

Elections

State officials were elected in two legislative assemblies. Candidates for the less important offices were elected by the Comitia Populi Tributa, organised on the basis of tribal affiliation, while those for the important offices were elected by the Comitia Centuriata, the century assembly.

01

Elections

Out with the king, in with the Republic

Although the Romans were determined to never tolerate a king in power again, the form of government which they had created with the establishment of the Roman Republic was still far from our modern-day understanding of a democratic system.



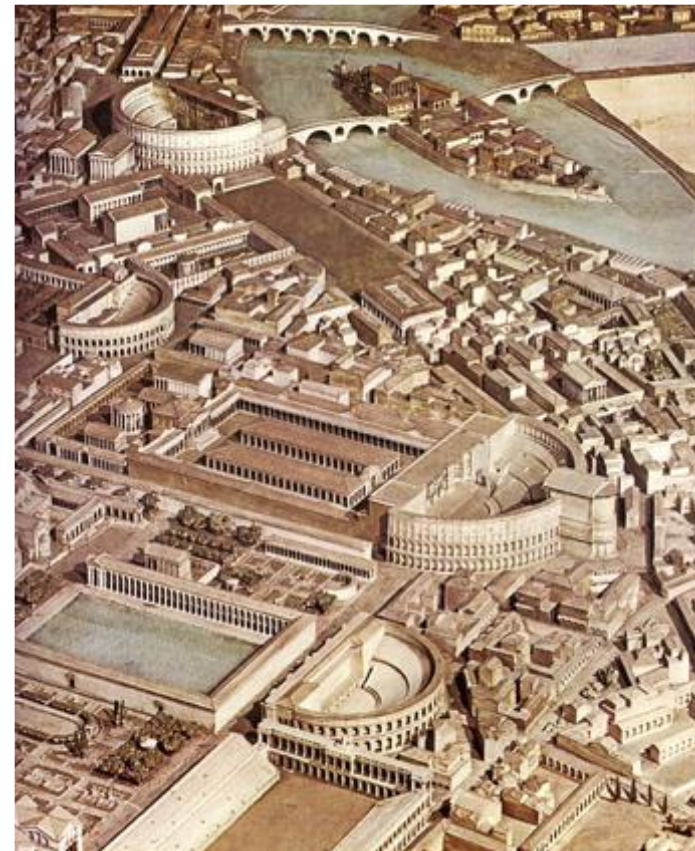
Tarquinius Superbus proclaims himself king. Caricature by John Leech, from 'The Comic History of Rome' by Gilbert Abbott à Beckett, around 1850. Source: Wikicommons.

03

Elections

The voice(s) of the people

Legislative power in the Roman Republic was formally divided among three assemblies: Comitia Centuriata, Comitia Tributa and Concilium Plebis. The most influential assembly was the Comitia Centuriata, modelled on the organisational structure of the military. This assembly elected the Republic's highest-ranking magistrates, decided over war and peace and had the power to pass laws. Due to the assembly's military origins, elections were held on the Campus Martius.



Model reconstruction of the Western part of Campus Martius. Source: Wikicommons.

04

Elections

Before the vote

The Comitia Centuriata could neither file petitions, nor propose laws. This right remained a privilege of the magistrates, who informed the population about the topics of the upcoming vote on public notices. Prior to the vote, these issues were debated at a contio. Once the voting had begun, discussions of or amendments to the contents of the law became impossible. Since the lex Papiria had been decreed in 131 BC, the secret ballot was the standard voting system.



Photo: Wikicommons / Ceridwen /
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/fr/deed.en>

05

Elections

Elections – A rare coin theme

What exactly happened at the elections is shown on this coin: Divided into electoral bodies, citizens were called up individually to step onto a bridge. They then received a ballot, which they cast into a voting box at the end of the bridge.



Denarius of P. Licinius Nerva, 113/2. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Citizen crossing the electoral bridge.

06

Elections

Yet another people's assembly

The Comitia Populi Tributa, the tribal assembly, elected the lower-ranking ('plebeian') magistrates. The assembly was constituted by tribes from 31 rural districts as well as the four urban tribes Subura, Esquilina, Palatina and Collina, whose names were derived from Rome's eponymous hills.



Map of the Seven Hills of Rome. Source: Wikicommons / Burny /

07

Elections

Democracy for everyone (?)

Each Roman citizen belonged to one of those tribes, each of which had exactly one vote in elections. Due to the difference in population density between the very densely settled urban areas and the much less densely populated rural areas, however, rural tribes carried more weight in political decisions. In order to cast their votes, citizens had to travel to Rome personally. As many poorer peasants could not afford the trip to the capital, the de facto influence of the more affluent citizens in the surrounding rural districts was disproportionately great.



Altglienicke, farmer with pig. Photo: Wikicommons / Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-23906-0001 / Quaschinsky, Hans-Günter / CC-BY-SA / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.de>

08

Elections

The rich vote first

In the Comitia Centuriata, just like in the Comitia populi tributa, more money equalled more power. In the century assembly, the 18 cavalry centuries, which among them had the wealthiest Roman citizens, enjoyed overwhelming influence. Rome's highest offices were usually assumed by candidates from within their ranks. They were the first allowed to cast their votes.



Roman cavalier, re-enactment at the Roman Army Tactics at Scarborough Castle/ UK. Photo: Wikicommons / Dorieo21/David Friel / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>

09

Elections

Are we done yet?

The group next in line was the wealthy first class infantry. A majority could already be reached after this group had cast its vote. And once a majority had been reached, a continuation of the vote was considered unnecessary. Accordingly, the vote of the common people was often inconsequential.



Re-enactment: Attacking Roman soldiers, around AD 70. Re-enactment of the 'Legio XV' in Pram, Austria. Photo: Wikicommons / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

10

Elections

Judge Merciless

Every citizen eligible to vote received two tablets, one to express his consent, the other to express rejection. This coin depicts such a tablet with the inscription *vti rogas*. It makes reference to the election of Judge Lucius Cassius Longinus Ravilla. In 113 BC, he made use of the powers invested in him by the people who had elected him: Three vestal virgins had been accused of unchastity, which the Romans interpreted as a sign of bad luck and the reason for their defeat in two decisive battles. As if that hadn't been enough, Ravilla thought it necessary to impose the deadly penalty of immurement upon the three women.



Denarius of L. Cassius Longinus, 63. Obverse: Vesta. Reverse: Citizen with voting tablets in front of a voting box.

11

Elections

But didn't the common people have a say at all?

As long as the wealthy agreed on any legislative matter, be it in the Comitia Centuriata or the Comitia Tributa, the common people simply did not have a say. A commoner may have believed that his vote was of importance when he cast the tablet into the voting box – in fact though, his influence was almost negligible.



Litter bin as voting box, seen in Munich-Schwabing, 2008. Photo: Wikicommons / Mattes / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.de>