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Jan. 25, 2010

**Driving the Conversation:**

Arena Ref: [Fred Barbash](#)

### What is it about the word "populist?" (these days)

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#### Roger Pilon

Vice President for Legal Affairs, Cato Institute :

"Populist" (or "populism"), in its American usage, invokes the "common man," yet the idea's origins -- in "the people" or "the polis" -- can be traced to ancient Greek democracy and, in particular, to political demagoguery. Both Plato and Aristotle had reservations about democracy as a system of government precisely because it was susceptible to corruption by populist appeals to superstition and error. In America, populism has had a long and varied history, but it is most often associated with the Populist Party that was formed in 1891 and, in particular, with the fiery speeches of the Democratic Party candidate for president in 1896 and 1900, William Jennings Bryan, and his famous "cross of gold" speech at the 1896 Democratic National Convention.

Thus, in a fundamental way, populism stands opposed to elitism, yet it's more complicated than that. On one hand, the populism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries contrasted with

the Progressivism of the era, which held that society should be organized and run by "professionals" trained at the best schools. (Thus, the emergence of political "science," as distinct from the older tradition of political philosophy.) But on the other hand, Progressives themselves purported to speak for "the people," even if in practice they were often contemptuous of the people's capacity to govern themselves, susceptible as the people were to the appeals of demagogues.

At the end of the day, therefore, populism is a double-edged sword. Used pejoratively, it stands for the idea that politicians, to obtain or preserve political power, will appeal to base popular sentiments or mistaken (often economic or legal) ideas. A good example is Obama's reaction last week to the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, rooted in the First Amendment's guarantee of political speech: He called it "a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans." There is an element of truth to that sentiment, of course, because the system of government that has evolved in America under the influence of Progressive "professionals" has endowed those professionals (read: the governing class, in all its reaches) with unprecedented power over "the people," who often feel powerless as a result. But demagogic appeals like that or like others we've heard lately from Obama will only exacerbate that problem. By contrast, a "populist" appeal that seeks to return power to people (N.B.: I did not say, as in the '60s, "power to *the* people") -- power to run their own lives, free from unwarranted government regulation or dependency -- is a side of the idea we hear too seldom. Yet it's what our founding documents are about. They established not simply popular government but *limited* popular government -- ensuring the right of the people to govern themselves, not mainly through government but individually or in voluntary association with others. It is that liberty that Progressive elitists who "knew better" -- the folks in Cambridge who voted 84 to 15 against Scott Brown -- have gradually extinguished.

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