Patricians and Plebeians: Experiencing a Struggle for Power

Experiential Exercise

Overview
In this Experiential Exercise students assume the roles of patricians and plebeians to understand how the struggle for power between these two groups led to a more democratic system of government in the Roman Republic. First, students are assigned to one of two groups, "Pats" or "Plebs," representing patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome. Then, Pats decide the number and colors of tiles—small pieces of paper cut out from magazines—Plebs should make for a mosaic project. Next, as the Plebs make tiles, the Pats relax and play games in the "Forum," a separate section of the classroom. Eventually the Plebs become frustrated that the Pats are not required to work and refuse to cut out tiles until the Pats agree to negotiate a new working arrangement. The teacher then debriefs the experience, making comparisons between the plebeians' demands for political power in ancient Rome and the students' experience. Afterward, students read how the struggle for power between patricians and plebeians led to a more democratic system of government in the Roman Republic.

Objectives
Students will be able to
- describe the differences between patricians and plebeians in the Roman Republic
- list the political rights earned by plebeians in their struggles with patricians
- explain how the government of the Roman Republic was reorganized to become more democratic

Materials
- overhead projector
- games, such as checkers and playing cards
- 8 magazines containing color photographs or illustrations, or similar multicolored paper, that can be cut into small pieces by students
- 8 rulers
- pairs of scissors
- snacks or candy
- student copies of Student Handout 1.2A
- Slide 1.2A
Procedures in Detail

1 **Before class, review the intent of this activity.** This activity is designed to introduce students to the struggle for political power between patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome. By assuming the roles of “Pats” and “Plebs”—groups representing patricians and plebeians—to perform a task in which one group has decision-making power and the other groups do all the labor, students will be better able to understand why the government of the Roman Republic was reorganized to become more democratic.

2 **Arrange classroom and prepare materials.** Before class, arrange your classroom according to the diagram on the right. Place at least one magazine and four pairs of scissors in the middle of each group of desks. In the “Forum,” place six desks, snacks, magazines to read, and games, such as checkers and playing cards.

3 **Have students randomly sit at desks, project Slide 1.2A, and introduce students to the activity.** As students enter the classroom, have them randomly sit at desks in one of the six groups. Explain that in this activity they will make tiles by cutting small pieces of paper from magazine pages to create a mosaic on ancient Rome. (Note: Students will never actually create a mosaic. Rather, they will make tiles in a working arrangement that simulates the relationship between patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome.) To help students understand what a mosaic is, project **Slide 1.2A**, which shows a Roman mosaic depicting a deer and a pool on the wall of a mausoleum. Tell students that Romans used fragments of colored tile, glass, and stone to create mosaics that showed scenes of everyday life, nature, and important Roman Gods. Mosaics were often constructed on the walls and floors of public buildings and the homes of the wealthy. Explain that instead of using fragments of colored tile, glass, and stone, students will use 1/2-inch squares of paper to create their mosaic.

4 **Assign students the roles of Pats and Plebs.** After introducing the activity, explain to students that they will work in small groups to prepare tiles for the mosaic. Tell them to identify who in each group is wearing the darkest clothing. Announce that these students are now called *Pats* and that they will be the group leaders. The rest of the students are now called *Plebs*. (Note: The random manner in which group leaders are selected is intended to represent the fact that patricians inherited their political power.) Take the Pats aside, and quickly review the following responsibilities with them:
As leaders, Pats will have the power to make important decisions about key aspects of the mosaic but will not participate in the work. Pats should behave like leaders by acting confident and decisive. Once decisions have been made, Pats should instruct Plebs to cut out tiles. Each tile must be only one color and no larger than a 1/2-inch square. If necessary, Pats should raise their voices to make Plebs listen to their instructions and to get them to cut out the tiles as quickly as possible.

Emphasize to Pats that they should be assertive to make sure their groups work quickly.

5 Have Pats stand in front of the class and vote on how the Plebs should make tiles. Once Pats understand their roles, have them stand in front of the class. Tell the Plebs that before they cut out tiles for the mosaic, the Pats will decide for the class the size and colors of the mosaic and how much time they will have to create it. As the Plebs watch, ask the six Pats to vote on the following four questions. As they make their decisions, record them on the chalkboard.

1. Should there be 5, 7, or 10 colors in the mosaic? (Note: Before the Pats decide, tell them that the mosaic should be as colorful as possible. Also, remind them that the Plebs, not the Pats, will do all the work.)
2. Which of the following colors should be included in the mosaic: black, brown, gray, blue, green, purple, red, orange, white, yellow, pink?
3. Should the Plebs cut out 300, 450, or 600 tiles for the mosaic? (Note: Before the Pats decide, tell them that the mosaic should be as large as possible.)
4. Should the Plebs have 5, 10, or 15 minutes to cut out the tiles?

Encouraging Pats to select large numbers of colors and tiles will create more tension between Pats and Plebs. It is critical to the activity’s success that there be tension between the two groups.

6 Have Pats return to their groups and instruct the Plebs how to make mosaic tiles. Once the Pats have decided the size and colors of the mosaic, tell them to return to their groups and instruct the Plebs to make tiles by cutting out approximately 1/2-square-inch pieces of paper from magazines. Remind the Plebs that it is important for them to work with the Pat who is their group leader so that the class can produce the established number of tiles within the time limit. Make sure the Plebs prepare the tiles within the guidelines that have been set for them by the Pats. Tell students that if they do not complete the task in the specified amount of time, they will be unable to start the mosaic project on time and will lose academic points. (Note: The loss of academic points is intended to represent the loss of peace and order in ancient Rome that resulted when patricians and plebeians struggled for power.)
7 Have Plebs begin working, have Pats relax in the “Forum,” and encourage Plebs to voice their complaints. Once Plebs understand how to make mosaic tiles, have them begin working. As the Plebs cut out tiles, make sure they are one color only and no larger than 1/2-inch squares—they can use their rulers to measure the pieces of paper they cut out from magazines. Have Pats tell Plebs to separate the tiles into piles by color. Circulate throughout the room and monitor their work. Make sure that only Plebs are cutting out tiles and that Pats are overseeing the task. After 2 to 3 minutes, tell all the Pats to move to the “Forum” and relax while the Plebs work. (Note: This action is designed to represent the aristocratic privileges that patricians held.) Expect Plebs to be frustrated with the privileges of the Pats. To ensure that a majority of students are frustrated, encourage them to complain about the task by prompting them with these questions: Don’t you wish you could sit in the Forum? Why is it taking your group so long to create tiles? To heighten the tension in the classroom, repeat any complaints Plebs make so that all students can hear them.

8 Have frustrated Plebs move to one corner of the room and elect two representatives to express their grievances. Once a majority of the Plebs are frustrated with preparing tiles, ask them this question: Would those of you who are upset about making tiles like to meet and share your feelings? Have Plebs who respond affirmatively move to one corner of the room. Have the remaining Plebs sit quietly and listen to what the frustrated Plebs have to say. Meet with the frustrated Plebs and facilitate a discussion using these questions:

- Why are you upset?
- What process do you think should be used to make the mosaic tiles?
- What roles should Pats play in the making of them?
- How might you get the Pats to change the work process?
- Do you want to present your complaints to the Pats?
- Which two members of this group could best represent your ideas in a meeting with the Pats?

Have the frustrated Plebs elect two representatives to express their grievances. Encourage them to select representatives who will speak confidently and are capable of negotiating a new working arrangement.

9 Have the Pleb representatives negotiate a new working arrangement with the Pats. After the frustrated Plebs have elected two representatives, have the six Pats move to the front of the classroom. Then, have the two Pleb representatives present their grievances to the Pats. Allow the Pats to respond to the demands made by the representatives. Encourage the Pleb representatives and the Pats to negotiate a new working arrangement for making the mosaic tiles that both sides can accept. If they are unable to compromise, coax them into the act by reminding them that unless the tiles are prepared by the end of the class period, all
students will lose academic points. Once an agreement has been reached, have the two sides announce the terms of the agreement to the entire class. (Note: The new working arrangement may include minor changes—such as decreasing the number of tiles needed by the end of the specified time period—or major ones—such as allowing Plebs to vote on new guidelines for preparing tiles.) Then, have all student return to their desks.

Wrap Up

1 Debrief the experience. Once students have negotiated a new working arrangement, hold a class discussion centering on these questions:

- How did you feel at the start of the activity?
- What did you think of the manner in which Pats were selected?
- Why did some Plebs become frustrated with making tiles?
- Why did the Pats negotiate a new working arrangement with the two Pleb representatives?
- What groups of people in ancient Rome may have struggled over political power?

2 Make connections between history and the activity. Once students have shared their feelings about the activity, have them connect their experience with the history it was intended to represent. Explain to students that the activity was designed to help them better understand the struggles between patricians and plebeians—represented as Pats and Plebs, respectively, in the activity—for political power in ancient Rome. Tell students that patricians were members of a small number of wealthy Roman families, and that plebeians made up the bulk of the population—working mostly as peasants, laborers, artisans, and shopkeepers. Explain that until 287 B.C.E., patricians held most of the political power in ancient Rome. Tell students that prior to that time, the plebeians used a series of protests to gain key political rights, such as representation in the government and the codification of laws. Use details from the T-chart on the next page to help students understand how their experience connects to history.

3 Pass out Student Handout 1.2A and have students read how the struggle for power led to a more democratic system of government in the Roman Republic. Explain to students that plebeians struggled with patricians for more than 200 years to achieve equality under ancient Roman law. Give each student a copy of Student Handout 1.2A: The Struggle for Political Power in Ancient Rome. Have students carefully read the handout.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Reality</th>
<th>In-Class Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• patricians were members of a small number of wealthy families and inherited their political power and wealth</td>
<td>• a small group of Pats were selected at random by the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• patricians made most of the political decisions</td>
<td>• Pats voted on the way Plebs would create mosaic tiles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plebeians made up the bulk of Roman society—working as peasants, laborers, artisans, and shopkeepers</td>
<td>• the majority of the class were Plebs preparing mosaic tiles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plebeians had fewer privileges than patricians and could not serve in the government</td>
<td>• Plebs were not allowed to make decisions on how to prepare the mosaic tiles, or to relax with Pats in the “Forum”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plebeians withdrew from Rome when their political demands were not met</td>
<td>• some Plebs stopped preparing mosaic tiles and moved to a corner of the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plebeians elected <em>Tribunes of the Plebs</em> to protect their political rights</td>
<td>• Plebs elected two representatives to negotiate with the Pats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Idea for Class Notes

As students read *Student Handout 1.2A*, have them underline passages describing key events that caused the Roman Republic to become a more democratic form of government. After students finish reading, tell them to record the events they identified on a timeline that ranges from 509 to 287 B.C.E. on the right side of their notebooks. For each event, have students write a one-sentence summary in their own words and draw a visual to represent it. Here is what part of the timeline might look like:

- **509 B.C.E.** Romans overthrow the last Etruscan king.
- **494 B.C.E.** Plebeians withdraw from Rome and refuse to serve in the military unless their demands for more political power are met.
The Struggle for Political Power in Ancient Rome

Between 616 and 509 B.C.E., Etruscan (pronounced eh-TRUSS-ken) kings from northern Italy ruled the city of Rome. During this time, Roman society came to be divided into two classes of citizens by birth. The upper class was a small group of wealthy landowners who believed their ancestors had been the first to settle in Rome. They were called patricians (pronounced puh-TREE-shenz)—from the Latin word patres, which means father—because they chose the "fathers of the state," or the officials who advised the king. Patricians claimed to have noble status in Roman society because they controlled the most valuable land and held key military and religious offices. The lower class of Roman citizens were called plebeians (pronounced pleh-BEE-inz)—from the Latin word plebs, which means many. Plebeians, who made up about 95 percent of the population, were mostly peasants, laborers, artisans, and shopkeepers. They had far fewer privileges than patricians and had very little say in government matters. Nonetheless, plebeians were required to pay taxes and serve in the Roman army.

Over time, patricians began to resent Etruscan rule and to demand more political power in the government. In 509 B.C.E. they led a rebellion against the Etruscan monarchy, and overthrew the last king, Tarquinius Superbus (pronounced tar-KWIN-ee-uss soo-PEE-buss), also known as Tarquinius the Proud. Patricians then established a new form of government, known as a republic, whose primary purpose was to serve the people. The word republic is derived from the Latin term res publica, which translates as "the affairs of the people." They also divided the state's power to prevent any single person from abusing it. Instead of a king, a body of 300 men, called the Senate, was elected to run the country. Senators served for life and were expected to make laws, appoint officials, and serve as judges. The Senate also selected two leaders, or Consuls, to command the army and run the day-to-day affairs of Rome.

Although Roman society was more democratic under the Republic than it had been under the Etruscan monarchy, it was controlled almost completely by patricians. Only patricians were allowed to become consuls and senators. Moreover, since laws were not written down anywhere, patricians often changed and interpreted them to serve their own interests. This meant that patricians, who made up only 5 percent of the population, held most of the political power in Rome. As a result, a struggle known as the Conflict of the Orders began, in which plebeians demanded more political rights for themselves.

The conflict between patricians and plebeians became particularly intense during times of war. Plebeians resented having to serve in the military and to pay heavy taxes, while patricians denied them any decision-making power in the government. They wanted to create an assembly of their own that would protect their rights and interests. In 494 B.C.E. the plebeians took a dramatic action:
they moved away from Rome and refused to work or serve in the military unless their demands were met. Livy, a famous Roman historian, wrote the following description of the state of Rome after the plebeians had left the city: "There was great panic in the city, and through mutual fear, all was suspense. The people left in the city dreaded [feared] the violence of the senators; the senators dreaded the people remaining in the city, uncertain whether they should prefer to stay or to depart; but how long would the multitude [crowd] which had seceded [left] remain quiet? What were to be consequences then, if, in the meantime, any foreign war should break out?"

The patricians, who heavily relied on the plebeians for military service, became alarmed. They realized that the welfare of the Republic depended on the plebeians' return, and they decided to make a compromise. They allowed the plebeians to elect 10 officials, called Tribunes of the Plebs, to represent plebeian interests to the Senate. These officials protected plebeians' rights by saying "veto," which means "I forbid," to any law they felt was unjust to plebeians. In addition, they created the Council of Plebs, which was made up of elected plebeians. The Council could pass laws that affected all Roman plebeians, but not patricians.

Over the next 200 years, plebeians used a series of protests to gain important political rights in the Roman Republic. First, they demanded that the laws be written down so patricians could no longer change them at will. In the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., the patricians chose 10 officials to standardize the laws and put them in writing. The resulting code of law, which was set up in public on 12 wooden tablets, became known as The Twelve Tables. Second, plebeians sought greater power in the government. Because of their demands, a law was passed in 367 B.C.E. requiring that one of the two consuls be a plebeian. In addition, since ex-consuls often held seats in the Senate, this law made it possible for plebeians to become senators. Finally, in 287 B.C.E., the Council of Plebs, which was later incorporated into the Citizens' Assemblies, gained the right to pass laws that affected the entire society, instead of just the plebeians.

As the political rights of the plebeians increased over the years, the Roman Republic became a more democratic form of government. The interests of both patricians and plebeians came to be represented in each branch of government. The power of each branch of government was also balanced by the actions of the other branches. The Citizens' Assemblies, which was made up of all adult Roman male citizens, nominated the consuls, members of the Senate, and the tribunes of the Plebs. The senators and the tribunes advised the consuls and were able to pass and veto laws. Their powers were kept in check by the Assembly, which was allowed to approve or reject new laws.