The Governments of Italian City-States

What types of governments did the Italian city-states have?

The Signoria

Many Italian city-states in the late 1200s suffered from internal conflicts. Various groups often fought each other in an attempt to gain power. A strong family sometimes defeated their opposition and established a signoria.

Although the establishment of a signoria usually ended the conflict within a city-state, average citizens had very little say in the government. The signore had the power to control most aspects of the government, including passing laws and choosing a successor. The signoria was often established in cities, such as Milan, Verona, and Padua, that had many artisans and farmers but not many other powerful families. This made it possible for one family to gain control.

Republicanism

The larger city-states, such as Venice and Florence, had numerous strong, wealthy families. These conditions made it difficult for one family to gain control over the city-state. In city-states like these, the ruling families formed republics. In a republic, a group of wealthy families ruled together.

For example, in Venice, wealthy families formed a Great Council that consisted of about 1,000 members from the upper class. These members elected representatives to the Senate and the Council of Ten. The Council of Ten was very powerful and controlled the police and the judicial system. The Senate dealt with foreign policy
and commerce. All of the candidates for the Senate and Council of Ten had to be members of the Great Council. In this way, the republic of Venice was a closed system. No person outside of the Great Council could play a role in government.

In Florence, the wealthy families set up a group called the *popolo*, which consisted of members of the elite class, such as wealthy *merchants*. The popolo elected six members of their group to serve as supreme magistrates of Florence. These magistrates supposedly ruled the city. However, in reality, the *popolo grasso* (literally “fat people”) held most of the power. The popolo grasso included extremely wealthy bankers and merchants, such as the Medici family.