

The Role of the Senate in the Downfall of Republican Rome

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to trace the role played by the Senate throughout the republican era, specifically over how it contributed to the downfall of the Republic. The downfall of the Roman Republic was caused by the majority of the Senate, die-hard Optimates, who drove the political procedures towards crisis, in their purely negative determination not to accept change of any sort, not to permit those they viewed as their enemies any opening for advancement if they could prevent it.

Keywords: *The Senate of Republican Rome, the downfall of Roman Republic, the republican government*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Roman Republic, 509-27 BCE, was a historical period during the Roman civilization governed by a republican government. It should be mentioned that the modern English word “republic” means something different than the original Roman “res publica.” The Roman Republic seemed to shape the Western world in how republicanism has been understood and defined. The uniqueness of the Roman political structure had been used not only for the “Republic” but also in the “Empire” period. Nonetheless, the political structure built a solid foundation under the republic era. While the structure of the Roman government changed, the essences from the regal period stood out and contributed to the government: the magistrate, Senate, and assembly. Under the political system of Rome, the Senate had an important role in the Roman Republic. This paper aims to trace the role played by the Senate throughout the republican era, specifically over how it contributed to the downfall of the Republic.

To understand the Senate’s influence, it would be helpful to first mention the historical background of the constitution of the Roman Republic. The Senate, built up by the society’s most experienced elite, functioned as the governing and advisory council, which, in reality, was one of the most permanent elements in the constitution of Rome. The Roman used the name *senatus*, which comes from *senex*, meaning wisdom and experience. Thus, the Senate was designed to give advice and guidance to the state and the people.

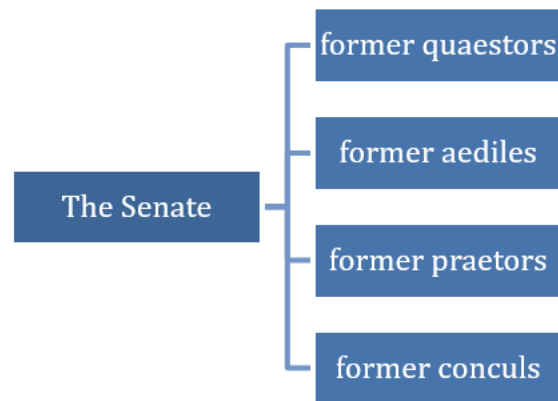


Figure 1 Image of the formation of the Senate at the period of Roman Republic after the 3rd century BCE

Since the Executive Magistrates were elected annually by the assembly, after finishing the one-year job, those magistrates would possibly have a seat in the Senate; hence, the Senate included about 300 members after the third century BCE. The laws did not allow the magistrate to continue being in the same position after one year unless the assembly wanted him to do so. However, it is necessary to state that there might be some exceptions. As laws and policies serve the people, they can be changed with the people’s will in emergencies. With a board of the most experienced politicians, in practice, the Senate would deal with most of the state matters, propose laws to the assembly, nominate the provincial governors, and also get to issue *senatus consulta*. Marcus Tullius Cicero, mostly known simply as Cicero, argued in the book *The Republic* that “the

greatest power should not rest with the greatest number [1].” As suggested by Cicero, this concept can precisely explain the status of the Senate in the republic era. The Senate included only a small percentage of the Roman population and did not have any legal power to make decisions. Still, they played a central role in the decision-making process-- the decrees would usually be implemented without objections even though they had no binding power.

2. DISCUSSION

Having laid out the blueprint of the Roman constitution, we can now analyze how the Senate affected Republican Rome. In the late third century BCE, Rome had already conquered most of the Italian city-states, built itself as a significant power of the ancient world, and was involved in a colossal struggle with Carthage for authority over the Western Mediterranean [2], which is known as the Punic Wars. Things went smoothly under the Senate’s instruction. According to Appian Punica 69 (314), the Roman Senate resolved a war in 152 BCE against Carthage, after Cato and his fellow messengers returned from their embassy to North Africa [3]. This decision can be seen as a symbol of the beginning of the

Third Punic War. Clearly, in the early stage of the Republic, the Senate did work efficiently and guided Rome with great success in expanding the territory. However, as the country grew, factional disputes in Rome appeared. According to their interests and aims, two different parties started to arise in the late Republican period: the Optimates symbolized the conservatives and the Populares represented the opposite. In 133 BCE, the conflict between the aristocrats and the commoners worsened and led to bloodshed, including the death of the plebeian tribune Tiberius Gracchus, one of the famous leaders of the Populares.

The plebeian tribunes like Ti. Gracchus was elected by the *concilium plebis*, as the representative of the commoners. These tribunes had the power to intervene on behalf of the plebeians in legal matters. Regardless of the tribune’s supervision, the *veto* seems to be a unique power owned by the *tribunus*. The tribune can use the word *veto*, stating “I forbid...,” to another person face-to-face in a voice that can be heard by others, to stop him from doing something and argue for rights. In the following steps, Tiberius Gracchus used this word to take power away from Marcus Octavius as a tribune of the plebs.

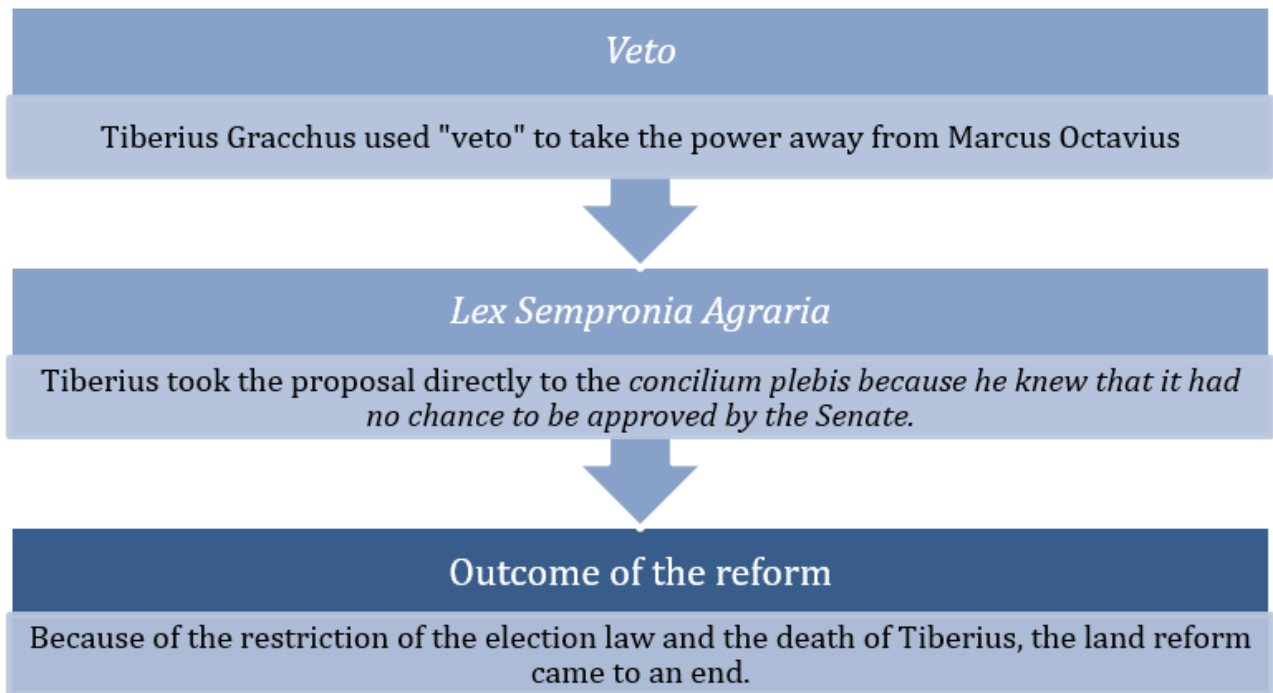


Figure 2 the process of Tiberius’ land reform under the factional dispute of the Senate

Before introducing the conflict between those two plebs, I would like to first mention the idea of Tiberius’ land reform. Considering the issue of military recruitment, Tiberius raised radical land reform favored by the commoners but outraged the Senate. Based on Tiberius’ *Lex Sempronia Agraria*, it was said that “no one was to be permitted to hold more than 500 *iugera* (about 330 acres) of the *ager publicus*... a further 250 *iugera*...

for each child... [4].” Because of the Italian War, some lands were seized by the nobles. Those lands were undistributed lands, which can also be called the “public lands.”

The nobles preferred the slaves as farmers for the public lands a more productive choice. The slaves were thought to be free labor while the freemen had to be paid.

What's more, freemen faced more uncertainties as they could be drafted from farming into military service while the slaves had no liability for military recruitment. Therefore, the nobles preferred "employing" slaves as farmers and herdsmen than freemen simply because the slaves were cost-free and more stable workers for farming [5]. The high profits from the *ager publicus* made the nobilities wealthier while worsening the well-being of the plebs and revealed a problematic political system of the Republican Rome. The Senate was selected by the nobilities who had been the magistrates before. In the other words, the behavior of the nobilities represented the majority of the Senate [6].

In depicting the Republic, Polybius stated that "the Senate stands in awe of the multitude and cannot neglect the feelings of the people [7]." From the previous analysis, it is evident that the nobles ignored the commoners' feeling to maximize their gains from the public lands. It was the Senate's fault but they did not want to make any changes because they, the nobilities, were living well. In practice, the proposals can be rejected by the Senate before the voting process. Although the Senate had no legal executive power, most of the tribunes who offered proposals rejected by the Senate would not insist on proceeding with the legal process. Knowing that the *Lex Sempronia Agraria* had no chance to be approved by the Senate, Tiberius took the proposal directly to the *concilium plebis*. While constitutional, Tiberius blatantly violated the Senate's voice which caused him a series of troubles. By having large numbers of supporters as the backbone, Tiberius Gracchus did remove the first obstacle by opposing another tribune who refused to pass the land law. Then, he managed to find enough money to support his reform when the king of Perganum, Attalus Philometor, passed away and bequeathed his country, which became one of the richest Roman provinces in that period. Whether Tiberius made these achievements legally or not might not be applicable to the focus of this paper.

To reveal the dilemma of the plebeians and gain more supporters, Tiberius mentioned the life of the plebs once in a speech, "The savage beasts in Italy have their articular dens, they have their places of repose and refuge, but men... having no houses or settlements of their own... with their wives and children [8]." In these words, the orator Tiberius Gracchus described a tragedy of the plebs. The rights plebes had in law also became the "excuse" of nobilities to refuse to hire them but the slaves. However, according to Tiberius' land reform, these public lands could no longer serve the nobles but the plebs in order to improve their lives. Therefore, the land reform offended the Senate by depriving them of the huge profits from the land they felt they should not lose. Although the laws could be changed by the willingness of the Roman people to extend the tribune's period, the Senate did not want Tiberius to continue being at this position. They refused to make an exemption for Tiberius when he asked to be

re-elected. Actually, it is hard for Tiberius to bring an ideal land reform proposal to an action that benefited the society without the favor of the Senate. Aristotle predicted this issue when he explained that, "Constitution also changes... when some office... acquires prestige or increases in size [9]." In retrospect, the reform of Tiberius Gracchus proved the selfishness of the Senate and the typical factional dispute was the first step of the downfall of Rome. The land reform came to an end because of the restriction of the election law and the death of Tiberius.

Besides the factional dispute, the Senate's attitude towards the noble family's reputations accelerated the downfall of the Republic. The Senate relied on the generations of well-known families too heavily, with the belief that men can be as brilliant as his father. Yet, in actuality, the nobles were not always dependable. The *Antonius* family was blindly believed by the Senate because of the noble's reputation. Around the first century BCE, three generations of the *Antonius* family shared the same name, Marcus Antonius. Thus, I will use Marcus Antonius the Orator, Marcus Antonius Creticus (the nickname "Creticus" was not an official agnomen), and the major Marcus Antonius to distinguish them.

The story started from the Orator. While conquering the Mediterranean, Rome had left several problems that they had not solved yet, and piracy was one of them. Piracy had, for nearly 100 years, been a growing problem in the Mediterranean world. Marcus Antonius the Orator was sent to clear the piracy threat in Mediterranean in 102 BCE with a proconsular imperium. He was given a *triumphus* given by the Senate when he came back. In 74 BCE, Marcus Antonius Creticus was elected to be the praetor while the Senate made a command with emergency power to combat pirates throughout the Mediterranean. What the Senate would offer to the commander of that campaign was an *imperium infinitum*, the temporary authoritarian power for handling emergency situations. With a "typical Roman fashion," M. Antonius the second was selected to be the commander only because his father had campaigned against pirates once [10]. The deep-rooted idea was that his family success would influence the success of a person. However, it is obvious to see that M. Antonius the second was far less qualified and talented than his father. In the campaign at Crete, Creticus not only failed to complete the task, but he also looted the provinces he should have protected from the pirates [11]. Florus discussed the campaign in his book that "his temerity and senselessness cost him a lot [12]." There were a great number of ships taken by the pirates and the pirates insulted the captures. Although the Cretans tried to make a peace treaty with him, M. Antonius felt humiliated and soon committed suicide. The political philosophy of which the Senate believed in did not work all time. Whether a person is qualified or not for the political position should not only be related to his family achievements in the past. It was a big mistake made by

the Senate because the generations of the great men might be lazy and reactive as he could always live under the reputation of his ancestors.

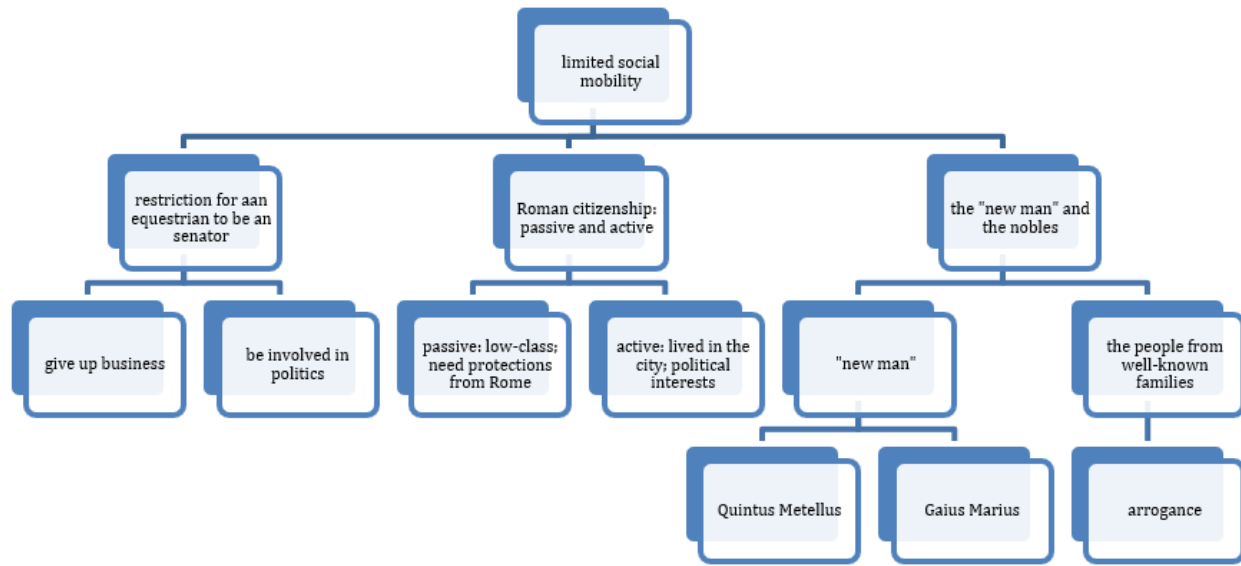


Figure 3 a structure to clarify how the laws in Roman Republic restrained people from social mobility

Apart from the thoughts of the Senate, the laws also restrained Roman people from sticking in their own classes or social status. First, there was the restriction on an equestrian becoming a senator. The senators and the equestrians had the same amount of property and could both be called the elites. However, there was a clear boundary between these two kinds of elites: involvement in politics. The senators engaged in politics, as did their fathers and grandfathers. The equestrians took part in commercial activities, such as tax-farming, and financially supported the state. As said in the law, an equestrian had to give up his business to be a candidate for the magistrate. Thus, many equestrians were unwilling to be part of the Senate simply because they wanted to stay wealthy and keep their trading business [13]. Second, there were two different types of citizenship among the Roman people. During the Republican period, many soldiers or former residents from provinces were granted Roman citizenship. Based on different needs, we can characterize Roman citizenship into two categories: passive and active. Low-class citizens usually act as passive citizenship. They wanted citizenship mainly because of protections from Rome. While the law said no adult male citizen could be deprived of his right to vote, passive citizens might not have a chance to be physically in the city during the voting process, as most of them lived far from the city of Rome. Although the meaning of the voting law was that everyone could use his right to vote for the magistrate, it was hard to achieve in practice. To vote, the Roman citizen had to personally be in the city of Rome. Not many citizens could afford the trip to Rome, and even those who lived nearby would not have been able to spend at least a day in Rome to exercise their political

rights with no economic compensation [14]. Therefore, passive citizens probably would not use their political rights even though they had the power. Active citizens were the counterpart. They lived in the city of Rome so that they could exercise their voting right to promote their own political interest instead of seeking pure protection. Active citizens used their reputation to find support from other voters to reach their political aims.

Third, the arrogance of nobles. The “new man” was not welcomed by the Senate as the nobilities thought that only the people from well-known families should control political power. Gaius Marius was a “new man” who had been a consul seven times. While born in an equestrian family, he married a patrician and became able to join the political system. When Quintus Metellus was sent to Africa in 109 BCE to fight Jugurtha, he invited Marius to join his staff. After defeating Jugurtha in a pitched battle, Marius decided to use this opportunity for self-promotion: be a candidate for consul election. In the winter of 109 to 108 BCE, he told Metellus about his decision and hoped to get support, as Metellus has praised his intelligence before. Metellus haughtily responded to him with an insult: he thought that Marius could not be a consul even when Metellus’ son was ready. At that time, Marius was about 50, but the son of Metellus was only a teen [15]. The conflict between Marius and Metellus was mainly because of the egotism of noble patricians as they thought they were born to be magistrates.

Both the legal structure and emotional ideology made it hard for the Senate to take in more non-nobles being the magistrates: the tribunes could use *veto* to stop it; the other magistrates could refuse by religious excuse when they did not want to risk the danger; and the Senate could

call of to vote for proposals. The immobilized political system supported the downfall of the Republic in advance.

Then, the role of the military is important enough to be included in this discussion. As we all know, Rome was built as a military state. Initially, during the early stage of the Republic, military recruitment followed the citizen-militia system so that there was no professional army. Soldiers had to have properties in order to join the military service. After the long-term service, as a return, some of the soldiers might be granted Roman citizenship. The problem of military recruitment was revealed: there might not always be enough soldiers. Ti. Gracchus was the first guy who found this problem. He thought that the plebeian could hardly reach the prerequisite of the military recruitment as they were jobless, with no property. Tiberius tried to deal with this issue but failed. Since Gaius Marius won the consulship election for 107 BCE, he needed new soldiers to end the Jugurthine War as promised. The nature of the army transformed from citizen-militia to semi-professional at that time. Marius' new military recruitment targeted the class of *proletarii*, which was the lowest class of Roman citizens. As "voluntary service," soldiers were no longer required to have any property prerequisites and they would receive generous rewards with booty from the enemy and each of them would have a land allotment in Numidia to retire. The standard weapons and professional training promised by Marius would teach soldiers at the same level and provide them with basic concepts of fighting.

Since all the benefits would be received based on the words of commanders, the soldiers have no loyalty to the Senate anymore, and the army behaved more like a "private army" of Marius. Unlike the early stage, the relationship between the Senate and the military changed. The relation of the Senate and commoners used to be the same between the Senate and the army. Marius' reform broke it and the Senate lost control of the armies. Therefore, in the late Republic, the Senate with no direct army backing them gradually lost its control in the face of the rising commanders who had soldiers' loyalty. When the commander went to the city of Rome, his army would encamp near the city. It was hard for the Senate to rule against the commander's proposal or manipulate the election because a large number of soldiers were around the city. Once the proposal was taken to the voting process, the voters from the army could again influence the outcome and forced the Senate to execute. In this way, the Senate could no longer preside over the whole Roman city-state as an authority.

On the way to the Empire, the ideology of the Senate made it unable to lead the country and withstand the radically changing situations. Most of the people in the Senate believed in traditional Roman morality and the Greek political philosophy. They insisted that the system was perfect and once it corrupted, that must be caused by

immoral people. While morality changed constantly, the Senate never altered its attitude towards the dictatorship. As the purpose of the dictatorship was to deal with urgent situations, the dictatorship was intended to be an emergency magistracy for a limited period: either as long as the emergency situation or no more than six months. Since the emergency magistracy had the greatest power in Rome, the commander with this priority was expected to resign and return to normal life. Based on the ideas of the Greek philosophy, the dictatorship was an evil thing. The Romans, who were educated, had been influenced by this argument deeply. Julius Caesar was assassinated because he broke the policy of dictatorship. What Caesar believed in was completely against the common morality of the nobilities in the Senate. Before Caesar, several men were thought to be tyrants, such as the Gracchus brothers, Gaius Marius, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Gnaeus Pompeius, etc. However, the temporary emergencies at that time did need those men to save Rome. Caesar's situation was different. After being the dictator of Rome for several years, in early 44 BCE, Caesar declared himself to be a *dictator perpetuus*, which was "dictator for life."

Caesar made it clear that he would permanently hold the power of dictatorship, which he thought should be in the political system of Rome. Now a conflict of two moralities existed. In Caesar's view, the government should look after the subject people of the Republic, do whatever needs to be done. But the traditionalists did not care about how to make the people live better. The new system broke the traditional political structure in a way that could hardly be accepted by the conservatives in the Senate. Despite Caesar having followers in the Senate, redundant of the Senate were conservatives and, educated in Greek philosophy, the right thing the Senate should do was to kill the tyrant in order to retain the old system. No matter how we define "tyranny" and "kingship" nowadays, by analyzing the good and bad behaviors, the Roman people did not think that way. They simply defined the dictator as a tyrant, regardless of his achievements.

Traditionally, it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine the intentions of someone such as the rulers. A ruler's behaviors can be interpreted in many ways; it was even challenging to say that the best rulers had done everything with absolutely no self-interest. However, the assassination's excuse was not persuasive enough for Rome to stop moving forward to a brand-new era. Thus, the death of Caesar pushed the Republic to transform.

Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis. Morality is always changing radically. Cato's belief, which the traditionalists also took for granted, was not suitable for the Republican political system. Being reactive, instead of proactive, the Senate demonstrated a reluctance towards making changes.

3. CONCLUSION

In the work, the downfall of the Roman Republic was caused by the majority of the Senate, died-hard *Optimates*, who drove the political procedures towards crisis, in their purely negative determination not to accept change of any sort, not to permit those they viewed as their enemies any opening for advancement if they could prevent it [16]. Lastly, the Senate was forced to give up the whole system and aimed to transfer to the Roman Empire.

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