

SPARTAN INFLUENCES ON THE DESIGN OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

*A Study of Mixed Constitutional Transmission from Lycurgus through Polybius to
the Founding*

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Aided by Claude and Grok

October 9, 2026

Loeb-Collated Edition

Abstract

This paper examines the structural and theoretical influence of the Spartan constitution of Lycurgus, who lived around the ninth to eighth century BC, on the design of the American Republic. Rome and Athens seem to get nearly all the credit for the republic the Founders built, yet a much larger share belongs to Sparta, and the paper makes that case. Sparta was a martial society organized as a strict hierarchy: a small, leisured, land-owning warrior aristocracy of Spartiates; the Perioikoi, free non-citizens who worked the trades and fought beside them; and the Helots, the state-owned serfs who worked the land and made up the great majority of the people. The Spartans recognized that hierarchy openly, as if Pareto had handed his principle to Lycurgus in advance, and their constitution was monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic depending on one's place in it. It was also anchored in religion, in the worship of Apollo and Artemis. The founding carried a significant, mediated inheritance from that constitution, passed down through Polybius, the Roman Republic, and the living example of Britain. The parallels are structural: the paired Kings and the President and Vice President; the Gerousia and the Senate; the Apella and the House of Representatives; and the Ephorate, which I read as the closest Spartan moniker for a supreme judicial check. Rome was the more immediate model and Britain the nearest modern one, and the paper says so plainly. Even so, Polybius presents Sparta as the reasoned prototype of the mixed constitution, Cicero and later John Adams set the Spartan Ephorate beside the Roman Tribunate, and Madison, in Federalist 63, names Sparta among the few long-lived republics that had a senate. The record also cuts the other way. Adams ranked the English constitution above the Spartan, and Jefferson despised the Spartans outright. The paper therefore claims a foundational and theoretical debt that has been underweighted, not literal copying, and it closes with what the spirit and execution of the Lycurgan constitution can teach the United States and the West at a time when public trust in government is low. It draws on Polybius, Plutarch, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, Adams, Madison and Jefferson, and on modern scholarship by Kurt von Fritz, Elizabeth Rawson, Paul Cartledge, Stephen Hodkinson, M.N.S. Sellers, Carl Richard, Paul Rahe, Lukas Thommen, Nikos Birgalias and Victor Davis Hanson to fix both the reach and the limits of the claim.

The Spartan System: Institutions of the Lycurgan Constitution

The political order of classical Sparta was the work of the lawgiver Lycurgus. As best we can establish, he lived in the ninth or early eighth century BC. Plutarch reports that some, Aristotle among them, placed him beside Iphitus at the first Olympic festival of 776 BC, while chronologers who counted back through the Spartan royal houses put him earlier ¹, and Thucydides says that Sparta had kept the same constitution for a little over four hundred years at the close of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC, which points to about 800 BC ². The sources differ on the dates, but they agree on the man and on what he did: he gave Sparta a mixed constitution built to balance monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements. The constitution as handed down by Herodotus, Xenophon, Aristotle, Plutarch, and Polybius is the one the Founders knew, and the received account is what moves the history of political thought. Herodotus already credits Lycurgus with the Ephors and the Council of Elders, along with the army's sworn divisions and the common messes ³. The same mixed pattern shows up again in the British constitution the Founders lived beside, so the American Republic was never alone in adapting these forms.

Sparta was first of all a camp. Its full citizens, the Spartiates, were professional soldiers. They gave up farming and trade, went through the state's training system, the agoge, from the age of seven, ate together in common messes, and lived for the phalanx ^{4,5}. They called themselves the Homoioi, the Equals. The Spartiates were a leisured, land-owning warrior aristocracy set at the top of a three-tier society. Below them were the Perioikoi, the "dwellers around," free men of the towns of Laconia and Messenia who ran the trades and crafts, managed their own towns under Spartan direction, and fought in the army beside the Spartiates ⁴. Below them were the Helots, the state-owned serfs who worked the Spartiates' allotments and fed the whole system ⁴.

The proportions were lopsided. Nobody knows the exact figures, and the estimates vary widely, but they all share one shape: the Spartiates a small minority, the Perioikoi a larger free population, and the Helots the great majority, outnumbering their masters many times over ⁶. In the army that fought at Plataea in 479 BC, Herodotus counts 5,000 Spartiates, 5,000 Perioikoi hoplites, and 35,000 Helots, a rough ratio of one to one to seven ⁷. Plutarch's tradition, which has Lycurgus redistribute the land, gives nine thousand lots to the Spartiates and thirty thousand to

the Perioikoi ⁸. The Spartiates numbered close to ten thousand at their height and then shrank, until Aristotle blamed a shortage of men for the city's decline ⁹.

That hierarchy is the key to reading the constitution. The Spartans recognized rank openly and built it into the state, as if Vilfredo Pareto had passed his principle of the rule of a small governing minority to Lycurgus in advance ¹⁰. The result was a government that was monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic all at once, depending on where one stood. Among the Spartiates it was a democracy of equals: each man had his vote in the assembly and the same place at the common mess. Before the Elders it was an aristocracy. Above both stood the Kings. And for the Perioikoi and the Helots, who shared in none of it, it was rule from above.

Religion gave the system its backbone, and the Spartans believed the constitution came from Delphi. Herodotus reports that the Pythia greeted Lycurgus as more god than man ³, and Plutarch says the Great Rhetra came from the same oracle and that its word for assembling the people points to Apollo as the source and author of the polity ¹¹. The Great Rhetra was Sparta's founding charter. It stands to Sparta roughly as the Constitution of 1787 stands to the United States, though it was a few oracular lines setting out the council, the assembly, and the people's share, not a long document. Two Olympians, the twin siblings Apollo and Artemis, stand behind the arrangement it created. Apollo was the god of Delphi and of law, music, and measure. The maxim carved at his shrine, "Nothing in excess," could stand as the motto of the whole Lycurgan balance ¹². Sparta honored him at the Karneia, a festival so binding that the army would not take the field during it ¹³. Artemis, worshipped at Sparta as Artemis Orthia, presided over the rites of the young, and boys faced the whip at her altar in tests of endurance that belonged to the agoge ¹⁴. Other cults mattered too, and Cartledge names Athena of the Bronze House as the city's patron goddess ⁴, but Apollo and Artemis are the pair most plainly tied to law and to the making of the citizen. The pairing is suggestive. Apollo stood for law received from above and for the measure that keeps power within bounds; Artemis for the discipline that bound the young to one another and to the city. A constitution that claimed a divine source for its limits, joined to a training that carried its values into every boy, was likely to produce citizens who held their government as sacred and not merely useful. That is an inference and not an ancient claim, but it frames the lesson in Section 6.

No account of a government is complete without its intelligence apparatus, and on Aristotle's account Sparta's belonged to the constitutional order itself. The Krypteia sent picked

young Spartiates into the countryside to watch the Helots and kill any who seemed dangerous. Aristotle also said that the Ephors opened each term by formally declaring war on the Helots, so that such killing brought no ritual guilt. Plutarch, who reports all this, doubts that so cruel a measure was Lycurgan and dates the worst of the cruelty to the years after the earthquake and Helot revolt of 464 BC ^{15,16}. It was, in function, a secret police, loosely comparable to the internal-security and counterintelligence work of the FBI in the United States. The comparison has a limit. Sparta wrote its secret police into the constitution. The American intelligence services, the FBI among them, rest on statutes passed by Congress and are not named in the Constitution, though Congress's powers over war and spending are what support them. Thucydides records the darker end of the same logic: Sparta once invited the Helots who thought they had served the state best to claim their freedom, and then two thousand of them disappeared ¹⁷.

At the apex stood a dual kingship. Two hereditary Kings, one Agiad and one Eurypontid, reigned at the same time. Each could command an army, but their powers were tightly bound in peace. They carried out religious duties, sat in the Gerousia, and could be called to account by the Ephors and the Elders ¹⁸. Herodotus reports that after a quarrel between two Kings in the field, Sparta made it law that both Kings could not march out together ¹⁹. One would lead abroad and the other stay home, so command was never left empty. Plutarch treats the doubled kingship as a restraint in itself, and Polybius saw in the whole arrangement a guard against kingship sliding into despotism. Britain shows a comparable arrangement today: a hereditary monarch with ceremonial and residual powers, and a Prime Minister who holds the effective leadership.

The Gerousia, or Council of Elders, was made up of the two Kings and twenty-eight men over sixty, elected for life by acclamation of the citizen assembly. Plutarch presents its creation as Lycurgus's central reform ¹¹:

“Among the many innovations which Lycurgus made, the first and most important was his institution of a senate, or Council of Elders, which, as Plato says, by being blended with the ‘feverish’ government of the kings, and by having an equal vote with them in matters of the highest importance, brought safety and due moderation into counsels of state. For before this the civil polity was veering and unsteady, inclining at one time to follow the kings towards tyranny, and at another to follow the multitude towards democracy.”

The Gerousia prepared every measure that went to the assembly. It could adjourn the assembly when it judged a motion “distorted,” and it served as the highest court, with capital jurisdiction and, together with the Ephors, the authority to try the Kings. It was the aristocratic ballast of the system. Aristotle recognized the mixed character even while criticizing Spartan rigidity, and he faulted the Elders for holding office for life with no real accountability ⁹. Britain’s House of Lords long played the parallel aristocratic part, an upper chamber of hereditary and life peers that checked the Commons and shared in high judicial business until a separate Supreme Court was created.

The Apella was the assembly of adult male Spartiates. It met periodically, voted by acclamation on proposals the Gerousia put before it, and decided questions of war and peace. It could neither initiate legislation nor debate freely; its power was final assent or rejection. In the Great Rhetra as Plutarch preserves it, the people receive “the deciding voice and the power,” yet that power works inside the framework the Elders set ¹¹. Britain’s House of Commons supplies the corresponding popular chamber in a bicameral Parliament.

The Ephorate, a board of five Ephors elected annually by the assembly, added a popular check. They supervised the Kings, summoned them to account, and shared in high judicial proceedings. Aristotle thought the office both democratic and dangerous: its members came from the whole people, often poor men open to bribes, and he called the method of choosing them childish, though he granted that the office held the constitution together and that the people liked it ⁹. Xenophon is blunter about their reach. They could fine magistrates on the spot, remove them from office, imprison them, and bring capital charges ¹⁸. Over time the Ephorate became one of the most powerful offices in Sparta, which shows how alive the mixed system was. Herodotus credits Lycurgus with the Ephors, but Plutarch, following Plato, says the office came about a hundred and thirty years later, in the reign of Theopompus, as a curb on the oligarchic element, and that it strengthened the aristocracy more than it served the people ²⁰.

Taken together, these institutions embodied the principle Polybius later analyzed: no single element, whether kingship, the few, or the many, was allowed to dominate unchecked. The longevity of the Spartan order, which ancient writers put anywhere from four to eight centuries, was credited to that equilibrium. Paul Cartledge stresses that the system’s stability also depended on social discipline and the subjugation of the Helots, a point the Founders largely set aside while keeping the constitutional form ⁴. The same equilibrium appears in the British mixed

constitution that Adams and others praised, and that the Founders adapted rather than invented. It is this architecture, seen through Rome and Britain, that the rest of the paper follows into the American Republic.

1. Introduction

The American constitutional order is usually explained by British parliamentary practice, Enlightenment theory (Locke and Montesquieu above all), and the example of the Roman Republic as passed down through Polybius, Cicero, and Livy, with Athens credited as democracy's birthplace. This paper does not dispute that those sources mattered. It does hold that Rome and Athens seem to get nearly all the credit for the republic the Founders built, while a much larger share of the credit belongs to Sparta. A significant and under-examined strand runs from the Spartan constitution of Lycurgus, through Polybius's analysis of mixed government, to the structural choices of the Founders. It was not a uniquely American inheritance. Britain's own mixed constitution, a hereditary King beside a Prime Minister, Lords and Commons as aristocratic and popular chambers, and an independent judiciary, already carried the pattern Polybius traced to Lycurgus. The Founders refined and republicanized institutions they had watched working in British practice.

Polybius says that Lycurgus was the first to build a constitution that joined the virtues of kingship, aristocracy, and democracy so that each checked the others, and that the Romans reached the same end later, by experience and not by reasoned design ²¹. John Adams's *Defence of the Constitutions*, published in 1787 as the Convention prepared to meet, devotes a long letter to Lacedaemon. He calls the Spartan republic a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy that "had the three essential parts of the best possible government," but he judges the balance defective and prefers England ²². Madison, in Federalist 63, observes that history shows "no long-lived republic which had not a senate," and he names Sparta, Rome, and Carthage as the only candidates, with life senates in the first two ²³. One detail needs correcting: the "anchor against popular fluctuations" is Madison's phrase for the senate of Carthage, not Sparta's. Madison then lists the Spartan Ephori and the Roman Tribunes as small bodies elected annually by the whole people and treated as their representatives. These references are not ornaments. They reflect a classical education in which Sparta stood as the earliest reasoned attempt at institutional balance.

The modern scholarship frames the claim and also limits it. M.N.S. Sellers has shown how deeply American republicanism drew on Roman ideology, yet the Polybian framework the Americans absorbed itself rested on the Spartan prototype ²⁴. Kurt von Fritz's study of the mixed

constitution traces how Polybius's analysis became the standard vocabulary of balanced government ²⁵. Elizabeth Rawson's history of the Spartan tradition in European thought shows Sparta admired, feared, and argued over from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment ²⁶. Carl Richard's survey of the Founders' reading confirms how broad, and how selective, their classical education was ²⁷. The Founders did not need a Spartan textbook. Sparta reached them already woven into the Greek and Roman authors they read, and into Montesquieu, who builds on the same ancient theory ²⁸.

The argument has three steps, and I want to state each at its true strength. First, the mixed constitution the Founders inherited was theorized on a Spartan prototype. Second, Rome, the more immediate model, was read by ancient and early modern writers as parallel to Sparta, and in Adams's telling as borrowing from it, most clearly in the Tribune and the Ephorate (Sections 3 and 5). Third, the three-part Spartan balance of Kings, Elders, and people, passed through Montesquieu, was re-sorted by the Founders from three social orders into three functional branches. That last step is American invention. It is where the Spartan inheritance stops and the Constitution's own originality begins.

2. Branches of Government: Spartan and American Monikers

A word on method. A “moniker” here is a functional label: the Spartan body that did the job the American body does, or something close to it. I am not claiming that a clerk in Philadelphia copied a Spartan chart.

2.1 Dual Kings and President / Vice President (Executive)

Sparta’s dual kingship supplied the monarchical element of the mixed constitution. Two Kings from rival houses reigned together. One normally led in the field while the other stayed home, each checked the other, and both answered to the Gerousia and the Ephors^{18,19}. Adams, in Letter XL, describes the Kings as high priests, commanders in chief, and presidents of the senate²². Hold on to that last phrase.

The American Constitution gives us one President and one Vice President, and I read them as a paired executive in the Spartan sense, with one dominant and one standing ready. The resemblance is closer than it first looks. As Article II originally stood, the Vice President was simply the runner-up in the electoral vote, which made him a rival from the other house, as Jefferson was to Adams after 1796. The Vice President presides over the Senate, as Adams’s Spartan Kings presided over theirs, and Adams himself later sat in that chair as the first Vice President. And the Vice President is the reserve: if the President is lost, the second office steps up, much as the surviving King kept the army and the state going when a Spartan King fell in the field.

The contrasts need stating. A fallen Spartan King was not replaced by his colleague. The seat passed within his own house, which is how Leonidas’s line carried on after Thermopylae, so the American succession is tidier than the Spartan one. The Spartan Kings also held equal military command, while the Vice President holds no executive power at all and the President holds all of it. Hamilton wanted it that way: “A feeble execution is but another phrase for a bad execution”²⁹. Rome offers the nearer comparison for a pair of equals, since Polybius treats the Consuls as the kingly element of the Roman mixture³⁰. Britain’s King and Prime Minister divide executive capacity in yet another way. The point is not that the American arrangement is Spartan. The point is that all of these systems were working on the same problem, how to keep

the top office from becoming one unchecked person, and Sparta's answer is the oldest on the record.

2.2 Gerousia and Senate (Upper Legislative / Aristocratic Chamber)

The Gerousia was Sparta's Council of Elders: twenty-eight men over sixty, elected for life by acclamation, plus the two Kings. It prepared every measure for the assembly, could adjourn the assembly over a distorted motion, and served as the highest court. Plutarch presents it as the ballast that steadied the ship of state between Kings and people, and in the Great Rhetra as he records it the body had to be set up before the assembly could act ¹¹. Aristotle saw the oligarchic element tempering both kingship and the demos, and also faulted the Elders for holding office without accountability ⁹.

The United States Senate was built to do analogous work: deliberate, steady the government, and check the popular chamber. It is smaller than the House, its members serve longer terms, and until the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913 the state legislatures chose them. Madison's argument in Federalist 63 is that a republic needs a select and durable body in its government, and he reaches for the ancient republics as proof ²³. He is also careful about the difference. The Spartan and Roman senates sat for life; the American Senate would not. Hamilton urged tenure during good behavior at the Convention and lost that argument ³¹. The elective, fixed-term Senate is a decisive American departure from the Spartan model.

Kurt von Fritz's analysis of Polybius gave later writers the conceptual vocabulary for justifying an upper chamber ²⁵. The Gerousia is therefore both a classical moniker and a functional model for the aristocratic upper house, in America and in Britain's House of Lords alike, which long checked the Commons inside a living mixed constitution.

2.3 Apella and House of Representatives (Lower Legislative / Popular Assembly)

The Apella was the assembly of adult male Spartiates. It voted by acclamation on proposals framed by the Gerousia and decided questions of war and peace. Its power was decisive but reactive. In Plutarch's account of the Rhetra the people hold "the deciding voice and the power," yet they could not initiate or freely amend ¹¹, and Adams stresses that the assembly was forbidden even to debate ²². This was democracy constrained by aristocratic initiative.

The House of Representatives is the more popular chamber of Congress, directly elected for short terms and closer to the people. Like the Apella it supplies the democratic element whose assent legislation needs, and Britain's House of Commons plays the same part in Parliament. The parallel is functional, not identical: the American House has far more initiative under Article I, including the power to originate revenue bills. Madison saw the difference clearly. For him the American answer to the passions of ancient assemblies was representation, which filters popular will and keeps the people out of government in their collective capacity²³. Sellers notes that American republican theory kept the classical insistence on popular consent while rejecting direct popular government²⁴. The House carries that retained insistence, as the Commons does in Britain. For readers of Plutarch and Polybius, the Apella's limited but decisive role showed why a popular chamber was indispensable even in a balanced republic.

2.4 Judicial Power: The Ephorate and the Supreme Court

The more elegant Spartan moniker for the Supreme Court is the Ephorate, the board of five Ephors chosen each year from the whole citizen body. I capitalize Ephorate and Tribunal throughout as the names of institutions. The Ephors stood outside the two political bodies, the Kings and the Elders, and their business was to keep the whole constitution honest. Xenophon says they could fine any magistrate, remove him from office, imprison him, and bring a capital charge, and that they punished lawbreaking the moment they saw it rather than waiting out the year¹⁸. Aristotle adds that the Ephors exercised jurisdiction and decided cases of importance, and he wanted their verdicts tied to settled rules rather than to their own judgment⁹. That is very nearly the case for judicial restraint. Adams, in Letter XL, describes the Ephors as five magistrates appointed to inspect the administration and maintain the constitution²². Put that sentence in front of a lawyer and he will think of the Court.

The analogy is functional, and its limits should be stated. The Ephors were elected annually from the whole citizen body; justices are appointed and serve for life under Article III. The Ephors could depose Kings; the Court cannot remove a President, and Spartan practice had nothing like judicial review of statutes. Aristotle thought the office badly designed, open to poor men and to bribery⁹. And Madison, in Federalist 63, treats the Ephori and the Roman Tribunes as annually elected bodies standing in for the people, not as judges²³. The Ephorate combined what Americans split between the Court and the popular branches. That is why Cicero,

comparing it with the Roman Tribunate, could say that the Ephors were set against the Spartan Kings as the Tribunes were set against the Consuls ³². Lukas Thommen observes that Polybius's comparison of Sparta and Rome passes over the Ephors, so the Ephor and Tribune pairing is Ciceronian rather than Polybian, and he is cautious about reading it as borrowing ³³. Nicolas Richer's study remains the fullest account of what the office actually did ³⁴.

Britain's independent judiciary, historically tied to the Lords' appellate jurisdiction and formalized in the United Kingdom Supreme Court in 2009, offers the nearest modern model, and Montesquieu's reading of English practice shaped Article III. Hamilton's defense of judicial independence in Federalist 78 rests on the idea that the courts have "neither force nor will, but merely judgment" ³⁵. That is a different bargain from the Ephors' power to punish magistrates directly. The Court is the Ephorate civilized: it judges, and it leaves the force to others. I think that is the right way to put the inheritance.

2.5 The Gerousia's Capital Jurisdiction and the Senate as Court of Impeachment

The Gerousia did not hand all judicial work to the Ephors. It alone could impose death or exile on a citizen, and with the Ephors it could try a King ¹⁸. Judgment on the gravest matters therefore sat in an aristocratic council, not in the assembly and not in a single magistrate. The American counterpart is narrower. The Senate tries impeachments, and a deliberative body of long-term members judges high officers much as the Elders did. Here the nearer source is Britain. Hamilton says in Federalist 65 that the model for the impeachment court was borrowed from the British constitution ³⁶, and the Lords had tried impeachments for centuries. Sparta's part is the underlying principle, that grave judicial questions should not be left to popular majorities or to a single executive. The Senate's part is to carry that principle in a form that reached Philadelphia by way of Westminster. Von Fritz shows that the mixed constitution's success depended on each element checking the others ²⁵, and the separate American judiciary is a modern intensification of that same logic, already visible in Sparta and in Britain.

3. Polybius and the Mixed Constitution

Polybius (*Histories* 6.3–10, 6.48–50) supplies the theoretical bridge. He argues that simple constitutions inevitably decay into their corrupt twins: kingship into despotism, aristocracy into oligarchy, democracy into mob rule. Lycurgus alone, by foresight and not by trial and error, combined all three good forms. The key passage (6.10) reads ²¹:

“Lycurgus, then, foreseeing this, did not make his constitution simple and uniform, but united in it all the good and distinctive features of the best governments, so that none of the principles should grow unduly and be perverted into its allied evil, but that, the force of each being neutralized by that of the others, neither of them should prevail and outbalance another, but that the constitution should remain for long in a state of equilibrium like a well-trimmed boat, kingship being guarded from arrogance by the fear of the commons, who were given a sufficient share in the government, and the commons on the other hand not venturing to treat the kings with contempt from fear of the elders”

Polybius adds that Lycurgus foresaw all this by reasoning, untaught by adversity, whereas the Romans reached the same result by another road: not through one lawgiver’s reasoning, but by living through many struggles and picking the best course out of what disaster taught them. This is the crucial concession and the crucial claim. Sparta is the original reasoned mixed constitution; Rome is its empirical realization. Later British constitutional development continued the same empirical adaptation.

Polybius is no uncritical admirer of Sparta, and the paper should not make him one. In 6.48–50 he holds that Lycurgus’s design was superb for keeping a small, disciplined city free and secure, but poorly suited to expansion, and that Rome’s constitution was better built for empire ³⁷. F.W. Walbank’s commentary is the standard guide through that comparison ³⁸. Cicero lets Cato make the Roman side of the same point: the Roman constitution was the work of many generations, not of one man’s genius ³⁹.

Kurt von Fritz showed that Polybius’s account became the standard classical analysis of balanced government ²⁵. Later European writers took the Spartan example from that Roman-mediated Greek text. Machiavelli, in *Discourses* 1.2, sets Lycurgus’s mixed constitution beside Rome’s ⁴⁰, and J.G.A. Pocock’s account of the Machiavellian moment shows how that line of thought carried into English and then American republican argument ⁴¹. The Founders knew Polybius, directly and through Machiavelli, Harrington, and Montesquieu, and so met Sparta as

the conceptual source of the balance they wanted to build. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, the most cited modern authority on separation of powers, then turns the three social orders into three powers and praises the English constitution as the best realization of the ancient theory²⁸. The Ephorate, though Polybius gives it less attention than the Kings, the Gerousia, and the assembly, formed part of the living checks that kept the equilibrium. Britain's mixed constitution showed the Founders that the pattern was not only ancient but practicable.

4. Transmission to the Founders

4.1 What the Founders read

The Founders' classical education gave them direct access to these texts. Carl Richard's survey shows how widely they read Greek and Roman authors, and how selectively they used them ²⁷. The Spartan side of that reading ran partly through what François Ollier long ago called the "mirage spartiate," the idealized Sparta of ancient and modern writers ⁴², and Elizabeth Rawson's history of that tradition shows it alive from Plutarch through Rousseau ²⁶. Greek scholarship keeps the subject open. A 2007 volume edited by Nikos Birgalias and colleagues in Athens gathers studies on ancient Sparta's contribution to political thought and practice ⁴³.

4.2 Adams, Madison, and Jefferson

Adams's *Defence*, published in 1787, treats Sparta, Rome, and the mixed constitution at length ²². In Letter XL he writes that the Lacedaemonian republic "may then, with propriety, be called monarchical, and had the three essential parts of the best possible government." He follows Polybius closely, but he is not naive about it. He says the Spartan balance failed in the essential particular, because the aristocracy held a legal power far above that of King or people, and he judges Sparta's civil liberty "little better than that of a man chained in a dungeon." He rates the English constitution higher, as the product of the most mature deliberation on universal history. Yet he gives the Ephors real credit: five annual magistrates to inspect the administration and keep the constitution, bound to the Kings by a monthly oath, and he says the Roman Tribunes were borrowed from that institution. In this one letter Adams hands the paper two of its premises, the Ephors as guardians of the constitution and Rome as a borrower from Sparta. He also hands it the strongest caution. The Spartan balance rested on opinion and religion, not on law.

Madison's contribution runs through the *Federalist*. In Number 38 he cites Lycurgus, with Minos, Solon, and others, as a lawgiver whose reform came from a single citizen, and he uses the contrast to praise the deliberative method of the Philadelphia Convention ⁴⁴. Number 63 groups Sparta with Rome and Carthage for their senates, and pairs the Ephori with the Tribunes as annually elected bodies of the people ²³.

Jefferson cuts the other way, and the paper should say so. Writing to Henry Wheaton in 1821, he said he had never understood how such a tribe of savages won the world's admiration, likened the Spartans to American Indians, and allowed them only that they were "as brave as bull-dogs" ⁴⁵. He credited whatever Sparta's name still carries to neighboring Athens. The Founders were therefore not of one mind. Adams admired the structure and rejected the system; Madison used Sparta as precedent; Jefferson rejected it. No text of Jefferson's defending the Spartan constitution has turned up in this study so far, and the Wheaton letter is late, so it cannot speak by itself for the Jefferson of 1787. It does show that the Spartan tradition was contested at the founding generation's own table.

4.3 The Citizen-Soldier and the Agrarian Republic

Victor Davis Hanson supplies the bridge between Sparta's assembled hoplites and the Founders' yeoman republic. In *The Western Way of War*, Hanson argues that the Greek invention of decisive infantry battle between citizen-soldiers is bound up with consensual, constitutional government, because both aim at a quick and public settlement of dispute ⁴⁶. In *The Other Greeks* he argues that the middling farmer-hoplite, not the aristocrat, created the core values of the polis and, through it, of the West ⁴⁷. Two things follow for this paper.

First, the Apella is best read as the army in its civic form, the male citizen body that fights and votes in the same formation. That is this paper's inference, not Hanson's, but it helps explain why the Spartan assembly decides by acclamation and does not debate, much as a phalanx answers a command.

Second, Hanson's model strains when it reaches Sparta, and the strain is instructive. The Spartiates were hoplites freed from the plow by Helot labor, so Sparta is the hoplite polis without the farmer. For a discussion of how Hanson's thesis sits within wider debates over Greek political history, see Samons ⁴⁸. The Founders' own ideal, Jefferson's yeoman, is far closer to Hanson's farmer than to the Spartiate. That helps explain how Jefferson could honor the citizen-soldier and still despise Sparta, and it marks the line between what the American Republic took from the Spartan assembly and what it refused.

4.4 The Chain, and Where It Stops

The chain runs as follows: Lycurgus and Sparta; the accounts of Herodotus, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Aristotle; Polybius and Cicero; Roman practice and the later European reception, including Machiavelli, Harrington, Montesquieu, and Britain; and finally American adaptation. Paul Rahe's *Republics Ancient and Modern* reads the Founders as deliberately moving away from the ancient model, whose purest instance was Sparta, toward a modern one⁴⁹. Rahe's reading marks the outer edge of the claim made here. The Spartan contribution is foundational to the theoretical framework even where the concrete institutional borrowing was Roman or English, and the Founders' functional division of powers is their own. The American Republic was not unique in copying the Spartan pattern. Britain had already adapted it in its own form.

5. Concessions, Roman Mediation, and Appropriation

5.1 The concessions

The Roman Republic was the more immediate classical model. Dual Consuls, a powerful Senate, and popular assemblies map onto American institutions in several respects more closely than the Spartan system does, and Polybius himself rates Rome higher as an engine of empire ³⁷. English mixed government (King and Prime Minister, Lords and Commons, independent courts), the experience of colonial legislatures, and Enlightenment theories of representation and separation of powers supplied the rest. Adams ranked England above Sparta ²², and Jefferson thought little of Sparta at all ⁴⁵. These concessions have to be stated plainly.

5.2 Priority and appropriation

Still, Polybius's ranking of Sparta as the reasoned original and Rome as the empirical successor establishes the priority of the Spartan model inside the classical tradition the Founders studied ²¹. Rome took over Hellenic culture on a large scale: the interpretatio romana of the gods (Zeus as Jupiter, Ares as Mars, Athena as Minerva), Greek philosophy and historiography, and Greek military symbols. Political thought traveled the same road, and the clearest case is the Tribune. Cicero sets the Roman Tribunes beside the Spartan Ephors ³². Rousseau puts the two together under the single heading of Tribune in *The Social Contract* ⁵⁰. Adams says flatly that the Tribunes were borrowed from the Ephorate ²². Thommen is right to warn that the ancient comparison was typological, a way of understanding Roman office through a Spartan mirror, and that Cicero himself held Roman practice to be independently grown and superior ³³. I take his point. But a comparison made by Cicero, repeated by Adams, and then reproduced when Madison lists the Ephori and the Tribunes together in Federalist 63 ²³ is itself a link in the chain of transmission, whether or not the Romans copied anything.

5.3 The crimson cloak

The same pattern shows in dress. Xenophon and Plutarch say the Spartan scarlet cloak was chosen as the least womanish and most warlike garment, and Plutarch and later writers add that its color hid blood ⁵¹. By most accounts Rome's armies and generals made red their color too, in the soldier's tunic and the general's cloak, and the Western military tradition kept it. No ancient

writer says that Rome took the color from Sparta, and I do not claim derivation. The claim is narrower. The scarlet that marked Sparta's disciplined soldiery became a Mediterranean and then Western sign of military order, a small and visible instance of how institutions and symbols travel together from one hegemon to the next.

5.4 Cautions

Cartledge and Hodkinson both warn against romanticizing Sparta ^{4,5}. The warning is sound, but the intellectual history of the mixed constitution cannot erase the Polybian priority of the Lycurgan model. The American system stands in a line that includes both ancient Sparta and modern Britain.

6. Conclusion

The Spartan constitution of Lycurgus supplied the earliest and most influential reasoned example of mixed government built to neutralize the vices of pure forms. Polybius made that example canonical, Cicero set its Ephors beside Rome's Tribunes, and Adams and Madison engaged it directly in designing and defending the American frame. The dual Kings and the President and Vice President (with Britain's King and Prime Minister), the Gerousia and the Senate (with the House of Lords), the Apella and the House of Representatives (with the Commons), the Ephors and the Supreme Court, and the Gerousia's capital jurisdiction and the Senate's impeachment court all reflect this inheritance, mediated through Rome and Britain and reworked by modern theory and American circumstance.

The influence is real, and it is primarily theoretical and structural rather than a matter of literal copying. Acknowledging it does not diminish the originality of the American achievement, above all the re-sorting of three social orders into three functional branches, or the greater practical weight of Roman and English models. It does restore a missing link in the classical pedigree of the Republic and place that pedigree in its comparative context. The record is divided: Adams respected the structure and rejected the system, and Jefferson rejected Sparta altogether. Hanson's citizen-soldier helps show why the Republic could borrow the civic logic of the Spartan assembly while refusing Spartan society. The Founders wanted the farmer, not the Helot-fed Spartiate. The equilibrium Lycurgus sought, and that Polybius praised as lasting like a well-trimmed boat, remains the animating principle of the Constitution's separation and balance of powers, as it animates the British system the Founders knew.

What the Spartans Can Remind Us Of

The paper closes with the question its subject raises for the present. Public confidence in government has been eroding in the United States since the 1960s. In 1958, 73 percent of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time; in September 2025 the figure was 17 percent, and it has not topped 30 percent since 2007⁵². Many observers report similar doubts across the West. People suspect that those who govern are not bound by the rules they write, that failure goes unanswered, and that no common purpose holds the system together. Sparta cannot be a model. It was a slave-holding warrior state that governed its serfs by terror, and Cartledge is right to warn against the romance⁴. But its

constitution lasted, by Thucydides's count, more than four hundred years ², and the reasons it lasted are worth asking about.

Three things stand out. First, the rulers lived under their own rules. The Spartiates, Kings included, ate at the common messes, shared the same training in youth, and answered to officials who could fine, depose, and imprison them ¹⁸. Plutarch says Lycurgus began by dividing the land into equal lots, replaced gold and silver coin with heavy iron money, and made the rich eat at the same mess as the poor, so that wealth could be neither used nor displayed ⁵³. Second, accountability was routine and aimed upward. The Ephors were chosen every year, and power was never allowed to settle in one place. Third, the law was held sacred and was shared. The constitution carried the authority of Delphi, Apollo's measure stood behind its limits, Artemis's discipline carried its habits into every boy, and, as Plutarch has it, the main laws were left unwritten so that education would do the lawgiver's work in every citizen ⁵⁴. Citizens obeyed it because it came from something above any officeholder and because they saw that the powerful obeyed it too.

The Spartan failure is the other half of the lesson. The system's stability rested on a closed circle of Equals and on a majority held down by force. Plutarch dates the turn to the gold and silver that flowed home after the Peloponnesian War and undid the laws of Lycurgus ⁵⁵. As land and wealth gathered in fewer hands the circle shrank, and Aristotle blamed Sparta's decline on that shortage of men ⁹. A republic whose governing circle narrows while its burdens fall on an excluded majority has begun to fail, whatever its constitution says.

What the Spartans can remind us of is simple and hard. A constitution is not kept by its text. It is kept by citizens who see that the powerful are bound by the same rules, who are taught from youth to put the law above their own advantage, and who share a sense of something larger than themselves. Where those habits fade, no arrangement of Kings, Elders, and assemblies, or of Presidents, Senators, and Justices, will hold. Where they live, a state can last four centuries on a balance of three parts.

Two lines of research would settle the open questions. One is the precise editions of Polybius, Plutarch, and Cicero in the libraries of the Convention delegates, Jefferson's catalogued library included. The other is a close reading of the sources behind Adams's Spartan chapters in the *Defence*, together with the Greek and Anglophone scholarship on the Ephors gathered in Birgalias's volume and in Richer's book.

Notes

Notes are numbered in order of first citation. Quotations from Polybius (Paton) and Plutarch (Perrin) have been collated with the Loeb texts. Page numbers for modern works remain to be added.

1. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 1 (the disputed dating of Lycurgus), trans. Perrin (Loeb, 1914).
2. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.18.
3. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.65, trans. A.D. Godley (Loeb).
4. Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (Overlook, 2003).
5. Stephen Hodkinson, *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta* (Duckworth, 2000).
6. Walter Scheidel, "Helot Numbers: A Simplified Model," and Thomas J. Figueira, "The Demography of the Spartan Helots," in Nino Luraghi and Susan E. Alcock, eds., *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures* (Harvard University Press for the Center for Hellenic Studies, 2003).
7. Herodotus, *Histories* 9.10 and 9.28–29 (the army at Plataea).
8. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 8.3 (the land lots).
9. Aristotle, *Politics* 2.9 (1269a–1271b).
10. Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society (Trattato di sociologia generale, 1916)*, trans. Andrew Bongiorno and Arthur Livingston (Harcourt, Brace, 1935).
11. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 5.6–7 and 6.1–4 (the Gerousia and the Great Rhetra), trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb, 1914). The quoted passages are collated with the Loeb text.
12. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.24.1 (the maxims at Delphi).
13. Herodotus, *Histories* 7.206 (the Karneia).
14. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* 2.9 (the altar of Artemis Orthia).
15. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 28 (the Krypteia and the annual declaration of war on the Helots, both reported on Aristotle's authority, with Plutarch's own doubts), trans. Perrin (Loeb, 1914).
16. Plato, *Laws* 1.633b–c (the Krypteia).
17. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 4.80.
18. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, esp. chs. 8 (the Ephors), 10 (the Gerousia), 13 and 15 (the Kings), trans. E.C. Marchant (Loeb).
19. Herodotus, *Histories* 5.75.
20. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 7 and 29.6 (the Ephorate).
21. Polybius, *Histories* 6.10, trans. W.R. Paton (Loeb, vol. 3, 1923); cf. 6.3–9 on the cycle of constitutions. The quotation is collated with the Loeb text, and the sentence continues beyond the ellipsis.
22. John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (London, 1787), vol. 1, Letter XL, "Ancient Aristocratical Republics: Lacedaemon."
23. *The Federalist* No. 63 (1 March 1788), generally attributed to Madison; authorship has been disputed between Madison and Hamilton.
24. M.N.S. Sellers, *American Republicanism: Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution* (NYU Press, 1994).

25. Kurt von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity* (Columbia University Press, 1954).
26. Elizabeth Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
27. Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 1994).
28. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, bk. 11, ch. 6.
29. *The Federalist* No. 70 (Hamilton).
30. Polybius, *Histories* 6.11–12 (the Consuls).
31. James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention*, 18 June 1787 (Hamilton’s plan of government).
32. Cicero, *De legibus* 3.16; *De re publica* 2.58.
33. Lukas Thommen, “Volkstribunat und Ephorat: Überlegungen zum ‘Aufseheramt’ in Rom und Sparta,” *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 6 (2003): 19–38.
34. Nicolas Richer, *Les éphores: études sur l’histoire et sur l’image de Sparte (VIIIe–IIIe siècle avant Jésus-Christ)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998).
35. *The Federalist* No. 78 (Hamilton).
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37. Polybius, *Histories* 6.48–50.
38. F.W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), on book 6.
39. Cicero, *De re publica* 2.2.
40. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* 1.2.
41. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975).
42. François Ollier, *Le mirage spartiate* (Paris, 1933).
43. Nikos Birgalias et al., eds., *The Contribution of Ancient Sparta to Political Thought and Practice* (Athens, 2007).
44. *The Federalist* No. 38 (Madison).
45. Thomas Jefferson to Henry Wheaton, 15 February 1821, Founders Online, National Archives.
46. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (Knopf, 1989; reissued University of California Press, 2000).
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48. Loren J. Samons II, review and discussion of Hanson, *The Other Greeks*, and Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution*, *Arion*, 3rd ser., 5.3 (1998): 99–123.
49. Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
50. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, bk. 4, ch. 5.
51. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* 11.3 (the red cloak); Plutarch, *Instituta Laconica* 24, in *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Loeb, 1931) (the cloak and wounds).
52. Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025,” 4 December 2025.

53. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 8–10 (the land lots, iron money, and common messes).
54. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 13 (unwritten laws and education).
55. Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 30.1 (gold and silver after the Peloponnesian War).

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