

How to Win an Election in Ancient Rome

Ancient Roman election advice suggested some uncomfortable campaign strategies. Evidence from Pompeii suggests many candidates followed it enthusiastically.

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Silver denarius of Cassius Longinus, depicting a citizen casting a ballot, 63 BC. CNG coins.

Marcus Tullius Cicero in his toga candida. Heritage Image Partnership/Alamy Stock Photo.



In the late 70s AD Marcus Cerrinius Vatia ran for the lower magisterial office of aedile in the ancient city of Pompeii. More than 80 inscriptions, painted on the walls of the city's buildings, record his campaign. While many are serious requests for his election, others seem to be either a joke, or an attack on his character:

All the late drinkers ask you to elect Marcus Cerrinius Vatia aedile. Florus and Fructus wrote this.

Regardless of intent, the somewhat spurious endorsements of late drinkers, late sleepers and even the petty thieves for Cerrinius Vatia are part and parcel of what was expected of a Roman campaign for political office. Pompeii's walls are adorned with red letters, the painted inscriptions that serve as ancient advertisements, including those used by politicians. Referred to as electoral programmata, these campaign posters were painted largely by professional sign painters (scriptores), recording the men who stood for office and their supporters (rogatores).

This is not the only evidence we have for ancient political campaigns. An instruction book, commonly referred to as the *Handbook of Electioneering* (*Commentariolum Petitionis*), is the main literary source from Roman antiquity that addresses the annual process undertaken by political hopefuls running for office – whether aspiring to rule Rome as consul or reaching the first rung on the magisterial ladder as aedile in a city like Pompeii. The text appears to have been written by Quintus Tullius Cicero, the younger brother of the more famous Marcus Tullius Cicero, known to history as Cicero, the statesman, lawyer and philosopher (for the sake of clarity I will refer to them as Quintus and Marcus).

The text is written as a letter, addressed to Marcus by Quintus, during the former's successful campaign for consul of Rome in 64-63 BC. Despite the survival of the text in a sixth-century AD manuscript that also included letters from Marcus to Quintus, the authorship has been called into question by scholars, not least because, as the younger of the two, Quintus had not yet campaigned for any office other than aedile, the lowest post in which one began their political career. The quality of the advice he could offer is therefore viewed with some scepticism. Nevertheless, it does offer guidance. Like many 'how to' books

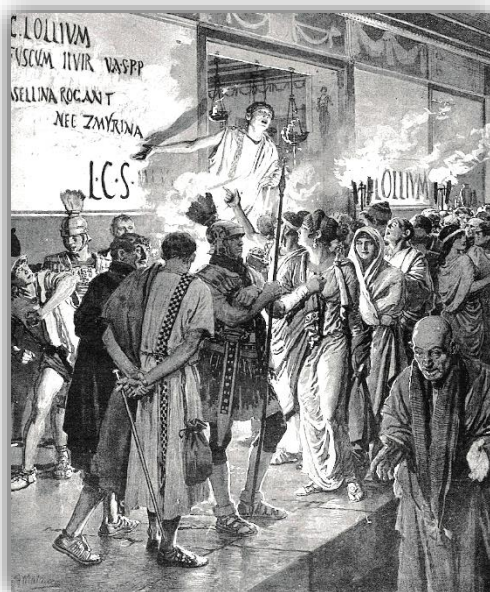
that survive from antiquity, however, finding evidence of the handbook's advice in practice is difficult. Most of what the handbook discusses relates to intangible actions based on the development and nurturing of friendships and associations during a political campaign. It is only through implications and suppositions that the advice can be mapped onto the most abundant source of information that survives for Roman political campaigns: the electoral programmata of Pompeii.

Good advice

The content of the handbook itself can be divided into three parts. In the beginning, Quintus addresses Marcus, detailing the specifics of his campaign, focusing on the fact that he is a *novo homo* – a new man, that is, one without family members in political positions – and the obstacles that entails, as well as outlining his opposition. Each of the other three candidates for consul are discussed, using the type of invective that is familiar to anyone who has read Marcus' later speeches. Quintus refers, for example, to Catiline and Antonius (uncle of Mark Antony), Marcus' opponents for consul, as 'two assassins from boyhood, both libertines, both paupers', who 'are just the competitors to be prayed for by a man of energy, industry, and blameless life'.

From here, the handbook moves on to general advice on canvassing, first in relation to friends and then in relation to 'the people' (i.e. those unknown to the candidate). It details what types of friends and associations the candidate should have and should take care to make – and how to use each group. You should, for example, show off the friends you have, in number and range of rank, making use of those who admire your oratory. Call in all debts owed to you and be kind and observe your duties to new and old friends. Make use of your networks, such as those in the same voting tribe (formal categories into which all Roman citizens were divided, used in voting and census taking), as well as neighbours, clients, freedmen, slaves and family. Make friends with all sorts: men of illustrious career and name, magistrates, people of exceptional influence and especially befriend leading men of other cities and towns. Make use of religious associations. Learn names. And once all of this has been done, work out how best to use all your different friends to your advantage

This would have been uncomfortable advice for Romans, who had clear definitions of friendship that did not include casual acquaintances or those based on personal gain – exactly what the handbook recommends. Quintus states that when canvassing it is permissible to form friendships with people with whom one would never associate in any other part of life. This is an extraordinary statement, and a prospect that Romans found distasteful. Valerius Maximus, author of *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, tells us that Lucius Licinius Crassus, consul in 95 BC, was so mortified by how he had to behave when canvassing that he was embarrassed to do so in the presence of his much-esteemed father-in-law Quintus Scaevola, a politician and expert on Roman law, to the point that when canvassing in the forum he asked Scaevola to leave. It was said his respect for his father-in-law outweighed his desire to win the election.



The Last Election in Pompeii', reconstruction based on discoveries made during excavations in 1924, by Fortunino Matania. Illustrated London News/Mary Evans.

Time spent with supporters and friends, Quintus writes, is of the utmost importance. Do it daily, with all ranks and ages, and from this daily support you might glean insight into what your portion of the final vote will be. This contact can be split into three types: those who call at your house, those who accompany you to the forum and those who attend you more generally. The advice is to notice visitors who call at the house as, Quintus observed, the current fashion was for them to visit more than one candidate. If one, therefore, realises that you take special notice of him, he is more likely to devote himself to your efforts to get elected. Those who accompany the candidate on the daily procession to the forum, however, are even more important because 'a large company of daily escorts makes a great impression and adds great prestige'.

In a city like Pompeii the routes to the forum were numerous and varied. Streets were almost exclusively used by pedestrian traffic during the day and, depending on the route, it was possible to garner a considerable amount of attention from onlookers before reaching the forum. In all likelihood, a candidate would leave his house with fewer attendants than he had once he reached the forum. This visibility is hugely important, writes Quintus, as the size of entourage and the demeanour of the candidate are evidence of his influence (*gratia*) and prestige (*dignitas*). Gaining such attention was helped considerably by the fact that once a candidate declared, he donned the *toga candida*, which was whitened by clay to brilliance. As such, candidates stood out in a crowd. Staining the *toga candida* would damage a candidate's reputation. Valerius Maximus tells the story of a son of Scipio Africanus, the celebrated general who defeated Carthage in 206 BC, who nearly lost an election after he arrived at the forum with his toga 'so debased by spots of turpitude'. If the toga was not pristine, surely the character was not spotless either.

Big promises

Once in the forum the candidate was expected to circulate, meet people, make promises and generally be seen. It did not matter if promises made during an election were kept, Quintus reasons; it is better to say yes and later fail to deliver:

People want not only promises ... but promises made in a lavish and complimentary way. And so – an easy rule – if you are going to do what is asked, show that you will do it willingly and gladly; but the next thing is harder, and accords better with your circumstances than with your character: whatever you cannot perform, decline gracefully or even don't decline. A good man will do the former, a good candidate the latter.

Political speeches were a rare occurrence in Roman campaigns. The right to address the public was held exclusively by magistrates and their willingness to cede to a candidate is not well attested. Some candidates, including Marcus, would instead use debates in the senate or their local town council to speak about their candidacy, but this limited their audience to other members of the ruling council. Political speeches made by those seeking office, when they did occur, normally required a designated space from which to deliver an oration. In Rome, this space was the *rostra* in the Forum Romanum, but no such structure survives in Pompeii. Indeed, it is difficult to identify any building that had a specific political purpose in Pompeii.

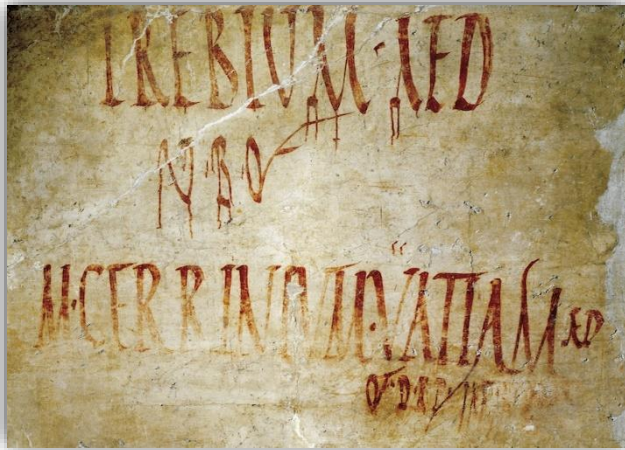
Surprisingly, electoral programmata – ubiquitous in Pompeii, and the most tangible evidence for political campaigns to survive antiquity – is not mentioned in Quintus' handbook at all. Yet, while no electoral notices survive in Rome, where Marcus was campaigning, there are references to them in ancient texts, and many scholars argue that warnings found on tombs against defacement and posters are proof that electoral notices must have existed everywhere.

Writing on the wall

Once a candidate announced their intentions for office, the programmata became a priority. There is much debate about how they were commissioned, however, and this is where the many supporters of a candidate, as the handbook advises, come into play. There is no question that there were professional sign painters – approximately 30 such individuals are known from the Pompeii signs, which sometimes include the names of painters, the whitewashers who prepared the wall and even the lantern holders who made it possible to carry out the work at night. A programmata for Marcus Pupius Rufus, who was running for *duovir*, the highest elected office in the city of Pompeii, lists those involved in its production:

The fuller Mustius elects and whitewashes. Unico writes, without the rest of the team on the Nones.

Whether they were hired by the candidates, their supporters, or some combination thereof is unknown. It is also possible that painters were proactive and painted a free sign once candidates announced in order to show off their talents and solicit a contract for additional posters. The surviving signs for individual candidates range in number from one to 120 notices. While the texts themselves are formulaic, variations in content and handwriting indicate that there was no one painter who was exclusively responsible for all notices a candidate might have.



Recent discovery from Region V of Pompeii of an electoral programmata for Lucius Albucius Celsus. Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

Beyond the sign painters, we must look to the rogatores, the individuals or groups whose names were included in the electoral notices asking for the election of a specific candidate. Approximately 600 of the electoral notices contain a name or group. These include women, men, freedpeople, professional and religious associations, neighbourhoods and, of course, the potentially spurious supporters such as the late-night drinkers – the very groups with whom the handbook suggests a candidate cultivates friendship. Some identities are clear: ‘The spectators in the amphitheatre ask for Holconius Priscus as duumvir with judicial power.’ Others less so: ‘Euxinus asks you to elect Quintus Postumius and Marcus Cerrinius aediles, together with Iustus. Hinnulus wrote this.’

An excellent example of prolific networking is found in the case of Gnaeus Helvius Sabinus, the man with the largest number of extant programmata. In the 120 surviving notices in his name he is supported by more than 20 different people and groups, including names such as ‘Crescens’, ‘Maria’ and ‘the devotees of Isis’. Clearly, he had actively and successfully canvassed the local population.

The electoral programmata, therefore, heavily suggest that, despite a candidate’s potential discomfort with the less salubrious acts undertaken as part of the canvass, they would nevertheless have sought new friendships, reinforced the old and reminded those otherwise beholden to them what obligations were due. The advice outlined in the handbook was relevant, then, regardless of whether or not your name was Marcus Tullius Cicero, if you were campaigning in Pompeii rather than Rome, or if you were a new man or from a politically established family. We can see the handbook’s advice in practice in the programmata created for Gaius Iulius Polybius. A message supporting his early campaign for aedile is written on the wall of the House of Aulus Trebius Valens:

Gaius Iulius Polybius for aedile in charge of public and sacred buildings. Lantern carrier, hold the ladder. Successful, he later went on to run for the higher office of duovir.

Despite the debate over its authorship, the handbook is of fundamental importance to understanding the mechanisms of Roman elections, forming, as one of the foremost translators of the text, D.R. Shackleton Bailey, wrote in 2002, ‘a blueprint of the perfect canvass’. After all, Marcus did win the consulship in the election of 64-63 BC and went on to become one of the most infamous politicians of that century. His letters show that he continued to make use of the networks he developed during his campaign, writing

continuously to the many players in the civil wars of the last years of the Republic. Quintus, too, was elected as praetor in 62 BC, later serving as governor of Asia and as an aide to Julius Caesar during the Gallic Wars. For the Cicero brothers, ultimately, the handbook's advice paid off.

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