***We the People: the Citizen & the Constitution***

2019-2020 High School Hearing Questions

Information, Tips, Analysis, & Resources from the Oregon high school We the People community

Unit 6 / Q. 3

**“We define populism as *a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘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.*”\*   
Do you agree or disagree with this definition of populism? Why?**

* What challenges, if any, have populist movements presented to our representative democracy?
* What are some examples of populist movements around the world, and what impact have they had on their respective political systems?

\* Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5–6.

**Collaboration Tips**

**5** different questions are in this overall question.

Historical events/context that connects to this question:

* **Shay’s Rebellion**
* **Populist Party formation/movement**
* **Civil Rights Legislation of 1960’s**
* **Militia movements**
* **Tea Party**
* **Malheur Occupation**

Sections of the Constitution:

* **1st Amendment**
* **17th Amendment**

Possible Current Events:

* **Current political campaigns**
* **3rd Party politics**
* **Populist movements in the rest of the world**

**Comments from Justice Jack Landau:**

*Historically, the term "populism" was coined by a late-nineteenth century American political party, The People's Party, which promoted aid to farmers, a progressive income tax, direct election of senators, and the initiative and referendum. The political party expired by the turn of the century. But the word "populism" survived to refer more generally to more or less left-wing political movements that cast themselves as anti-corporate establishment. (For a terrific account of populism in Oregon -- or, more specifically, Portland -- see generally Robert D. Johnston, The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland.) Nowadays, the term is used to refer to a belief in the wisdom or virtues of the "common people," as opposed to "elites." It's not a very useful definition, as it depends on who the "people" are and who are the "elites." Thus, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have been referred to as "populists." And, in fact, political scientists now recognize both right-wing and left-wing versions of "populism." Right-wing populists tend to define "the people" in narrower terms -- tending to exclude minorities and other "outsiders," while referring to "elites" as liberal technocrats and government bureaucrats. Left-wing populists tend to define "the people" more broadly and refer to "the elites" as wealthy, corporate interests. The idea of "populism" also assumes that there is a general will (volonte generale) that the people share -- defined how? Usually by simple majoritarianism. In that sense, populism can be seen as standing in some tension with traditional notions of representative government. Think of the political consequences (some might say, havoc) of the adoption of direct democracy.*

*The meaning of the term is a subject of debate among scholars. Some -- prominently, English political scientist Margaret Canovan -- suggest that the term is too ambiguous to be useful and should be abandoned. Others, like Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, think that, in spite of its ambiguity, the term is too important to be cast aside. Still, most academics recognize that the term "populism" refers to some sort of distinction between "the people" and "the elites." The Mudde reference to "thin-centered" ideology is pretty abstruse stuff for high school students, by the way. It refers to the idea that populism is too intangible to amount to an actual platform or program for social change. It stands in contrast to "thick-centered" ideologies -- capitalism, socialism, fascism, nationalism.*

*Depending on how you define "populism," different examples can be cited: The Progressive Era of the early twentieth century in America (especially the West); the Share the Wealth movement of Huey Long; the anti-communist fervor of the McCarthy era; the Tea Party of the early twenty-first century; the Occupy movement; various populist movements (from Peron in Argentina to Fujimori in Peru) in Latin America in the twentieth century (for whom the "elites" were American imperialists or the IMF).*