

The government of the Roman Republic was, in theory at least, a democracy and, as in any democratic state, elections were an important part of political life. In Rome, most political offices were held for one year and the annual elections were a time for keen electioneering. With competition fierce, campaigns had to be carefully planned. Moreover, campaign strategies have not changed a great deal over the centuries.

The Roman candidate for public office, not having the benefit of television and photography to ensure his recognisability, made himself conspicuous by wearing a toga especially whitened with chalk. He demonstrated his popularity with the people by appearing in public surrounded by a large crowd of supporters, a forerunner to the modern practice of regularly publishing opinion polls. Friends, relatives and clients would be pressed into service to accompany the candidate on all public outings and, if necessary, pressure might be brought to bear on the less eager:

From those who are under obligation to you, you can simply require this service, that those whose age and business permit be in constant attendance upon you, and those who cannot attend in person assign relatives to this service . . .

The above quotation comes from a letter which purports to be written by Quintus Cicero to his brother Marcus Tullius Cicero, the famous orator, to advise on his brother's campaign for the consulship. It is a valuable document for Roman election practices. Among other things, Quintus urges the use of flattery which "though vicious and repulsive in the rest of one's life, is indispensable in an election campaign" and even encourages his brother to make promises he might not be able to keep:

But it is more difficult, and more suited to the requirements of the occasion than to your nature, to promise what you may not be able to perform, instead of refusing politely. The second is the conduct of a good man, the first of a good campaigner . . .

Not surprisingly, election bribery was a perennial problem which the Romans tried to curtail through legislation with little success.

Finally it would be hard to imagine an election without campaign posters. Political notices in Rome were rather less polished than our posters: usually they were in the form of messages scribbled on walls urging the support of various candidates. Some have survived on the walls of the city of Pompeii and give a colourful picture of the local elections:

Your best friend - Marcus Marius. Elect him aedile.
I ask you to elect Gaius Julius Polybius aedile. He gets good bread.

Political partnership is everywhere evident:

Quinctius; let anyone who votes against him take a seat by an ass.

And sometimes support comes from some rather odd quarters:

The petty thieves support Vatia for the aedileship.

As Canada endures another federal election campaign, we can sympathise with the man who wrote on a Pompeian wall that was covered with election notices:

I wonder, O wall, that you have not fallen in ruins from supporting the stupidities of so many scribblers.