

Reputation, manipulation, and negotiation: the personal politics behind senatorial decision-making in 2nd century BC Rome

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Context & Aim:

The origin of this project lay in a number of **observations** regarding the modern historiography of Roman politics in the mid-Republic:

1. That in the late 3rd and early 2nd centuries most political decisions were made by the senate (the deliberative institution formed of the aristocracy). In instances such as the declaration of war and peace or the formation of legislation, their decisions would have to be ratified by the People. But about military affairs, routine administration, foreign policy, and religion, all of which formed the majority of decision-making, the senate acted alone. In other words, Roman politics can only be fully understood if the intra-senatorial dynamics are understood.
2. That our understanding of intra-senatorial dynamics is woefully insufficient. The scholarly work of the past few decades has seriously undermined the previous group/factional theory of Roman politics, with one of the consequences being a loss of credibility for viewing the senate as a battle-ground between groups. However, rather than provide an alternative model of intra-senatorial dynamics, historians have moved on to analyse relations between aristocracy and people.
3. That historians have replaced a focus on groups with a focus on the individual in many aspects of political analysis. This would be a useful approach to take when analysing intra-senatorial decision-making.

The aim of project was to conduct an analysis of Roman politics with these observations in mind. The result was a 10,000 word paper which used the two decades from 200 to 180 BC as a case study.

Argument:

This paper argued that to understand intra-senatorial decision-making we must regard the individual as the fundamental unit of power. It can be broken down into two main points:

1. **Tactics:** agency rested with the individual to employ and combine various tactics to increase their **political capital**, such that they could affect the decision-making process. All of these tactics and their combinations were used against one another by different individuals who were striving for **influence** over decisions. The resulting **complexities** and dynamics of these interactions stress the individual as the **fundamental unit of power** because the relative political capital individuals could gain was dependent upon the ways they employed such tactics in the political arena.
2. **Structure:** the interaction and competition between political tactics reveal a **political framework** that structured the decision-making process within the senate. There was a **complex layering** of various structures: a competitive hierarchy of prestige, an inextricable connection between this hierarchy and decision-making, a system open to persuasion, a united ideology, and networks of connections.

My research isolated **three** fundamental tactics that individuals could employ to influence the decision-making process.

1. Auctoritas

Auctoritas was a powerful **structuring value**: leading to individual self-fashioning and forming a loose but competitive **hierarchy** of social standing within the aristocracy. It is a Latin term that roughly translates to '**prestige**', albeit a prestige that compels deference and obedience. It was a value **possessed** in varying degrees by individual aristocrats.

Because lesser senators were **ideologically preconditioned** to respect and support the will of men with more *auctoritas* than themselves, an individual could use his *auctoritas* to affect the decision made. I isolated **three** main ways individuals employed their *auctoritas*: by simply declaring an opinion and allowing one's individual *auctoritas* to **give it force**; by **deliberately emphasising** *auctoritas* to try and increase the influence it brought; and by **combining** it with the prestige of other individuals.

2. Oratory

Every senatorial decision was arrived at through speaking. This allowed individuals to employ **oratorical strategies** and **powerful arguments** to achieve periodic enhancement of their political capital. In particular, I found that there were times when the prestige of the speaker was less important than the speech itself; times when oratory may have been used to **counter** the influence of prestige; times when oratory helped **gain prestige** or worked to **undermine it**. The importance of oratory helped to emphasise the **openness of the senate**, where individuals were constantly being **persuaded** by others in the support or opposition of different decisions.

3. Friendship Networks

Every senator had large a **number of connections**; in most of these the performance of **favours** and the provision of political support were prominent. An individual might ask his connections to use their *auctoritas* and oratory to help him influence a decision; an individual might use his influence to help another in the hope of **creating a connection**, so he could call in favours at a later time. From this I illustrated how the decision-making process was made more **complex** because the tactics I detailed in the previous two sections were used not only in the **direct interest of oneself** but in the **interest of others** based on this structure of connections.



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