

*The Encyclopedia of Political Science*, CQ Press, 2010.  
(Geoffrey Garrett, Margaret Levi, Paula McClain, James Alt, Simone Chambers eds.)

Contributor: **Josep Colomer**

## City-republic

The city, from which the notion of ‘citizenship’ is derived, is the most basic form of political community. In ancient, medieval, and early modern times, there was an array of self-governing city-republics where many collective decisions were made by the vote of a broad electorate. Most of them shared the following defining characteristics: small size in terms of both territory and population; relatively high degrees of internal harmony, as defined by the economic and ethnic characteristics of their members; and simple and soft forms of government based on the ease with which they could form a social majority supporting collective, enforceable decisions. The better known cases can be found in Mesopotamia, the poleis of Greece, the German and Swiss territories, as well as a number of medieval Italian communes that have existed since the late Middle Ages.

The typical medieval city was formed from private associations of households organized to provide public goods such as the maintenance of a food supply, the administration of justice, and military defense. Local autonomy was a Roman tradition in some Southern European towns, but it was also created by the privileges given to certain communes by their lords.

### Medieval self-governed cities

One of the earliest meetings recorded of a representative assembly in Europe was in 1064, in Barcelona, Catalonia, for the approval by consensus and acclamation of public laws later compiled in the celebrated Customs of the city (*Usatges*). Throughout the 12th century, the North Italian towns, led by their consuls, became autonomous from the Emperor and the Church authorities. Bologna, Genoa, Pavia, Pisa, Siena, and many other communes organized themselves around the Assembly of all the citizens, or ‘harangue’ (*arenigo*), which was an open, inclusive, and popular event, able to make decisions by broad social consensus, as well as an occasion of public spectacle, processions, and festivities. They approved the appointment of the Consulate by acclamation or by indirect election. Regular elections to numerous offices were also held with the participation of most adult men.

In the case of Venice, the election of the doge (duke) by the entire population dates from 697. For almost five hundred years, powerful doges were elected by the Assembly, or harangue. Since 1172, the people’s general Assembly indirectly elected the Great Council (usually attended by about 1,000 to 1,500 men, 30 or more years old), which became the supreme authority, and the Senate. From the 13th to the 15th century, the people’s Assembly had to ratify the election of the doge by the Council. Other elected offices, from the 13th century until 1789, included magistrates, procurators, advocates, and a High Chancellor.

The citizens of Florence elected their rulers by broad popular suffrage for almost one hundred and fifty years from 1291 on, as well as during shorter periods in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Council of the People (with 300 members) and the Council of the Commune (with 200 members) were selected by a mixed procedure of people’s election and appointment. The standard-bearer of justice or *Gonfaloniere* and the nine members of the Lordship or *Signoria* were elected by a mixed system of voting and lots. Its administration was formed by representatives of the sixteen quarters of the city, as well as by many other

elected officers. Most adult men (over the age of twenty-five) voted and most voters were eligible.

Geneva's liberties were codified by its bishop in 1387. But the General Council rejected papal authority and in 1542 adopted a new institutional framework which lasted for more than two-hundred years. The General Council exerted legislative powers, including the ability to make laws, levy taxes, and make declarations of war and peace, as well as the power to annually elect the four syndics and other magistrates of the city and make them accountable. It was formed by about 1,500 to 4,000 heads of family, and most adult men were eligible to participate. In parallel, and increasingly in conflict with the former, the Grand Council (with 200 members) and the Petit Council, which were controlled by a few traditional families, developed legislative initiative and nominated candidates for elected offices.

Many French municipalities were also governed by people's assemblies from the late 13th century. Especially in the Southern region of Languedoc, and more famously in towns like Montpellier and Nimes, among others, the 'General Assembly of Inhabitants' was attended by all heads of households (including widows) if they were natives or long-standing residents. Attendance was commonly regarded as an obligation rather than a right. The Assemblies elected proctors or syndics, as well as the collective consulate usually called the 'town body' (*corps de ville*), over whose legislation they exerted control. Municipal offices were held for short terms of about two years.

### **Modern complexity and decline**

The end of the republican regimes in the Italian communes has been attributed to frequent violence, disorder, and instability provoked by political factionalism, family feuds, and class conflicts. As new economic interests developed, the traditional predominance of artisans' guilds was defied, and the pattern of relatively peaceful fusion of old and new elements in society weakened. But unregulated assemblies were replaced with more sophisticated rules. New institutional procedures were designed to accommodate varied social demands.

For example, for the election of their doge, the Venetians adopted an increasingly complicated procedure with up to nine stages of approval ballots and lots which was conceived with the aim of making insincere voting and manipulative strategies unviable. In Florence, an extremely complex procedure of elections was conceived to prevent the fraudulent manipulation of the electoral process and to avert the commune's domination by a few of the city's powerful families. In many cities, some restrictions regarding re-election and office accumulation promoted openness and circulation of the appointees. Rulers and office-holders stayed in their posts for short periods of only six months or a year.

Procedures like these were conceived with the aim of promoting the rotation of rulers, making manipulative strategies unviable and preventing the concentration of power into a single group. However, in some cities, the association between popular participation in increasingly complex communities and rising instability was inescapable. Elections, factions or parties, and institutional stability became a difficult combination. Lacking appropriate rules for consensus-making, factionalism, family feuds, and class conflicts weakened republican self-government. Northern Italian cities, deprived of protection by the fading Empire, entered into frequent conflicts with more powerful neighbors: the duchy of Milan, the Papacy and the kingdom of Naples, and among themselves. In most late medieval and early modern cities, the republican form of government was replaced with authoritarian, aristocratic rules, which eventually became supports to the building of new large and centralized states.

See also: Citizenship; Greek Democracy, Classical

Josep M. Colomer

### **Bibliography**

- Babeau, Albert. 1882. *Le village sous l'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Didier.
- Brucker, Gene A. 1983. *Renaissance Florence*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press.
- Colomer, Josep M. 2007. *Great Empires, Small Nations. The uncertain future of the sovereign state*. London-New York: Routledge.
- Fazy, Henri. 1890. *Les constitutions de la République de Genève : étude historique*. Paris: Librairie Fischbacher.
- Finlay, Robert. 1980. *Politics in Renaissance Venice*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fralin, Richard. 1978. *Rousseau and Representation. A study of the development of his concept of political institutions*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Guidi, Guidubaldo. 1981. *Il governo della città-repubblica di Firenze del primo Quattrocento*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 3 vol.
- Lines, Marji. 1986. 'Approval Voting and Strategy Analysis: A Venetian Example', *Theory and Decision*, 20:155–172.
- Tilly, Charles, and Wim P. Blockmans eds. 1994. *Cities and the Rise of States in Europe, A.D. 1000 to 1800*. Boulder, Co., and Oxford : Westview Press.
- Waley, Daniel. 1988. *The Italian City-Republics*. New York: Longman.