

Although no consensus exists as to whether the Commentariolum Petitionis was really written by Quintus Cicero in 64 B.C., Roman historians generally agree that, whoever the author and whatever the date, it provides a reliable and well-informed description of Roman election campaigns during the Late Republic. However, the purpose of the work was not to describe election campaigns but rather to show, using the example of Marcus Cicero, that campaigns debased candidates by forcing them to court voters in humiliating ways. It is, in other words, a tongue-in-cheek satire on Roman electioneering.

The work contains several signs that it should not be read in a literal manner: 1) references to addressing strangers as friends (28, 31-32, and 41-43), 2) the use of the term amicus in an avowedly exploitative sense (16), a use totally at odds with Cicero's De Amicitia, and 3) the citation of C. Aurelius Cotta (cos. 75), a politician of dubious reputation (Syme 1964, 200), as an authority on campaign tactics.

Two pre-existing negative images provide the foundation of the Comm. Pet.'s satire. 1) Elections were seen as problematic, as is demonstrated by a long series of Republican laws attempting to stem abuses such as bribery, illegal combinations, and the use of nomenclatores, and by measures taken during the Empire steps to limit disturbances in the comitia and to transfer elections to the Senate. 2) Marcus Cicero was often portrayed as a fickle troublemaker (Millar 1964, 46-55). Gabba (E. Gabba, RSI 1957) has analyzed the many common themes to be found in the main works in this anti-Ciceronian tradition (the denunciation of Cicero by Calenus [Dio 46.1-28], Appian, Civil Wars, Book III, and [Sal.] in Ciceronem). Almost all of these themes, excluding those relating to Cicero's life after 64, are also included in the Comm. Pet. For example, the work's stress on how Cicero can overcome his novitas in his campaign is adapted from attacks on him as an upstart. The recommendation that he put pressure on his former legal clients to support his campaign (19) is a reflection of the charge that he exploited arbitrarily selected forensic activity for personal advantage. The threat to prosecute opponents who violated electioneering laws (57) refers to the charge that he prosecuted innocent people.

By-products of this reading of the Comm. Pet. are the conclusion that it was not written by Marcus Cicero's own brother Quintus, and a terminus post quem for its composition in 54 B.C., when Marcus Cicero gained his reputation for inconstancy by defending Vatinius and Gabinius, whom previously he had bitterly denounced.

The Comm. Pet. makes a case, with finesse and a dead-pan style, that election campaigns forced candidates to behave in an undignified manner. Historians who believe that the Comm. Pet. shows that Roman politics was opportunistic and unprincipled are not misunderstanding the work's content, but rather failing to see that what they regard as their own conclusion based on the information presented is, in fact, the work's very point. The Comm. Pet.'s bias undermines its value as a historical source for the workings of Republican election campaigns, although it does provide evidence for Roman criticism of electioneering.