

From Forum to Capitol Hill: Republican Decline in Rome and the Structural Tensions of 21st-Century American Politics

Yuxuan Wang

Abstract: With the new presidential election over, the United States just entered a new era with dramatic political polarization, increasing social tension, and the growth of public anxiety. 2000 years ago, these familiar phenomena happened in another great civilization which experienced an autocratic, military control and that caused the republicans to transition to the Empire. This is Rome—one of the most powerful civilizations in human history. Today, we may see another turning point in the United States. So, how do two countries lead themselves to face the similar turning point of the cross road of history? And since the loss of the Roman Republic had lots of similarities and differences with America, how will it warn the challenge of American democracy?

Major Department: History Major, Education Major

Introduction

In 49 BCE, Caesar conquered Gaul in the Gallic War, and added this land to under the part of Roman reign. When he returned to Rome as a winner, most Senators felt threatened by his power because his power already overpassed the balance that Council should have.¹ Senators and other nobles worried about the republican trap in a disordered situation. And they did not worry wrong, Caesar used his power to eliminate his biggest political enemy Pompey and control Rome completely, he was indeed trying to become Rome to his own property.² In the 20th century, the United States showed the symbol of democracy and brought the way of free and equity to American citizens and all around the world. America had the same way, in some cases, with the Roman Republic. The Roman Republic ended the regal period and brought power from the king to the people, while comparatively, America ended the dictatorship of Nazi Germany. They all symbolized the new era that more benefits to normal people's rights, including voting rights and citizens can decide things directly. However, as events unfolded in the Rome Republic, the republic government ultimately fell. Before Octavian became Augustus and almost announced the end of republicanism, there were several signs already predicting the result, such as Sulla's military dictatorship and Caesar's concentration of power. This paper deems that the structural tensions regarding American politics in this century also shows signs of predicting the democracy going to crossroad, so this paper will compare the continued political change of the late Roman Republic and the political tension that happened in the United States of America.

¹ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, in *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 28.2.

² Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 60.2.

The Fall of the Roman Republic: Institutional Decay and Adoration of an Individual

Institutional Breakdown Begins: The Rise of Sulla

“Dictator” is a negative word today when people mentioned it, and usually made it to relate with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Yet, this word came from Rome and it was an official powerful position in the Rome government.³ In the late Roman Republic, Sulla carried forward to new heights of this position although it was dormant after the second Punic War.⁴ When Sulla controlled the power and the military force through the external wars and also the internal conflict of Rome, which was the civil war, he became extremely powerful to impact Rome by his own words.⁵ This was a sign, and it was a risk that the Senate and the power of the Republic was controlled by one person who can use the military to suppress both the city and the political opponents. Sulla’s life showed dramatic change and ambition. According to Plutarch, he was the Quaestor appointed by Marius during the Jugurtha war.⁶ Therefore, he followed Marius and seized power step by step until his position threatened Marius, then the civil war started,⁷ which showed the conflict between the military force controller and political figures with power. It was also a scene of weakness when too much prestige and power were concentrated in the hands of individuals to control the military, the balance was broken and caused the collapse of the system.

³ Andrew Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 112–113.

⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, in *The Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, vol. III (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 33.1.

⁵ Appian, *The Civil Wars*, Book 1, section 95, in *The Roman History of Appian of Alexandria*, trans. Horace White, Loeb Classical Library, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 387.

⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 3.1.

⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 4.4–5.1.

After the civil war, Sulla started to reshape the politics of Rome. He was elected consul, though the election was largely symbolic. He soon proposed to the Senate that the office of dictator, which had been abolished four centuries earlier, be reinstated.⁸ The restoration of the dictatorship laid the groundwork for the later dictatorships of Caesar and Octavian, but regardless of what came later, Sulla effectively became the king of Rome, though the term “king” was never used. After seizing power, he implemented a series of reforms to prevent potential unrest. First, he repeatedly stripped the tribunes of their powers, as they had once held the ability to incite the masses, which Sulla believed was a major cause of Rome's chaos. He enacted a law prohibiting anyone who had served as a tribune from holding any other public office, thereby thwarting the plans of many who had sought to use the tribune position as a stepping stone to higher office.⁹ He then turned his attention to the Senate. Due to years of turmoil and civil war, the Senate had become weak, so Sulla selected 300 knights to join the Senate as senators.¹⁰ At the same time, he granted legal citizenship to 10,000 young, strong slaves, who, upon becoming citizens, effectively became his private army.¹¹ This action was later imitated by Caesar, laying the groundwork for the further collapse of the Republic. The following year, Sulla, as dictator, was nominally re-elected as consul, while his ally and subordinate Metellus Pius was also elected consul. Appian, in *The Civil War*, described this situation as “in order to preserve the pretense and form of democratic government.”¹² Furthermore, he suggested that it was perhaps due to Sulla's precedent that later Roman emperors would maintain the appearance of appointing others or themselves as consuls. This serves as evidence of Sulla's destructive impact on the republican system.

⁸ Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.100.

⁹ Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.101.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.105.

From Breakdown to Oligarchy: The First Triumvirate and the Capture of the Republic

The First Triumvirate refers to Crassus, Pompey, and the well-known Caesar. All three rose to prominence after Sulla came to power, and the alliance they gradually formed became the dominant force in the Senate many years after Sulla relinquished power.¹³ Although the three eventually formed an alliance, their initial positions were not unified. Crassus and Pompey had both originally aligned themselves with Sulla, especially Pompey, who distinguished himself in several wars and was highly regarded by Sulla.¹⁴ Even Plutarch noted that he was considered to have the potential to be the next Alexander the Great in his youth, which was a very high compliment in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹⁵ Pompey also gained immense prestige in the military through his achievements in warfare and was deeply beloved by the Roman people. Crassus, however, was more complex. He had fought alongside Sulla in the civil war and had once been highly favored by him. However, his greed strained his relationship with Sulla. Crassus was a natural merchant; he had acquired land and property during Rome's turmoil, seized the property of dead soldiers, and even exiled others for coveting their property. Even the Romans said, “The many virtues of Crassus were obscured by his sole vice of avarice.”¹⁶ Caesar, however, was different from the other two. He was the son-in-law of Marius, Sulla's political enemy, so he stood on the opposite side of Sulla.¹⁷ In his youth, he even fled into exile because of this. Caesar had

¹³ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, in *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 1.1.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, in *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 13.1.

¹⁵ Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 13.1.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 2.3

¹⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 1.1.

studied in Greece and possessed powerful oratory skills.¹⁸ Upon returning to Rome, he quickly gained political status by relying on his generosity and debating skills to create favor and influence with people. Furthermore, as the son-in-law of Marius, he did not compromise to Sulla's threats, which earned him the favor of the Roman people.

Therefore, from the perspectives of wealth, military power, and politics, the three of them increased their influence over Rome. This also laid the groundwork for their later alliance. In 60 BCE, Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar formally allied, forming the largest controlling faction in Rome. This alliance also signaled the beginning of the collapse of the republican system.¹⁹ The alliance of the three could control the entire nation, and once the alliance broke down, Rome would once again be plunged into the vortex of civil war, as the alliance had destroyed the possibility of resolving political disputes through peaceful means. Most seriously, the First Triumvirate was not as harmonious as it appeared on the surface, especially between Caesar and Pompey.²⁰ Pompey had accumulated significant prestige in the army and among the Roman populace through his military campaigns, but his status and power were frequently challenged by Caesar in later years. It was not until the death of Crassus during his campaign against the Parthian Empire that the balance among the three was broken,²¹ and Caesar and Pompey soon launched a new round of civil war. At this point, although the Senate was aligned with Pompey, it had little ability to mediate the conflict between the two, and could only watch as Rome once again plunged into civil war. The ultimate outcome was Pompey's death in Egypt,²² leaving Caesar in absolute power. Although

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.2.

¹⁹ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 13.1

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.1

²¹ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 31.4.

²² Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 80.3

his dictatorial rule was interrupted by his death, the precedent he set and his political legacy helped Octavian completely destroy the republican system.

The Apex of Personal Power: Caesar and the Death of the Republic

Caesar's rise to power came from his personal charm and oratory skills, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, but this only allowed him to gain political allies in Rome and was not enough to give him greater power. What truly made him feared was his victory over the Gauls during the 58-50 BCE. After that, he became a Roman hero and was loved by the Roman people. This also threatened Pompey's position, and the conflict between the two was about to erupt. Caesar ultimately defeated Pompey, who was killed after fleeing to Egypt in 48 BCE. Upon returning to Rome, Caesar held absolute power. At his behest, his loyal subordinate Mark Antony was elected tribune²³, and like Sulla, he expanded the Senate once again, ensuring that he always had a strong voice within the Senate²⁴. After becoming dictator, he further established himself as an unprecedented "permanent dictator,"²⁵ which granted him even greater power while further undermining the system. The position of permanent dictator effectively legalized Caesar's rule, granting him even greater power than Sulla. Although Caesar's dictatorship and political abilities came to an end when he was killed by conservative senators because they feared his power would undermine the Republic.²⁶ The outbreak of another civil war after his death once again demonstrated that the Republic and the Senate were incapable of preventing civil war. Especially after the conservative faction led by Brutus was defeated, no one could stop the Republic from

²³ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, in *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, vol. IX (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 5.2

²⁴ Plutarch, *Caesar*, 57.3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.1.

turning toward despotism. Octavian inherited Caesar's political legacy and benefited from the groundwork laid by Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar, seamlessly transitioning to dictatorship. The Senate granted him the title of “Augustus,” which later became the exclusive title of all subsequent Roman emperors.²⁷ The consular system continued to exist as a mere formality.

Comparative of Rome and 21st-Century America

Challenging the System

The United States of America and the Roman Republic are two political systems that share fundamental similarities. In fact, the founding fathers of the United States drew inspiration from the history of the Roman Republic during the nation's formative years.²⁸ Both nations have held dominant positions in the world. The Roman Republic became a powerful nation through a series of foreign expansions, including the Punic Wars, while the United States emerged as the dominant force in the world order following World War II and the Cold War. However, as the United States entered the 21st century, it began to exhibit some of the same signs that preceded the downfall of the Roman Republic.

First, internal conflicts became frequent, and the two major political parties entered a phase of irreconcilable differences. Although tensions between the two parties were already high during the Obama administration, the situation worsened during the three presidential terms beginning in 2016, with the Republican and Democratic parties engaging in mutual accusations and rejecting

²⁷ Suetonius, *The Life of Augustus*, in *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 7.2.

²⁸ Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3–5.

each other's policies. In the late Roman Republic, a similar situation arose. The conflicts between Sulla and Marius, Caesar and Pompey, and even Octavian and Mark Antony all led to civil wars. This political tension has intensified ahead of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, with some voters expressing concerns that a civil war could erupt after the election. In 2016, Republican President Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States. During his four-year term, the two parties demonstrated extreme contradictions and mutual non-cooperation, which was clearly evident in his conflicts with Nancy Pelosi, especially on the impeachment trials, and policy disputes over immigration and pandemic problems. This made his first term extremely challenging. When Joe Biden became the 46th President, the Democratic Party also targeted the political legacy of the Republican Party and Trump.

It is worth noting that the Civil War marked the beginning of the collapse of the Roman Republic, and a similar signal has emerged in the United States. The most notable example is the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot, in which supporters of Donald Trump violently stormed Congress in an attempt to change the result of the 2020 presidential election. This event was viewed as a potential trigger for civil war and posed a threat to the nation's institutional framework.²⁹

However, the lack of coordination between the two parties has led to further inefficiency.³⁰ When candidates from different parties become president, they often prioritize refuting the strategies of the previous president, which makes them inefficient in addressing issues. This was also evident in the Roman Senate, where, when faced with Caesar, they were internally divided into pro-Caesar factions and traditional conservatives. The internal conflicts within the Senate were also one of the reasons they were unable to quell or influence the civil war³¹. Therefore, a

²⁹ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018), 5.

³⁰ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 104–106.

³¹ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 28.2.

situation arises where, despite the Senate's high authority in many cases, its power becomes particularly weak when faced with ambitious individuals like Sulla, Pompey, or Caesar who command armies. The United States has not yet reached such an extreme situation, but the influence of the president or a small group on the military still poses risks, especially during wartime, when the president may temporarily transform into a “dictator.”³²

Parallels Between Caesar and Trump

In the 2024 US presidential election, Trump was re-elected as the 47th president of the United States. Since the Republican Party also won a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, this means that his power is much greater than it was in 2016. Trump's success is very similar to that of Caesar. He is a walking advertisement, using speeches, slogans, and bold statements on social media to attract a fervent following, which is a form of personal worship. The relationship between Elon Musk and Trump bears some resemblance to The First Triumvirate. Trump and Caesar also share many similarities.

First, both challenged established norms and institutions. After seizing power, Caesar became the permanent dictator of the Roman Republic, laying the groundwork for its collapse. Trump, after losing the 2020 election, refused to accept the results and sparked the Capitol riot. Both used their power and influence to undermine the existing system to some extent.

Second, both men share a similar narrative perspective, portraying themselves as saviors or heroes. After defeating the Gauls, Caesar returned to Rome and was honored by the Romans,

³² Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 5. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 69–72.

naturally becoming a heroic figure.³³ This, to some extent, undermined the authority of the Senate through personal heroism. Trump is no different; he portrays himself as the savior of the United States, which is also a form of political propaganda centered on the individual and carries the risk of threatening government authority.³⁴

The weakening role of the Roman Senate and the US Senate and House of Representatives

Another possible factor influencing the development of republicanism and democracy is the weakening of the role of parliament, which can lead to dictatorship and authoritarianism. The Roman Senate is a classic example. During the periods of Sulla and Caesar, it failed to exert the influence it should have, leading to civil war and chaos in Rome, and ultimately resulting in the gradual transition of the republic to authoritarian rule. During this period, the military power of Sulla and Caesar played a decisive role. However, the Senate's repeated compromises and inability to unite were also important factors.³⁵ As an elite alliance composed of noble families, the Senate's members had differing interests, so when faced with the oppression of a dictator, they did not necessarily unite to form an effective resistance.³⁶ Such a situation has not yet occurred in the United States, but the Republican Party's control of both houses of Congress and the White House could potentially trigger similar risks. Additionally, President Trump's executive orders and personal factors may further weaken the power of Congress.³⁷ This could put American democracy

³³ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 27.3–28.1.

³⁴ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018), 73–75.

³⁵ Plutarch, *Sulla*, 28.1, 33.1; *Caesar*, 28.2, 57.3.

³⁶ Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 310–312. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book 30.1, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library.

³⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 4–7.

at risk, potentially leading to a weakening of the Senate's status, similar to that of the Roman Senate, and triggering more severe structural imbalances.

Conclusion

The similarities between the Roman Republic and the United States in certain aspects do not necessarily lead to the same outcome. History is not a mirror but more like the rhyming scheme of a song. Therefore, similar stages may appear in history, but they cannot possibly lead to identical outcomes. In today's politically tense United States, there may be similarities with the late Roman Republic in certain aspects, but the United States possesses a more stable and well-developed institutional framework, as well as a stronger judicial system and corrective mechanisms, which affords it greater maneuverability in its political trajectory. This paper has addressed to compare the political structures of the late Roman Republic and 21st-century America, as well as the risks and threats they may face. It does not intend to make value judgments or predict political outcomes for any political task or party. The comparison between ancient Rome and 21st-century America is purely an academic analysis based on structural, institutional, and historical perspectives.

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