

# What do to about Populism

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(based on our forthcoming book

*The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies and the Fate of Liberty*)

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# What is Populism?

- Populism is an anti-elitist and anti-pluralistic exclusionary political ideology which builds a coalition of discontented citizens/people to challenge the “status-quo”.
- It is exclusionary because it rests on a specific definition of the “people” contrasted to the elite (and others) (Farage: Brexit a victory for the “real people”; Trump: “The only important thing is the unification of the people, because the other people don’t mean anything”; Colombian former president Álvaro Uribe’s: “gente de bien”).
- It is anti-pluralistic because it elevates the interests of the “people” above others.



# Why is Populism Bad?

- Three main perceptions
  1. Often led by individuals, not parties or movements (but not always, Peronism, Bolivian MAS, the French National Front).
  2. The anti-pluralistic and exclusionary elements undermine liberal institutions and rights.
  3. It leads to an excessive concentration of political power and de-institutionalization which is associated with poor public good provision and economic performance.

## Why does Populism Emerge?

- To understand this one needs a theory of how liberal democracy emerges and the circumstances under which it may prove vulnerable to a populist strategy.
- Machiavelli proposed a way of thinking about it in *The Prince* when he observed that  
“the people do not wish to be commanded or oppressed by the nobles, while the nobles do desire to command and to oppress the people. From these two opposed appetites, there arises .. one of three effects: a principality, liberty, or license.”

# The Balance of Power

- Machiavelli thought of society as divided between citizens and an elite.
- If the elite dominated the citizens you got a “principality” (I shall say a Despotic Leviathan)
- If the citizens dominated you got license (I shall say an Absent Leviathan)
- But if there was a **balance of power** between the citizens and the elite one got liberty?
- Is this where liberty came from in Europe?

## Roots of European Liberty

- As the Western Roman Empire collapsed in 5<sup>th</sup> century late Roman state institutions (bureaucracy, territorial organization, church) were merged with the participatory institutions of the Germanic tribes.
- The main political entrepreneur was Clovis who founded the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks.

## Participation in the German Tribes

- Roman historian Tacitus noted this already in 98 A.D.,  
“over matters of minor importance only the chiefs debate; on major affairs, the whole community ... The Assembly is competent also to hear criminal charges, especially those involving the risk of capital punishment ... These same assemblies elect, among other officials, the magistrates who administer justice in the districts and villages.”

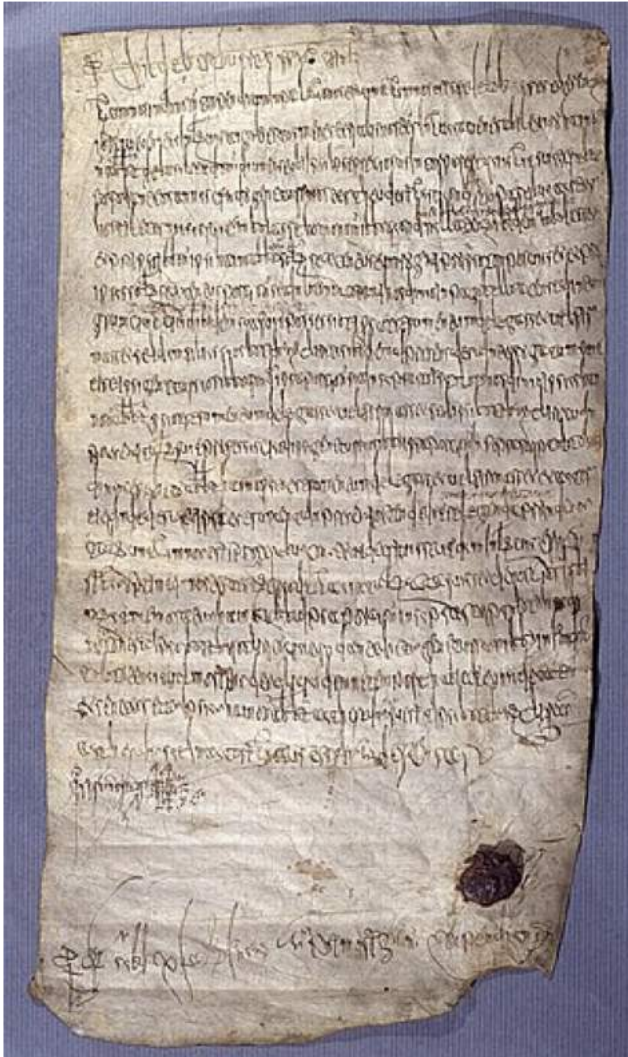


“At that time the custom was followed that no more than two general assemblies were to be held each year ... those of lower station were present in order to hear the decisions and to deliberate concerning them, and to confirm them not out of coercion but by their own understanding and agreement.” Hincmar of Rheims, 882 CE.



Clovis, King  
of the Franks





PREFACE TO CLOVIS' SALIC LAWS:  
...Therefore four men, chosen out of many among them, stood out: Their names were Wisogast, Arogast, Salegast and Widogast. They came from the *villae* of Bothem, Salehem and Widothem, beyond the Rhine. Coming together in three legal assemblies, and discussing the origins and cases carefully, they made judgement on each case as follows...

The Model Spreads: Runnymede Meadow, England, where the Magna Carta (Great Charter) was signed in 1215



## Germanic Tribes in Italy

- The same forces (in the guise of the Germanic Lombards) led to the rise of the famous communes of Northern Italy...



# Allegory of Good Government, Siena 1338





# Consequences of Good Government in the City



## The Shackled Leviathan

- European history suggests that liberty emerges from the interplay of and competition between state elites and society, a process we call the **Red Queen Effect**.
- We call the type of state that emerges a Shackled Leviathan – Leviathan-like control of society but shackled by and accountable to society.
- But this is hard to create. Why?
- Let's consider China.
- Not so different historically ...



# The Xunzi, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC

<p>安位傳曰君者舟也庶人者水也水則載舟水則覆舟</p>	King
<p>此之謂也故君人者欲安則莫若平政愛民矣欲榮則</p>	Boat
<p>莫若隆禮敬士矣欲立功名則莫若尚賢使能矣是君</p>	Common People
<p>人者之大節也三節者當則其餘莫不當矣三節者不</p>	Water
<p>當則其餘雖曲當由將無益也</p>	Water
<p><small>曲當謂委曲皆當當丁浪反</small></p>	Holds Up
<p>孔子曰</p>	Boat
<p>大節是也小節是也上君也大節是也小節一出焉一</p>	Water
<p>入焉中君也</p>	Sinks
<p><small>謂一得一失也</small></p>	Boat
<p>大節非也小節雖是也吾無觀其</p>	
<p>餘矣成侯嗣公聚斂計數之君也</p>	
<p><small>成侯嗣公皆衛君也史記衛聲公卒子成</small></p>	



But then a new model emerges...

“when the people are weak, the state is strong; hence the state ... strives to weaken the people.” Shang Yang

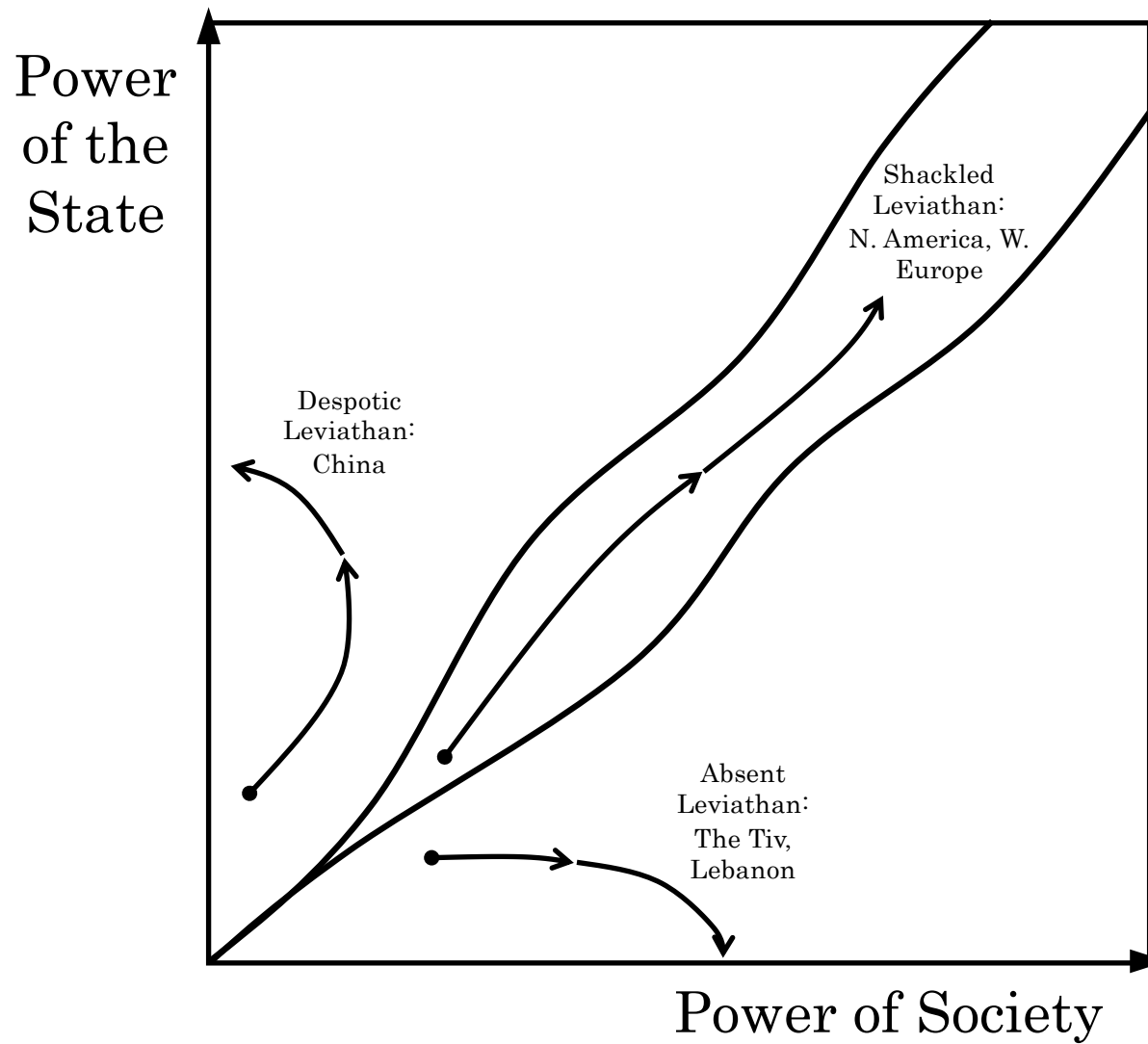


Big Brother (as in Orwell's *1984*) really is watching you now..



## The Despotic Leviathan

- In the Chinese case, instead of the balance between state and society, the state dominates society, and liberty is scarce.
- The potential for this type of dominance can explain why it is hard to create a Shackled Leviathan.
- It is difficult to create a Leviathan and control it.
- This fact can help explain the third situation which is neither shackled nor despotic.
- The Absent Leviathan emerges because of the fear of what a Despotic Leviathan can do.



**The Narrow  
Corridor**  
- where liberty  
emerges

## Red Queen (Out of Control)

- A Shackled Leviathan emerges out of the contest between elites and society.
  - As Machiavelli noted, each tries to dominate the other.
  - Though the balance sets off a race which can create a strong state and strong society the competition may spin out of control.
1. Elites can overthrow liberty. (Many historical examples).
  2. Citizens can overthrow liberty (More puzzling... and related to populism.)

## Ferrara, 1264

“a full assembly of all the people of the city of Ferrara... have decreed as follows ... The magnificent and illustrious Lord Obizzo ... is to be Governor and Ruler and General and permanent Lord of the City of Ferrara and its districts at his own will.”

- The republican commune had voted itself out of existence and given its power to Lord Obizzo.
- What went on in Ferrara was common in northern Italy?

## Machiavelli's Explanation

- Machiavelli noted that the common people “seeing that they cannot resist the nobility, give their support to one man so as to be defended by his authority.”
- When people lose trust in republican democratic institutions and become worried that they will be captured by an elite, giving up such institutions may be the lesser evil.



# Why the Red Queen gets Out of Control

- This is more likely to happen when
  1. Elite dominance becomes plausible.
  2. Existing institutions lose legitimacy or don't deal well with new conflicts and challenges so a radical alternative looks attractive.
  3. An non-pluralistic exclusionary political identity
    - Must potentially emerge
    - And form the basis of a feasible path to power for political entrepreneurs.

# Elite Dominance and Social Distance

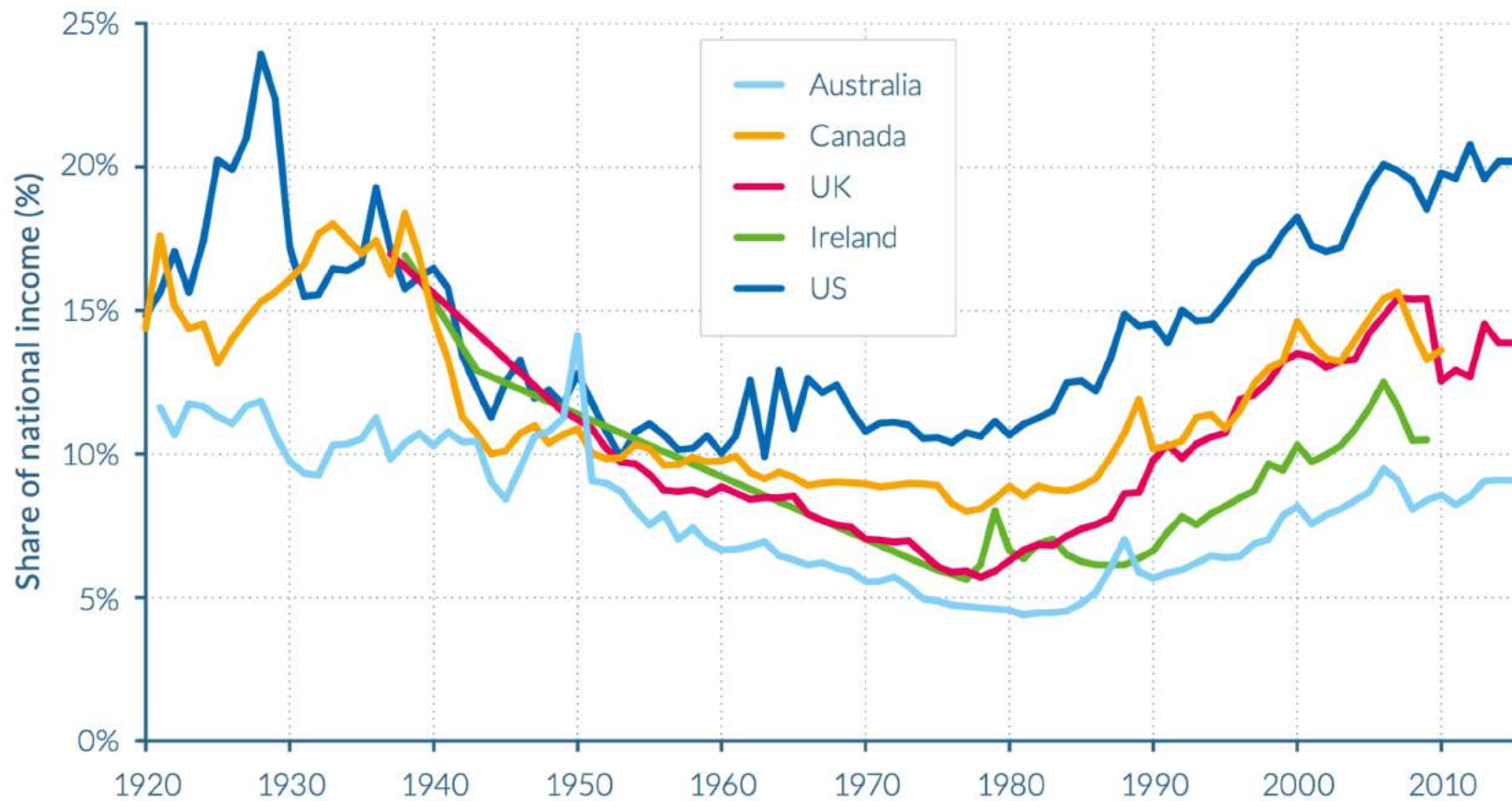
- Increasing inequality (Bezos, Gates and Buffet versus the bottom 50%).
- Increasing elite social distance and the “fly over-country”.
- Problem of political representation. In the U.S.
  - Politicians representing the interests of the elite (Larry Bartels)
  - Gerrymandering

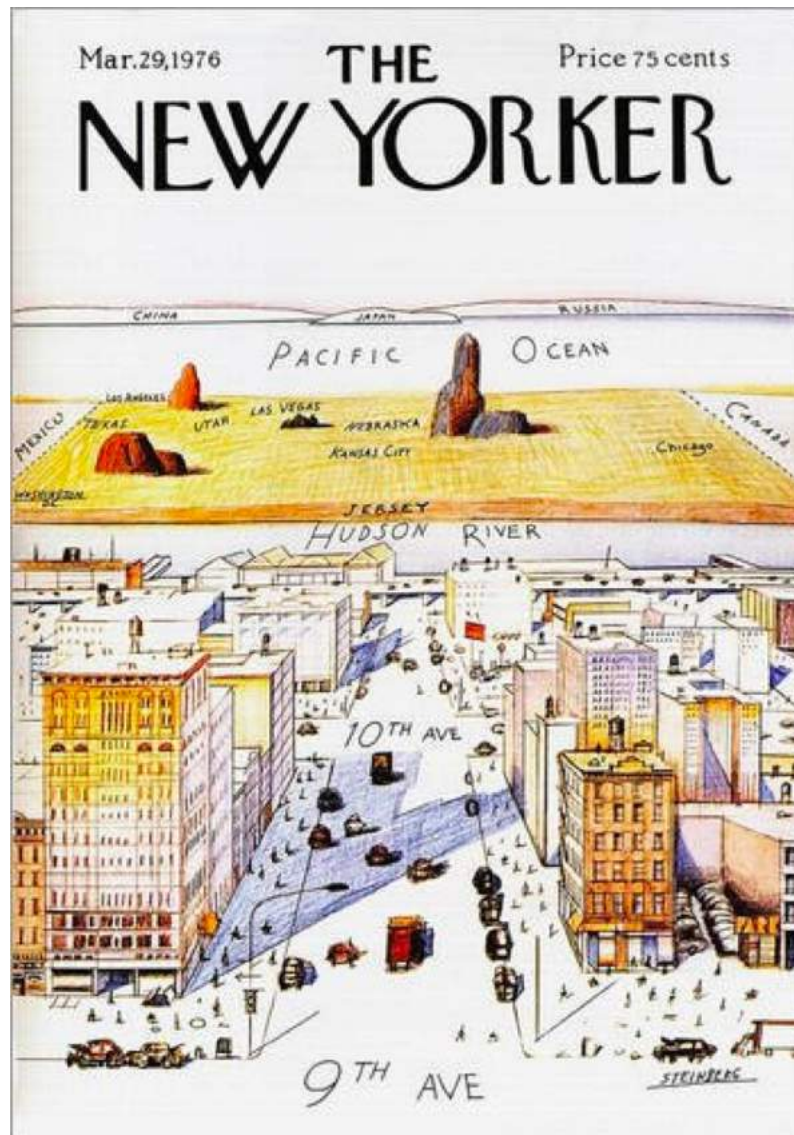
• In E.U. as Jean-Claude Juncker put it once

“We decree something, then float it and wait some time to see what happens. If no clamor occurs and no big fuss follows, because most people do not grasp what had been decided, we continue – step by step, until the point of no return is reached.”

**Figure 2.3.1**

**Top 1% national income share in Anglophone countries, 1920–2015**





## The U.S. Fly-Over Country

- according to Saul Steinberg

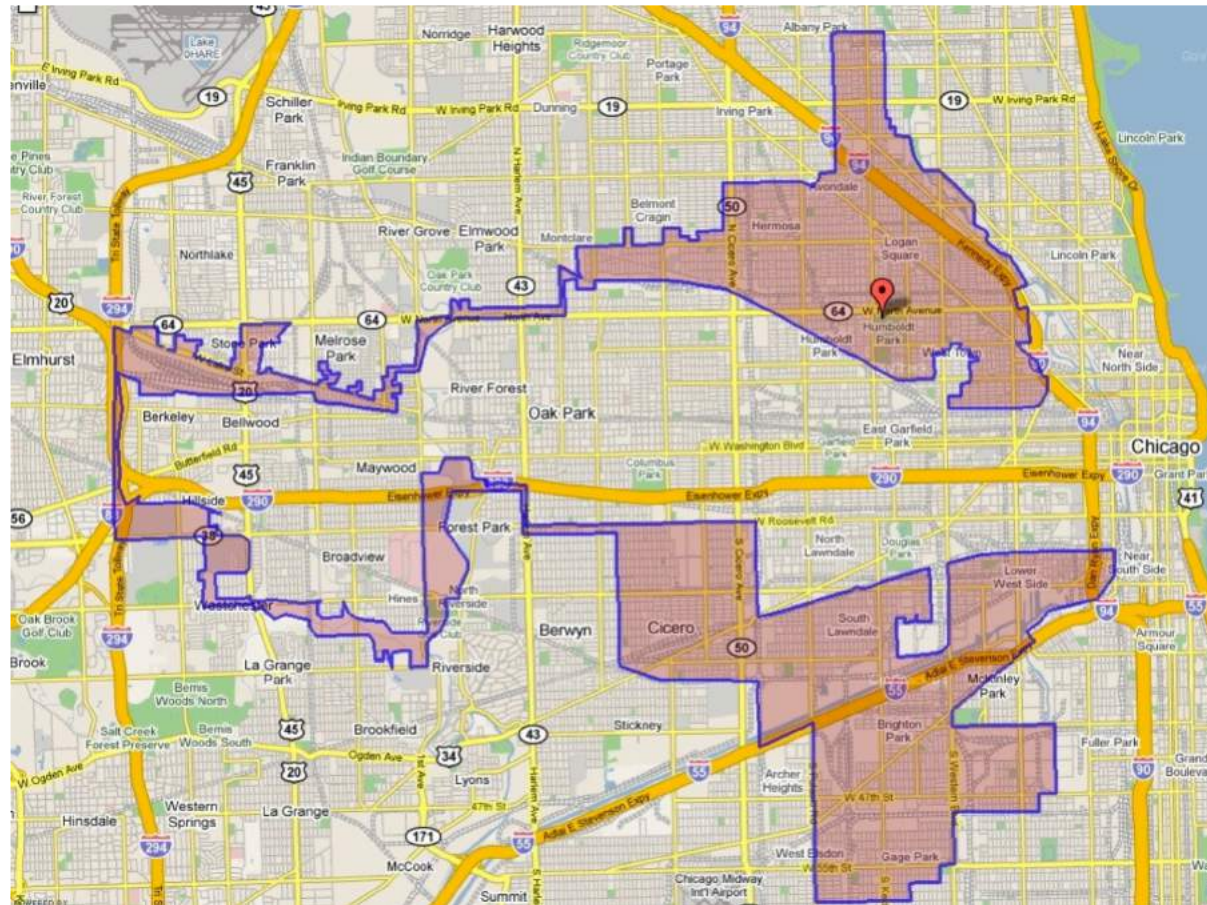




Fly-Over Country:  
English Style  
South Bank, Teeside  
Where my Mother grew up  
66% voted in favor of Brexit



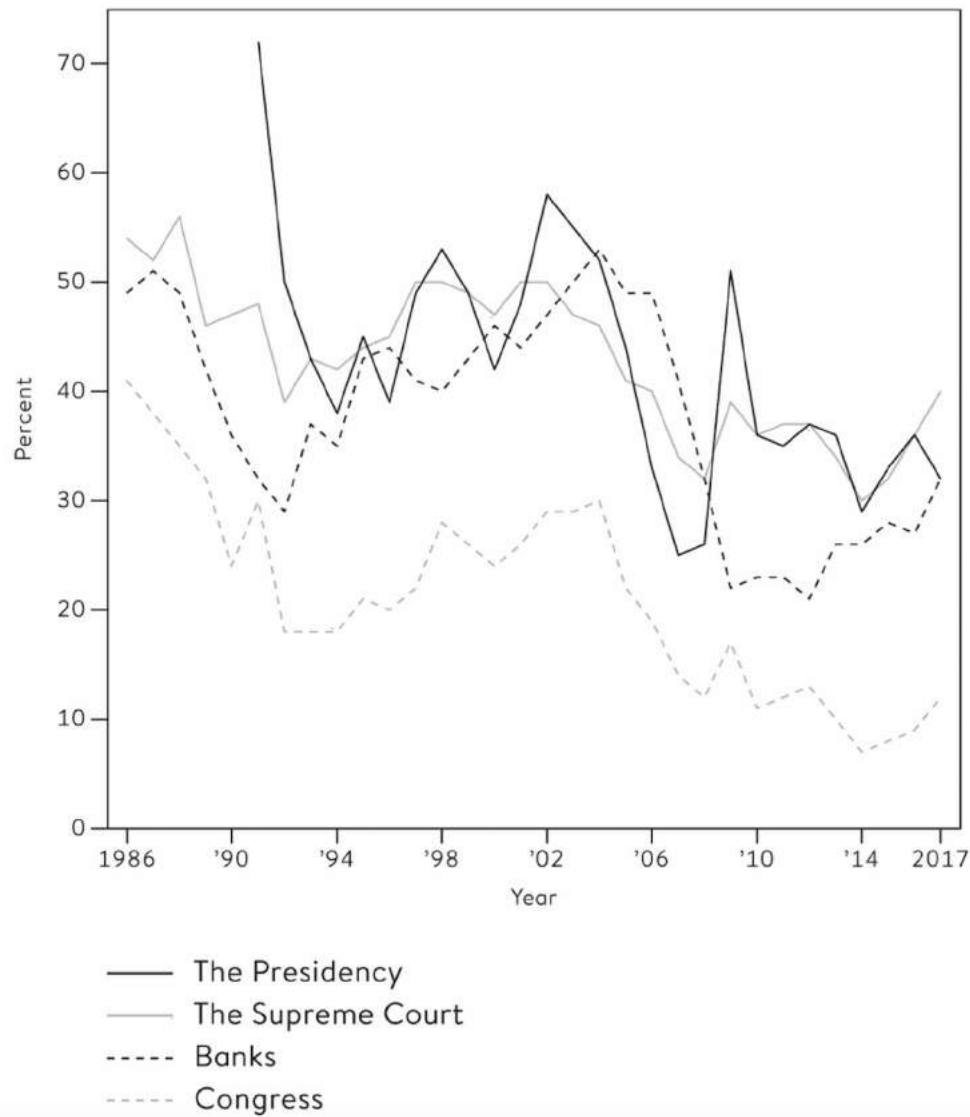
# The Gerrymandered Fourth Congressional District Of Illinois



# The Race between Challenges and Institutions

- Deteriorating trust in institutions
  - populism is a de-institutionalizing strategy so it responds to disillusionment in institutions.
- The perception that institutions can't cope – how to deal with
  - Regulating (and taxing) the new “mega-firms” like Facebook, Google, Amazon;
  - The Financial Crisis
  - The “China Shock” and globalization;
  - Migration.

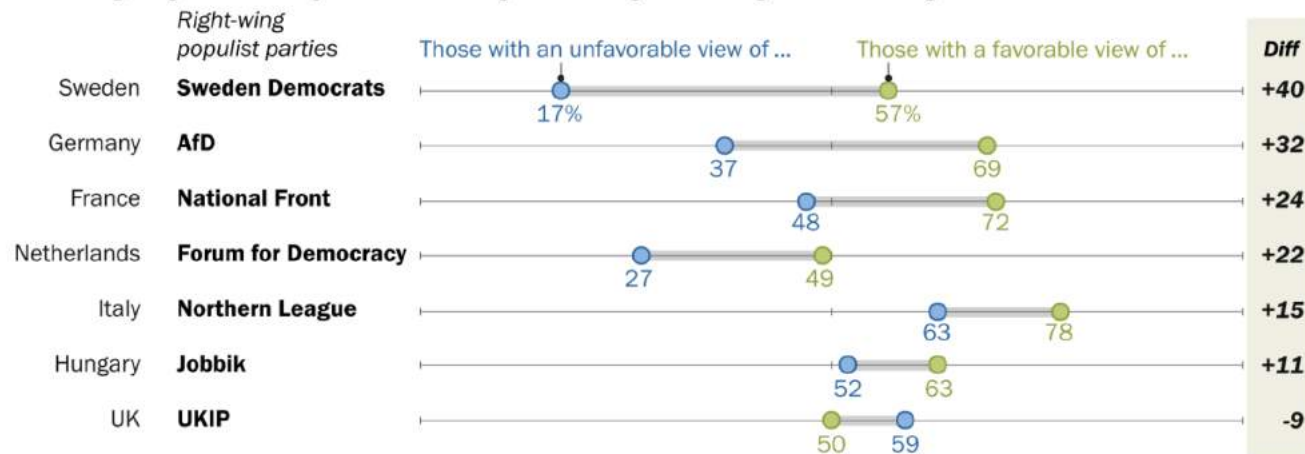
## Declining Trust in US Institutions according to Gallup





## People with favorable views of populist parties tend to be more dissatisfied with democracy

% who say they are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in our country

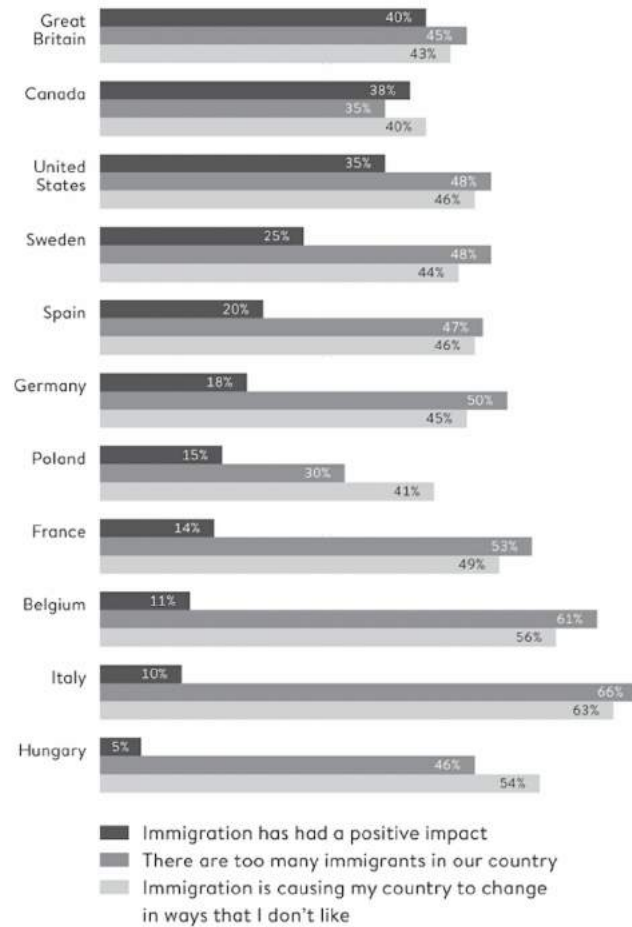


Note: All differences shown are statistically significant. Political party favorability was fielded as "Northern League" in Italy (now called League) and "National Front" in France (now called National Rally).

Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey, Q4.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# The Challenge of Migration



**Figure 4.1** Percentage of population who agree that:

# When an Exclusionary Strategy becomes feasible

- People have many identities and interests.
- My friends from Sierra Leone, where I work are:
  - From particular local lineages or clans
  - From “ruling families” or elite lineages – a class distinction
  - Mende (a broader linguistic and cultural group)
  - Southerners
  - Christians
  - Members of the Poro society (a secret society spanning the country)
  - Joking cousins (*cousinage*) with the Loko (a different ethnic group)
  - Creoles: speakers of Krio, a ‘pidgin’ language spoken by most people in Sierra Leone.
  - Even Sierra Leoneans.

## When an Exclusionary Strategy becomes attractive

- Even if there are circumstances, “salience” or political “framing” in which one identity emerges as a potential definition of “the people”.
- It is not obvious that stating that the “other people don’t mean anything” is good politics.
  - Violates the **Niemöller Principle** – I recognize and defend your rights because you recognize and defend mine.

## The Niemöller Principle

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

# When an Exclusionary Strategy becomes attractive

- Only works in special circumstances
  - U.S.: Trump can appeal to marginal voters safe in the knowledge that Republicans will vote for him.
  - The people who “don’t mean anything” can be narrowly defined both are also threatening.
  - A context where one identity can be made to swamp all others, providing a broad definition of “the people”.

# How to Combat Populism

- Important to recognize that the potential for populism to emerge is grounded on real problems, grievances and challenges that should be addressed
  1. Rising income inequality and increasing elite social distance.
  2. Contested visions of citizenship.
  3. Failings of representation
    - more democracy - and maybe referenda - not less!
    - policies to make the political class more representative of society (like political reservations based on gender and caste in India)
    - Get the Niemöller principle working!