
Republicanism

As you study American history, you will encounter many permutations of the word *republic*: *republican*, *Republican*, *republicanism*, *Republicanism*. These words can refer to a form of government, to an ideology, or, when capitalized, to a specific political party. The origins of the word *republic* can be found in Latin, in which *res* means ‘things’ and *publica* means ‘public.’ Over the centuries, however, the English offspring of the Latin *respublica* have become a complicated soup. Below are some of the basic terms that you will need to know.

republic/republicanism: The word *republic* refers to a variety of governments that are representative in nature. Historically, the republican form of government was usually contrasted with monarchical and aristocratic forms of government in which the governing class held power as a birthright or by virtue of force (or both). In a republic, by contrast, citizens choose their political leaders. Although republics are by definition representative, it is important to note that they are not necessarily very democratic. The early United States, for instance, enfranchised (gave voting rights to) significantly fewer than half of its inhabitants.

republican ideology: The republican ideology derives from a variety of sources, both ancient and early modern. Within the context of early American history, *republican ideology* usually refers to a strain of political thought that emphasized the need for the government to pursue the public good. Republican thinkers believed that liberty was a very fragile thing that had to be carefully guarded. In order to successfully protect liberty, politics had to be carried out by virtuous men who would protect the public good rather than seeking to benefit private interests. Political virtue, according to republican thinkers, rested upon economic independence, which meant secure ownership of property. The great fear for republicans was that corrupt politicians would reduce citizens from independence to dependence, thus making them powerless to protect their property and liberty. Republican thinkers were very suspicious of centralized power, because they feared it was liable to abuse. They also feared standing armies, which could be used to force citizens into dependent status. A version of the republican ideology that developed in England during the late 1600s and early 1700s helped American revolutionaries argue for American independence from the allegedly tyrannous monarchy of England.

The Republican Party: This name has been assumed by two formal political parties in American history. The first Republican party (also known as the Democratic-Republican party) was founded in the 1790s and was prominent until the 1820s. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were the key national leaders of this first Republican party, which arose in order to oppose the Federalist party of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams. The second Republican party was founded in the 1850s to oppose the further expansion of slavery. Abraham Lincoln was the first Republican president of this party. This second Republican party continues to exist today, but it has undergone many transformations in the last century and a half.

