

Lesson 1.4: Political Ideals

Learning Intentions

- To understand the key political ideals that shaped Republican discourse and behaviour*
- To explore how figures like Cicero and Cato embodied these values in their political careers*
- To analyse the tension between idealistic rhetoric and political reality in the Late Republic*
- To evaluate how political ideals could be both genuine principles and rhetorical weapons*

Understanding the Content

What were Roman political ideals?

Roman political ideals were a set of deeply held values that shaped how politicians presented themselves, defended their actions, and judged their opponents. These ideals provided both genuine moral guidance and rhetorical tools for political advantage.

Latin Term	Ideal	Definition	Political Application
Dignitas	Honour/dignity	Honour earned through merit	Could justify extreme actions to preserve reputation
Auctoritas	Authority	Influence based on wisdom and experience	Justified elite leadership and advice
Libertas	Freedom	Freedom from tyranny for all citizens	Used to justify resistance to strongmen; also to defend elite privileges
Concordia Ordinum	Harmony of the Orders	Harmony between senators and equites	Cicero's ideal of cooperation between different social classes
Otium cum Dignitate	Leisure with Dignity	Honorable retirement from active politics	Cicero's ideal of scholarly retirement while maintaining influence
Virtus	Moral Excellence	Moral excellence and courage in service	Standard for judging fitness for office

Stoicism in Politics

- Philosophical school emphasising duty, reason, and virtue over personal gain
- Cato the Younger (95-46 BC)** → Most famous Stoic politician
- Stoic principles: virtue as highest good, resistance to corruption, death before dishonour
- Stoics refused compromise with what they saw as vice or tyranny
- Often seen as inflexible idealists, but commanded respect even from enemies
- Cato's suicide at Utica (46 BC) became symbol of Republican resistance

Guided Practice

Exercise 1.1: Identifying Political Ideals

Read these quotations and identify which Roman political ideal each speaker is invoking:

1. "The die is cast. I cannot return to private life with my honour intact." — Caesar
2. "I would rather die than see the Republic enslaved to any man." — Cato
3. "The cooperation between senators and businessmen is the salvation of the state." — Cicero
4. "True influence comes not from force but from the respect of good men." — Cicero
5. "Our ancestors valued moral excellence above all riches and honours." — Sallust
6. "A statesman should seek honourable retirement from public life when his work is done." — Cicero

Exercise 1.2: Stoic Principles in Politics

Read the following passage about Stoic Philosophy and answer the questions below

Stoicism was a philosophical school that taught politicians to prioritise duty over personal gain, reason over emotion, and virtue over success. Stoic politicians believed that public service was a moral obligation, not just a career opportunity. They made decisions based on logic and principle rather than passion or what was politically convenient. For Stoics, integrity was more valuable than wealth, popularity, or even political success. They refused to compromise with what they saw as corruption, even if such compromises might achieve a "greater good." Stoics focused on what they could control and accepted what they could not. Most dramatically, they believed that death was preferable to living dishonourably under tyranny.

1. According to Stoics, what should politicians prioritise over personal gain?
2. How did Stoics believe political decisions should be made?
3. What did Stoics value more than wealth and popularity?
4. Why might Stoic politicians refuse political compromises?
5. What extreme choice would Stoics make rather than live dishonourably?

Exercise 1.3: How political ideals could be corrupted

Using the Classialia website sections on "Interactive Explorer," "Case Studies," and "Cynicism and Political Realism," complete the table below. For each ideal, explain how it could be corrupted or misused, then find an example from the website.

Ideal	How it could be corrupted/misused	Example
Dignitas		
Auctoritas		
Libertas		
Concordia Ordinum		
Otium cum Dignitate		
Virtus		