

## The Struggle for Political Power in Ancient Rome

Between 616 and 509 B.C.E., Etruscan (pronounced eh-TRUSS-ken) kings from northern Italy ruled the city of Rome. During this time, Roman society came to be divided into two classes of citizens by birth. The upper class was a small group of wealthy landowners who believed their ancestors had been the first to settle in Rome. They were called *patricians* (pronounced puh-TREE-shenz)—from the Latin word *patres*, which means *father*—because they chose the “fathers of the state,” or the officials who advised the king. Patricians claimed to have noble status in Roman society because they controlled the most valuable land and held key military and religious offices. The lower class of Roman citizens were called *plebeians* (pronounced pleh-BEE-inz)—from the Latin word *plebs*, which means *many*. Plebeians, who made up about 95 percent of the population, were mostly peasants, laborers, artisans, and shopkeepers. They had far fewer privileges than patricians and had very little say in government matters. Nonetheless, plebeians were required to pay taxes and serve in the Roman army.

Over time, patricians began to resent Etruscan rule and to demand more political power in the government. In 509 B.C.E. they led a rebellion against the Etruscan monarchy, and overthrew the last king, Tarquinius Superbus (pronounced tar-KWIN-ee-uss soo-PER-buss), also known as Tarquinius the Proud. Patricians then established a new form of government, known as a *republic*, whose primary purpose was to serve the people. The word *republic* is derived from the Latin term *res publica*, which translates as “the affairs of the people.” They also divided the state’s power to prevent any single person from abusing it. Instead of a king, a body of 300 men, called the *Senate*, was elected to run the country. Senators served for life and were expected to make laws, appoint officials, and serve as judges. The Senate also selected two leaders, or *Consuls*, to command the army and run the day-to-day affairs of Rome.



Conflict between patricians and plebeians in the Roman Republic

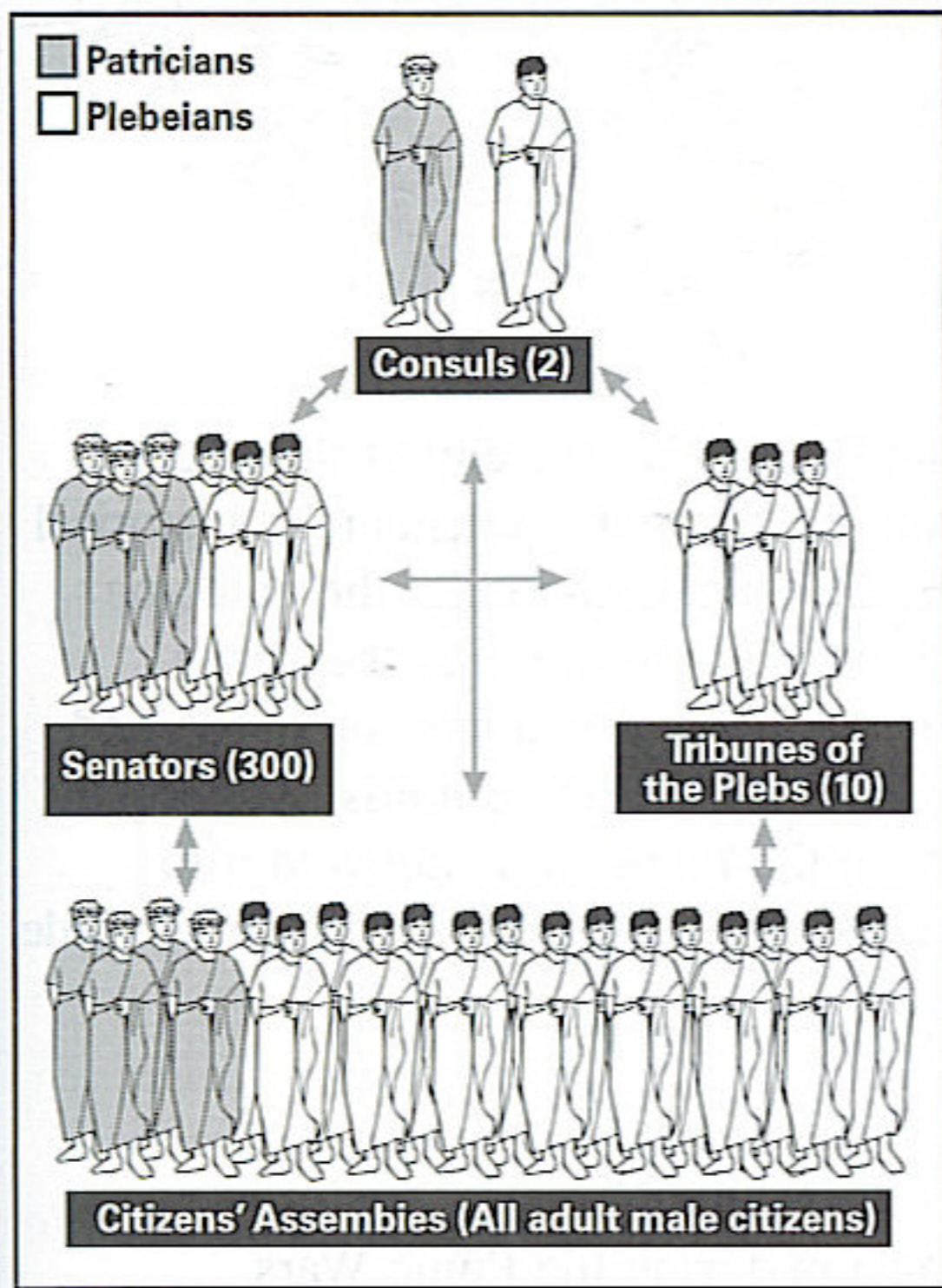
Although Roman society was more democratic under the Republic than it had been under the Etruscan monarchy, it was controlled almost completely by patricians. Only patricians were allowed to become consuls and senators. Moreover, since laws were not written down anywhere, patricians often changed and interpreted them to serve their own interests. This meant that patricians, who made up only 5 percent of the population, held most of the political power in Rome. As a result, a struggle known as the *Conflict of the Orders* began, in which plebeians demanded more political rights for themselves.

The conflict between patricians and plebeians became particularly intense during times of war. Plebeians resented having to serve in the military and to pay heavy taxes, while patricians denied them any

decision-making power in the government. They wanted to create an assembly of their own that would protect their rights and interests. In 494 B.C.E. the plebeians took a dramatic action:

they moved away from Rome and refused to work or serve in the military unless their demands were met. Livy, a famous Roman historian, wrote the following description of the state of Rome after the plebeians had left the city: “There was great panic in the city, and through mutual fear, all was suspense. The people left in the city dreaded [feared] the violence of the senators; the senators dreaded the people remaining in the city, uncertain whether they should prefer to stay or to depart; but how long would the multitude [crowd] which had seceded [left] remain quiet? What were to be consequences then, if, in the meantime, any foreign war should break out?”

The patricians, who heavily relied on the plebeians for military service, became alarmed. They realized that the welfare of the Republic depended on the plebeians’ return, and they decided to make a compromise. They allowed the plebeians to elect 10 officials, called *Tribunes of the Plebs*, to represent plebeian interests to the Senate. These officials protected plebeians’ rights by saying “veto,” which means “I forbid,” to any law they felt was unjust to plebeians. In addition, they created the *Council of Plebs*, which was made up of elected plebeians. The Council could pass laws that affected all Roman plebeians, but not patricians.



Structure of the Roman government in 287 B.C.E.

Over the next 200 years, plebeians used a series of protests to gain important political rights in the Roman Republic. First, they demanded that the laws be written down so patricians could no longer change them at will. In the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., the patricians chose 10 officials to standardize the laws and put them in writing. The resulting code of law, which was set up in public on 12 wooden tablets, became known as *The Twelve Tables*. Second, plebeians sought greater power in the government. Because of their demands, a law was passed in 367 B.C.E. requiring that one of the two consuls be a plebeian. In addition, since ex-consuls often held seats in the Senate, this law made it possible for plebeians to become senators. Finally, in 287 B.C.E., the Council of Plebs, which was later incorporated into the Citizens’ Assemblies, gained the right to pass laws that affected the entire society, instead of just the plebeians.

As the political rights of the plebeians increased over the years, the Roman Republic became a more democratic form of government. The interests of both patricians and plebeians came to be represented in each branch of government. The power of each branch of government was also balanced by the actions of the other branches. The Citizens’ Assemblies, which was made up of all adult Roman male citizens, nominated the consuls, members of the Senate, and the tribunes of the Plebs. The senators and the tribunes advised the consuls and were able to pass and veto laws. Their powers were kept in check by the Assembly, which was allowed to approve or reject new laws.