THE AUGUSTAN ‘PURGE’ OF THE SENATE AND
THE CENSUS OF 86 BC

by Richard J. Evans
(University of South Africa)

ABSTRACT

The *lectio senatus* carried out by Octavian and Agrippa in 28 BC is characterized as a ‘purge’ in most modern accounts. However, it is possible to show that the census of 86 was at least as severe, if not more drastic, than the one undertaken fifty-eight years later. The censorial pair of 28 may have been strict, but it is rather the less well remembered censorship of 86 which, by far, deserves to be described as a ‘purge’, along with all that word’s sinister undertones.

A triumphant Octavian returned to Rome in 29 BC after his victories over Cleopatra and Antony. In the following year, in his sixth consulship (*RGDA* 8.1), which he shared with M. Vipsanius Agrippa, through their joint *censoria potestas*, Octavian conducted and completed a census.² According
to Dio (52.42.1), with the tacit approval of his colleague, Octavian ‘reviewed the senate’ (τῇ ἄκολουθῳ ἔξηγα), which clearly echoes the information to be found in Suetonius’ life (Aug. 35.1). Dio, whose account is by far the more extensive, states that the senate, as a result of the civil war, had grown to a membership of a thousand (ἐκ τὸ κιλίον). Suetonius, more briefly but for much the same reason, states that the senate by then exceeded a thousand members (super mille). Suetonius also says that, by virtue of the powers granted to Octavian, presumably by a senatus consultum, he persuaded many senators to retire from the order, and so returned this body to its former glory and prestige (ad modum pristinum et splendorum). Expelled from the senate were the ‘orcivi’, a pejorative name for senators, supposedly ex-slaves, who had been adlected by Antony after the death of Caesar.  

In a more precise description of the events in 28, Dio states that Octavian instructed senators who knew that they were unworthy of the order, notably πολλοὶ μὲν γὰρ τοιχὶ πολλοὶ ἔξα πεζοὶ, to resign, and that fifty did so without delay (52.42.2). A further one hundred and forty senators were later relegated but, unlike the earlier group, had their names ignominiously published. Still, all were allowed to retain the social privileges of senators. Just one politician is named in the context of the relegation process. A tribune named Q. Statilius was deposed from office for unspecified activities, but there is evident ambiguity in Dio’s account (52.42.3) about whether or not he also lost his place in the senate. Statilius could have opposed the removal of so many senators when no censors had been elected by the people. His stance was not likely to have endeared him to Octavian, and his deposition is readily explicable.

3. Although Dio does not mention his source, ultimately it could well be the same A. Cremutius Cordus, who is acknowledged by Suetonius in his biography, and noted by Tacitus, Ann. 4.34.

4. On orcin or orcin see also Plutarch’s account of Antony’s appointment of ‘many magistrates’ and ‘many senators’, Ann. 15.2–3. Suetonius, Aug. 35.1, says that, through bribery and corruption, the senate had been infiltrated by an unsuitable and unworthy crowd (… deformi et incondita turba … indignissimi … orcinos vulgus vocabat). Dio, 52.42.1, on the other hand, is rather vague on this issue, merely noting that the increase in numbers was unjustified.

5. Among the second group there may have been lesser supporters of Antony, Sattler, Augustus 33; though no major figure is known to have been removed from the senate at this time. And Dio clearly shows that the more influential former Antonians were spared at this stage, 52.42.8; P.A. Brunt, ‘The Senate in the Augustan Regime’ CQ 34 (1984) 442: ‘even prominent Antonians like C. Furnius and C. Silius were not removed’.

6. It is possible that this Statilius was related to the great T. Statilius Taurus (cos. 37 & 26). If so, he was perhaps singled out as an example to others: that no one, however well connected, was above examination. For possible Lucanian origins see Syme, RR 237.
The senatorial order was greatly trimmed, and the final number arrived at by Octavian, probably in about 18 BC, was to remain enforced throughout the Early Principate. Syme concludes, presumably on the basis of the numbers ejected, that Octavian 'took in hand a purge of the senate'. And this opinion with implications of sinister undercurrents has tended to pervade the modern comments about this censorship, but just how relentless were Octavian's activities as a censor when they are measured against the actions of earlier censors of the republican period, and does the result of this censorship deserve to be described as a 'purge'?

The activities of the censors are reasonably well documented in the one hundred and fifty years following the end of the Second Punic War; and severe measures against senators, who were perceived as unworthy, were evidently not that uncommon. For example, in 194 the censors, Sex. Aelius Paetus and C. Cornelius Cethegus, expelled three senators (Liv. 34.44.4-5, 35.9.1), while in 184, the elder Cato, and his colleague L. Valerius Flaccus, relegated seven senators during a censorship which was particularly noted for its harsh regime. The censors of 174, Q. Fulvius Flaccus and A. Postumius Albinus, expelled nine senators from the order, including two praetorii, and their successors in 169, C. Claudius Pulcher and Ti. Sempronius Gracchus, also removed nine colleagues. However, the censors in 164, L. Aemilius Paullus and Q. Marcus Philippus, expelled just three members of the senate, and in 142 Scipio Aemilianus was unable to expel Ti. Claudius Asellus, who was probably a personal enemy, due

7. Sattler, *Augustus* 32 n. 76.
9. See, for example, J. Buchan, *Augustus*, London 1937, 142-143: 'purged the Senate ... With a Senate purged and reduced in numbers'; M.P. Charlesworth, 'The First Citizen', *CAH* 10, Cambridge 1934, 123: ' ... the Senate ... was now purged of its less worthy members'; D. Shotter, *Augustus Caesar*, London 1991, 27: ' ... weed unworthy elements from the senate, replace them and fill the gaps caused by the recent civil war'.
10. See J. Suolahti, *The Roman Censors: A Study on Social Structure*, Helsinki 1963, 393-495, for notes regarding the censors between 200 and 42 BC, and 496-501, for the census of 28, though he is more concerned with the origins of the politicians than with their activities.
12. *MRR* 1.404 for the censorship of 174; Suolahti: 369. M. Cornelius Scipio Maluginensis and L. Cornelius Scipio, both ex-praetors, were relegated as was a certain L. or M. Fulvius. For the actions of the censors in 169 see *MRR* 1.423–424; Suolahti: 374.
to opposition from his colleague L. Mummius. The censors in 136 are said to have exercised their powers strenuously, and Q. Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus, censor in 131, is said to have relegated or attempted to expel a senator named C. Atinius Labeo. L. Cassius Longinius Ravilla, censor in 125, and L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, censor in 120, both acquired reputations for austerity and severity, but neither is known to have expelled individuals from the ordo senatorius.

On the other hand, in 115 the censors L. Caecilius Metellus Delmaticus (cos. 119) and Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus (cos. 122) expelled thirty-two senators, including the recent consul C. Licinius Geta (cos. 116) and a senator named Cassius Sabaco. Considering the fact that the average size of the Roman senate at the end of the second century BC was roughly three hundred, and it very probably seldom reached this figure in formal sittings with as many as fifty senators, senior and junior, required to fulfill duties either overseas in the provinces or in Italy, a loss of thirty-two members in peace-time, which represents over ten percent of the total, deserves to be described as an exceptionally drastic action by the censors. No preceding censorship in that century, and arguably ever before, had witnessed expulsions even in double figures. No source provides a hint for the reasons behind this mass removal; and a lax attitude by recent censors, given their reputations, does not seem to be a credible explanation. It is perhaps possible that former senatorial supporters of the Gracchi were examined and found wanting, but such an onslaught on 'Gracchani' would surely have drawn comment from an ancient writer. The whole affair remains shrouded in mystery.

During this and the next decade the senate also began to suffer numerous expulsions. For Scipio see MRR 1.474–475; Suolahti: 396–397. The censors may have expelled senators in 142, though none are known and it seems as if Mummius prevented any notable relegations. The consuls in 136 were Ap. Claudius Pulcher and Q. Fulvius Nobilior, MRR 1.486. For the censorship of Metellus and Q. Pompeius see MRR 1.500; Suolahti: 403–410. Veil. 2.10.1: 'prosequamur nota severitatem censorum Cassii Longini Caepionis-que'. Ravilla's colleague on this occasion was Cn. Servilius Caepio (cos. 141). MRR 1.510, 523; Suolahti: 411–412, 414–416. Piso Frugi acquired the additional name 'Censorius'. MRR 1.531–532; Suolahti: 417–420. On the identification of Caecilius Delmaticus as censor and not his cousin Diadematus see R.J. Evans, Gaius Marius: A Political Biography, Pretoria 1994, 50 n. 99, 209. For Cassius Sabaco's relegation see Evans: 49 n. 95.

Cassius Sabaco is credited with amicitia with C. Marius, Plut. Mar. 5.4, and Marius may have championed Gracchan proposals during his tribunate, Evans: 98–100, 144 n.15. But Marius himself was untouched by the censors, one of whom, Delmaticus, may well have been a former patron, since he held the praetorship in 115.
casualties on the battlefield against the Germanic tribes, which must have made significant inroads into the senatorial membership. The alarming trend of military defeats continued throughout the final years of the century and, in part, explains the success of a novus homo like C. Marius in consul elections in 108, but it also meant that the rigour of the censors of 115 could not very quickly be repeated on a similar scale. A substantial decline in senate numbers was occurring without artificial intervention. As a result, no figures of relegated senators are mentioned in connection with the next successfully completed censorship in 108, even though one of the censors, L. Licinius Geta, had himself been expelled in 115 and had only regained his former position by winning election to a curule office in the meantime. A desire for revenge against the political opponents responsible for his expulsion may have been mitigated by Geta’s conservative colleague Q. Fabius Maximus Eburnus (cos. 116). Similarly, the wish in 102 for a vigorous display of censorial powers by Q. Caecilius Metellus Numidicus (cos. 109) was foiled by his colleague and cousin C. Caecilius Metellus Caprarius (cos. 113), who adamantly refused to allow the expulsion of even two senatorial members. That those two senators happened to be the formidable pair L. Appuleius Saturninus and C. Servilius Glauda, with whom Numidicus had a personal quarrel, may go some way in explaining the caution of Caprarius. The censorship in 115 had terminated with a very noticeable loss of senators, but its aims were obviously not to be easily emulated.

In 97 the censors were L. Valerius Flaccus (cos. 100) and M. Antonius (cos. 99) who expelled a certain M. Duronius, a tribunicius from the senate (Val. Max. 2.9.5). The censorial pairs in the 92 and 89 were evidently unwilling to follow the example of the censors of 115, and it is not until 86, in the aftermath of the Social War and the civil unrest

19. The defeat of Cn. Papirius Carbo occurred during his consulship in 113, MRR 1.535; the praetor L. Calpurnius Piso died in Spain during his proconsulship in 112, MRR 1.538; the consul L. Cassius Longinus and many of his staff were killed by the Triburini in 107, MRR 1.550, 552. A consul, P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica, died in office in 112, MRR 1.540; a censor, M. Livius Drusus (cos. 112), also died in office in 109, MRR 1.545; and a designated consul failed to take up his magistracy in 108, MRR 1.548. A considerable depletion of the senate is plainly attested for this time.

20. The censorship of 109 was not completed because Drusus, one of the censors, died suddenly and the other, M. Aemilius Scæus, was forced to resign, MRR 1.545; Suolahi: 420–426.

21. On the censors of 108 see MRR 1.548–549; Suolahi: 426–428, and the identity of Eburnus, or possibly Allobrogicus (cos. 121), who had his own son executed. This Fabius Maximus was obliged to go into exile soon afterwards, further reducing the number of senior senators.

22. On the censorship in 102 see MRR 1.567; Suolahi: 433–434; Evans: 86 n. 105, 187.

23. For the censors of 97 see MRR 2.6; Suolahi: 434–436; Evans: 214.
between Marius and Sulla, that the censors are again to be found altering
the composition of the senate. Cicero states (dom. 84) that L. Marcus
Philippus (cos. 91), one of the censors of that year, excluded his uncle
the praetorius Ap. Claudius Pulcher (pr. 89, cos. 79) from the role of
the senate.24 The action of Philippus appears fairly mundane until the
circumstances are taken into account. In 86 the government at Rome had
come under the unofficial control of the consul L. Cornelius Cinna, who
had begun the year as the consular colleague of Marius, whose death had
occurred unexpectedly in January. Cinna had marched on and captured
the city with Marius, and had silently acquiesced, at the very least, in the
wholesale slaughter of political opponents, including several consulares
and other holders of curule office. A large number of the most senior members
of the senate were summarily annihilated in 87. Among those killed or who
committed suicide were the consuls of 87, Cn. Octavius and L. Cornelius
Merula, the consulares Q. Lutatius Catulus (cos. 102), M. Antonius (cos.
99), F. Licinius Crassus (cos. 97) and L. Iulius Caesar (cos. 90),25 the
praetorius Q. Ancharius, the aediles C. Iulius Caesar Strabo (aed. 90),
and the tribune Sex. Lucilius.26

Moreover, several senators were absent from Rome, including the consul
of 88, L. Cornelius Sulla, who was in the East with a staff of senatorial
legates,27 and others, such as Ap. Claudius Pulcher and Q. Caecilius
Metellus Pius (pr. 89, cos. 80), held grants of imperium in Italy or in
the provinces. Metellus Pius did not come to terms with Cinna, and so his
exclusion from the senate along with Ap. Pulcher may be assumed with
some confidence. Indeed, like Sulla and his staff, Metellus Pius and his
own consilium could very well have been declared hostes.28 The effect on
the senate’s numbers and its prestige as an institution must have been
devastating. Yet a calculated measure relegating senators who were the
supporters of one party by the supporters of another (or who were at least
passive and non-partisan) was bound to reflect badly on the reputation of

24. For the censorship in 86 see MRR 2.54; Suolahti: 457. The political inclinations
of Philippus’ colleague M. Perperna (cos. 92) are not attested.
25. R.J. Evans, ‘The Consulares and Praetorii in the Roman Senate at the beginning
26. Appian, BC 1.72, notes that an Atilius Serranus (possibly the cos. 106), a P. (Cor­
nelius) Lentulus, a C. Nemetorius and a M. Baebius were killed, all probably
senators, and that all the friends of Sulla were murdered. BC 1.73. The death of
Lucilius called ‘Lucinius’ is noted by Plutarch, Mar. 45.1.
27. Among those with Sulla and who returned to Italy with him were L. Licinius
Lucullus (cos. 74), L. Licinius Murena (pr.), L. Hortensius (pr.), C. Scribonius
Curio (cos. 76), Ser. Sulpicius Galba, L. Manlius Torquatus (cos. 65), M. Iunius
Sabinus, Cn. Cornelius Dolabella (cos. 81).
28. Metellus Pius must have been declared a hostis by the senate at the time he was
expelled from Africa in 86 by C. Fabius Hadrianus, MRR 2.54.
the censorship, and especially on the integrity of the censors. Philippus
and Perperna may have tried to steer a careful path between the warring
parties, but it seems quite plain that the censors were under severe
pressure from Cinna to do his bidding. They had little choice but to exclude
the opponents of the new leadership from the senatorial order. The Social
War and the subsequent civil upheavals between 91 and 87 had caused a
large reduction in the number of senators, and this depletion must have
been exacerbated by the actions of the censors in 86. The senate may well
have been reduced to little more than a rump perhaps half or a third of
its average size. All those politicians associated with Sulla from 86 until
his victory at the end of 82 would legally not have been members of the
senate.

The result of the misuse of the censorship in 86 was the law of Sulla,
which strictly regulated the *cursus honorum*, making redundant the *lectio*
of the senate. While a politician as cautious as Sulla would not have
abolished outright a magistracy of the *res publica*, as with the tribunate,
the censorship was, nonetheless, made redundant and unattractive, and
simply ignored until 70 when it was re instituted. The censors Cn. Cornelius
Lentulus Clodianus (cos. 72) and L. Gellius Poplicola (cos. 72) were, it
appears, utterly ruthless in their *lectio* which excluded sixty-four senators
from the ordo. Among those to be expelled from the senate were the cons-
ular L. Cornelius Lentulus Sura (cos. 71) and the quaestorius C. Antonius
(Cic. Quent. 117–134; Sall. Hist. 4.52M; Liv. Per. 98; Ascon. 84C; Plut.
Cic. 17.1; Dio, 37.30.4). After the dictatorship of Sulla the moribund
senate was revitalised, firstly, with old friends of the newest regime, some
like Sulla himself, formerly of senatorial standing, secondly, others who
were entirely newcomers to the order and, thirdly, with the *quaestorii*. The size of the senate grew beyond its previous average size of about three
hundred to a total nearer to five hundred and, although there is no accurate
evidence for an exact figure, it appears as if a good attendance in the

29. Syms, *RR* 128 credits the Marcii Philippi with 'caution' and 'guile'. Philippus'
survival of two civil wars in the 80's certainly supports the contention.

30. For the *leges Corneliae* see *MRR* 2.74–76. Since all ex-quaestors were admitted
annually to the senate the *lectio* was no longer needed. However, down to 81 the 12
or 14 ex-quaestors and the 10 *tribunicii* each year qualified for admission formally
before the censors. There was, therefore, a slight reduction in the intake since the
*tribunicii* no longer qualified.

31. *MRR* 2.126, 138 & n.8; Suolahti: 458–463. Antonius regained his senatorial place,
and went on to become consul in 63. He is more likely to have been an ex-quaestor
in 70, with a tribunate in 68.

32. On the influx of new senators after 81, see Wiseman, *New Men* 6–10. Those novi
*homines* were also, presumably, among those most vulnerable to the activities of
strict censors simply because of their lack of influence.
late 60's was slightly more than four hundred. Assuming a total senate complement of roughly five hundred by this time would mean a percentage loss of approximately thirteen percent.

In the period between 70 and Caesar's increase in senatorial numbers in 45, only the census in 50 appears to have included expulsions from the order. Ap. Claudius Pulcher (cos. 54), presumably with the support of his colleague L. Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus (cos. 58), relegated large numbers of senators among whom were the later historian C. Sallustius Crispus and the senator C. Ateius Capito (Cic. Div. 1.29; Ps.-Cic. Inv. in Sall. 16; Dio, 40.63.4). The size of the senate fluctuated after Caesar's murder as a consequence of the proscriptions in 43, the heavy death toll associated with the various military campaigns down to 41, and the placement of new senators loyal to the triumvirs, Octavian, Antony and Lepidus, together with the concomitant entry of new members, who were ex-magistrates in the expanded colleges of elected officials at this time.

On his return to Rome in 29, Octavian appears to have been faced with a swollen senate, although Suetonius' 'super mille' is possibly an exaggeration, and Dio's 'thousand' an approximation. After all, the loss of senators in continuous civil war, lasting nearly two decades must have been high, and had reduced the effects of large scale senatorial admission. Nevertheless, Octavian felt impelled to take action though he evidently carried out his censorial powers through persuasive means rather than by the customary bluntness of previous censors. This change in the application of his powers underlines the difference between this census and those which had been carried out under the old system. Even though he was invested with censoria potestas with senatorial approval, this power must obviously have been perceived in some quarters as a departure from the mos maiorum, though evidently not by Augustus himself who hardly mentions the exercise (RGDA 8.2). Still, the knowledge that these powers were innovative probably accounts for care in which senators were cajoled into retirement, and that there was also the extra enticement of being allowed to retain the insignia and honours which went with their former positions.

33. Cicero, Att. 1.14.5, mentions a senatorial vote involving four hundred and fifteen senators in February 61. Discounting abstentions, if there were any, this suggests an average attendance figure at important occasions, allowing for, by then, rather more than fifty absences on official business or duties.

34. For the increase in the senate in 45 see Cic. Fam. 6.18.1; Phil. 11.12, 13.27; Suet. Ind. 76.3, 80.2; Dio, 43.47.3; MRR 2.305.

35. MRR 2.247-248; Suolahti: 488-489. Censors were elected in 42. But the censors, P. Sulpicius Rufus and C. Antonius (cos. 63), achieved little. Sulpicius was the first non-consular politician since P. Licinius Crassus (cons. 210, cos. 205) to be elected to this office, Suolahti: 489-490.

36. Octavian was also concerned with measures designed to improve the efficiency of the governing body of the res publica, Tulbert, Senate 136-139, 164-165.
Dio's mention of figures permits us to reach a reformed total of eight hundred and ten senators after 28. Suetonius' ambiguity allows for some interesting speculation. He says only that the senate was returned to its former ancient prestige, with nothing about the size of the body. He could have meant that the senate was reduced to its pre-Sullan size, which is simply unrealistic since that course would have involved a seventy percent diminution. A reduction to the senate's immediate post-Sullan size of approximately five hundred seems to lack feasibility because Suetonius specifically names the orcivi senatores, and this appellation cannot have applied to a very large group nearly twenty years after the event described by Plutarch (Ant. 15.2-3). Furthermore, the supposed admission of huge numbers attributed to Antony could also have more of a basis in hostile propaganda than in a sound historical source. This brings us back to the rather less dramatic figure of one hundred and ninety expulsions, which represents a percentage loss of under twenty percent. A further reduction at a later date may actually have been achieved not by de-selecting senators, but by rigorously limiting the adlection process.

It is apparent that the Augustan 'purge' of the senate was somewhat higher than the expulsion rate of 10% in 115, or 13% in 70, but it is very likely to have been less extreme than the exclusions in 86 which, unfortunately, may only be surmised. A strikingly abnormal clearance of senators did not occur in 28, but Octavian plainly used the opportunity to remove some of the less honourable members, and perhaps politicians opposed to him, to give an impression of this body's rejuvenation and rebirth. Moreover, Dio's use of the verb ἄδελτην was surely never intended to convey the same meaning as the much more charged 'purge' with all its negative political connotations. In modern usage 'purge' suggests the forced removal of particular, and often powerful, opponents, and this clearly did not occur in 28. In contrast, the language of Dio is quite neutral, and the gentle dismissal of senators considered detrimental to the senate's collective dignitas is what was actually achieved by Augustus. The census in 28 was radical but far from extreme, and the censorial pair of Augustus and Agrippa did not embark on a sinister mission. If a purge, in the truest sense of the word, of the senate is to be sought in the first century BC, however, then that search would conclude with the censors and the census of 86. With an already severely depleted senate, following the Social War of

37. Plutarch is not particularly sympathetic in his treatment of late republican figures such as Antony, and while he would probably not have stooped to reproducing scurrilous information he might well have found the episode of the 'orcivi senatores' to his liking and in keeping with his portrayal of the subject.

91–89 and the civil unrest of 88 and 87, the senate was further denuded of all supporters of Sulla and of other public figures unwilling to acknowledge the government of Cicero. It is certainly plausible to argue that the lectio of 86 contained, at a conservative estimation, between a third and a half less than the average sized senate of the second century. A purge, in its most modern sense was, therefore, wisely avoided by Octavian in 28. And just as Sulla had diminished the role of the censors when he won sole power in 82, on account of the events in 86, so too did the politician who was soon to become Augustus avoid an office, which had become tarnished in the eyes of his predecessors and contemporaries alike.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Senators Expelled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>194 BC</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>184 BC</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>174 BC</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>169 BC</td>
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<td>164 BC</td>
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<td>142 BC</td>
<td>1 attempted</td>
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<tr>
<td>131 BC</td>
<td>1 (?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>115 BC</td>
<td>32 = 10 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>102 BC</td>
<td>2 attempted</td>
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<tr>
<td>97 BC</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>86 BC</td>
<td>1 known but many more = ?? %</td>
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<tr>
<td>70 BC</td>
<td>64 = 13 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 BC</td>
<td>2 of many attested</td>
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<tr>
<td>28 BC</td>
<td>190 &amp; 1 possible = 19 %</td>
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39. For an appraisal of the senior senators left alive in 81, see Evans, Athenaeum 61 (1983) 527–528.
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