Assumptions and the Validity of Cross-Cultural Comparisons
The campaign for the 2008 Presidential election is drawing to a close and provides a suitable opportunity to consider the relative fairness of the electoral system created in the Roman republic by comparing it with the system employed in the US. Our focus will be on campaigning, eligibility to vote and the voting process. In preparation for this discussion, read the two linked documents (“cursus honorum,” “Roman Government” on the syllabus), and ask yourself what parts of the two systems can be compared:
• What components of campaigning, of the eligibility to vote, and of the voting process merit comparison?
• What are the limits to that comparison? I.e., are there aspects of US and Roman culture that are so remarkably different that a comparison produces meaningless results? If so, what are they? Why can’t we compare them productively?

Campaigning
Candidates for the presidency are not usually accused of inciting riots or hiring thugs or gladiators (or football players, etc.) to secure their elections, but some aspects of Roman election campaigns do ring true with historical and/or contemporary practices.
• What comparisons can you discern?

Eligibility to Vote
Not everyone in Rome was eligible to vote; not everyone in the US is eligible to vote. In both cultures, changes occurred that sometimes widened, sometimes narrowed the constituencies that were eligible to participate in an election. I’ll fill you in on Roman eligibility, though you’ll find some of the most critical issues in “Notes on Roman Politics.”
• What issues of eligibility have arisen in US politics, both historically and in contemporary elections?

Voting Process
On the voting process in particular, first read the material on “Notes on Roman Politics: Voting.” Once you’ve digested all of this material and answered the questions above, move on to the next section.

Case Study: US Adopts the Roman Voting Process
We employ the Electoral College to resolve whom the citizenry elects as its next president (read the Wikipedia article if you’re not up on your US political structure), and not the popular vote – ask Al Gore in 2000.
Imagine if we made two changes to our Electoral College:

1. assigned eligible voters not to states and hence geography (whose parameters are arbitrary anyway) but to categories of demonstrable wealth;
2. assigned those categories to vote not in an order based on geography but in descending order of wealth.

1. On the first issue – assignment by geography vs. wealth – both systems count the collective majority, not individual votes.

   - In the US, the majority of votes in one (geographic: read “state”) group determine the allocation of votes to a candidate. Each state has a different number of Electoral College electors/votes determined by its total Congressional representation, which is based on a) two Senators per state plus b) a proportionate percentage of the overall population which thus determines the number of Representatives in the House from that state. In the US, it’s winner takes all in each state; the states and the District of Columbia together comprise 538 Electoral College electors and votes, and so the winning candidate must garner a majority (270) of the total number (538) of Electoral College votes.

   - In Rome, the majority of votes in one (economic: read “century”) group determined the allocation of that entire century (which counted as one vote) to a candidate. In Rome, the winning candidate must garner a majority (97) of the total number (193) of the centuries.

2. On the second issue – order of voting – both systems constructed an order of voting but with very different approaches.

   - In the US, those on the East Coast vote first, those on the West Coast vote last. The advent of mass communication has, of course, complicated this issue and has introduced such phrases as “Countdown to Closing of Polls” and “CNN is prepared to predict that [candidate X] has won [state Y]” even though the news ticker shows “0% Polls Reporting.”

   - In Rome, the centuries consisting of citizens with the greatest wealth (and they would be a very small minority of the eligible voters) would vote first, and those centuries with poorest citizens – the majority of the citizenry – would vote last. An individual’s vote was kept confidential; the votes for each of the centuries would be tallied in turn, and with 193 centuries consisting of thousands and thousands of voters, the process must have seemed interminable.

Blend these issues with what you learned from “Nature of Roman Politics: Campaigning” and be prepared to share your responses to the questions raised above, and to analyze **what would happen if the US Adopts the Roman Voting Process.**