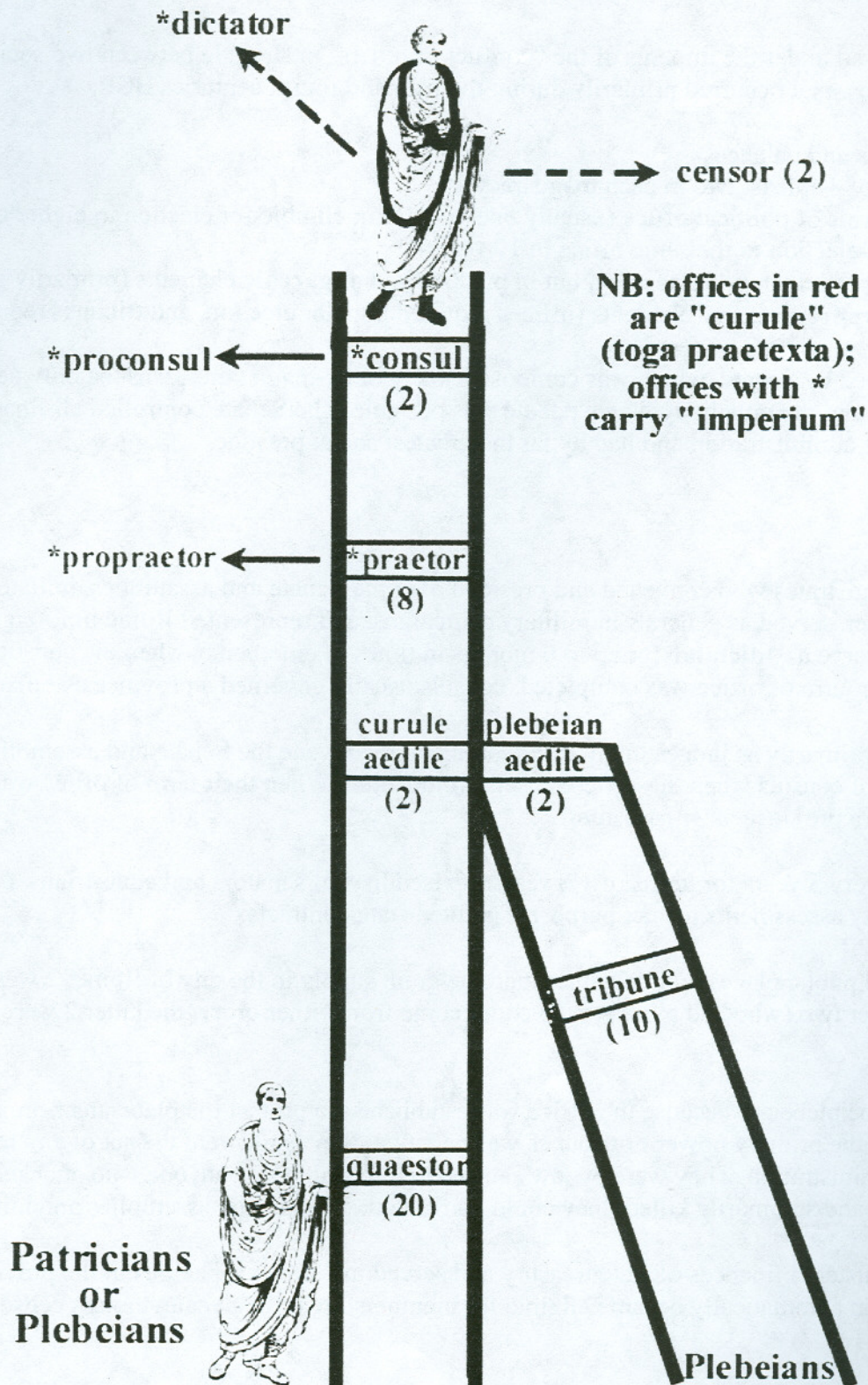


ROMAN CURSUS HONORUM



NB: This diagram shows the ladder of political advancement (*cursus honorum*) during the late Republic. Red text designates "curule magistrates," who had the right to sit on a special ivory folding stool (*sella curulis*) as a symbol of their office; they also had the right to wear the purple-bordered toga (*toga praetexta*). Offices marked with an asterisk carried *imperium*, the highest political authority, which included the right to command an army, to interpret and carry out the law, and to pass sentences of death. Magistrates whose title began with "pro" were in charge of

provinces; the Senate normally conferred these after the men had finished their term of office in Rome. The more important provinces, especially those requiring large military forces, were assigned to ex-consuls, while the less significant provinces were governed by ex-praetors.

Principles of Structure:

These principles evolved under the impetus of the “conflict of orders,” a struggle between two social classes, the patricians and plebeians, that occurred primarily during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

- system of checks and balances
 - collegiality—at least two in each magistracy
 - limited terms of political office (usually one-year term; eligible for election to higher office in 2-3 years and for re-election to the same office in 10 years)
- in theory was a participatory democracy, but in practice had **oligarchic** elements (primarily governed by an elite class) and **representative** elements (offices required popular election, and tribunes represented a plebeian constituency)
- crucial role played by Senate, which was composed solely of ex-magistrates, was the only permanent governing body and the only body where debate was possible. The Senate controlled all finances, foreign affairs, and state administration and had by far the greatest social prestige.

Magistrates:

2 *consuls—chief magistrates who convened and presided over the Senate and assemblies, initiated and administered legislation, served as generals in military campaigns, and represented Rome in foreign affairs. Consuls could appoint and/or serve as *dictator for up to 6 months in times of emergency when the constitution was suspended. When their term of office was completed, consuls usually governed a province as *proconsul.

8 *praetors—served primarily as judges in law courts, but could convene the Senate and assemblies; they assumed administrative duties of consuls when these were absent from Rome. When their term of office was completed, praetors might govern a province as *propraetor.

2 censors—elected every 5 years for terms of 1½ years; revised lists of senators and equestrians; conducted census of citizens and property assessments for tax purposes; granted state contracts.

4 aediles—supervised public places, public games, and the grain supply in the city of Rome; 2 were required to be plebeians, and the other two (who had more status) could come from either order; the latter 2 were called curule aediles.

10 tribunes—had to be plebeian, because the office was established to protect the plebeians from arbitrary actions of magistrates. Hence the primary power of tribunes was negative; they could veto the act of any magistrate and stop any official act of administration. They were by law **sacrosanct**, meaning that anyone who attacked them physically could be immediately and summarily killed; they could convene the Senate and assemblies and initiate legislation.

20 quaestors—administered finances of state treasury and served in various capacities in the provinces; when elected quaestor, a man automatically became eligible for membership in the Senate, though censors had to appoint him to fill a vacancy

Senate:

- composed of 600 magistrates and ex-magistrates (minimum qualification was election as quaestor) who served for life unless expelled by the censors
- normally met in a building called the *Curia* located in the Roman Forum; [click here for a drawing of the chamber in which the Senate met](#), or find out more about the building by visiting the Senate House in VRoma

- although technically an advisory body, in effect the Senate was the chief governmental body because it controlled public finances and foreign affairs, assigned military commands and provinces, and debated and passed decrees that would be submitted to the assemblies for final ratification
- the Republican government was symbolized by the letters SPQR (*senatus populusque Romanus*), meaning “the Senate and the Roman people”

Assemblies:

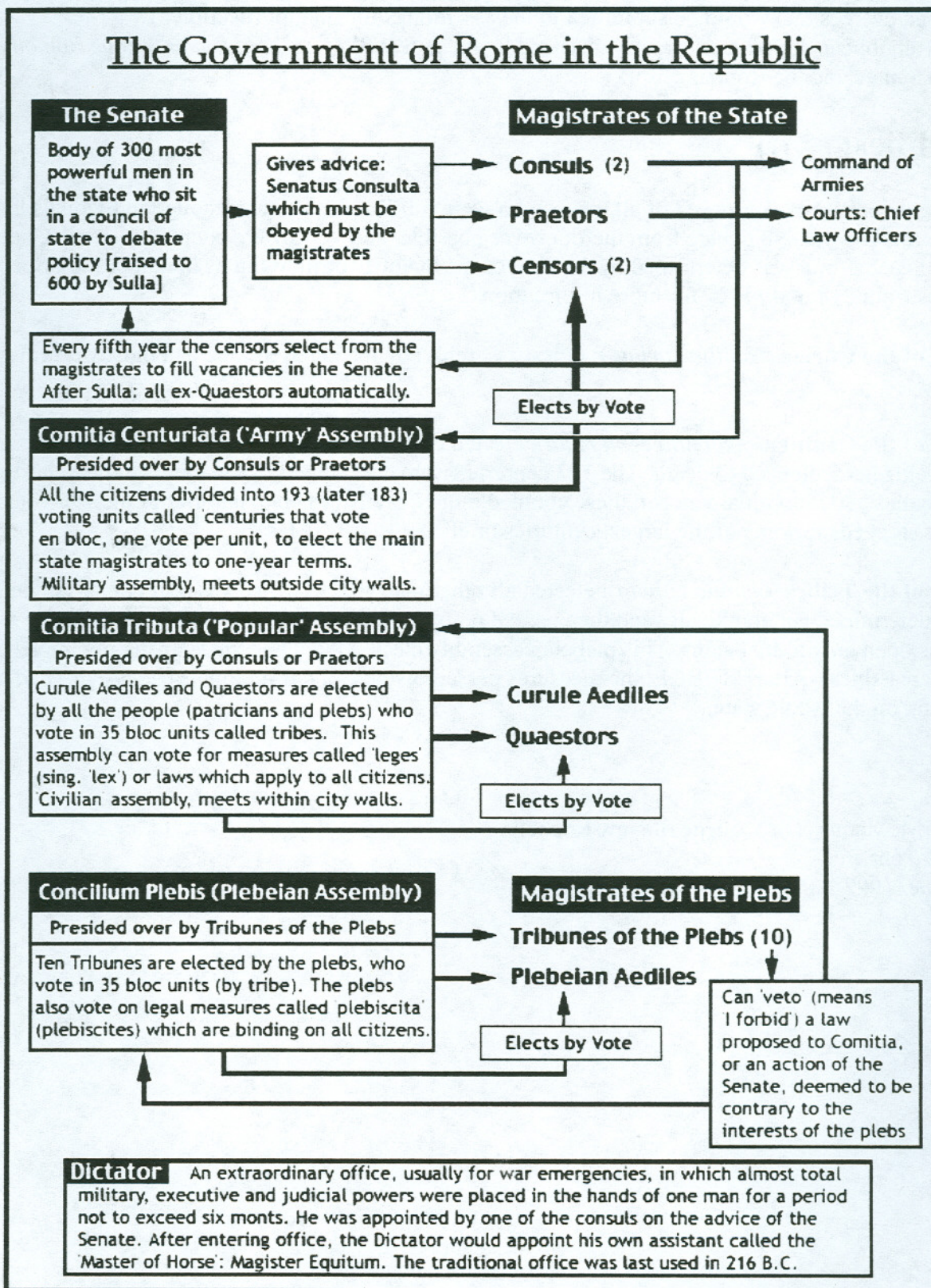
These were theoretically composed of all males who were full Roman citizens, though individuals had to attend in person in order to vote. No debate from the floor was possible, and votes were counted in groups, not individually (the vote of each group was determined by the vote of the majority of individuals in that group). See Roman Assemblies from 218 to 49 B.C. for more information.

Assembly of the Curiae (*comitia curiata*): oldest assembly; by the late Republic had mostly ceremonial and clan functions.

Assembly of the Centuries (*comitia centuriata*): elected consuls, praetors, censors; declared war; served as court of appeal for citizens sentenced to death. The 193 centuries were determined by wealth, and the richest centuries were also the smallest, so individual votes in these counted more heavily (when a majority of the 193 votes was reached, voting was stopped, so some of the largest centuries rarely got to cast votes).

Assembly of the Tribes (*comitia tributa*): elected all other magistrates; voted yes or no on laws; the 35 tribes were originally determined geographically and then passed on by birth. A subgroup of this assembly, the **Concilium Plebis**, was open only to plebeians. This plebeian assembly elected the magistrates open only to plebeians (tribunes and plebeian aediles). After 287 BCE, the measures passed by the **Concilium Plebis** (*plebiscita*) had the force of laws binding on the whole state.

A Brief Overview of the Roman "Constitution" in the Republic



The 'Class-Based' Voting Assembly - The *Comitia Centuriata*

(end of the Second Punic War)

Group/Class	Number of Centuries	Property Qualification
Equites	18	possession of cavalry horse
Infantry Class 1	80	100,000+ asses
Infantry Class 2	20	?
Infantry Class 3	20	?
Infantry Class 4	20	?
Infantry Class 5	30	11-12,000 asses
Army Engineers	2	?
Musicians	2	?
<i>Proletarii/Capite Censi</i>	1	1500/>350 (ineligible for legions)
Total	193	

NOTE: When this assembly voted by a simple majority of centuries (at first 97, later 92 after the total number of centuries was reduced to 183), it voted to elect the senior magistrates of the state--the Consuls and Praetors, holders of *imperium*--for each year. Please note that this voting assembly underwent a reform after the mid-third century BC by which the number of centuries in the first class were reduced to 70 (35 *seniores* and 35 *iuniores* = one group selected from each of the voting tribes of the popular assembly, the *Comitia Tributa*). The tribune Gaius Gracchus (123 and 122 BC) proposed to have the order of voting by the centuries determined by lot, in order to democratize (somewhat) this voting assembly, but his proposal apparently failed to become law.

Magistrate	Function	Number*	Minimum Age**
Censors	Hold census of wealth to determine status/ranking for membership in centuries. Note: Elected every 5th year for 18-month term	2	[post-Consulate]
Consuls	As Commanders-in-Chief, preside over <i>Comitia Centuriata</i> ; as chief civil magistrates, preside over <i>Comitia Tributa (Populi)</i> , the all-inclusive 'popular' assembly	2	42
Praetors	Legal Officers; also, lesser generals. May convene the two centuriate and popular assemblies in lieu of Consuls	2 (8-10)	39
* The numbers in brackets indicate the later numbers of officials, first under Sulla, and then under Caesar and Augustus			
** These are the minimum ages that can be argued to have been enforced by the <i>Lex Villia Annalis</i> = 'The Villian Law on (Minimum) Years (for office holding)', passed in 180 BC (Liv. 40.44.1).			

How the Comitia Centuriata Worked

The *Comitia Centuriata* voted in single voting blocks called 'centuries' (*centuriae*). The membership of each citizen in one of these was determined by a property qualification. This was dependent on the amount of property each citizen owned and was determined by the censors who took a census (an 'evaluation') of all Roman citizens once every five years (the actual ceremonial being known as a *lustrum*). Originally the evaluation would have been expressed in terms of property (land, slaves, animals), but by the second century BC it was expressed in terms of a money value (first in *asses*; then after 141 BC in *sestertii* = **HS**). When the *Comitia Centuriata* voted, all the citizens allocated to each century voted in order to see how their century would cast its one vote. A simple majority of the total possible (at first 97 of 193 votes; after the mid-third century, 92 of 183) carried the day on any one issue. This voting assembly elected the senior magistrates of the Roman state to their one-year terms.

Men who were elected to the magistracies of the Roman state, beginning with the quaestorship (see below), began climbing a 'ladder' of offices which the Romans called the *cursus honorum* (the regular 'course' or 'track' of offices) which eventually had to be taken in a prescribed order from lowest (the quaestorship) to highest (the consulship). Originally, the censors in their revision of the lists of who was and was not in the Senate (the *lectio Senatus*), a process that was repeated once every five years, would appoint new senators from among these office-holders as well as from past tribunes of the plebs. After the Atinian plebiscite in the mid-second century, however, all ex-tribunes of the plebs were automatically enrolled in the senate; after Sulla, all men who were elected to the first magistracy (the quaestorship) automatically entered into the Senate.

The Senate was a deliberative body of about 300 men who offered their advice (a *Senatus consultum*) to the magistrates. Although they were formally only pieces of 'advice,' these *Senatus consulta* had the effect of orders which the magistrates were normally bound to follow, and which they usually did obey.

The *Comitia Centuriata* also deliberated on policy matters, such as deciding on peace and war, though the voters technically could only respond by a 'yes' or 'no' decision to questions or measures put to them by the consuls who were the presiding officers of the assembly.

The Popular Voting Assembly - The *Comitia Tributa Populi* (The 'Tribal' Assembly of (all) the People)

35 'Tribes' or 'Voting Districts':	
Urban 'Tribes' (City of Rome):	4
Rural 'Tribes' (Italy)	31
Total	35
Majority Required	18

This assembly votes by bloc in 'Tribe' units (each 'tribe' gets to cast only one ballot). A simple majority of 18 votes decided the matter. It voted to elect the quaestors, and the two curule aediles. All these magistrates held office for only one-year terms.

Magistrate	Function	Number*	
Curule Aediles	[In charge of urban infrastructure, certain games]	2	36
Quaestors	[Financial officers, in charge of the mint, etc.]	20 (after Sulla)	30

How the *Comitia Tributa Populi* Worked

The Tribal Assembly began in the late-fifth or early-fourth century with 25 'tribes' or voting units; 2 more were added in 358 BC (Livy, 7.15); 2 were added in 333 BC (Livy, 8.17); 2 were added in 317 BC (Livy, 9.20); then more were added in pairs (to maintain an uneven number) in the first half of the third century, bringing the total, by 241 BC (Lily Ross Taylor) or c. 230 BC (U. Hackl), to 35 tribes. All lower class persons in Rome, including freedmen or former slaves (Ps.-Asconius, 52 C), were grouped into the four 'urban tribes' (Livy, 9.46). The Tribal Assembly included *all* Roman citizens by right, including patricians. They had the vote not because of any property qualification, but simply because of the fact that they held Roman citizenship. In this assembly, however, the principle of block voting still held. All the citizens voted within their tribe in order to decide how the whole tribe would cast its one vote. A simple majority of 18 votes decided the matter. These tribes were not 'tribes' in any kinship sense; they were simply voting regions or districts to which you belonged from the time you acquired your citizenship (you did not change your 'tribe' when you moved; you were assigned a voting tribe for life). This assembly voted to elect the magistrates without imperium, i.e., the curule aediles and the quaestors.

The Plebeian Voting Assembly - The *Concilium Plebis* (The Council of the Plebs)

35 'Tribes' or 'Voting Districts':	
Urban 'Tribes' (City of Rome):	4
Rural 'Tribes' (Italy)	31
Total	35
Majority Required *	18

The *comitia tributa populi* (described in the previous section) had been designed along the lines of the *concilium plebis*, an assembly (or council) for plebeians only, reputedly formed at the time of their first secession in the 490s BC as an *ad hoc* organization in which the plebeians could deliberate their grievances e.g., land-hunger, debt, famine, or oppression by the patrician magistrates. Voting was by tribe, the order chosen by lot, rather than by wealth classes; votes could only be binding on the plebeians, as their organization was not yet recognized by the patrician establishment. One of its first actions was to establish officers who would represent their interests (at first only by interposing their veto), and protect them (by their *ius auxilior* "right of assistance") from undue punishments at the hands of the patrician magistrates. These officers, called "tribunes of the plebs", were held to be inviolate and sacrosanct. This status was made effective by virtue of the sacred oath sworn by all the plebs to kill anyone, including magistrates, who opposed or harmed one of their tribunes.

The *concilium plebis* also elected the first *aediles*, men who assisted the tribunes in several ways, one of

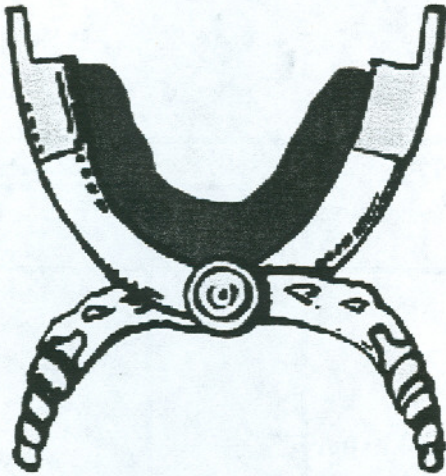
which was to record the dealings and transactions of the senate (as a safeguard against double-dealing) and to keep those records in the Temple of Diana on the Aventine. In this way, the senate could be held to account. The aediles were also responsible for caring for the temples, particularly those of concern to the plebs (Ceres, Liber, Libera, Diana on the Aventine) and the food supply (a constant concern for the poorer classes in Rome). At all times the tribunes of the plebs could call the *concilium* together and bring various types of business before it.

Officer	Function	Number	Age*
Tribunes of the Plebs	Convene and preside over <i>concilium</i> ; Propose Legislation; Veto; <i>ius auxilii, coercitio</i> (the rights of assistance and summary judgment/punishment)	10	30*
Plebeian Aediles	Keep records; care for temples, infrastructure, food supply; plebeian games	2	36 (?)
*There is evidence that the <i>Lex Villia Annalis</i> did not strictly apply to Tribunes of the Plebs, as we find some who were much closer to 20 than to 30 years of age (and some in their 50s!)			

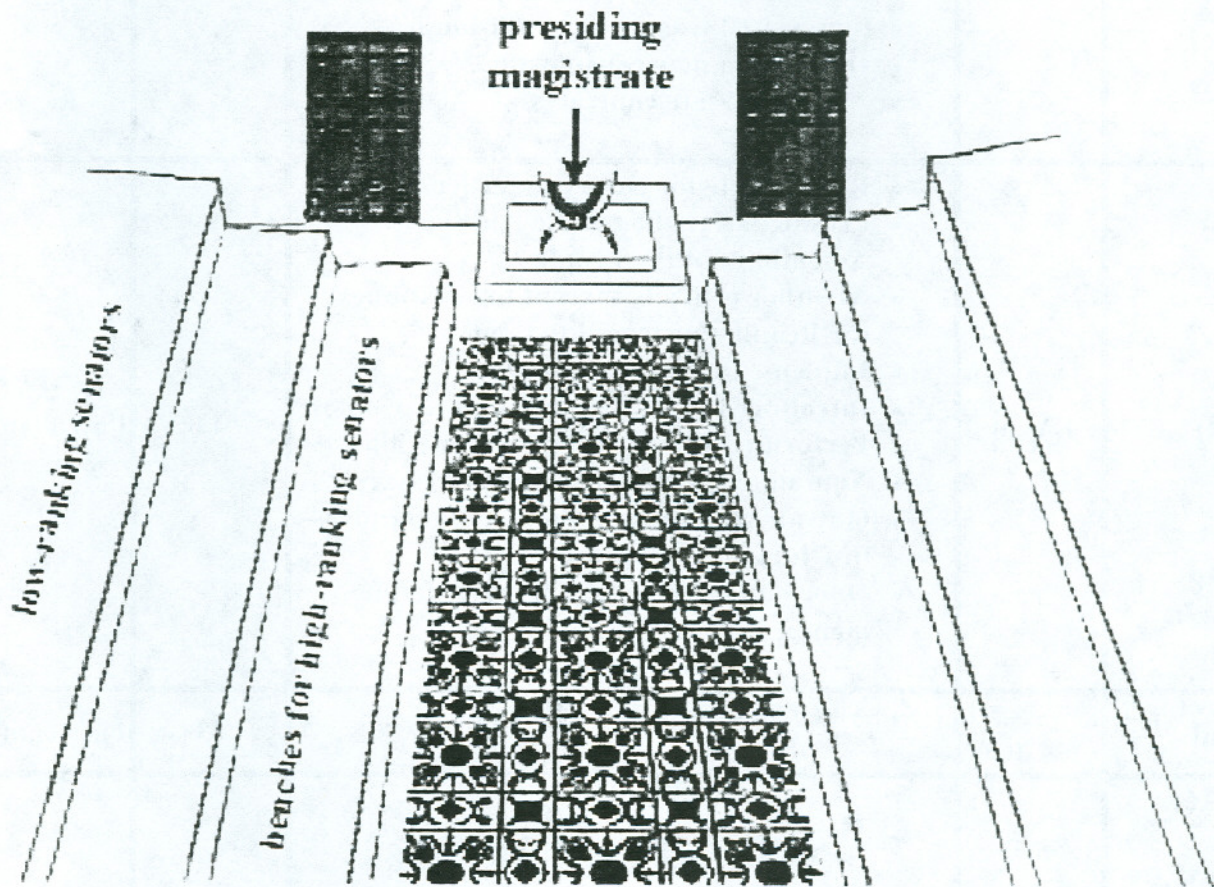
The *concilium plebis* was regularized by law after the fall of the Decemvirate in 449; in answer to this new "state within a state" the patrician establishment devised the all-inclusive "comitia tributa populi" described in the previous section. Both tribal assemblies were more democratic than the *comitia centuriata* as voting was by tribal bloc, the tribes going in order by lot, rather than by a fixed system in which the wealthiest classes always went first and had the potential to lock out the lower classes through a majority vote. Once the plebeians obtained rights to the highest offices in the state (367 and after), the patricians devised new offices to balance those of the plebeians: namely, the praetor and curule aedile (offices which at first were reserved for patricians, but which eventually opened up to plebeians).

In 287, in a concession to the last recorded secession of the plebs, the dictator Hortensius, himself a plebeian, decreed that the decisions of the *concilium plebis* were no longer mere resolutions affecting only the plebs, but would have the same force of law as decisions of the *comitia tributa populi*. As a result, these binding decisions, properly known as "plebi scita" (plebiscites), are often confused (or assimilated) in the ancient literature with "leges" (laws). In any event, plebiscites passed by the *concilium plebis* came to be the main vehicle whereby most Roman law was made; thus, the tribunes of the plebs became, in effect, Rome's chief legislative officers. This arrangement left the magistrates with *imperium* (consuls and praetors) free to deal with military issues or with the dispensing of justice.

In the later republic (after 59) it is unclear whether the numerous popular assemblies called by the consuls denote infringement upon the rights of the tribunes to run plebeian assemblies, or a renewed interest in convening the *comitia tributa populi* to pass certain types of legislation (notably, land-distribution laws).



The curule chair (*sella curulis*) was a significant symbol in Roman politics because of the authority it represented. For example, when the young Octavian was seeking to validate his claim to political power in the years immediately following the assassination of Julius Caesar, he minted this coin (c. 42 BCE) with his image and a depiction of the *sella curulis*. The empty stool holds Caesar's golden laurel wreath and is inscribed with the words "CAESAR DIC[tator] PER[petuus]."



ROMAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

During the Late Republic

Elected Offices (# elected)	Term	Duties & Privileges	Pro		
			Minimum Age	Class	
Censor(2)	Every 5 years, elected for 18 months	<p>Once every five years:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected the Princeps Senatus • Kept the Senate Roster updated • Controlled public morals and could expel Senators for violation of same • Supervised the water supply • Took censuses of property • Kept a register of all citizens and assigned them to centuries for voting • Supervised leasing of public land • Decided on new construction • Awarded State contracts 	43	Patrician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must • Elect
Consul(2)	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible for enforcing order in Rome • Presided over the Senate and the Assemblies of the People • All other officials--except the Tribunes of the People--answered to them • Implemented Senate decisions • Introduced legislation before the people • Performed various religious functions. • Nominated a Dictator when necessary • Outside of Rome served as Commanders-in-Chief in case of war • Once out of office, considered lifetime member of the Senate 	42	Patrician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must • Elect
Proconsul	As needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acted as Provincial Governors 	43	Patrician	Had to hav
Praetor(16) Two types: <i>Praetor Peregrinus</i> --dealt with disputes where one or both parties were foreigners.	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Served as the supreme civil judges for legal cases • Issued annual edicts re Roman Law 	39	Patrician Plebeian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If Ple • Tribu • Elect

<i>Praetor Urbanus</i> -- handled civil/criminal law cases					
Propraetor	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acted as Provincial Governors 	40	Patrician	Had to hav
Aediles Two types: Plebeian (2) Curule (2)	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In charge of maintaining public buildings, aqueducts, and roads Managed the grain supply Handled inspection of weights and measures Supervised the games 		Plebeian Patrician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curule Elect
Tribune of the People (10)	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safeguarded the interests of the People Could veto the action of any elected official could punish--even with death--a disobedient official. Immune from arrest or punishment themselves Responsible directly to the Concilium Plebis 		Plebeian	Possibly elc
Quaestor (40) Four types: urban, military, provincial, and Italian.	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handled receipt and disbursement of state money Maintained public records Oversaw state contract details Acted as quartermasters and paymasters for generals in the field Acted as financial secretaries to provincial governors 	27-30	Plebeian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must Elect
Board of the 26 <i>(vigintisexviri)</i>	1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police commission of three to oversee arrest, trial, and punishment of criminals Commission of 10 for the judgment of certain legal cases Commission of 4 in charge of the courts of Capua, Cumae, and other towns Commission of 3 in charge of the mint Commission of 4 for inside city street cleaning Commission of 2 for outside city street cleaning 			

Appointed Offices(# elected)	Term	Duties & Privileges	How Appointed
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Dictator(1) [<i>Magister Populi</i>]	6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had absolute power over Rome; was supreme military and judicial authority 	by the Senate and approved by the People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State of emergency Usually was a cap
Master of the Horse (1) [<i>Magister Equitum</i>]	6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second in command to the Dictator 	by Dictator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State of emergency
Interrex	5 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take over the duties of the Consuls hold election for Consuls 	by the Senate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be a senator Appointed when 1 or other cause
Military Tribune(6 for each standing legion) [<i>Tribuni Militum</i>]	Varied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Served as officers in the legions Commanded a Century and/or served on the command staff 	by a Consul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 years service in answer the call. typically 26-29 ye

Notes:

- Patricians were the privileged class of Rome--the large landowners; they dominated political affairs
- Plebeians were the Roman Citizens who weren't Plebeians
- During this period, every Roman Citizen had the privilege of voting on legislation and in the election of g
- The normal progression (the *Cursus Honorum*--the Course of Honors) through the various offices was: Q and Censor.
- Not everyone followed the normal progression (e.g., Marius and Pompey)
- Tribune of the People, Censor, Dictator, and Master of the Horse weren't regarded as true magistracies
- The minimum interval between holding various magistracies was 2 years
- To win a magistracy *suo anno* (in one's year) meant to win the magistracy at the earliest possible age
- The Comitia Centuriata met in the Campus Martius. It consisted of citizens divided according to property called centuries. This assembly decided between war and peace and it elected the higher officials (Censor, Consul, Praetor, or Interrex.
- The Comitia Tributa met in the Roman Forum for legislation and judgments, and in the Campus Martius divided into 35 "tribes". It elected the lower ranking officials (Quaestor, Aedile, etc.) and acted as a court of capital punishment. It also was a legislative body which votes on legal measures submitted to it by the praetor, Consul or Praetor; and, sometimes by a Curule Aedile.
- Every Roman Citizen belonged to both the Comitia Centuriata and the Comitia Tributa
- The Concilium Plebis met in the Roman Forum for legislation and judgments, and in the Campus Martius Plebeians divided into their 35 tribes. It may have elected the Plebeian Tribunes and the Plebeian Aediles presided over by a Tribune of the Plebs or an Aedile of the Plebs.