

## **Why don't philosophers propose institutional reforms? Neo-Tribunes: a Liberal Republican Reform**

Rising populisms around current Western democracies have recently come to many political philosophers' attention. Especially in the EU, the two decades-lasting debate on democracy's accountability crisis has been rephrased with a new heed on populist deformation of our political systems. While a broadly defined 'populism' seems to be growing in European civil societies (Podemos, Movimento 5 Stelle, Front National, Syriza), most of the intellectual world is still engaged in a staunch defense of traditional democratic institutions (Urbinati, Pettit). John P. McCormick constitutes a lonely, provocative advocate of a radical form of 'populist democracy', which according to him would have the merit of fighting back many ongoing shortcomings that vex current representative democracies. Notably, his model allegedly offers a remedy to bursting economic inequalities, which not only impact on the equal amount of political power citizens should be able to afford, but also does so to such extent that the very democratic essence of nowadays political institutions is called into question. McCormick leans on a three-featured institutional reform in order to neutralize this oligarchic tendency routed in any representative system: (1) offices that exclude the wealthiest citizens from eligibility; (2) selection procedures for those offices combining both election and lottery; (3) offices' power to institute political trials over politicians' deeds. This reform project targets oligarchic effects of elections and aims at countervailing them by handing back part of the political power to a small assembly of 'common citizens' selected by lot. In so doing, it resonates with both ancient Rome's tribunes of the plebs and deliberative models of mini-public.

In this paper we will argue that such proposal falls short of its proclaimed aim to contribute in the neutralization of wealthiest élites' power. First of all, we introduce McCormick's Neo-Romanian scheme and its expected effects on political decisions. Second, we claim that such a scheme has two major drawbacks. On one hand there is a theoretical pitfall, which rests on a sociological understanding of 'the people' as opposed to 'the wealthiest', inherited from Machiavelli, that conflicts with commonly shared liberal principles of individual freedom. On the other, the practical shortcoming consists in the model's lack of effectiveness due to a traditional accountability issue. Finally, we put forward our improved version of McCormick's institutional design and provide arguments for its effectiveness and feasibility. Such version still focuses on the role of 'neo-tribunes', but it does not explicitly pick on the wealthiest. Instead of giving tribunes the direct power to veto laws introduced by the legislative, we assign them the power to indict an abrogative referendum. If three referendum fail, all neo-tribunes lose their office and another group is randomly selected. This would limit the tribunes' personal power by linking it more straightforwardly with the people at large, and at the same time would not

excessively slow down the introduction of new laws which a modern democracy requires. Moreover, it radicalizes McCormick's intent by making explicit and direct recourse to the people largely intended and it is still able to marginalize wealthiest élites' power without formally discriminate them.