

**MOB RULE:
POPULARITY AS AUTHORITY IN THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND
POSSIBLY THE FUTURE**

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The 2016 presidential elections marked history by electing Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America. This time, the people didn't vote for a politician who knew how to deal with politics, but for a businessman and TV host to lead them. His authority as president was bestowed upon him by the people who recognize him as their leader despite being unqualified to do so. Power and authority today are constantly shifting. Instead of concentrations of powers within spheres of the elite, we see the rise of many micro powers¹, ranging from celebrities to Instagram influencers. Power moved from armies and kings to politicians, and now to virtually anyone with social skills and access to the Internet. Today's authority differs from the past, but is it truly that different? Throughout history, popularity has always been a form of authority. The people have always chosen their leaders, no matter their qualifications. Nothing has truly changed.

In a paper that discusses popularity and authority, it is important to define such terms. In an interview with Mitch Prinstein, a psychology professor and author of "Popular: the power of likability in a status-obsessed world", he defines two forms of popularity: status and likeability. For this paper, only likeable popularity will be discussed. Likeable popularity points to being widely liked and appreciated by others². Authority is by itself a form of power. Thus, before defining authority, it is important to define power. Moisés Naim defines it in his book "The End of Power" as "the ability to direct or prevent the current or future actions of other groups of individuals"³. Authority is a form of power that is accepted by people who follow it⁴. Authority

¹ Moisés Naim, *The End of Power*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p.17

² Dave Nussbaum, "Status Check.", *Behavioral Scientist*, September 16, 2017, <https://behavioralscientist.org/status-check-mean-popular/>

³ Naim, *The End of Power*. P.16

figures are generally perceived as “reasonable, legitimate, beneficial, or true”⁵. There are three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. For this paper, only charismatic and traditional authority will be defined. Traditional authority refers to the authority transmitted through history: “its legitimacy exists because it has been accepted for a long time”⁶. The Queen and the President are examples of traditional authority. Charismatic authority refers to the authority of an individual charismatic leader that gathers many followers to their cause. Jesus Christ and Hitler are all examples of charismatic authority⁷. Thus, authority is a form of power that is considered legitimate by its followers that can originate from a historical seat of recognized power or the charisma of an individual and popularity is being liked by a large amount of people.

Popular groups with authority can be identified throughout history. In Ancient Greece, it was the Sophists. They were widely sought for their teachings on rhetoric and their main philosophy later attracted many followers. The Sophists followed moral relativism, a belief by which all good and bad are decided by men, and rejected the thought of a higher power or a determined moral code⁸. Their teachings weren’t focused on helping their students grow to become moral and virtuous. They aimed to produce “clever students” and were more concerned by the “acquisition of power”⁹. They taught ways to make the weak argument look strong,

⁴ “Power and Authority | Introduction to Sociology.” Lumen learning, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wmopen-introsociology/chapter/power-and-authority/>.

⁵ “Power and Authority | Introduction to Sociology,” Lumen

⁶ “Power and Authority | Introduction to Sociology,” Lumen

⁷ “Power and Authority | Introduction to Sociology,” Lumen

⁸ Jackson Roy, *Plato: A Complete Introduction*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016) 28.

⁹ Jackson, *Plato*, 28.

employing double arguments, or *dissoi logoi*, to convince the audience, while not caring about the truthfulness of their speech¹⁰. They were thus extremely popular as Athens at the time was a Democracy and “the ability to speak and to be able to argue for your side was crucial in Athenian society to the extent that your livelihood, and your life, could depend on it”¹¹. The Sophists had likable popularity. As such, they were able to influence the actions and beliefs of their followers and students, so much so that the lack of consideration for the morality of their methods led to a “decline in moral standards of Athens [during Socrates’ later years]”¹². The Sophists’ charismatic authority influenced the people’s political thinking and morality and they were only able to do so by gaining likeable popularity.

It might be said that since Athens was a democracy at the time, authority was attributed by the people as Democracy by definition means “rule by the people”¹³. However, popularity has also been a form of authority during the Enlightenment and the Middle Ages. The Roman Catholic Church was a powerful religious organization partly because of the vast amount of followers it had in Western Europe. Religious leaders like the Pope possess traditional authority over their followers as it is a seat with a history of power, yet all this wouldn’t have been possible if Jesus Christ wasn’t popular. Jesus Christ himself was a charismatic leader¹⁴ that gathered and influenced people’s actions and beliefs. If his speeches were ignored at the time,

¹⁰ Ponce, “Ancient Philosophy Handout 7: Sophists and Intro to Socrates: Athen’s Fall, Sophists and Socrates.”(Class Handout, September 24, 2020), Word.

¹¹ Jackson, *Plato*, 29.

¹² Jackson, *Plato*, 29.

¹³ *Britannica*, s.v. “Democracy | Definition, History, Meaning, Types, Examples, & Facts,” last modified March 9, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy/additional-info#history>.

¹⁴ “Power and Authority | Introduction to Sociology,” Lumen

there wouldn't be the Catholic Church as we know of today. Christianity started with likable popularity and later gained authority through it.

However, during that period, authority was also marked by the presence of the sacred. Religion brought a new set of moral and political conducts that were dictated by a higher power. As such, authority was not bestowed upon by popularity, but by God. Even so, corruption and greed soon took over seats of power, such as the papacy, with alleged crimes of sexual abuse¹⁵, selling indulgences¹⁶, and more. Authority bestowed by the sacred began losing its legitimacy in the eyes of the people, which led to popularity retaking its seat as a form of authority.

The French Revolution is an example that shows the descent of sacred authority. The kings of France, after Charlemagne, were all "chosen by God" as it was the Pope that crowns them¹⁷: their authority was given by the sacred. However, the leaders became less and less qualified. In the eyes of the people, their governors were hateful due to their incompetence in managing the nation and their continuous extravagant indulgences while the rest were starving¹⁸. The sacred was lost. The power it bestowed was not considered legitimate anymore and popularity once again became authority. Note that it was the people who decided whether or not to legitimate a certain power. Because the sacred was an illegitimate power in the eyes of the people, it lost popularity and thus lost its power and authority.

¹⁵ "Catholic Church Child Sexual Abuse Scandal," *BBC News*, February 26, 2019, <https://libguides.marianopolis.edu/citation/chicago17/notes#s-lg-box-wrapper-18383902>.

¹⁶ *Britannica*, s.v. "Indulgence | Roman Catholicism | Britannica," last modified November 25, 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/indulgence/additional-info#history>.

¹⁷ "The War of the Bucket - OverSimplified," *Youtube video*, 3:22, posted by "Oversimplified," September 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cln0J87vulU>.

¹⁸ "The French Revolution - OverSimplified (Part 1)" *Youtube video*, 3:29-7:27, posted by "Oversimplified," June 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qRZcXIODNU&t=2s>.

In today's society, popularity is more closely related to authority than ever before. With the development of social media platforms and multiple functions such as "likes" and "followers", it is possible for anyone to amass popularity by creating an account. A popular account is then able to influence its followers, either by promoting products, lifestyles, or posting their opinions on current social events. A recent example would be the storming of the Capitol building in the United States by Trump supporters sixty-five days following a tweet by the previous president, claiming they "[stole] the election"¹⁹. His election has also opened the door for more celebrities and popular figures to enter the world of politics and gain more authority than ever before: "celebrities such as Kane West and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson [considered] making their own presidential bids in the 2020 elections"²⁰. Celebrities possess charismatic authority through their likable popularity: they gain fans through their work and their promotion on media platforms. Their authority allows them to influence their fans that respect and trust them: "people are more likely to think positively about a product because they are familiar with the celebrity"²¹. Endorsement by celebrities is extremely beneficial to political parties as they influence their supporters to also think positively of it. Barack Obama has even been "referred to as 'the first celebrity president'"²². The increasing importance of gaining popularity during a political campaign reveals that popularity is indeed a form of authority. The opinion of the people is weighting more and more in the eyes of politicians and one might ask if reason has any place in today's government.

¹⁹ Shayan Sardarizadeh, Jessica Lussenhop, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol," *BBC News*, January 10, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55592332>.

²⁰ Idzikowski, *Celebrities in Politics* (New York: Greenhaven Publishing, 2020), 25.

²¹ Idzikowski, *Celebrities in Politics*, 22.

²² Idzikowski, *Celebrities in Politics*. 24.

The problem with this is the emergence of unqualified authority with the popularity one gains on the platforms. Socrates and Plato have heavily criticized democracy and the liberalism that came with it²³. The people were allowed to “pursue wealth and power but without any thought for the welfare of the state as a whole or, more importantly, with any concern for knowledge”²⁴. Plato advocates for the installments of knowledgeable and qualified rulers²⁵, but with democracy, anyone who pleases the people can gain authority, no matter their qualifications. Today with social media, it is even easier for people to gain authority by appealing to the audience as education on how to become famous on platforms are available everywhere like “8 ways to get followers, become popular and get TikTok Famous”²⁶. As such, authority is not following reason, but the desires and appetites of the hoi polloi. To maintain their authority, leaders will have to appeal to large masses instead of reason. It is mob rule, as Plato describes it²⁷, and “in time, a man will arise who can persuade the masses to follow him and a tyranny will result”²⁸.

In conclusion, popularity is a form of authority that has been present many times in the history of mankind and its power struggles. Today’s society in particular opens the doors for

²³ Jackson, *Plato*, 118.

²⁴ Jackson, *Plato*, 118.

²⁵ Jackson, *Plato*, 119.

²⁶ Graham Riley, “How To Become TikTok Famous in 2021 | Grow Your Following Now,” *Insense*, May 18, 2021, <https://insense.pro/blog/how-to-become-tiktok-famous-in-2021-grow-your-following-now>.

²⁷ Jackson, *Plato*, 130

²⁸ Jackson, *Plato*. 130

everyone to gain power and authority through social media. Appealing to the masses comes before reason.

We are putting bakers²⁹ on the thrones instead of doctors.

²⁹ Ponce, "Ancient Philosophy Handout: Gorgias Part 1.", (Class handout, October 30, 2020), Word. (In reference to the baker and doctor analogy made by Socrates that was presented in this handout)

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