

Winning Votes, Performing Politics: Cicero's *How to Win an Election* and Contemporary India

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Abstract

Elections and democracy are commonly examined through institutions, voting behaviour, party competition, and electoral outcomes. This study uses qualitative textual analysis of *Commentariolum Petitionis*, commonly known as *How to Win an Election*, attributed to Quintus Tullius Cicero and associated with Marcus Tullius Cicero's campaign for the Roman consulship in 64 BCE for the consular year 63 BCE. The *Commentariolum Petitionis*, translated by Philip Freeman (2012) as *How to Win an Election*, is the primary text examined in this study. Rather than reviewing the text, the study analyses it as a political text to examine the strategic organisation of electoral competition. The study identifies five interrelated themes: candidate identity and reputation; networks, relationships, and mobilisation; visibility and political performance; communication and voter persuasion; and opponents and strategic adaptation. The study highlights that electoral success is presented as dependent not only on political merit but also on the strategic mobilisation of reputation, relationships, visibility, and communication. The study also focuses on the relevance of these themes to contemporary India, while recognising the substantial institutional differences between the Roman Republic and India. It shows that personal relationships, candidate visibility, and targeted communication remain important in electoral politics, including in India. The study concludes that the enduring value of *How to Win an Election* lies not in treating it as a timeless campaign manual, but in reading it as a historical account of the strategic and performative dimensions of electoral competition.

Keywords: Electoral competition, political communication, campaign strategy, political mobilisation, Cicero, Roman Republic, India

Introduction

Electoral politics is mostly understood through the formal institutions, electoral rules, political parties, constituencies, voting systems, campaign finance, and the aggregation of votes into political office. Such institutional dimensions are indispensable, but they do not fully explain how candidates attempt to win. Elections are interpersonal and communicative contests. Candidates must establish recognition, cultivate support, mobilise networks, communicate their suitability for office, respond to opponents and persuade citizens that they are worthy of political authority. Campaigns therefore involve not only the presentation of policies but also the construction of political identities.

The strategic dimensions of electoral politics are particularly evident in the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, translated by Philip Freeman as *How to Win an Election*. The work is presented as advice to Marcus Tullius Cicero during his campaign for the Roman consulship in 64 BCE. Freeman's edition identifies the text as a short campaign-oriented work dealing with the practical problems of electioneering, including personal relationships, public visibility, voter cultivation, and the management of competitors. The text is particularly valuable because it approaches elections from the perspective of the candidate and asks a deceptively simple political question: how can an aspiring office-holder convert personal qualities, relationships, reputation, and campaigning activity into electoral victory?

The question is politically significant beyond the Roman context. Modern election campaigns are vastly different from those of the late Roman Republic. Contemporary democratic elections involve mass electorates, universal suffrage in most systems, organised political parties,

constitutional regulation, mass media, digital platforms, opinion polling, professional campaign organisations, and formal restrictions on campaign practices. Nevertheless, candidates continue to face problems that have a recognisable structural similarity. These include how candidates become known, establish credibility, mobilise supporters, establish personal connections with voters, distinguish themselves from opponents and transform public visibility into electoral support.

The study does not ask whether Cicero's advice can simply be applied to contemporary politics. The study focuses on what the text reveals about the strategic logic of electoral competition and whether that logic provides a useful comparative framework for examining contemporary electoral politics, particularly in India. The central argument of the study is that *How to Win an Election* presents electoral competition as a multidimensional process of political performance.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The *Commentariolum Petitionis* has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly because its authorship remains disputed. It is traditionally attributed to Quintus Tullius Cicero, but scholars have questioned this attribution. The work appears in some manuscript traditions of Cicero's letters to his brother but is absent from the *Codex Mediceus*, an important medieval manuscript containing Cicero's letters. Its absence from this manuscript is one reason scholars have questioned whether the work was written by Quintus Cicero or composed at a later date.

The authorship of the *Commentariolum Petitionis* remains disputed. Powell (2015) ^[9] notes that the arguments against its authenticity are cumulative rather than individually

decisive. Nisbet (1961) ^[8] raises concerns about the work's purpose, rhetorical character, chronology, and relationship to other Ciceronian material. Sillett (2016) ^[11] argues that the question cannot be settled through philological evidence alone and suggests considering the text's wider philosophical and intellectual context. The present study therefore treats the *Commentariolum Petitionis* as a historical political text without relying on a definitive claim about its authorship.

A second strand of scholarship uses the *Commentariolum Petitionis* to understand Roman electoral practices. Morstein-Marx (1998) ^[7] challenges the view that patronage alone explains electoral support in the Roman Republic. He argues that candidates also had to cultivate popular support and maintain a visible presence among voters. Personal relationships were important, but electoral mobilisation involved more than traditional patron-client ties. The campaign described in the *Commentariolum* therefore combined personal networks with public engagement and efforts to appeal to the wider electorate.

Other scholars have drawn attention to relationships, clientship, and exchange in *How to Win an Election*. García (2023) ^[5], writing from the perspective of public relations history, highlights the role of personal relationships and the exchange of favours in political influence. Alexander (2009) ^[1], however, offers a different interpretation and suggests that the text may be satirical or pseudo-didactic rather than a straightforward guide to election campaigning. These interpretations show that *How to Win an Election* cannot simply be treated as an ancient version of a modern campaign manual.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides important insights into the text's authenticity, political relationships, patronage, and rhetorical character. However, these strands of scholarship have received comparatively less systematic integration within a Political Science framework concerned with the broader dynamics of electoral competition. The study examines how candidate reputation, political networks, public visibility, voter communication, and competition with opponents interact as elements of campaign strategy. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative analysis of these interconnected dimensions of electoral competition in *How to Win an Election*.

The study addresses three questions:

1. How does *How to Win an Election* conceptualise the strategies through which a candidate converts personal reputation and social relationships into electoral support?
2. What does the text reveal about the relationship between political performance, voter persuasion, and electoral competition?
3. Which aspects of this strategic logic, with appropriate historical qualifications, remain analytically relevant to contemporary Indian electoral politics?

The objective is consequently interpretive rather than predictive. The study does not claim that the Roman Republic and contemporary India constitute equivalent electoral systems. Instead, the Roman text is used as a historical case that illuminates recurring mechanisms of political competition.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis of *Commentariolum Petitionis*, using Philip Freeman's English translation, *How to Win an Election: An Ancient Guide for Modern Politicians*, published by Princeton University Press in 2012^[4]. Freeman's edition translates the Latin text and provides the relevant historical and contextual material. The analysis follows a thematic approach, rather than reproducing the sequence of the original text.

2. Primary and Secondary Sources

The primary source is Freeman's 2012^[4] translation of *Commentariolum Petitionis*. The study supplements the primary text with peer-reviewed scholarship and authoritative academic reference works concerning its authorship, historical context, political meaning, patronage, electoral practices, and interpretation.

The secondary literature includes Powell's Oxford Classical Dictionary entry on the *Commentariolum*, Morstein-Marx's analysis of publicity, popularity, and patronage, Nisbet's examination of authenticity, Sillett's philosophical interpretation, Alexander's alternative reading of the text, and García's study of relationships and clientship.

For the Indian comparison, the study draws on political science scholarship concerning constituency relationships, personalisation, political communication, and electoral campaigning, particularly Bussell (2019), Kumar (2022) ^[3, 6], and Shome *et al.* (2024).

3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis identifies recurring patterns in the text and examines their political significance, following a thematic approach to qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) ^[2]. Five themes guide the analysis: (1) candidate identity and reputation; (2) networks, relationships, and mobilisation; (3) visibility and political performance; (4) communication and voter persuasion; and (5) opponents and strategic adaptation. These themes were derived from close reading of the text and are treated as interconnected dimensions of electoral strategy. For each theme, relevant passages were identified and interpreted in relation to the research questions before being compared with the secondary literature and, where appropriate, contemporary Indian electoral scholarship.

4. Limitations

The study has three main limitations. First, it examines a single historical text and cannot provide a complete account of electoral practices in the Roman Republic. It focuses specifically on the strategies represented in *How to Win an Election*. Second, the authorship of the *Commentariolum Petitionis* remains debated (Nisbet, 1961; Powell, 2015) ^[8, 9]. The analysis therefore treats the text as a historical source for examining ideas about electoral competition rather than relying on a definitive attribution to Quintus Tullius Cicero. Third, the comparison with contemporary India is interpretive rather than causal. The Roman Republic and India differ substantially in their political institutions, electorate and constitutional arrangements. The similarities identified are therefore treated as analytical parallels, not evidence of continuity.

These limitations define the scope of the study. Its purpose is to examine what the text reveals about electoral strategy

and to assess the relevance of these themes to contemporary Indian electoral politics.

Electoral Competition as Political Performance

1. Candidate Identity and Reputation

One of the central concerns of *How to Win an Election* is the candidate. The text draws attention to the candidate's background, political standing, relationships, and reputation, suggesting that these qualities acquire electoral value only when they are recognised by voters. This is particularly significant in the case of Marcus Cicero, a *novus homo* ("new man") who lacked the established aristocratic lineage of many of his competitors. Powell (2015) ^[9] identifies the problem of overcoming this disadvantage as an important concern of the *Commentariolum Petitionis*. The campaign was therefore not simply a question of possessing qualifications for office. It also involved presenting those qualifications in a manner that could establish the candidate's credibility (Cicero, 2012) ^[4].

This emphasis on the candidate provides a useful starting point for understanding electoral politics as a process of political representation and personal presentation. Candidates compete not only through political positions but also through the images of competence, character, experience, and leadership that they communicate to voters. The electoral strategies represented in the *Commentariolum Petitionis* should not be projected directly onto contemporary democracies, but the broader question of how political leaders construct public identities remains relevant. Indian electoral politics provides a contemporary illustration of the continued importance of political personalisation. Shome *et al.* (2024), analysing Facebook advertisements during the 2021^[10] West Bengal Assembly election, found that campaign communication connected identity, ideology, gender, and strong leadership. The comparison does not suggest similar electoral systems; it indicates that the construction of political identity remains relevant to electoral campaigning.

2. Networks, Relationships, and Mobilisation

A second theme is the importance of political relationships. *How to Win an Election* does not present the candidate as an isolated political actor. Friends, supporters, influential individuals, and other political contacts form an important part of the candidate's support base. Electoral mobilisation therefore depends not only on direct appeals to voters but also on the relationships through which political support can be developed (Cicero, 2012) ^[4].

Morstein-Marx (1998) ^[7] is important here because he cautions against explaining Roman electoral politics entirely through patron-client relations. His analysis draws attention to the importance of popular support and public engagement alongside personal relationships. The campaign described in *How to Win an Election* therefore involved both personal relationships and efforts to gain wider public support, rather than relying solely on patronage.

This distinction is useful in the Indian context. Bussell (2019) ^[3] shows that relationships between politicians and citizens remain important to political representation through constituency service. Her field experiment found that politicians' responses to individual requests were generally not determined by citizens' stated electoral preferences. Personal political relationships should therefore not automatically be equated with clientelism; they may also involve political responsiveness.

3. Visibility and Political Performance

Visibility is an important element of the campaign described in *How to Win an Election*. The candidate is expected to be present among voters and to demonstrate attentiveness to them. A central finding of the analysis is that the electoral strategy represented in *How to Win an Election* cannot be reduced to patronage or personal exchange. Morstein-Marx (1998) ^[7] reads this feature of the *Commentariolum Petitionis* as evidence of the public character of Roman electioneering. In his analysis, the candidate had to demonstrate his suitability for office before voters, including those who did not know him personally. Political reputation therefore had to be made visible through public interaction rather than remaining a private quality.

The means of political visibility have changed considerably in contemporary India. Electoral campaigns now combine physical campaigning with television, print media, social media, and other forms of mediated communication. Kumar (2022) ^[6], examining BJP and AAP campaigns in the 2015 and 2020 Delhi Assembly elections, describes them as highly organised, leader-centred, and professionalised, with differences in the issues and appeals directed towards particular audiences. Shome *et al.* (2024) similarly show how Facebook advertisements combined leadership with wider social and ideological identities. These examples indicate that contemporary campaigns extend voter communication beyond direct personal contact to mass and digital forms of communication.

The comparison with Cicero should not be taken to suggest that Roman and Indian campaigns operate under similar institutional conditions. Candidate visibility remains important across different electoral contexts, although the means through which candidates become visible have changed substantially. The candidate represented in the *Commentariolum Petitionis* relied heavily on physical presence and personal encounters, whereas contemporary Indian campaigns can combine physical campaigning with mass and digital communication. The comparison therefore identifies a recurring feature of electoral competition without implying historical continuity between the two contexts.

4. Communication and Voter Persuasion

The text *How to Win an Election* highlights the variability of electoral communication. Candidates must understand that different groups of voters have different interests, expectations, and relationships (Cicero, 2012) ^[4]. In a heterogeneous electorate, adapting one's communication to different audiences can be a normal feature of political representation. The difficulty arises when responsiveness becomes merely strategic and the candidate presents substantially different political positions to different audiences.

Contemporary Indian campaigns similarly demonstrate considerable attention to audience and context. Kumar (2022) ^[6] highlights that the BJP and AAP campaigns in the Delhi Assembly elections differed in their selection of issues and in the ways they adapted campaign appeals to particular audiences. The study also identifies both campaigns as leader-centred and professionalised, while noting differences in their use of affect and campaign narratives. Shome *et al.* (2024) similarly demonstrate that campaign communication in the 2021^[10] West Bengal Assembly election was shaped by the interaction of identity,

ideology, and gender. Their analysis of Facebook advertisements found that campaign communication used visual representations of leadership alongside wider social and political identities.

The significance of the comparison lies not in suggesting that Indian campaigns reproduce Cicero's strategies, but in showing that electoral communication takes place within an uneven and differentiated political audience. Candidates decide how to present themselves and how to connect political messages with the expectations of particular groups.

5. Opponents and Strategic Adaptation

Electoral competition also requires candidates to distinguish themselves from their opponents. *How to Win an Election* discusses the strengths and weaknesses of competing candidates and the need to cultivate goodwill among voters (Cicero, 2012) ^[4]. Its advice reflects the pragmatic character of electoral competition, but does not establish that deception or misconduct was considered acceptable. Rather, the text raises a broader question about the boundary between legitimate persuasion and manipulative electoral strategy.

The themes identified in this section provide the basis for the later comparison with contemporary India. They show that electoral competition involves more than formal qualifications: reputation, relationships, visibility, communication, and competition with opponents all shape the pursuit of electoral support.

This distinction is particularly important when drawing lessons for India. Cicero's text should not be treated as a guide for contemporary election campaigns. Its importance lies in showing the practical pressures that shape electoral competition. Indian elections take place within a constitutional and institutional framework that is very different from that of the Roman Republic. The relevance of Cicero, therefore, lies not in copying Roman campaign practices, but in considering how candidates balance the pursuit of electoral success with the demands of democratic accountability.

From Patronage to Performance: Rethinking the Electoral Relationship

Taken together, the preceding themes complicate a purely patronage-based interpretation of electoral strategy in *How to Win an Election*. The text presents electoral support as emerging through the interaction of personal networks, public visibility, reputation, and wider popular appeal. Personal relationships were important, but they operated alongside efforts to establish the candidate's public standing and secure broader electoral support (Cicero, 2012; Morstein-Marx, 1998) ^[4, 7].

This suggests that electoral strategy in the *Commentariolum Petitionis* was neither purely relational nor purely performative. Networks could facilitate access to voters and political influence, while public presentation enabled the candidate to communicate his suitability for office beyond established personal connections. Electoral support therefore involved both the cultivation of relationships and the performance of political credibility before a wider electorate.

This interpretation also complicates a simple understanding of Roman electioneering as an exchange between candidates and patrons. Morstein-Marx (1998) ^[7] argues that popular

support and public engagement were significant alongside patronage and personal relationships. The *Commentariolum Petitionis* can therefore be read as depicting electoral competition as a process in which private political connections and public appeals operated together rather than as mutually exclusive forms of mobilisation.

The distinction is analytically useful for contemporary India, although the institutional contexts are substantially different. Bussell (2019) ^[3] demonstrates the continuing importance of relationships between politicians and citizens through constituency service and political responsiveness, while Kumar (2022) ^[6] and Shome *et al.* (2024) point to the importance of leader-centred, professionalised, and mediated forms of political communication. These developments suggest that personal political relationships and public political performance can coexist rather than represent alternative forms of electoral strategy.

The broader implication is that electoral competition cannot be adequately understood through patronage or personal relationships alone. The *Commentariolum Petitionis* illustrates how electoral support may be constructed through the interaction of relationships, reputation, visibility, communication, and public performance. Its contemporary relevance therefore lies not in transferring Roman campaign practices to India, but in providing a historical case through which these interconnected dimensions of electoral competition can be examined.

Relevance for Contemporary India

Any comparison between the Roman Republic and contemporary India must begin with their institutional differences. Roman electoral competition operated within a political order structured by citizenship, status, and elite competition (Morstein-Marx, 1998; Powell, 2015) ^[7, 9], whereas contemporary India is a constitutional democracy based on universal adult suffrage, political parties, fundamental rights, and formally regulated elections. Contemporary Indian elections are also embedded in constitutional, statutory, and judicial institutions that regulate electoral competition and electoral disputes and have no direct equivalent in the Roman Republic. The comparison, therefore, is analytical rather than institutional. Its value lies in identifying recurring features of electoral competition while recognising their different political contexts.

1. Candidate Reputation and Political Personalisation

How to Win an Election places considerable emphasis on reputation, public conduct, relationships and the candidate's presentation before voters. Similar concerns remain visible in contemporary Indian campaigning, although through substantially different institutional and technological forms. Kumar (2022) ^[6], for example, finds that the BJP and AAP campaigns in the 2015 and 2020 Delhi Assembly elections were highly organised, leader-centred and characterised by political personalisation. This suggests that candidate visibility and reputation remain important dimensions of electoral competition, even though contemporary campaigns operate through party organisations and mass and digital communication.

2. Political Relationships and Constituency Service

How to Win an Election highlights the electoral significance of personal relationships and networks. In India, this has a

different institutional expression through constituency service and political responsiveness. Bussell (2019) ^[3] shows that Indian politicians did not generally help citizens only because they expected their votes. Politicians may respond to citizens' requests as part of their constituency work. Such interactions can also help politicians build a positive reputation.

3. Direct Engagement and Campaign Communication

In *How to Win an Election*, the emphasis on personal contact also has a contemporary parallel, although electoral communication in India now operates across physical and digital spaces. Kumar (2022) ^[6] shows that contemporary campaigns combine organised voter outreach with audience-specific political messaging. Similarly, Shome *et al.* (2024) demonstrate how Facebook campaign advertisements during the 2021^[10] West Bengal Assembly election linked identity, ideology and gender with representations of strong leadership. Direct engagement has therefore not disappeared; rather, its forms have expanded from interpersonal canvassing to multimodal and digitally mediated communication.

4. Personalisation and Institutional Accountability

The comparison also raises the question of political personalisation. Both Kumar (2022) ^[6] and Shome *et al.* (2024) identify important dimensions of leader-centred and personalised campaigning in contemporary India. However, these studies do not establish that personalisation necessarily weakens institutions. The more defensible conclusion is that political visibility and leadership should complement, rather than substitute for, institutional accountability.

5. Electoral Strategy and Democratic Accountability

Finally, *How to Win an Election* illustrates the strategic pressures inherent in electoral competition: candidates must cultivate support, manage relationships, shape public perceptions and respond to opponents. These features are not necessarily unique to the Roman context. Their contemporary significance, however, must be assessed within the normative framework of constitutional democracy. The value of Cicero's *How to Win an Election* therefore lies not in providing techniques for imitation, but in revealing how electoral strategy, political persuasion and reputation interact with the conditions of political competition. For India, the central lesson is consequently analytical rather than prescriptive: electoral effectiveness must remain compatible with democratic accountability and meaningful political choice.

Discussion

The analysis shows that *How to Win an Election* presents electoral competition as both relational and public. Candidates had to build reputations, maintain political relationships, gain visibility, and cultivate support beyond established networks. Morstein-Marx (1998) ^[7] is important here because he challenges a purely patronage-based interpretation of Roman elections and emphasises the importance of appealing to the wider electorate. These elements are interconnected rather than separate stages of campaigning. Reputation, networks, visibility, communication, and attention to opponents worked together in the pursuit of electoral support. Cicero (2012) ^[4] presents

electoral strategy as a form of political performance shaped by relationships with voters and competitors.

The Indian evidence shows that some of these dimensions remain relevant under very different institutional conditions. Kumar (2022) ^[6] identifies organised and leader-centred campaigning in the Delhi Assembly elections, while Shome *et al.* (2024) show how digital campaign communication connects leadership with identity, ideology, and gender. Bussell (2019) ^[3] demonstrates the continuing importance of politician–citizen relationships through constituency service and political responsiveness.

These studies do not establish continuity between Roman and Indian elections. They instead show that *How to Win an Election* remains useful as an analytical framework for examining how candidates build support, establish political identities, communicate with voters, and compete with opponents. Its significance lies not in the specific campaign advice it offers, but in its depiction of the strategic and relational character of electoral competition.

Conclusion

How to Win an Election provides a useful historical basis for examining the strategic dimensions of electoral competition. The analysis identifies five interconnected elements: (1) candidate identity and reputation; (2) networks, relationships, and mobilisation; (3) visibility and political performance; (4) communication and voter persuasion; and (5) opponents and strategic adaptation.

The study also complicates a purely patronage-based interpretation of the electoral strategy represented in *How to Win an Election*. As Morstein-Marx (1998) ^[7] shows, personal relationships were important, but candidates also had to cultivate wider popular support and demonstrate their suitability for office in public. Electoral competition thus involved both relationships and public appeal.

The comparison with contemporary India is analytical rather than historical. Indian elections operate through universal suffrage, political parties, constitutional institutions, and mass and digital communication. Yet research shows the continuing importance of constituency relationships, leader-centred campaigning, and mediated political communication (Bussell, 2019; Kumar, 2022^[3, 6]; Shome *et al.*, 2024). These parallels do not establish continuity between the two systems; they indicate the continuing relevance of questions concerning reputation, relationships, visibility, communication, and electoral competition.

The enduring value of *How to Win an Election* lies not in providing a model for modern campaigns, but in showing how electoral strategy is shaped by political relationships, public presentation, persuasion, and competition, subject to the institutional and ethical conditions of each political system.

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