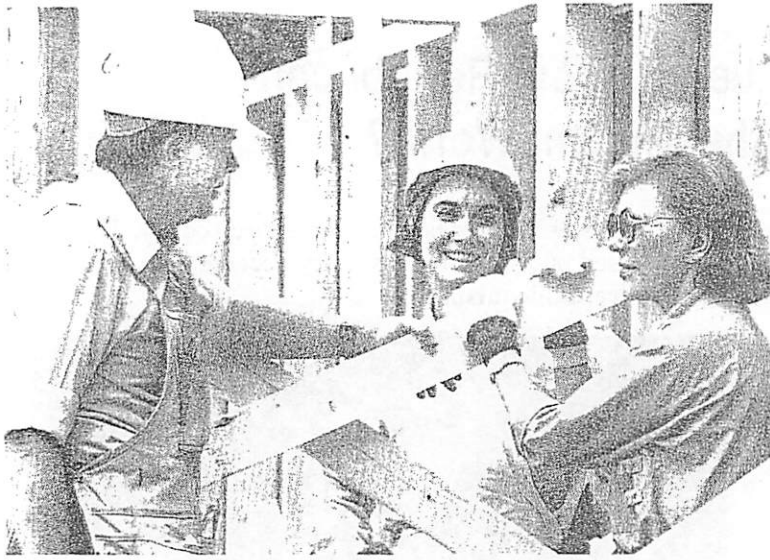


How does the architectural style of some government buildings symbolize the influence of ancient Greece and Rome on the Founders?

Classical republicanism is a theory that the best kind of society is one that promotes the common good instead of the interests of only one class of citizens. In a classical republic, citizens and their government are supposed to work cooperatively to achieve the common good rather than their own personal or selfish interests. The Roman Republic was thought to be one of the best examples of this type of society. Americans in the eighteenth century shared the view that citizens should work to promote the common good. They also believed that the type of government and society most likely to promote the common good was only possible if the society and its citizens shared the following characteristics:

- Civic virtue
- Moral education
- Small, uniform communities

Civic virtue. The classical republics demanded that their citizens have a high degree of civic virtue. A person with civic virtue was one who set aside personal interests to promote the common good. Today we might describe this as "public spiritedness."



President Jimmy Carter and wife Roslyn join 100 volunteers to construct low income housing.

Do all Americans have an obligation to practice civic virtue? Why?

Citizens were expected to participate fully in their government to promote the common good. They were not to be left free to devote themselves only to their personal interests. They were discouraged from spending much time doing such things as making money or caring for their families. They also were discouraged from traveling or reading and thinking about things that had nothing to do with their government. If citizens had the freedom to do such things, it was feared, they might stop being reliable and fully dedicated to the common good.

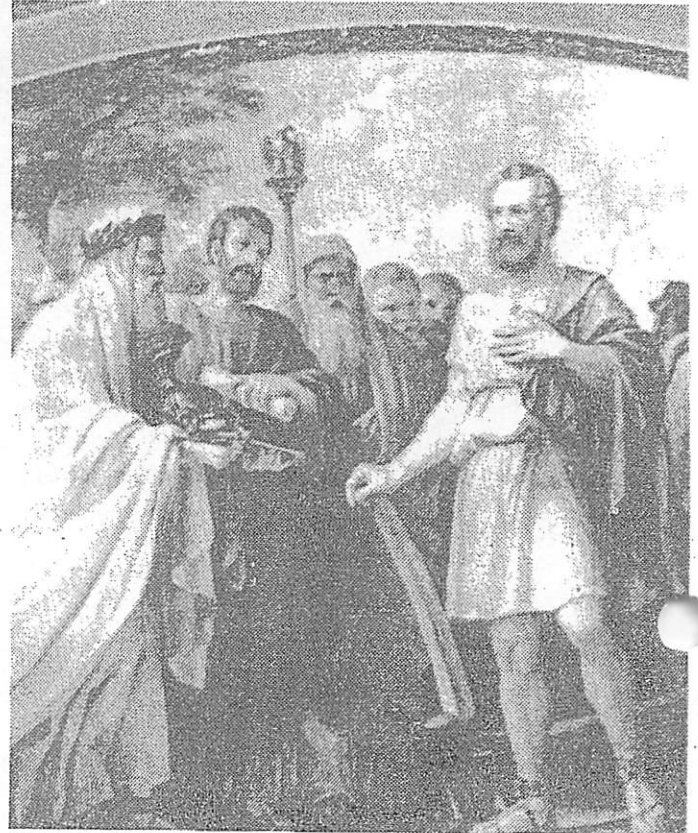
To make sure citizens participated in their government, the classical republics often drastically limited individual rights. There was little concern with protecting an individual's privacy, freedom of conscience or religion, or nonpolitical speech or expression.

Certain rights, however, were necessary for citizens to participate in governing themselves. These were political rights, such as the right to vote, to express ideas and opinions about government, and to serve in public office.

Moral education. People who believed in classical republicanism were convinced that civic virtue is not something that comes automatically to people. Citizens must be taught to be virtuous by moral education based on a civic religion consisting of gods, goddesses, and their rituals.

Classical republicans believed that young citizens must be raised in a manner that develops the right habits. They should learn to admire the people with civic virtue described in literature, poetry, and music. The Founders themselves admired such heroes of antiquity as the Roman patriot and orator Cato and the citizen soldier Cincinnatus. The Founders believed they were examples

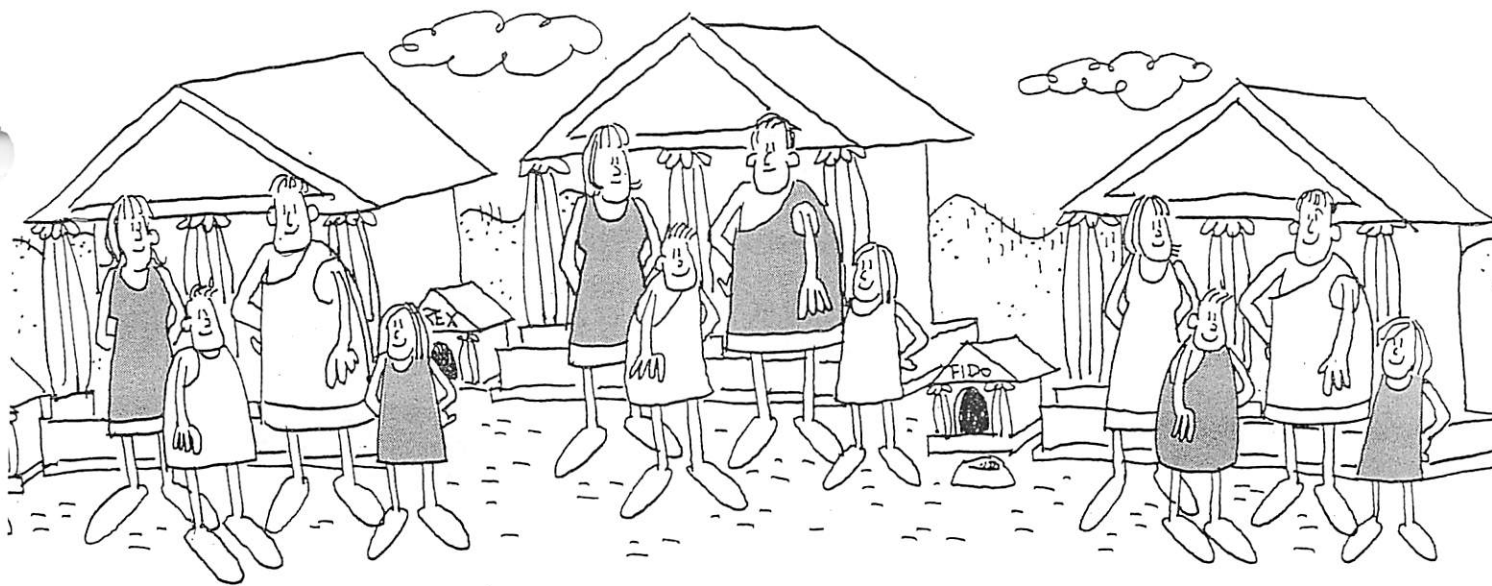
of civic virtue whom Americans should emulate. His fellow Americans admired George Washington as a modern-day Cincinnatus because he sacrificed his private pursuits in order to lead the nation in war and peace. George Washington was often called "our Cincinnatus" because his fellow citizens believed he was an example of the civic virtue that all citizens should possess.



Is civic virtue as important in America today as it was in ancient Rome? Why? Why not?

According to classical republicans, children, as well as adults, should be encouraged—partly by the belief in a watchful god or gods—to practice virtues, such as generosity, courage, self-control, and fairness. They should learn the importance of taking part in political debate and military service. The whole community must closely supervise the upbringing of the next generation of citizens and be attentive to how individuals behave in their daily lives.

Small, uniform communities. Classical republicans believed that a republican government would only work in a small community. A small community is necessary if people are to know and care for each other and their common good. In addition, the people must be very much alike. A great degree of diversity should not be tolerated. They did not believe, for example, that people should be very different in their wealth, religious or moral beliefs, or ways of life.



Why did classical republicans believe that republican government could only work in small, uniform communities?

Classical republicans believed that if people differed greatly, they would divide into **factions** or interest groups, rather than work together for the common good. To prevent this, citizens should be encouraged, by education and example, to avoid the development of great differences in their ownership of property, religion, and way of life. To prevent diversity in religious beliefs and lifestyles, they believed the community should have one official, **established religion** and one set of family and moral standards to which all must conform.

Great inequalities of wealth led inevitably to corruption as well as to factions or interest groups. Individuals would be more concerned with their own interest rather than the interest of the community. Their fear of great economic inequality and the corrupting effect of luxury led the classical republicans to be wary of money-making and economic growth. Such economic growth, they thought, gave rise to the great economic inequality which was inconsistent with the goals of republicanism.

What do you think?

1. Identify someone living today who you think shows civic virtue. Explain the reason for your choice.
2. What did classical republicans think should be the goal of education? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What civic virtues are important for young people to have today and why?
4. What similarities and differences are there between your ideas about rights and those of the classical world?

Critical Thinking Exercise

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE NATURAL RIGHTS PHILOSOPHY AND CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM

You may work individually, with a study partner, or in small groups to develop responses to the following questions. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

1. The classical republican idea of civic virtue conflicted with the Founders' belief in natural rights and their understanding of human nature as defined by John Locke. Create a chart, similar to the example below, that illustrates the differences between natural rights and classical republicanism. In completing your chart, you may need to review some of the ideas presented in Lesson 1.

Natural Rights Philosophy	Classical Republicanism
1. Stressed the rights of the individual to life, liberty, and property	1. Stressed promoting the common good above the rights of the individual
2.	2.
3.	3.

2. Suppose you were among the Founders chosen to participate in drafting a constitution. How might you reconcile these differences between natural rights and classical republicanism? Which ideas would you choose to emphasize? Why?

3. What problems might you encounter in transferring some of the ideas of classical republicanism to American society? How might you solve these problems?

How did the Founders think a government should be organized to promote the common good?

In addition to the example of the ancient Roman Republic, the Founders also learned about republican government from writers of their own time. One of the most important of these was the Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), a French writer who was widely admired by Americans.

Montesquieu advocated a system that **divided and balanced** the power of government among the classes. This, he believed, was the best way to ensure that the government would not be dominated by a single social class and would be able to enhance the common good.

He admired the Roman Republic as a representative government that combined elements of three basic types



Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755)
What important contribution did Montesquieu make to the Founders' ideas about government?

of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Since all classes shared power, this type of government seemed best for serving the common good.

Even though Britain was a monarchy, Montesquieu admired the British constitution. He believed it embodied the idea of a **mixed government**, in which power was divided among different classes in British society.

What were some problems in transferring the ideas of classical republicanism to eighteenth-century America?

In some respects, the Founders were uncritical admirers of the ancient world, most especially the Roman Republic. They were inclined to exaggerate the degree to which these states represented the interests of the whole community rather than just the interests of the upper classes. They also overlooked the fact that the ancient republics depended on the institution of slavery. Their admiration for classical republicanism was based on a somewhat idealized version of antiquity.

The Founders were aware of the difficulty in transplanting ideals of classical republicanism to the newly independent American states. They differed concerning the degree to which these ideals could be adopted. The classical republicanism of the ancient world only flourished in small, uniform communities.

The following expectations of classical republicanism posed several problems for the founders of the new American nation:

- caring for each other and the common good in small communities
- believing that people must be very much alike
- supervising citizens to avoid the development of great differences among them in their ownership of property, religion, and way of life
- believing that great economic inequality is destructive of the common good
- having one official “established” religion and one set of family and moral standards which everyone would follow

How was a political ideal based on small, tightly knit communities to be applied to a new country as large as the young United States which represented people of different cultural backgrounds, economic conditions, and religious beliefs?

The classical republican idea of civic virtue conflicted with the Founders' belief in natural rights and with their understanding of human nature as defined by Locke and the other natural rights philosophers. The natural rights philosophy considered the rights of the individual to be primary in importance. The state existed to serve the interests of the individual, instead of the other way around. In classical republicanism, the rights of the community as a whole came first.

Americans of the founding era seemed more representative of human nature as described by the natural rights philosophers than the ideal expected by the civic virtue of the classical republicanism. They and their ancestors had come to the new land to take advantage of the opportunities it offered. Such restless, diverse, and ambitious people were ill-suited for the ideals of self-sacrifice and conformity of classical republicanism.

How did James Madison refine the ideas of classical republicanism?

James Madison was one of the most important Founders responsible for creating the U.S. Constitution. He has been called "the Father of the Constitution." He was very influential in translating the ideas of classical republicanism in such a way as to make them practical in the new American republic.

Madison defined the difference between democracies and republics in the following way:

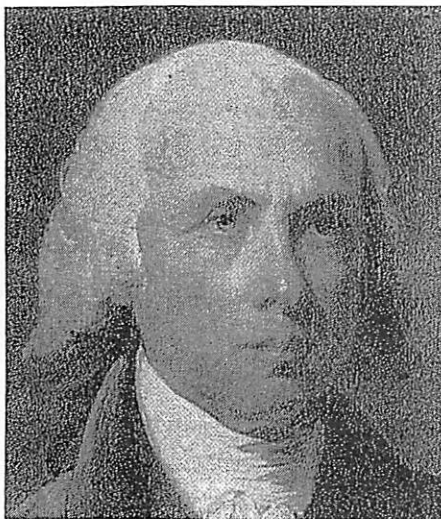
- In a democracy, the people administer the government themselves. These "direct democracies" must be confined to small communities like the ancient city-states of Greece.

- In a republic, the people's representatives administer the government, allowing it to be extended over a much larger area.

Madison believed, therefore, that America could and should have a republican form of government. Laws would be made and administered by representatives elected by the people. Madison also accepted certain principles of democracy. He insisted that members of government should be elected by a large number of the people, rather than by a small number or a specially favored group. Such a form of government was a democracy in the sense that it derived its authority—its right to govern—from the people as a whole. Madison's new definition of a republican government, therefore, also could be defined as a **representative democracy**. In this way the two classical ideas of republic and democracy were adapted to the new form of government created by the Founders.

How did the Founders adapt the ideal of civic virtue to the American republic?

Like the other Founders, Madison understood the importance of informed and public-spirited citizens to this new government. He had to modify the classic definition of civic virtue to make it practical in the very different conditions of America. He accepted the natural rights philosophers' view of human nature—people were motivated primarily by self-interest. He believed that the pursuit of self-interest could in its own way further the common good. For example, a statesman's desire for fame and admiration from others would lead him to practice civic virtue. The common good could be served by each individual pursuing his or her economic self-interest. Each would contribute to the general prosperity.



James Madison (1751–1836)
*Why did James Madison favor a constitution
that limited the power of government?*

Madison also realized that as people pursue their own interests they sometimes act against the interests of others and against the common good. Any sound government had to make allowances for this. As Madison said, if all people were angels, there would be no need for government. He argued for a government that would encourage people to act as good republican citizens possessing the quality of civic virtue. At the same time, this government would guard against the consequences if they did not. This is why Madison favored a constitution that limited government by the following methods:

- separation of powers
- a system of checks and balances

The American adaptation of the principles of classical republicanism was, then, a sort of compromise. The Founders created a form of government they called **republican**, even though it was different from the models of republicanism in the ancient world.

They believed that it was important for citizens to possess civic virtue. Civic virtue could not always be relied upon, however. Therefore, the proper structure provided by a system of representation with separation of powers and checks and balances also was necessary to protect the common good.

What do you think?

1. Under a republican form of government, if elected officials hold views of the common good contrary to those of their constituents, what do you think the officials should do? Why?

2. Should a member of Congress vote against anti-smoking legislation intended to protect the health of the general population if it would hurt the economy of his or her state and put people out of work in that state?
3. To what extent do you think the common good in today's American society depends on the classical republican ideal of civic virtue and to what extent on the natural rights philosophy idea of each individual pursuing his or her own self-interest? Cite examples to support your case.

Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. What is meant by "the common good"? Give an example of a rule or law that you think promotes the common good.
2. What is meant by the term "civic virtue"? Give an example of a situation in which someone is expected to show civic virtue.
3. What did classical republicans believe the purpose of government should be? What essential characteristics should a society and its citizens possess in order for a classical republican form of government to work? Why would these characteristics be important? How could these characteristics be established or maintained?
4. Why might small, uniform communities be more likely to foster civic virtue than large, diverse communities?
5. How would you describe the differences between the natural rights philosophy and classical republicanism?
6. How did James Madison adapt the ideals of classical republicanism to the large, diverse group of colonies that became the United States? How did he try to compensate or make up for the possible lack of civic virtue in the people?
7. What is the difference between a democracy and a republic? What aspects of the government of the United States suggest it is a democracy? What aspects suggest it is a republic?
8. Do research to find out more about the political philosophy of Baron de Montesquieu. What did he admire about mixed governments? What influence did his ideas have on the Founders?