Roman Civil Wars: Insights from Political Science

The first century BCE was a time of extreme turmoil in the Roman empire with repeated incidents of violent and destructive civil war. Even after Julius Caesar achieved a clear and overwhelming victory in the civil wars ending in 45 BCE, a single year later in 44 BCE he was assassinated and in 42 BCE yet another civil war had broken out between the triumvirs Antony and Octavian and the assassins Brutus and Longinus. These repeated civil wars and the inability of the Roman elite to create a lasting peace, even after decisive victories, were a defining characteristic of the late republic.

In the past decades, a wealth of new data on modern civil wars has enabled political scientists to empirically evaluate the factors during civil wars and their resolution which increase or decrease the likelihood of civil wars recurring. A major finding suggests that the chances for creating enduring peace are highest when one side wins a clear military victory (Toft 2010). In cases where neither side wins an overwhelming victory, civil wars instead end with a negotiated peace settlement, and a large body of work focuses on how the details of peace settlements affect prospects of lasting peace, with many of these findings concerning peace settlements also applying to how the actions of a victor can influence the likelihood of peace. Kreutz discovered that the deployment of peacekeepers reduces the risk of recurrence, the chance of recurrence is higher in situations where defeated rebels had been seeking total control of government (2010). Arrangements for power-sharing where both belligerents play a role in governing and the separation of opposing military forces both improve prospects for peace (Savun 2009). More counterintuitively, research suggest that settlements which include territorial partitions increase the risk of conflict recurring (Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl 2009), as does the holding of

elections soon after a conflict ends (Brancati and Snyder, 2013). These and other empirical findings describing the factors which increase or decrease the likelihood of civil war recurrence provide valuable insights into understanding why Rome was so unsuccessful at creating lasting peace and instead descended time after time into civil war.

In this paper, I apply the lessons from political science research to provide a new perspective on the causes for the onset of civil war following Julius Caesar's civil war victory. While Caesar's decisive victory was of the kind which would be expected to lead to a lasting peace, his implementation of the peace led to his assassination which undermined that hope. Plutarch describes how, following his assassination, the senate instates a peace settlement giving amnesty and enacting reconciliation while upholding Caesar's acts as dictator and giving various provinces and offices to the conspirators, and Plutarch reports that everyone thought that that arrangement brought maters to a satisfactory conclusion (*Life of Caesar* 67). This paper will show how the empirical findings of political science about civil war recurrence can help explain why the prospects of peace brought about by Caesar's military victory were broken by his assassination and why the senate's seemingly satisfactory reconciliation failed within days and another civil war soon broke out.

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