

# Republicanism in the United States

**Republicanism** is the political values system that has been a major part of American civic thought since the American Revolution.<sup>[1]</sup> It stresses *liberty* and *unalienable rights* as central values, makes the people as a whole sovereign, rejects aristocracy and inherited political power, expects citizens to be independent in their performance of civic duties, and vilifies corruption.<sup>[2]</sup> American republicanism was founded and first practiced by the Founding Fathers in the 18th century. This system was based on early Roman, Renaissance and English models and ideas.<sup>[3]</sup> It formed the basis for the American Revolution and the consequential Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1787), as well as the Gettysburg Address (1863).<sup>[4]</sup>

Republicanism may be distinguished from other forms of democracy as it asserts that people have unalienable rights that cannot be voted away by a majority of voters.<sup>[5]</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville warned about the "tyranny of the majority" in a democracy, and advocates of the rights of minorities have warned that the courts needed to protect those rights by reversing efforts by voters to terminate the rights of an unpopular minority.<sup>[6]</sup>

The term "republicanism" is derived from the term "republic", but the two words have different meanings. A "republic" is a form of government (one without a hereditary ruling class) while "republicanism" is a political ideology that can appear in republics or monarchies.<sup>[7]</sup>

Two major parties were explicitly named after the idea—the Republican party of Thomas Jefferson (founded in 1793, and often called the "Democratic-Republican Party" by political scientists), and the current Republican party (founded in 1854).<sup>[8]</sup>

## The American Revolution

### Republican virtues

The colonial intellectual and political leaders in the 1760s and 1770s closely read history to compare governments and their effectiveness of rule.<sup>[10]</sup> They were especially concerned with the history of liberty in England and were primarily influenced by the "country party" (which opposed the Court Party that held power). Country party relied heavily on the classical republicanism of Roman heritage; it celebrated the ideals of duty and virtuous citizenship in a republic. It drew heavily on

ancient Greek city-state and Roman republican examples.<sup>[11]</sup> The Country party shared some of the political philosophy of Whiggism as well as Tory critics in England which roundly denounced the corruption surrounding the "court" party in London centering on the royal court. This approach produced a political ideology Americans called "republicanism", which was widespread in America by 1775.<sup>[12]</sup> "Republicanism was the distinctive political consciousness of the entire Revolutionary generation."<sup>[13]</sup> J.G.A. Pocock explained the intellectual sources in America:<sup>[14]</sup>



The Capitol exalted classical republican virtues<sup>[9]</sup>

The Whig canon and the neo-Harringtonians, John Milton, James Harrington and Sidney, Trenchard, Gordon and Bolingbroke, together with the Greek, Roman, and Renaissance masters of the tradition as far as Montesquieu, formed the authoritative literature of this culture; and its values and concepts were those with which we have grown familiar: a civic and patriot ideal in which the personality was founded in property, perfected in citizenship but perpetually threatened by corruption; government figuring paradoxically as the principal source of corruption and operating through such means as patronage, faction, standing armies (opposed to the ideal of the militia); established churches (opposed to the Puritan and deist modes of American religion); and the promotion of a monied interest—though the formulation of this last concept was somewhat hindered by the keen desire for readily available paper credit common in colonies of settlement.

Revolutionary Republicanism was centered on limiting corruption and greed. Virtue was of the utmost importance for citizens and representatives. Revolutionaries took a lesson from ancient Rome, they knew it was necessary to avoid the luxury that had destroyed the Empire.<sup>[15]</sup> A virtuous citizen was one that ignored monetary compensation and made a commitment to resist and eradicate corruption. The Republic was sacred; therefore, it is necessary to serve the state in a truly representative way, ignoring self-interest and individual will. Republicanism required the service of those who were willing to give up their own interests for a common good. According to Bernard Bailyn "The preservation of liberty rested on the ability of the people to maintain effective checks on wielders of power and hence in the last analysis rested on the vigilance and moral stamina of the people...." Virtuous citizens needed to be strong defenders of liberty and challenge the corruption and greed in government. The duty of the virtuous citizen became a foundation for the American Revolution.<sup>[16]</sup>

### Cause of Revolution

The commitment of most Americans to republican values and to their property rights helped bring about the American Revolution. Britain was increasingly being seen as corrupt and hostile and that of a threat to the very idea of democracy; a threat to the established liberties that Americans enjoyed and to American property rights.<sup>[17]</sup> The greatest threat to liberty was thought by many to be corruption—not just in London but at home as well. The colonists associated it with luxury and, especially, inherited aristocracy, which they condemned. (A few Americans did gain English titles, but they moved to London.)

Historian Thomas Kidd (2010) argues that during the Revolution Christians linked their religion to republicanism. He states, "With the onset of the revolutionary crisis, a major conceptual shift convinced Americans across the theological spectrum that God was raising up America for some special purpose."<sup>[18]</sup> Kidd further argues that "new blend of Christian and republican ideology led religious traditionalists to embrace wholesale the concept of republican virtue."<sup>[19]</sup> As virtuous republicans, citizens had a growing moral obligation to eradicate the corruption they saw in the monarchy.<sup>[20]</sup>

Historian Gordon Wood has tied the founding ideas to American Exceptionalism. "Our beliefs in liberty, equality, constitutionalism, and the well-being of ordinary people came out of the Revolutionary era. So too did our idea that we Americans are a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty and democracy."<sup>[21]</sup> Americans were the protectors of liberty, they had a greater obligation and destiny to assert republican virtue. In *Discourse of 1759* Jonathan Mayhew states "An absolute submission to our prince, or whether disobedience and resistance may not be justified able in some cases...to all those who bear the title of rulers in common but only to those who actually perform the duty of rulers by exercising a reasonable and just authority for the good of human society." The notion that British rulers were not virtuous, nor exercising their authority for the "good of human society" prompted the colonial desire to protect and reestablish republican values in government. This need to protect virtue was a philosophical underpinning of the American Revolution<sup>[22]</sup>

## Founding Fathers

The "Founding Fathers" were strong advocates of republican values, especially Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, George Washington, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton.<sup>[23]</sup>

Thomas Jefferson defined a republic as:

“a government by its citizens in mass, acting directly and personally, according to rules established by the majority; and that every other government is more or less republican, in proportion as it has in its composition more or less of this ingredient of the direct action of the citizens. Such a government is evidently restrained to very narrow limits of space and population. I doubt if it would be practicable beyond the extent of a New England township. The first shade from this pure element, which, like that of pure vital air, cannot sustain life of itself, would be where the powers of the government, being divided, should be exercised each by representatives chosen...for such short terms as should render secure the duty of expressing the will of their constituents. This I should consider as the nearest approach to a pure republic, which is practicable on a large scale of country or population ... we may say with truth and meaning, that governments are more or less republican as they have more or less of the element of popular election and control in their composition; and believing, as I do, that the mass of the citizens is the safest depository of their own rights, and especially, that the evils flowing from the duperies of the people, are less injurious than those from the egoism of their agents, I am a friend to that composition of government which has in it the most of this ingredient.”

[24]

The Founding Fathers discoursed endlessly on the meaning of "republicanism." John Adams in 1787 defined it as "a government, in which all men, rich and poor, magistrates and subjects, officers and people, masters and servants, the first citizen and the last, are equally subject to the laws."<sup>[25]</sup>

## Virtue vs. Commerce

The open question, as Pocock suggested,<sup>[26]</sup> of the conflict between personal economic interest (grounded in Lockean liberalism) and classical republicanism, troubled Americans. Jefferson and Madison roundly denounced the Federalists for creating a national bank as tending to corruption and monarchism; Alexander Hamilton staunchly defended his program, arguing that national economic strength was necessary for the protection of liberty. Jefferson never relented but by 1815 Madison switched and announced in favor of a national bank, which he set up in 1816.

John Adams often pondered the issue of civic virtue. Writing Mercy Otis Warren in 1776, he agreed with the Greeks and the Romans, that, "Public Virtue cannot exist without private, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics." Adams insisted, "There must be a positive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honor, Power, and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty. And this public Passion must be Superior to all private Passions. Men must be ready, they must pride themselves, and be happy to sacrifice their private Pleasures, Passions, and Interests, nay their private Friendships and dearest connections, when they Stand in Competition with the Rights of society."<sup>[27]</sup>

Adams worried that a businessman might have financial interests that conflicted with republican duty; indeed, he was especially suspicious of banks. He decided that history taught that "the Spirit of Commerce ... is incompatible with that purity of Heart, and Greatness of soul which is necessary for a happy Republic." But so much of that spirit of commerce had infected America. In New England, Adams noted, "even the Farmers and Tradesmen are addicted to Commerce." As a result, there was "a great Danger that a Republican Government would be very factious and turbulent there."<sup>[28]</sup>

## Other influences

A second stream of thought growing in significance was the classical liberalism of John Locke, including his theory of the "social contract". This had a great influence on the revolution as it implied the inborn right of the people to overthrow their leaders should those leaders betray the agreements implicit in the sovereign-follower relationship. Historians find little trace of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influence in America.<sup>[29]</sup> In terms of writing state and national constitutions, the Americans used Montesquieu's analysis of the ideally "balanced" British Constitution. But first and

last came a commitment to republicanism, as shown by many historians such as Bernard Bailyn and Gordon S. Wood.

## Historiography

For a century, historians have debated how important republicanism was to the Founding Fathers. The interpretation before 1960, following Progressive School historians such as Charles A. Beard, Vernon L. Parrington and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., downplayed rhetoric as superficial and looked for economic motivations. Louis Hartz refined the position in the 1950s, arguing John Locke was the most important source because his property-oriented liberalism supported the materialistic goals of Americans.<sup>[30]</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, two new schools emerged that emphasized the primacy of ideas as motivating forces in history (rather than material self-interest). Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood from Harvard formed the "Cambridge School"; at Washington University the "St. Louis School" was led by J.G.A. Pocock. They emphasized slightly different approaches to republicanism.<sup>[31]</sup> However, some scholars, especially Isaac Kramnick, continue to emphasize Locke, arguing that Americans are fundamentally individualistic and not devoted to civic virtue. The relative importance of republicanism and liberalism remains a topic of strong debate among historians, as well as the politically active of present day.

## New Nation: The Constitution

The Founding Fathers wanted republicanism because its principles guaranteed liberty, with opposing, limited powers offsetting one another. They thought change should occur slowly, as many were afraid that a "democracy"- by which they meant a direct democracy- would allow a majority of voters at any time to trample rights and liberties. They believed the most formidable of these potential majorities was that of the poor against the rich.<sup>[32]</sup> They thought democracy could take the form of mob rule that could be shaped on the spot by a demagogue.<sup>[33]</sup> Therefore they devised a written Constitution which could only be amended by a super majority, preserved competing sovereignties in the constituent states,<sup>[34]</sup> gave the control of the upper house (Senate) to the states, and created an Electoral College, comprising a small number of elites, to select the president. They set up a House of Representative to represent the people. In practice the electoral college soon gave way to control by political parties. In 1776 most states required property ownership to vote, but most citizens owned farms in the 90% rural nation, so it was not a severe restriction. As the country urbanized and people took on different work, the property ownership requirement was gradually dropped by many states. Property requirements were gradually dismantled in state after state, so that all had been eliminated by 1850, so that few if any economic barriers remained to prevent white adult males from voting.<sup>[35]</sup>

## "Republican" as party name

In 1792–93 Jefferson and Madison created a new "republican party" in order to promote their version of the doctrine. They wanted to suggest that Hamilton's version was illegitimate.<sup>[36]</sup> According to Federalist Noah Webster, a political activist bitter at the defeat of the Federalist party in the White House and Congress, the choice of the name "Republican" was "a powerful instrument in the process of making proselytes to the party.... The influence of names on the mass of mankind, was never more distinctly exhibited, than in the increase of the democratic party in the United States. The popularity of the denomination of the Republican Party, was more than a match for the popularity of Washington's character and services, and contributed to overthrow his administration."<sup>[37]</sup> The party, which historians later called the Democratic-Republican Party, split into separate factions in the 1820s, one of which became the Democratic Party. After 1832 the Democrats were opposed by another faction that named themselves "Whigs" after the Patriots of the 1770s who started the American Revolution. Both of these parties proclaimed their devotion to republicanism in the era of the Second Party System.

## Republican motherhood

Under the new government after the Revolution, "republican motherhood" became an ideal, as exemplified by Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren. The first duty of the republican woman was to instill republican values in her children, and to avoid luxury and ostentation.<sup>[38]</sup>

Two generations later the daughters and granddaughters of these "Republican mothers" appropriated republican values into their lives as they sought independence and equality in the workforce. During the 1830s thousands of women mill workers went on strike to battle for their right to fair wages and independence, as there had been major pay cuts. Many of these women were daughters of independent land owners and descendants of men who had fought in the Revolutionary War; they identified as "daughters of freemen". In their fight for independence at the mills, women would incorporate rhetoric from the revolution to convey the importance and strength of their purpose to their corporate employers as well as to other women. If the Revolutionary War was fought to secure independence from Great Britain, then these "daughters of freemen" could fight for the same republican values that (through striking) would give them fair pay and independence just as the men had.<sup>[39]</sup>

## Democracy

Ellis and Nelson argue that much constitutional thought from Madison to Lincoln and beyond has focused on "the problem of majority tyranny." They conclude, "The principles of republican government embedded in the Constitution represent an effort by the framers to ensure that the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness would not be trampled by majorities."<sup>[40]</sup> Madison in particular worried that a small localized majority might threaten inalienable rights, and in "Federalist #10" he argued that the larger the population of the republic the more diverse it would be and the less liable to this threat.<sup>[41]</sup> Jefferson warned that "an elective despotism is not the government we fought for."<sup>[42]</sup>

As late as 1800, the word "democrat" was mostly used to attack an opponent of the Federalist party. Thus George Washington in 1798 complained, "that you could as soon scrub the blackamoor white, as to change the principles of a profest Democrat; and that he will leave nothing unattempted to overturn the Government of this Country."<sup>[43]</sup> The Federalist Papers are pervaded by the idea that pure democracy is actually quite dangerous, because it allows a majority to infringe upon the rights of a minority.<sup>[44]</sup> Thus in encouraging the states to participate in a strong centralized government under a new constitution and replace the relatively weak Articles of Confederation, Madison argued in Federalist No. 10 that a special interest may take control of a small area, e.g. a state, but it could not easily take over a large nation. Therefore, the larger the nation, the safer is republicanism.<sup>[45]</sup>

By 1805 the "Old Republicans" or "Quids", a minority faction among Southern Republicans, led by Johan Randolph, John Taylor of Caroline and Nathaniel Macon, opposed Jefferson and Madison on the grounds that they had abandoned the true republican commitment to a weak central government.<sup>[46]</sup>

## Property rights

Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story (1779–1845), made the protection of property rights by the courts a major component of American republicanism. A precocious legal scholar, Story was appointed to the Court by James Madison in 1811. He and Chief Justice John Marshall made the Court a bastion of nationalism (along the lines of Marshall's Federalist Party) and a protector of the rights of property against runaway democracy. Story opposed Jacksonian democracy because it was inclined to repudiate lawful debts and was too often guilty of what he called "oppression" of property rights by republican governments.<sup>[47]</sup> Story held that, "the right of the citizens to the free enjoyment of their property legally acquired" was "a great and fundamental principle of a republican government."<sup>[48]</sup> Newmyer (1985) presents Story as a "Statesman of the Old Republic" who tried to rise above democratic politics and to shape the law in accordance with the republicanism of Story's heroes, Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall, as well as the New England Whigs of the 1820s and 1830s such as Daniel Webster.<sup>[49]</sup> Historians agree that Justice Story—as much or more than Marshall or anyone else—did indeed reshape American law in a

conservative direction that protected property rights.<sup>[50]</sup>

## **Military Service**

Civic virtue required men to put civic goals ahead of their personal desires, and to volunteer to fight for their country. As John Randolph of Roanoke put it, "When citizen and soldier shall be synonymous terms, then you will be safe."<sup>[51]</sup> Scott (1984) notes that in both the American and French revolutions, distrust of foreign mercenaries led to the concept of a national, citizen army, and the definition of military service was changed from a choice of careers to a civic duty.<sup>[52]</sup> Herrera (2001) explains that an appreciation of self-governance is essential to any understanding of the American military character before the Civil War. Military service was considered an important demonstration of patriotism and an essential component of citizenship. To soldiers, military service was a voluntary, negotiated, and temporary abeyance of self-governance by which they signaled their responsibility as citizens. In practice self-governance in military affairs came to include personal independence, enlistment negotiations, petitions to superior officials, militia constitutions, and negotiations regarding discipline. Together these affected all aspects of military order, discipline, and life.<sup>[53]</sup>

## **Civil War and Reconstruction**

Historian Frank Lawrence Owsley depicted antebellum Southern society as a broad class of yeoman farmers who stood and worked between the slaves and poor whites at one end and the large planters at the opposite end of the economic spectrum, Owsley asserted that the real South was liberal, American, and Jeffersonian, not radical or reactionary. It reflected the best of republican principles (though Owsley did not use the word "republicanism" but his followers did)<sup>[54]</sup> Agrarianism in the 20th century was a response to the industrialism and modernism that had infiltrated the South. According to Owsley, the position of the South vis-à-vis the North was created not by slavery, cotton, or states' rights, but by the two regions' misunderstanding of each other.<sup>[55]</sup> J. Mills Thornton argues that in the antebellum South the drive to preserve republican values was the most powerful force, and led Southerners to interpret Northern policies as a threat to their republican values.<sup>[56]</sup>

In reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, antislavery forces in the North formed a new party. The party officially designated itself "Republican" because the name resonated with the struggle of 1776. "In view of the necessity of battling for the first principles of republican government," resolved the Michigan state convention, "and against the schemes of aristocracy the most revolting and oppressive with which the earth was ever cursed, or man debased, we will co-operate and be known as Republicans."<sup>[57][58]</sup>

After the war, the Republicans believed that an important aspect of securing citizenship for freedmen was to give them the franchise; that the true political education was to be gained in exercising the right to vote and organizing for political purposes. At the time, only men were allowed to vote. Constitutional amendments were passed granting citizenship to freedmen and the franchise to men.

## **Progressive Era**

A central theme of the Progressive era was fear of corruption, one of the core ideas of republicanism since the 1770s. The Progressives restructured the political system to combat entrenched interests (for example, through the direct election of Senators), to ban influences such as alcohol that were viewed as corrupting, and to extend the vote to women, who were seen as being morally pure and less corruptible.<sup>[59]</sup>

Questions of performing civic duty were brought up in presidential campaigns and World War I. In the presidential election of 1888, Republicans emphasized that the Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland had purchased a substitute to fight for him in the Civil War, while his opponent General Benjamin Harrison had fought in numerous battles.<sup>[60]</sup> In 1917, a great debate took place over Woodrow Wilson's proposal to draft men into the U.S. Army after war broke out in Europe. Many said it violated the republican notion of freely given civic duty to force people to

serve.<sup>[61]</sup> In the end, Wilson was successful and the Selective Service Act of 1917 was passed.

## New Deal Era to present

The New Deal era broadened the scope of republicanism. Feldman says that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, "would not ignore poor or unemployed laborers. The ... concept of civic virtue no longer justified protecting old-stock Protestant values and interests while disregarding those of workers, indigents, and immigrants."<sup>[62]</sup>

Republicanism, especially in the sense of civic duty and equality of sacrifice, was a major theme in World War II. Lee reports that, "Long after the war, the generations who had lived through it would wax nostalgic about their equality of sacrifice and of suffering, and about the resurgence of a sense of civic duty and community participation."<sup>[63]</sup>

"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country!" demanded President John F. Kennedy in 1961 in a dramatic call for the American people to honor the core republican value of civic duty.<sup>[64]</sup>

Military service in Vietnam became a test of civic duty for political candidates.<sup>[65]</sup> In the presidential election of 2004, one of the chief topics of discussion was whether the candidates John Kerry and George W. Bush had fulfilled their civic duty of fighting for their country, part of the republican duties.<sup>[66]</sup> Opponents charged that Bush had shirked his National Guard duties. Kerry won public approval when he heavily emphasized his Vietnam service,<sup>[67]</sup> while his opponents, most famously the Swift Vets and POWs for Truth, alleged that Kerry did not truly earn the medals he was awarded in Vietnam.<sup>[68]</sup>

## Legal terminology

The term *republic* does not appear in the Declaration of Independence, but does appear in Article IV of the Constitution which "guarantee[s] to every State in this Union a Republican form of Government." What exactly the writers of the constitution felt this should mean is uncertain. The Supreme Court, in *Luther v. Borden* (1849), declared that the definition of *republic* was a "political question" in which it would not intervene. During Reconstruction the Constitutional clause was the legal foundation for the extensive Congressional control over the eleven former Confederate states; there was no such oversight over the border slave states that had remained in the Union.<sup>[69]</sup>

In two later cases, it did establish a basic definition. In *United States v. Cruikshank* (1875), the court ruled that the "equal rights of citizens" were inherent to the idea of republic. The opinion of the court from *In re Duncan* (1891)<sup>[70]</sup> held that the "right of the people to choose their government" is also part of the definition. It is also generally assumed that the clause prevents any state from being a monarchy — or a dictatorship. Due to the 1875 and 1891 court decisions establishing basic definition, in the first version (1892) of the Pledge of Allegiance, which included the word *republic*, and like Article IV which refers to a Republican form of government, the basic definition of *republic* is implied and continues to do so in all subsequent versions, including the present edition, by virtue of its consistent inclusion.

## Democracy

In March 1861 in his famous First Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln denounced secession as anarchy, and explained that majority rule had to be balanced by constitutional restraints in the American system:

"A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people."<sup>[71]</sup>

Over time, the pejorative connotations of "democracy" faded. By the 1830s, democracy was seen as an unmitigated positive and the term "Democratic" was assumed by the Democratic Party and the term "Democrat" was adopted by its members.<sup>[72]</sup> A common term for the party in the 19th century was "The Democracy."<sup>[73]</sup> In debates on Reconstruction, Radical Republicans, such as Senator Charles Sumner, argued that the republican "guarantee clause" in Article IV supported the introduction by force of law of democratic suffrage in the defeated South.<sup>[74]</sup>

After 1800 the limitations on democracy were systematically removed; property qualifications for state voters were largely eliminated in the 1820s.<sup>[75]</sup> The initiative, referendum, recall, and other devices of direct democracy became widely accepted at the state and local level in the 1910s; and senators were made directly electable by the people in 1913. The last restrictions on black voting were made illegal in 1965.

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- "Inventing a New Republican Culture for America" (<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/inventing-new-republican-culture-america>) Lesson plan for grades 9-12 from National Endowment for the Humanities

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