

UNDERSTANDING POPULISM

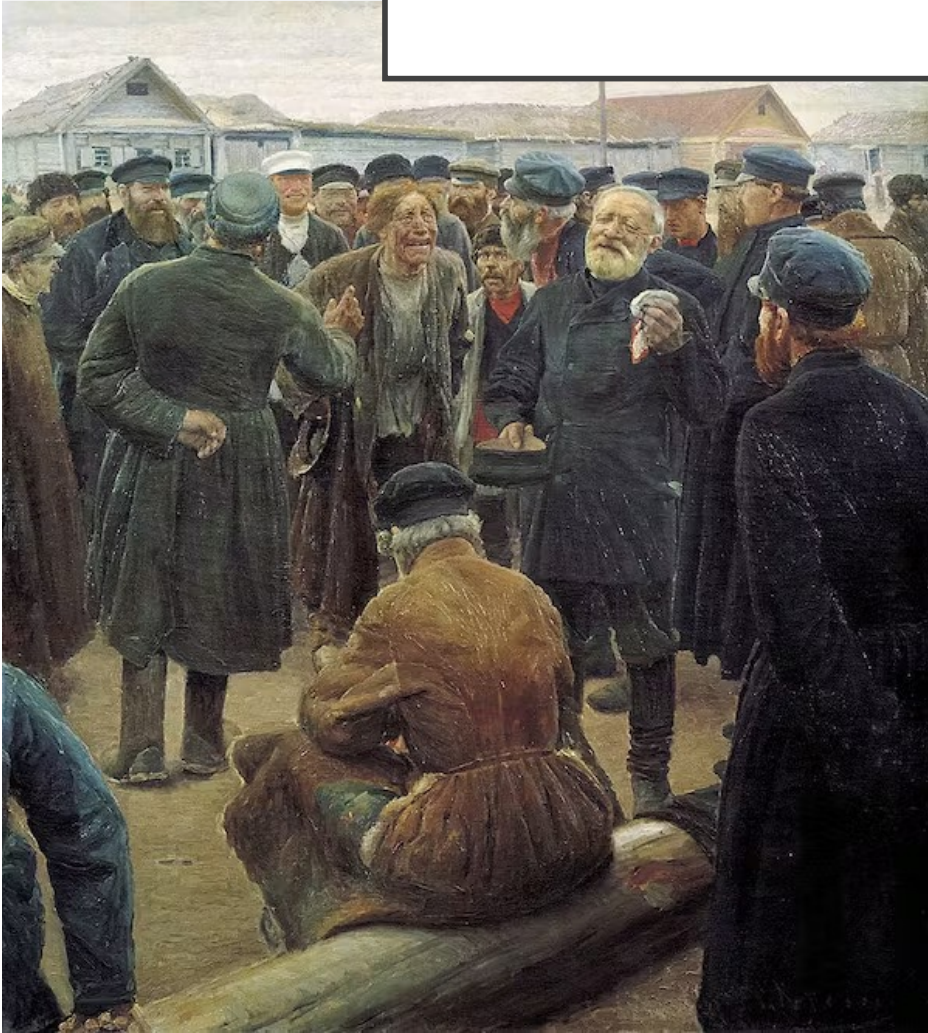
U3A _ TIMARU

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TODAY'S LECTURE

- Populism: A potted history
 - Russia/USA... Ancient Rome/India/Cuba
- **Anti-Populism**
 - What it gets wrong...
- A thinner version of populism
 - Taking seriously the charge of Elite Failure
- **Perilous Politics ...**
 - What follows? What is to be done?

HISTORICAL ORIGINS



Born in places “two hundred and fifty miles to the nearest post office, one hundred miles to wood, twenty miles to water, six inches to Hell”.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

1860s

RUSSIAN

Narodniks – “friends of the people”

- Intention was to help emancipate the masses and increase their welfare.

Zemlya i Volya (Land and Liberty)

Peasantry = the revolutionary subject capable of bypassing capitalist development and moving directly to communism through communal land ownership, based on the traditional *mir*.

Dissolved into two major factions:

- *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will)
- *Chernyi Peredel* (Black Repartition)

... Gave way to Leninist-Marxism.

AMERICAN

1890s

The People's Party (est. 1891)

- An electoral coalition of the protest movements of the **Southern Farmers' Alliance**, the **Colored Farmers' National Alliance**, and the **Knights of Labor**.
 - A coalition across racial and gender lines.
- Endorsed William Jennings Bryan for Democratic Presidential Candidate, who lost (in 1896) to McKinley.
 - Terroristic violence and fraud characterised that election;
 - Movement became increasingly riven by racial conflict and eventually collapsed.

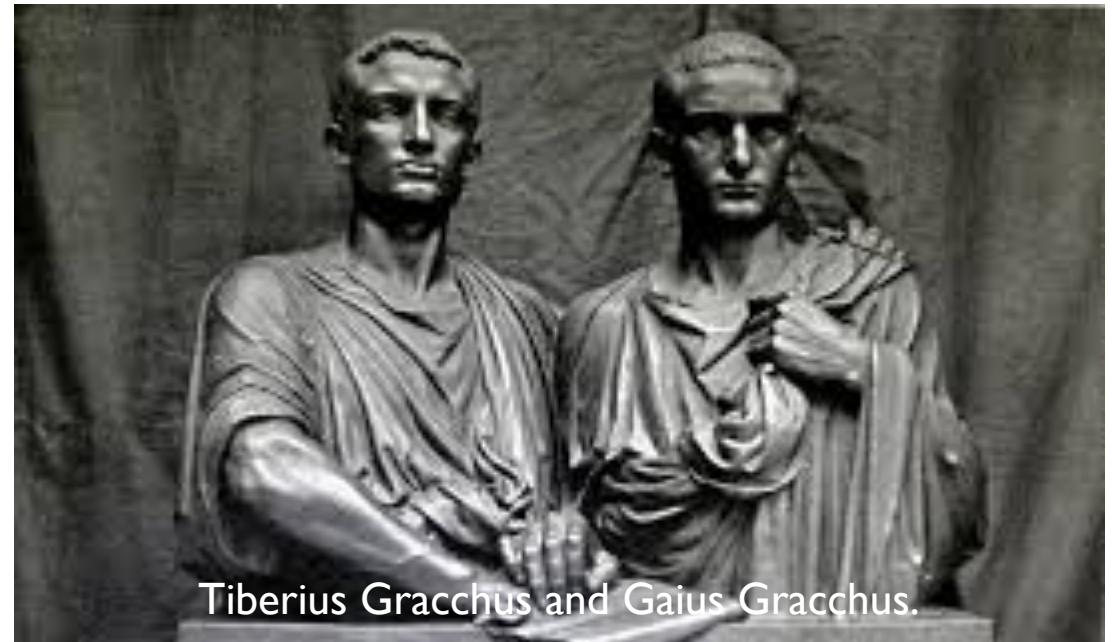


Fidel Castro



Mahatma
Gandhi

Populists



Tiberius Gracchus and Gaius Gracchus.

UNDERSTANDING POPULISM



Cas Mudde

“An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two **homogeneous and antagonistic** groups, ‘**the pure people**’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”.



Jan Werner-Muller

“The danger to democracies today is not some comprehensive ideology that systematically denies democratic ideals. The danger is populism—a **degraded form of democracy** that promises to make good on democracy’s **highest ideals**.”



William Galston

“**The assumption of (popular) homogeneity is always false, it leads first to denial and then to suppression.** The inevitable culmination of denial and suppression is a populist declaration of enmity on behalf of a non-existent people against an undeserving scapegoat.”

In Sum: Populism is illiberal, anti-pluralist, dangerously exclusionary, insufficiently cognizant of the demands of a complex reality.

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Ideology of Demagogues



ANTI-POPULISM

In sum, populism is understood as a...

➤ **A 'Thin-centred' ideology**

Committed to...

➤ **Anti-pluralism**

Which issues in strategies characterized by...

➤ **Unorganized, amorphous and fickle masses;**

➤ **Antagonistic forms of rhetoric;**

➤ **Illiberal *and* undemocratic consequences.**

THE ORIGINAL POPULISTS

These people are removed from Muller's definition of populism.

The original populists are **not**, it turns out, populist!!!



‘Raise less corn and more hell’

Mary Lease



Populist critique of democracy involves two central parties...



The People

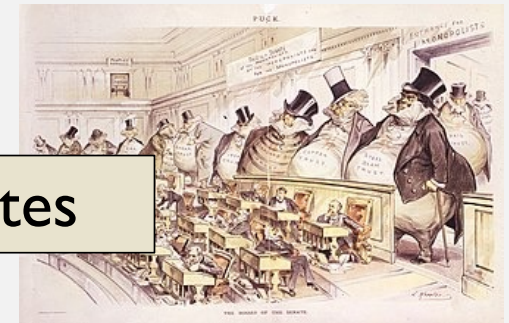
Usually articulated at a *national* level

“Democracy”

An ambivalent
evaluation of the
democratic credentials
of the situation

The Elites

Often articulated at both
national and international levels



It is at the national level where democracy has – until recently – been most effective...

We live in “**façade democracies**”,
where legitimacy is
based on
acquiescence...



Wolfgang Streeck

How do different populists differently decontest...

Democracy, People, Elite?

All populists provide answers to the following questions:

‘How have the **elite** damaged **democracy**’

and

‘How has this harmed the **people**?’

DEFINITIONS...

THINNER STILL

Ridding definitions of their moral baggage

Three parts

- 1. Positing the centrality of popular-elite hostility to political life**
 - But that need not be the **only** important division
 - Nor do we need to assert anything like the ‘moral purity of the people’
- 2. Ambivalence with respect to claims that our democracies are best described as having been constrained by *liberal commitments***
 - ... as opposed, instead, to having been constrained/‘corrupted’ by elite agency
- 3. An expectation that elites will react against populist interventions**
 - Elites are incorrigible, well-resourced and competent political actors.

THE BASIC POLITICAL DIVISION

DRAWING A 'FRONTIER'

1. Pure
2. Decent
3. Honest
4. Distaste for politics
5. Good, common sense
6. Silent majority
7. The heartland
8. Rural
9. Hard working
10.

1. Evil
2. Corrupt
3. Deceitful
4. Love of power
5. Lacking in sense
6. Vocal minority
7. Cosmopolitan, worldly
8. Urban
9. Indolent
10.

Again...

1. Although populists always posit the centrality and basic salience of the elite/popular division this need not mean
 - It is not the **only** relevant constituency;
 - People who are with us, those who must be convinced; those who must be ignored; those who must be defeated...
 - Nor does it spell out what populists are destined **to do** about their orientations.

And, most crucially of all, it does not tell us how we must articulate **the people**.

'The people' is a radically **open** category

A STRUCTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PEOPLE

Who *should* 'the people' be?

Put simply:

Those ill-served by the elites.

This is an understanding that *can* extend beyond... race, gender, class and even **nationality**.

The people *are* diverse – and there need be no sense of unity based on a notion of anything as substantial as 'moral purity'...

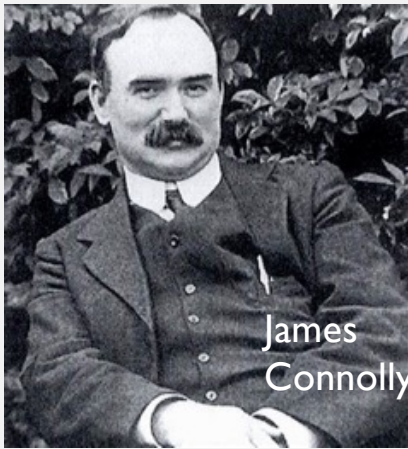
They are united simply by their being victims of elite failings, and who have the right to expect a lot more from their representatives

...

But, the divisions persist...

- Inside/outside....
- Us/them.

And so, dangers (of the kind critics identify) remain



Naming the Enemy

“O, yes! The **ruling class** are worthy of study. The natural history of the ruling class is of fascinating interest. You begin with interest, you proceed with awe and admiration, you deepen into hatred, and you wind up with contempt for the nature of the beast. You realise that – *The Capitalist Class is the Meanest Class that ever grasped the Reins of Power.*”



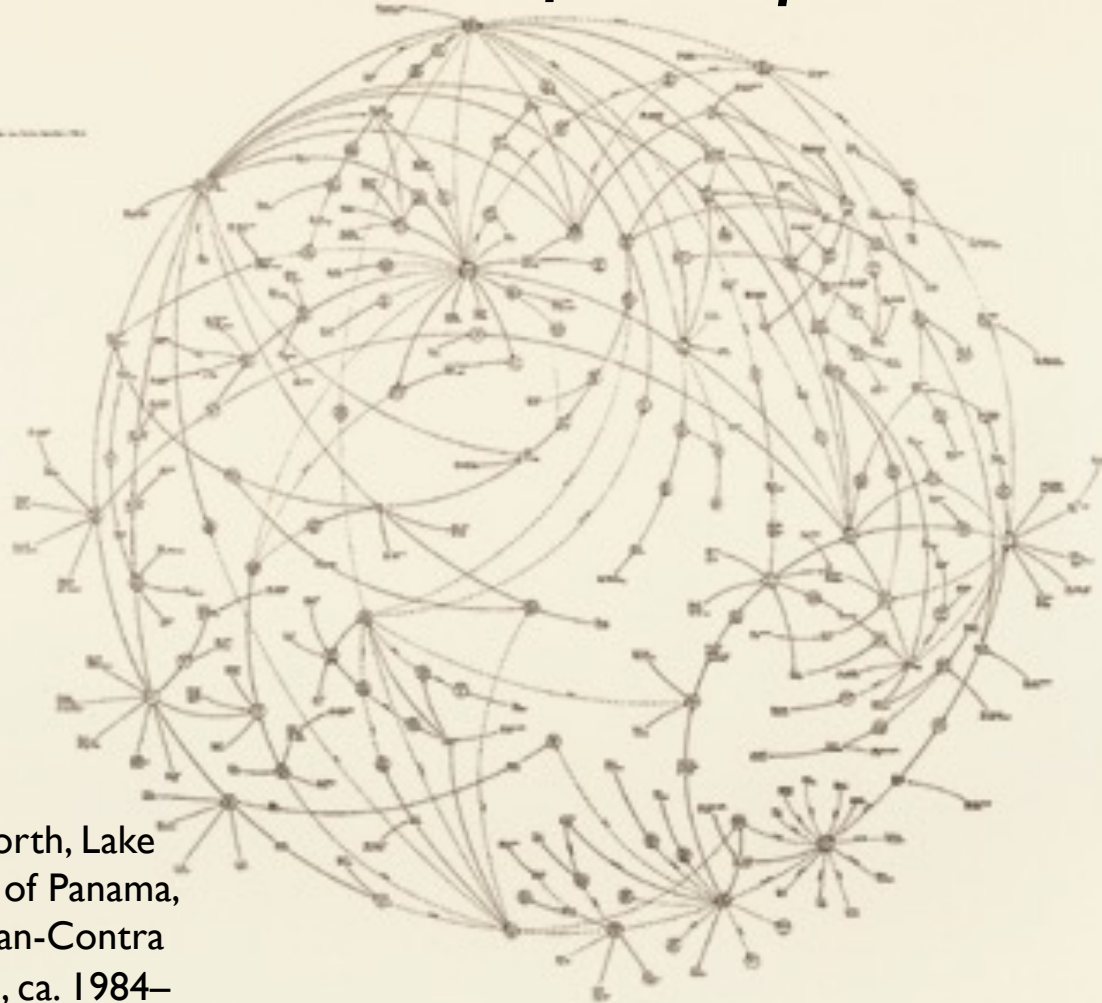


Mark Lombardi

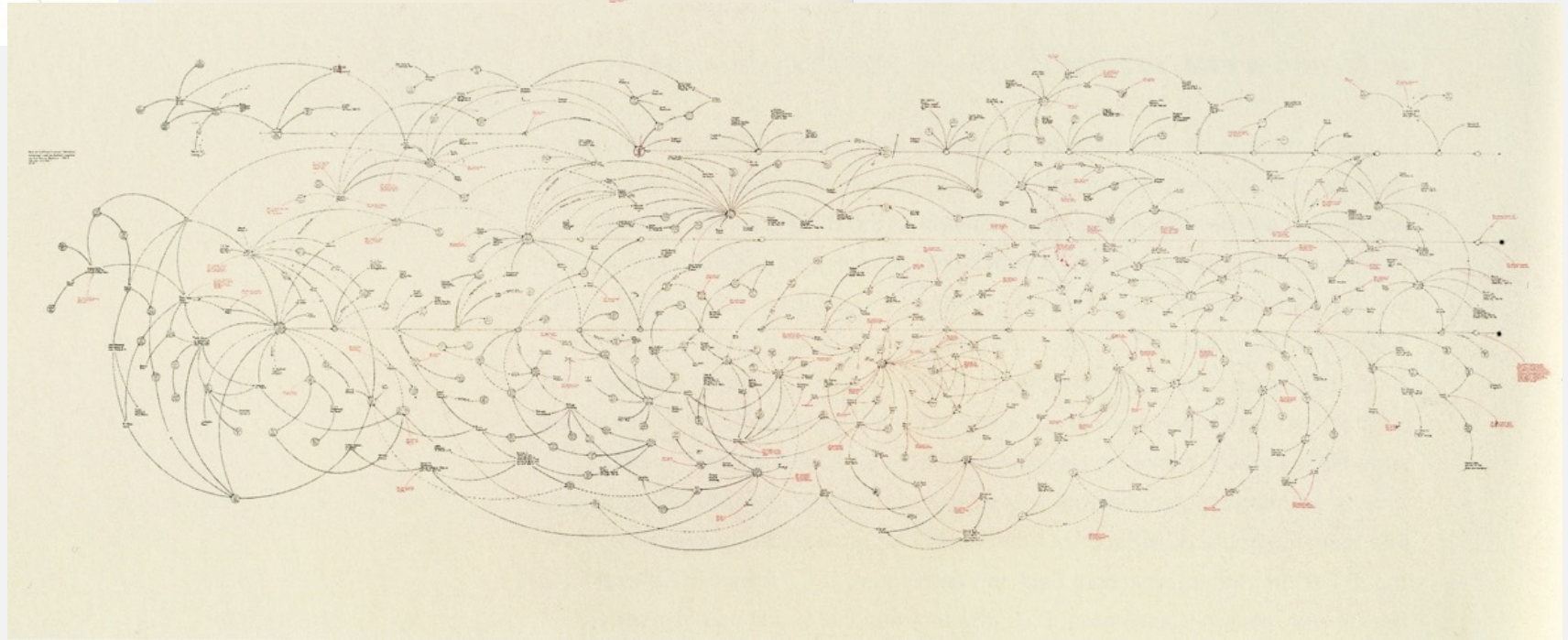
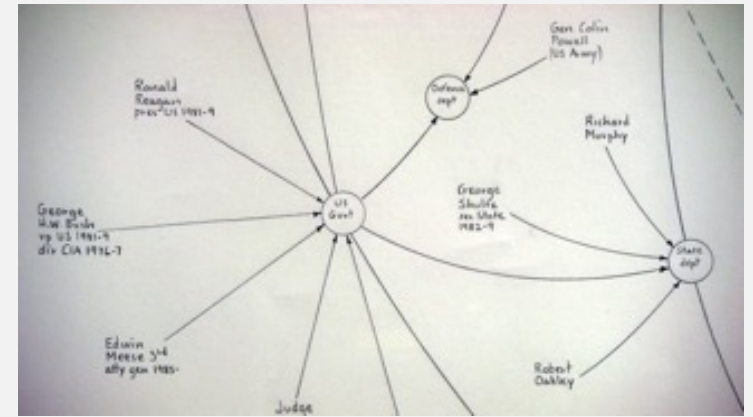
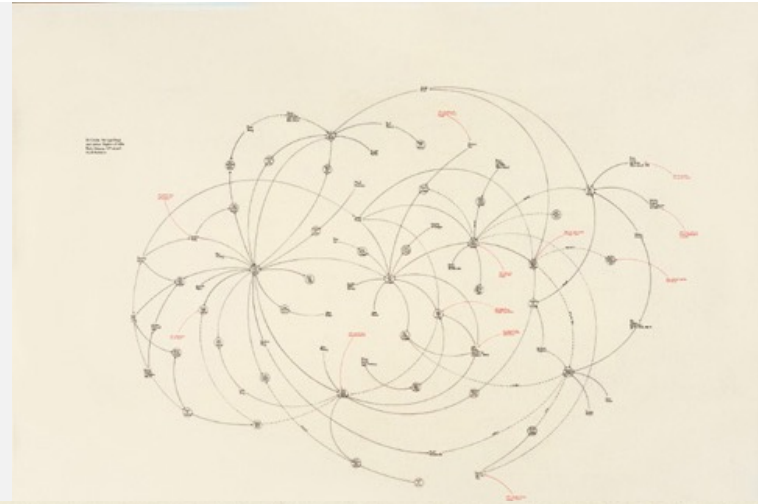
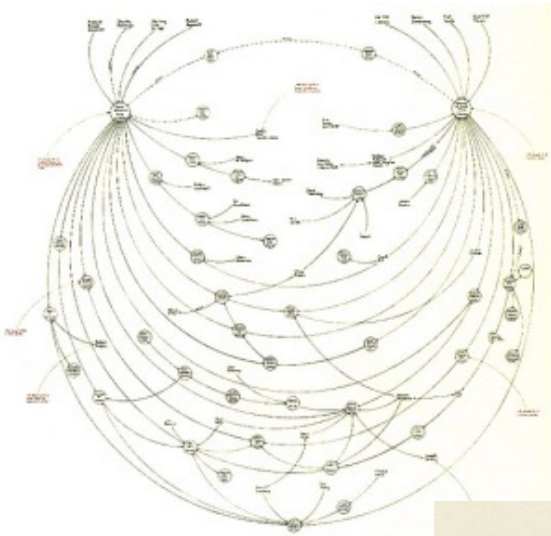
Deranged
conspiracy?

Well
researched
map of elite
power?

Networks of elite power



Oliver North, Lake
Resources of Panama,
and the Iran-Contra
Operation, ca. 1984–
86 (4th Version), 1999.



Art that documented 'the uses and abuses of power'.

A BASIC QUESTION...

Why assume that populists' contempt for (at least some) elites is **wrong**?



Camila Vergara

OLIGARCHIC OVERREACH

In modern, liberal democratic nations ‘the elites’ are *also* citizens...

Citizenship is egalitarian and unranked...

In previous epochs, there were *formal divisions* between

The Plebeians and the Nobles... People are marked out into definitive classes.

However,

‘Even though the theory of popular sovereignty that underpins liberal representative governments has **obscured the fundamental division between the ruling elite and the common people, this split is factual and unavoidable**’.

Specifically,

‘In times of crisis—in which common people are impoverished and disempowered to the point of oppression -... the *veil of legal equality thins out*’.

Against which populism is best regarded as ‘the politicization of wealth in reaction to systemic corruption and the immiseration of the masses, an attempt to balance the scales of social and political power between the ruling elite and the popular sectors.’



Popolo/Grandi




Vergara is here making an **empirical claim...**



THE RULING CLASS REALITY OR CONSPIRATORIAL FICTION?

Some questions to ask yourself....
And that can have answers.



- Do we live in ‘**real**’ democracies? 
- What are the conditions that need to be satisfied for real democracy to function?
- What do the relevant elites do?
 - What are the kinds of things elites do the pursue their interests?
- Are elites connected to the needs and interests and rights of ‘ordinary people’?
 - How do/should ordinary people hold their elected representatives (and others) to account?

No... Murderous Satanic and blood drinking paedophiles are running things with the help of ‘woke’ anti-patriots who are funded by foreign powers and a “cultural Marxist” agenda.

No....A ruling class of people operate to limit the demands people can make of their institutions in order to guarantee that the growth required for ever expanding capitalist production is sustained, even as ordinary folk suffer, many quite considerably, as a result



DEALING WITH ELITES...

An instance of 'ferocious populism'

'... He [Cleomenes] perceived that he could not confer this benefit on his country unless he obtained sole power. For he saw that the ambition of others made it impossible for him to do what was useful for many against the will of a few. Wherefore, finding fit occasion, he murdered the Ephori and all others likely to oppose him; after which, he completely renewed the laws of Lycurgus.'



John P. McCormick

POPULIST STRATEGY

**Even if populists convince
us of their correct
reading of our
failed/failing democracies,
it does not mean that
“anything goes”...**

POPULIST STRATEGY

Populists can draw on a range of approaches to advance their agendas

1. 'Shortcuts to power': the possessive approach

- Including 'dismembering' and 'unmembering' one's rivals;
- Pack the courts with one's chosen personnel
- Changing of constitutions to keep populist leader in power
- Gerrymandering electoral districts

2. Use constitutional provisions to...

- Expand the courts (as pursued by FDR and Abraham Lincoln).
- Change electoral process in ways that will favour populist agenda

3. Try and achieve a degree of cultural hegemony *outside* formal arenas of power

- Cultural products (cinema, art, theatre, literature) can be produced with populist messages.

4. 'Take over' a political party... by getting one's candidates elected!

- Self-declared (left-)populists in the US are trying to swerve Dems in broadly populist directions.

5. Use/Avoid divisive rhetoric and keep under the radar

- Perfectly possible and sensible for populists to avoid using populist rhetoric in an effort to stay under the radar.

Even if populists convince us of their correct reading of our failed/failing democracies, it does not mean that "anything goes"...