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In the summer of 64 BC, Marcus Tullius Cicero, the greatest orator ancient Rome ever produced, was running for consul, the highest office in the Roman Republic. He was forty-two years old, the son of a wealthy businessman from the small town of Arpinum south of Rome. His father had seen that Marcus and his younger brother Quintus received the finest education and had even sent the boys to Greece to study with the most noted philosophers and orators of the day.

Marcus was a gifted speaker and possessed a brilliant mind equal to his golden tongue. What he lacked was the advantage

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of noble birth. Ancient Roman society was highly class-conscious and dismissed men such as Marcus Cicero as unfit to preside over the republic. He was determined to prove them wrong.

As a young man Marcus had completed an undistinguished year in military service under the father of the future Roman general Pompey the Great, who would one day defend the state against Julius Caesar. This younger Pompey became a patron of Marcus and helped him in his subsequent political career. At twenty-five, Marcus won his first case in the Roman courts defending a well-connected man against murder charges. His reputation grew in the years to follow as he successfully represented many prominent men—victories that also helped him rise through the political ranks of the republic. He had already served admirably in the

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important but lesser offices of quaestor and praetor. However, no man outside the noble families had been elected as a consul for thirty years, making the attainment of this ultimate goal by Marcus unlikely.

Yet in 64, the other candidates for the consulship—most notably Antonius (known as Hybrida) and Catiline—were such an unsavory lot that some of the nobility held their noses and threw their support behind Marcus Cicero. Still, the thought of an outsider from a small town being one of the two consuls to govern the ancient republic, ruler of millions across the Mediterranean lands, was too much for many of the blue-blooded families to stomach. Marcus was going to have a long and difficult campaign if he was going to win.

At this point the more practical Quintus decided that his elder brother needed

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some advice. Quintus was four years younger than Marcus, with a fiery and sometimes cruel temperament. Although overshadowed by his elder sibling, he was fiercely loyal to Marcus and recognized that his brother's success would pave his own way to fame and fortune. He had even married the headstrong Pomponia, sister of Marcus's best friend Atticus, and fathered a son with her two years earlier, though the marriage was always rocky.

As the campaign for consul was beginning, Quintus wrote a short pamphlet to Marcus on electioneering in the form of a letter. The result is a little-known text that has somehow survived the centuries, called in Latin the *Commentariolum Petitionis*. Some specialists in Roman literature doubt that Quintus wrote the work, believing it was another contemporary or perhaps a

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Roman from the following century. Others would agree that Quintus was indeed the author. What matters, however, is not the identity of the writer but what he says. The author was clearly someone intimately familiar with Roman politics in the first century BC who possessed a keen sense of how elections are won in any age.

Rome in the days of the Cicero brothers was a vast empire run as if it were still a small town nestled among seven hills along the Tiber River. Politics was deeply personal, controlled by a few leading families of the city, and centered around the Roman Forum, a former swamp in the center of town. Although Roman citizens lived across the Mediterranean region, there was no such thing as an absentee ballot. All campaigning was done by candidates within the city of Rome or in nearby towns.

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Any Roman who aspired to the consulship was required, after obligatory military service, to be elected first to a series of lower offices known as the *cursus honorum*, or “path of honors.” The first step in this long process was to be chosen around the age of thirty as one of the quaestors elected each year to manage the mundane tasks of governance, such as running the treasury. Service as a praetor came next, and brought with it such responsibilities as managing the courts, after which a man might be sent abroad to govern a Roman province. Only a few would choose to campaign for the ultimate prize, the office of consul. These two annual magistrates held supreme executive power over the republic and were responsible for both civil and military affairs. Election to the consulship was jealously guarded by the aristocracy of Rome,

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for service in this highest office granted a man and his descendants the coveted status of nobility.

The Romans scoffed at the Greek idea of “one man, one vote” as an invitation to mob rule. Any adult male citizen could cast a ballot, but this was done in a complicated system of groups. Individuals helped determine how their own group would vote, but it was the group itself that cast a single vote within the assembly. These groups might be military in origin (centuries) or tribal, but by the time of Cicero their original significance had been replaced by class designations based on wealth. The richest citizens held a disproportionate degree of power over the much more numerous lower classes. Often a sufficient number of ballots would be cast to elect a candidate even before the poorer citizens could come

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to the polls. The system also favored those who lived in or near Rome, since voting had to be done in person. A farmer or merchant of modest income living far from the city was unlikely to make the journey to cast his ballot.

Yet for those citizens who lived in the capital or had the means to travel to Rome for elections, the process of choosing consuls was orderly and usually fair, in spite of the rampant bribery and occasional violence of the campaigns. Citizens would gather early in the morning on the nearby Campus Martius to hear final speeches, then divide into their centuries in roped-off areas to cast their votes. Voting was by secret ballot, as each man wrote the name of his favored candidate on a small wax-covered wooden tablet and placed it in a large wickerwork basket. The votes of each

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group were announced as soon as they were tabulated. The first candidate to achieve a majority according to the system was declared the winner, with the man placing second in the polls named as the junior consul. The senior consul could then take up the *fasces*—a bundle of rods with an axe fixed in the top symbolizing his authority—on his inauguration day on January 1 and for one year enjoy the unmatched power and prestige of governing the Roman Republic, whose might extended over much of the known world.

Understanding the basics of the Roman electoral system in the first century BC is useful for appreciating the advice Marcus Cicero receives in this letter, but the real pleasure for most modern readers is its unashamedly pragmatic advice on how to manipulate voters and win political office.

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Like Machiavelli's *Prince*, this short treatise provides timeless and no-nonsense counsel to those who aspire to power. Idealism and naïveté are left by the wayside as Quintus tells his brother—and all of us—how the down-and-dirty business of successful campaigning really works.

The letter is full of priceless advice for modern candidates, but some of the choicest gems are:

1. *Make sure you have the backing of your family and friends.* Loyalty begins at home. If your spouse and children aren't behind you, not only will you have a hard time winning but it will look bad to voters. And as Quintus warns his brother, the most destructive rumors about a candidate begin among those closest to him.

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2. *Surround yourself with the right people.* Build a talented staff you can trust. You can't be everywhere at once, so find those who will represent you as if they were trying to be elected themselves.

3. *Call in all favors.* It's time to gently (or not so gently) remind everyone you have ever helped that they owe you. If someone isn't under obligation to you, let them know that their support now will put you in their debt in the future. And as an elected official, you will be well placed to help them in their time of need.

4. *Build a wide base of support.* For Marcus Cicero this meant appealing primarily to the traditional power brokers both in the Roman Senate and the wealthy business community—no easy task since these groups were often at odds with each

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other. But Quintus urges his brother as an outsider in the political game to go further and win over the various special interest groups, local organizations, and rural populations ignored by other candidates. Young voters should be courted as well, along with anyone else who might be of use. As Quintus notes, even people no decent person would associate with in normal life should become the closest of friends during a campaign if they can help get you elected. Restricting yourself to a narrow base of support guarantees failure.

But how do you win over such a wide array of voters?

5. *Promise everything to everybody.* Except in the most extreme cases, candidates should say whatever the particular

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crowd of the day wants to hear. Tell traditionalists you have consistently supported conservative values. Tell progressives you have always been on their side. After the election you can explain to everyone that you would love to help them, but unfortunately circumstances beyond your control have intervened. Quintus assures his brother that voters will be much angrier if he refuses to promise them their hearts' desire than if he backs out later.

6. *Communication skills are key.* In ancient Rome the art of public speaking was studied diligently by all men who aspired to political careers. In spite of the new and varied forms of media today, a poor communicator is still unlikely to win an election.

7. *Don't leave town.* In Marcus Cicero's day this meant sticking close to Rome. For

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modern politicians it means being on the ground pressing the flesh wherever the key voters are at a particular moment. There is no such thing as a day off for a serious candidate. You can take a vacation after you win.

8. *Know the weaknesses of your opponents—and exploit them.* Just as Quintus takes a hard look at those running against his brother, all candidates should do an honest inventory of both the vulnerabilities and strengths of their rivals. Winning candidates do their best to distract voters from any positive aspects of their opponents possess by emphasizing the negatives. Rumors of corruption are prime fodder. Sexual scandals are even better.

9. *Flatter voters shamelessly.* Marcus Cicero was always courteous, but he could be formal and distant. Quintus warns him

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that he needs to warm up to voters. Look them in the eye, pat them on the back, and tell them they matter. Make voters believe you genuinely care about them.

10. *Give people hope.* Even the most cynical voters want to believe in someone. Give the people a sense that you can make their world better and they will become your most devoted followers—at least until after the election, when you will inevitably let them down. But by then it won't matter because you will have already won.

There are many other useful bits of advice in the letter that modern readers can happily discover for themselves. Even though the Roman Republic vanished over two thousand years ago, it is fascinating to see that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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And you might be wondering how the election for consul turned out. Did Marcus beat the odds and win his campaign? Did the advice of Quintus work? What became of the two brothers after the election? Read on and at the end of the letter discover what happened.