WEIGHING THE KINGFISH: AN INVESTIGATION INTO HUEY LONG’S NEO-POPULISM AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY AND INSTITUTIONS IN LOUISIANA

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This thesis studies the rise and tenure of Huey P. Long’s neo-Populist movement within the political and economic environment of Louisiana. The thesis examines the historical political and economic realities of Louisiana prior to Long, his legislative efforts related to infrastructure and education, and his actions and influence on elections and the state’s legislature. The goal of the thesis is to discuss and consider the nature of populism, and whether it is compatible with liberal democracy, through the lens of the career of Huey P. Long. Chapter 1 focuses on two historical periods that preceded Long; from 1877 – 1898, when Bourbon Democrats and their allies dominated state government and suppressed political challenges by Populists within the state; and 1900 – 1920, when the New Orleans Ring employed Machine politics to influence state government and were challenged by Progressive reformer John M. Parker, a precursor to Long’s rise.

Chapter 2 discusses Long’s most notable legislative programs focused on improving Louisiana’s infrastructure and public education. Chapter 3 examines Long’s expansion of suffrage as well as his tactics and control over elections and the state’s legislature. Ultimately, there was a friction between Long’s neo-Populist platform and rhetoric, which promoted the vision and preferences of the people through legislation, with the reality of Long’s increasingly centralized and dictatorial control of state government. This friction was a product of the inconsistency between the populist interpretations of voting and governance with a liberal democracy. The thesis adds to previous studies into Long’s legacy and further investigates how populist movements manifest within dysfunctional liberal democracies.
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Introduction: Weighing the Kingfish: An Investigation Into Huey Long’s Neo-Populism And Its Impact on Democracy and Institutions in Louisiana

For some, populism is a distortion of liberal democracy that precedes a more autocratic political environment. This is the view espoused by political scientist Jan Werner-Müller, who writes: “The danger to democracies today is not some comprehensive ideology that systematically denies democratic ideals. The danger is populism—a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals.”¹ In contrast to Müller, Lawrence Goodwyn, author of Democratic Promise, saw the Populist movement in the United States as a “moment of Democratic Promise,” and claims the heart of the agrarian movement “was its cultural assertion as a people’s movement of mass democratic aspiration.”² This contrast between the aspirations of the original Populists and how populist movements have manifested within liberal democracies illustrates the divergence between the goals of the ideology and its impact on public institutions and the state.

Huey P. Long Jr. led a successful left-leaning neo-Populist political movement defined by the slogan, “Every Man a King, (But No One Wears a Crown).” Long remains Louisiana’s most famous politician: from 1918 – 1935, he served as a U.S. Senator, Governor of Louisiana, and as a member and commissioner of the state Railroad / Public Service Commission. In addition to these offices, Long amassed political power and controlled the state on a level that had no comparison before or after his tenure. At his height, Long represented Louisiana in the U.S. Senate and simultaneously governed as a dictator over the state legislature even though he had no official position or designation. Economic and political opportunities eluded many Louisiana, a product of government
neglect and corruption that stretched back generations. Long’s expansion of state action and autocratic leadership style secured him and his allies unprecedented power within the Pelican State. Long’s machine became synonymous with fraud, corruption, and self-aggrandizement, all in the name of helping “the people.” Investigating Long’s connections to Populism within Louisiana, and how his tenure influenced state institutions, as well as the state’s political and economic environment, allows me to contribute to the existing scholarship on his career, better understand how he became so powerful in the state, and what his rise can tell us about populist movements in contemporary times.

Initially, I became interested in Long and his legacy as the “Kingfish” because of perceived parallels between him and former President Donald Trump. I also was interested in Long’s perception of state power and how that impacted his style of governance and engendered popular support. As I learned more, I moved away from a direct comparison with former President Trump, and instead focused on the conditions that occasioned Long’s rise, and his ability to assert and consolidate power over Louisiana. Further, I realized that in order to analyze Long’s influence on state institutions and his connections to the Populists, I had to account for the oppressive influence of Bourbon Democrats and their allies on the state and civil society following Reconstruction.

Another dynamic that motivated my research was that Long governed during a period of profound economic and political disruption. Long’s calls to re-distribute wealth, tax corporations and capital owners, and expand public services were central to his class-based appeal within the state, and eventually the nation, as the U.S. grappled with the
Great Depression. In researching these issues, I noticed similarities between the climate that allowed Long to rise to prominence and our contemporary political and economic environment. Questions about the efficacy of public institutions and the state’s role in regulating markets and large corporations were relevant in Long’s era and garner renewed interest today. Externalities created by expanded economic inequality, as well as increasingly illiberal, undemocratic impulses coupled with insecurities created by technological innovation and globalization were relevant in Long’s period and our own. With these questions in mind, I believe that revisiting this period of Louisiana and American political and economic history will provide readers a contemporary investigation of Populism as an ideology and as a form of governance, as well as the implications for public institutions, individual citizens, and liberal democracy.

In the United States, Populism was commonly associated with the agrarian movements of the 1880s and ‘90s, a reaction to the economic insecurity and political marginalization endured by workers and laborers across the nation.³ Populists sought to help small-farmers and laborers, mainly rural populations, whose livelihoods were increasingly unstable, and in the long run, disappearing.⁴ Populism, as an ideology or philosophy, has manifested in various movements and figures overtime, across the political spectrum. This has led to a variety of scholarship and debate over what exactly makes a person or a movement “Populist.”

American Populists claimed to represent the “people,” against the financial and political elites. Populists believed these plutocrats manipulated government through their financial strength and enriched themselves at the expense of the majority. Historian Lawrence Goodwyn argued that Populism in the late nineteenth century represented a
“people’s movement of mass democratic aspiration.” Another historian, John Hicks, similarly saw Populism as a collective response to economic and political marginalization and emphasizes the desire for greater popular control of government.

Building upon these themes, Richard Hofstadter discussed the origins and ideas of Populism, and its implications for democracy and civil society in the twentieth century and beyond. Hofstadter claimed, “Populism is endemic to the American political spirit and history,” and that Populism has survived in the twentieth century “as an undercurrent of provincial resentments, popular and ‘democratic’ rebelliousness and suspicion, and nativism.”

Taking a more critical position on the political and social implications of populist movements is Jan Werner-Müller, who derides populism as a symptom of liberal democracy’s failure to address economic as well as cultural anxieties within a society. He stresses that populists offer simplistic solutions to people’s fears and insecurities that states have failed to address or previously ignored. Similarly, William Riker’s discussion of populism differentiates between liberalism and populism, specifically in the contexts of voting and institutions. Like Müeller, Riker highlights the populist idea of the “sovereign will of the people” which he argues is learned through elections and compels officials to enact the policies voters prefer because they represent the majority and doing otherwise would be a violation of the people’s liberty.

Existing scholarship on Long’s political identity as a descendant of the Populists is numerous and conflicted. Since his death, historians have argued about what Long’s legacy should be, and attempted to ascribe him to a particular ideology.
The most complete account of Long’s life was published by T. Harry Williams, and portrays Long as a driven mass-leader, and an exceptional man, whose evil doings were more or less justified by the good he did for the people.\textsuperscript{11} Williams never ascribed the Populist or neo-Populist label to him, and prefers the term “mass-leader,” an element present in Populism, as well as other insurgent ideologies, like Communism or Fascism.\textsuperscript{12}

Conflicting with this sympathetic approach is scholarship produced by William Ivy Hair, a student of Williams, as well as works by Hodding Carter and Raymond Graham Swing, which focused on the darker side of Long’s tenure.\textsuperscript{13} All three works note improvements in public services and Long’s every-man image but do not believe these programs justify his embrace of autocracy.

Diverging from both these characterizations are Glen Jeansonne and Alan Brinkley, who do not judge Long within a good-bad binary. Instead, they focus on the political motivations and economic factors that contributed to his success.\textsuperscript{14} Their works focused on Long’s place within the volatile inter-war period, characterized by economic uncertainty and rising political radicalism, and its implications for American society.

Similarly, Allan Sindler and Perry Howard present historical analyses of Long’s movement and ideology, illuminating his role within the complex world of Louisiana politics.\textsuperscript{15} Sindler and Howard’s analyses are helpful for understanding where Long’s political support overlapped with the original Populists, and how he built upon their ideals to achieve electoral victory.

In order to understand Long’s rise to power one must first look to the movements that preceded him. In my first chapter, I will discuss The Agrarian Revolt, also termed the Populist Movement, nationally and in Louisiana, as well as touch on the periods of New
Orleans Choctaw domination, and the gubernatorial term of reform candidate John M. Parker, respectively. The Populist movement preceded and influenced Long and laid the foundation for his eventual ascension. Economic volatility combined with a dedication to “hard-money” policy by federal and state representatives produced restrained responses, like the application of tariffs, to confront economic turmoil. The Farmers Alliance, and later the People’s Party, organized in response, representing the interests of farmers and workers. In Louisiana, Bourbon-Democrats and their allies employed both legal and violent means to prevent Populist votes from being counted or cast, leading to an erosion of democratic institutions, with inequality becoming legally entrenched throughout the state. In conjunction with the Bourbons, the New Orleans Choctaw Club, the “Old Regulars,” or the “Ring,” was the political machine that controlled the city of New Orleans. Through their web of patronage and relationships with business interests they exerted considerable influence in state politics and drew the ire of rural and urban reformers alike.16

Following nearly two decades of control, John M. Parker, with a coalition of reformers, laborers and farmers, disrupted “Ring” rule. Parker emerged as a champion of progressive reform, organized the Good Government League in New Orleans in 1910, and hoped to promote efficiency and order within state government.17 Parker assembled a successful electoral coalition, drawing support from reform-friendly voters across the state, with the help of a young railroad commissioner named Huey P. Long Jr.18 Once in office, Parker’s reform efforts were modest and failed to generate lasting electoral support within the state. Parker’s election signaled the desire for reform within the state and provided a model for future electoral success against the Choctaws and their allies.
Next, I will begin discussing Long’s tenure with a focus on his two most prominent attempts to reshape public services and promote opportunity for Louisianans. Long’s efforts to pave roads and build modern infrastructure, as well as improve and expand opportunities for public education, represented sectors where previous administrations failed to provide adequate services to the people. These programs were central to Long’s popular political appeal. Through deficit spending and increased taxation, Long’s policies echoed the Populist notion that the state should play an active role in promoting the economic interests and security of its citizens. Long promoted this idea on the stump and from the capitol and used his authority to exact economic and political concessions from enemies, in the name of the people.

Finally, I will discuss Long’s efforts to promote direct democracy through expanded franchise in Louisiana, and the contradictions created by instances of voter suppression and election fraud. Also, of interest is Long’s influence on the state legislature, and his use of Special Sessions to pass key components of his legislative program as well as concentrate power and rule as an autocrat. Long removed barriers to suffrage and expanded the number of eligible voters to historically high levels. Promoting direct democracy and popular control of the state was central to the Populist movement in the nineteenth century, but Long’s suppression of political opposition and interference in democratic institutions raised questions about his commitment to democracy. These instances also highlighted the dismal condition of democracy and corresponding institutions in Louisiana prior to Long’s rise.

By analyzing Long’s influence on state institutions and the political climate he inhabited, readers will better understand the conditions that preceded and gave credence
to Populism within Louisiana, how Long’s rise and career drew upon and diverged from the ideals and experience of the People’s Party, and finally, what Long’s tenure and Louisiana’s period of populist governance illustrates about the relationships between popular movements, economic insecurities and inequality, and ineffectual democratic institutions. Long’s ascension coincided with a period of economic and political disruption domestically and internationally, not dissimilar to our world today. While there are similarities between Long and contemporary leaders, I am less interested in personal comparisons, and instead, look to focus on the economic, political, and cultural trends that allowed his popular movement to be successful. By looking at the actions, tactics, and motivations of Long and his enemies, I will illustrate the complex relationship between Long’s autocratic tendencies, the strong popular support for his program, which he constituted as a moral imperative and mandate to govern, and how the repressive and restrained nature of previous administrations led to Louisianans rejecting the state’s political establishment. The title of my thesis, Weighing the Kingfish, refers to my attempt to weigh and place Long along the spectrum of popular, democratic leaders and undemocratic autocrats. As Long’s tactics and tenure illustrated, his approach to state and national politics was fluid, and often embodied characteristics of both types, which raises questions about the contradictions inherent within populist movements and their compatibility with liberal democracy.

Long was an authentic example of a neo-Populist leader whose legislative actions and efforts to include marginalized portions of the population in the political process were consistent with the Populist philosophy. By the same token, his leadership and political methods were firmly rooted in the undemocratic and corrupt style employed by
the political establishment he replaced. Given the historical literature, one can understand why Long was genuinely embraced as a neo-Populist every-man, even though he often operated as anything but. In keeping with the goals of the Populists, Long expanded the franchise, augmented public services provided by the state, and garnered support from apathetic voters, even though his methods and tactics of governance were consistent with the undemocratic and corrupt politicians that dominated the state’s political environment.

In my view, the historical context and Long’s political record demonstrate that he should be regarded as a descendent of the Populists, a neo-Populist. His political record demonstrates his commitment to direct engagement with the voters, refocusing governmental priorities and resources to the benefit of the general population and expanding participation in the electoral and political process to marginalized populations. By the same token, Long’s autocratic leadership style, domination and control of Louisiana politics, and his political operation squarely continued in the undemocratic, manipulative and thoroughly corrupt traditions of the political establishment that he replaced. Plainly, there is a tension between Long’s role as the Kingfish, the ultimate political boss, and Long’s neo-Populist message. Ultimately though, Long’s message and policies were sufficiently powerful and attractive for his supporters to embrace Long and his autocratic methods, as a neo-Populist everyman.

3 Müller, What is Populism? 87.
4 Goodwyn, 10-11.
5 Goodwyn, 541. Goodwyn saw the Populist movement as a manifestation of prolonged economic and cultural insecurities, and as a means to promote “higher Democratic ideals,” in opposition to the influence of corporations and financial institutions. Goodwyn’s analysis emphasized Populists’ desire to re-capture
the economic and political self-determination that many saw as the promise of American Democracy; and prevent the societal destruction they associated with modern industrialization and commercialization.


8 Müller, 17. For Müller, the most prominent component of this logic is that an individual leader or movement alone represents the “will and voice” of the “people,” defined as a portion of the population separate from the “elites,” who are the opposition and deemed enemies of the “true” people

9 Müller, 17.


12 Williams, 23, 414 – 16. Williams notes the influence of local elders who engaged in “populist talk,” which Williams argues shaped Long’s early political development and identity relative to other politicians within the state.

13 William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 294 – 97. One of Hair’s final chapters is titled “Plain Dictator,” where he likens Long’s actions to that of European Fascists Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. However, he clarifies Long’s lack of ideological grounding renders the connection imperfect; Hodding Carter, “Huey Long, American Dictator,” in *The Aspirin Age, 1919 – 1941*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), 363. Populist themes of the 19th century permeate Long’s rhetoric and platform, driving Carter’s vision of Long as the “heir” to this constituency, but labels him a “wannabe-dictator,” rather than reformer; Raymond Graham Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc. 1935), 19; 88. Swing emphasizes the conditions that precede Fascism; as well as the “power” Hitler and Goebbels derived from the “people,” both of which, he claims, are present in Long’s Louisiana.

14 Glen Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses: Huey Long and the Great Depression*, 3-4. Jeansonne argues Long’s brand of neo-Populism is driven by the disruptive forces of industrialization and urbanization, leaving rural populations behind financially and socially; Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long and Father Coughlin*, 143. Brinkley similarly believes that Long’s movement exploited anxieties related to mechanization of industry and concentration of financial power, a threat to individual autonomy and the “ability to control one’s destiny.”

15 Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 175, 225; Allan P. Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana 1920 – 1952* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956). Sindler discusses Louisiana’s political situation just prior to, and in the years following Long, investigating his influence on the state, and attempting to understand the motivations that led to Long’s domination of the political scene. Howard’s *Political Tendencies in Louisiana: 1812 – 1952* provides a long-run look at political trends within the state, including the Populist revolt of the 1890s, years of Ring domination, Parker’s Progressive moment, and Long’s rise and abrupt fall. Howard argues the Populists of the 1890s were suppressed by extra-legal means and the “undemocratic realities of political life,” which ingrained grievances that Long exploited thirty years later.

16 Howard, 194.

17 Howard, 201.

18 Howard, 212 – 214.
Chapter 1 Weighing the Kingfish: Political and Historical Circumstances in Louisiana Prior to the Rise of Huey Long and the Development of Populism

In order to understand Huey Long’s rise and appeal, one must first look to the movements that preceded him. Accordingly, this chapter offers two crucial pieces of historical background. First, it reviews the political and economic consequences that preceded Long’s rise to power in Louisiana, where rural farmers and laborers struggled financially with little influence in the state’s political process. Second, it discusses Populism’s evolution from a third-party protest movement with isolated support, to a viable political platform and influential cultural ideology that fueled Long’s emergence as a political force and ultimately propelled him to the Governor’s Mansion and the United States Senate.

Bourbon Domination and Populist Embers

With the end of Radical Reconstruction in 1877, Democratic rule again reigned supreme in Louisiana. A coalition of planter elite and New Orleans business interests dominated state government. Bourbons and their Democratic allies regularly committed election fraud to prevent legitimate political competition. The Democratic party of this period included “patrician (or noblesse oblige) conservatives; the Bourbon reactionaries; and the Lottery-New Orleans machine interests.” The Bourbons contended with Populist fervor in in the rural Northern Parishes such as Winn, Lincoln, Grant, and others in the Northern and Central Pine Hills of the state. Legal and extra-legal tactics by the dominant Bourbons disenfranchised many organizers and supporters. A shared disdain for ordinary citizens, fiscally and socially conservative responses to public crises, and
broad use of patronage and extra-legal means to ensure their continued domination in the state characterized their political strategy.

The drafting of a new state constitution in 1879, signaled a key moment in the Bourbon-Ring coalition’s attempt to entrench their power. The *Daily Picayune* on July 10-11, 1879, reported that a Bourbon delegate from Shreveport opined in favor of restricting suffrage from the “masses,” to which a colleague replied,

such an action might intensify Kansas fever and—far worse—engender an alliance ’between the poor white and colored people, which would inaugurate a reign of communism and secret societies, attended by labor strikes.6

The fear of a class-based coalition reflected the alliance’s intentions to restrict political participation in their pursuit of a society that codified social and economic White Supremacy. Further concerns about increased interest in redistributive policies in rural communities arose when Captain E.E. Kidd of Jackson Parish, a leading voice for the agrarian faction, pushed for a repudiation of the state debt incurred during Radical Reconstruction.7 Conservative business interests sought to keep a high interest rate of seven percent on the debt, while poorer rural farmers wanted the debt repudiated entirely so state funds could be spent elsewhere. Instead, the state lowered the principal rate of interest on the debt, from seven to four percent, striking a meager compromise between agrarian and financial interests. Finally, the constitution expanded gubernatorial power over state affairs while curtailing legislative and local powers.8 Centralizing control within the state’s executive branch allowed for greater influence over elections and patronage. Bourbon Democrats and their allies were disinterested in the economic problems that concerned a majority of Louisianans and preferred a system that rewarded and compounded upon their indifference.
From 1881 to 1888, Samuel McEnery served as Louisiana’s Governor. Lou A. Wiltz became governor in 1879 but died prior to the end of his term and was replaced by McEnery, whom would win re-election in 1884, before losing in 1892. Alongside McEnery, serving as state treasurer, was Major Edward Burke, an early ally of the Louisiana Lottery company who occupied his position from 1877 – 1888. Burke was heavily connected to the banker-planter coalition of New Orleans and an ally of the Lottery.⁹ The Louisiana Lottery company was incorporated by a gambling syndicate from New York in 1868, who operated as a monopoly in exchange for an annual $40,000 payment to the state until 1892.¹⁰ As Republican power decreased in Louisiana, the Lottery allied itself with the Democrats through appeals to White Supremacy. They enlisted support from former Confederate Generals P.G.T. Beauregard and Jubal A. Early in 1877, who ensured the lottery’s charter was renewed and helped the organization become key players within the politics of New Orleans.¹¹ According to historian William Ivy Hair, “The Pelican State by the 1880’s had become a byword for political corruption and general lawlessness; and the Bourbon regime of that decade did virtually nothing to improve this sad reputation.”¹² In 1888, “Democratic Reformer” Francis T. Nicholls assumed the office of Governor of Louisiana for the second time since 1870, but his election changed little in the character of state government.

These administrations had many failures, but none more glaring than the neglect of Louisiana’s public education system. Political scientist V.O. Key Jr. argued in his *Southern Politics: In State and Nation* that an effective measure of a financial oligarchy’s dominance was its investment and stewardship of public education.¹³ In 1860, only ten percent of adult white males were considered illiterate.¹⁴ By 1890, that number doubled,
and for Louisianans age ten and over, forty-five percent of the state’s population was considered illiterate. Louisiana collected proportionately and literally fewer revenues through state and local education taxes than four “poorer” Southern states (Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Florida) in 1890, based on “True Value of Property,” lagging behind South Carolina by forty-thousand dollars in spending while possessing fifty-million dollars more in taxable property. Compounding these problems, public expenditures and their order of payment fell under the complete control of Treasurer Edward Burke, whose reputation for nefarious financial practices and disregard for public institutions peaked when $1,267,905 from the state treasury disappeared following his flight to Honduras, in 1888. Years of Bourbon domination were characterized by corrupt fiscal management and conservative opposition to state spending, especially on education, which disproportionately impacted the states more rural, poorer populations.

Meanwhile, in Texas, Kansas, Louisiana, and across the nation, agrarian movements grew in strength and numbers. In 1890, at a convention in Ocala, Florida, the Farmer’s Alliance made the fateful decision to enter politics. The “Populist” movement, as termed by historians, was a political movement that united rural farmers and their allies in pursuit of greater economic opportunity and assistance guided by the state. They advanced a number of policy responses aimed to address capital shortages, as well as volatility in the price of commodities and agricultural inputs, specifically for producing cotton. Across the West and South, the movement grew throughout the 80s and 90s, reaching its peak in Louisiana.

Populist Economic and Ideological Development (1877 – 1892)
The Populist movement coalesced as a response to sustained economic insecurities among rural farmers. Monetary policy, specifically a return to the Gold Standard, loomed large following the Civil War. Currency under the Gold Standard relied on gold to derive its value, but during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Federal Government issued “greenbacks,” fiat money that derived its value from the government rather than gold. Returning to the Gold Standard required the federal government to repay hundreds of millions of dollars in bond obligations to private bankers and financial corporations, which meant increased taxation and fiscal tightening. 19 Bankers and financial interests supported gold monometallism, arguing that currency backed by gold was “civilized” compared to “barbaric” bimetallism, systems that included silver as well as gold. 20 This loyalty to the Gold Standard fed theories that strict monetary policy was a conspiracy by merchants, gold interests, and the international financial community, specifically in London and New York, usually of Semitic ancestry. 21 The government responded with the Resumption Act of 1875, which restricted coinage and currency issues through regulations and capital requirements for banks, causing interest rates to rise, greenbacks to depreciate relative to gold, and deflation to occur before the nation returned to the Gold Standard on January 2, 1879. 22

In the South, this strengthened the crop-lien system in the lives of southern farmers as interest rates rose faster than commodity prices, trapping farmers in debt. 23 In the West, the rejection of silver as a legitimate currency produced economic hardship and resentment from miners and workers. 24 The combination of falling commodity prices, increased production, and rising interest rates all contributed to unpayable debt for many American farmers and laborers across the country. The issue of returning to the Gold
Standard and the economic turmoil that followed in the South and West shaped the demands of the Populist movement of the 1880s and 90s.

In 1877, a group of farmers congregated at the farm of J.R. Allen in Lampasas County, Texas, to form a group named “Knights of the Reliance,” that would soon be re-named “The Farmers Alliance.” Combined with rising membership, initial results from “bulking” sales, where the collective cotton of Alliance members was sold at premium rates of “five to ten cents per one hundred pounds above prevailing levels” had mild success, and stoked excitement among the membership. The Farmers Alliance grew throughout Texas, and spread across the South and West, fueled by a tide of resentment amongst farmers across these regions. S.O. Daws, a former Mississippian and traveling lecturer, energized the movement with speeches that attacked capitalists, credit merchants, the Gold Standard, as well as increased the number of active “sub-alliances” by almost four hundred percent across the South.

The emergence of the Farmers Alliance shrunk participation in organizations like the Grange, but fueled Populist political organization across the South. The Alliance of the Grange, the oldest organization for farmers in the U.S. had begun in the 1870s to build a community of farmers that supported one another. Some Grange organizations experimented with bulk-cooperative purchasing of items, but never entertained more radical measures to assist its members. With financial hardships among farmers mounting, the Grange’s political limitations were detrimental. In Texas, the Farmers Alliance steadily increased membership, growing from ten thousand members in the summer of 1884, to fifty thousand members by the end of 1885. In Louisiana, the Lincoln Parish Famers’ Club was founded in 1881, but failed to garner significant
momentum until 1886, when John A. Tetts, a homesteader from South Carolina and original member and former secretary, met a man named Samuel Skinner, a farmer from Ruston, who re-started the organization. This organization would become the Louisiana Farmers’ Alliance and by 1887, had nearly four thousand members. The Louisiana Farmers’ Association would join forces with the Texas Alliance, as well as the Agricultural Wheel, an agricultural organization with similar ideals in Arkansas to form the Farmers Alliance.

The Alliance codified the economic and political failures they aimed to address with the Cleburne Demands. In 1886, William Lamb, a lecturer and Alliance member, penned a letter to fellow Alliance-men expressing a renewed focus for their movement. He supported cooperation with the Knights of Labor, continued boycotts of manufacturers and merchants who opposed “bulking” or other cooperative ventures, and organized political action. S.O. Daws, Lamb’s mentor, published his own letter re-defining the structure of the Alliance with the creation of local anti-monopoly leagues and the nomination of their members to run for public office. These ideas culminated in a meeting in Cleburne, Texas, where delegates and members of the Texas Alliance drafted the “Cleburne Demands.” Seventeen in all, demands ranged from greater taxation on railroads to the establishment of a national banking system to measures preventing purchase or ownership of land by foreigners. The delegates addressed them to the state government of Texas, the federal government, and current Alliance leader, President Andrew Dunlap.

The affirmation of some radical ideas caused a schism within the movement, which allowed Charles W. Macune to rise. Macune was a Populist editor whose
proposals, chiefly the Joint-Note and Sub-Treasury Plans, attempted to address the economic plight of Populists. Macune later sent Evan Jones, spokesman for the “radicals” at the convention, to discuss a potential merger with the Louisiana Farmers’ Union, which joined the movement in 1887 at an Alliance convention in Waco, Texas. After Cleburne, Lamb supported Greenback candidates, helped form the National Union Labor party in 1888, formed the People’s Party in Texas in 1891, and assisted other third-party organizations and press outlets integral to Populism’s growth. The schism at Cleburne defined the Alliance moving forward and brought the issues related to banking and monetary policy to the forefront of the movement.

Through the Texas Exchange, Alliance farmers hoped to sell their cotton in bulk to garner higher prices and simultaneously pay lower prices for inputs thanks to collective purchasing power. Initially, the Exchange lacked the capital necessary to purchase inputs and guarantee lower prices. A two-dollar per member capital stock fee, and “joint-notes,” drafted collectively by county were offered as solutions. “Joint-notes” required members to submit a schedule of needs for the coming year with proof of full collateral, and a pledge of cotton worth “at least three times” the amount of credit requested. Farmers drafted a “joint-note” for the estimated amount of credit, with interest payments starting on May 31, and ending after harvest on November 15, 1888. By March of 1888, Exchange orders for goods topped $100,000, with more than $200,000 in joint notes supported by $600,000 in collateral from local farmers. The Exchange stayed solvent through its first year, before it nearly collapsed in June, when farmers across the state mobilized to meet interest requirements. Tasked with saving the Exchange, Macune conceived the Sub-Treasury plan.
The Sub-Treasury plan was a Populist attempt to reform the relationship between debtor and creditor that shifted responsibility onto financial institutions and government and expanded the money supply. The plan nationalized agricultural clearinghouses and replaced them with government-sponsored exchanges for farmers to store their crops. Exchanges would also extend cash advances, in the form of greenbacks, so farmers could finance their harvest and have flexibility when they chose to sell their crop. Macune envisioned farmers receiving 80 percent of the local current value of the product at a rate of one percent of interest per annum, with the advance being repaid within one year, either by the farmer selling the crop or the debt being auctioned off to the highest bidder. If the farmer contracted with a buyer, he would only keep the difference between the market price paid by the buyer and the amount already advanced to him by the Sub-Treasury, with the buyer redeeming the crop certificates at the Sub-Treasury, repaying the original advance plus interest and storage costs.

Macune and the Populists envisioned federal government support and spending, enumerated in the Sub-Treasury plan, as the mechanism to address the capital deficiencies and other economic challenges that plagued farming communities across the South and West. Access to generous lines of credit with low interest rates would have created greater flexibility for farmers when deciding when to sell their crops, and for how much. Expansion of a government-backed currency, either through treasury certificates or green-backs, repudiated the monetary orthodoxy that guided national economic policy since Reconstruction. The plan, officially introduced in 1890, was never seriously considered by Congress. In 1892, the House Ways and Means committee produced an “unfavorable” report on the plan, and it never left committee. However, it would be
included in the 1892 People’s Party platform at Omaha and St. Louis. This rejection reinforced the belief that both parties were beholden to banks and financial interests, and stimulated Populist political organizations throughout the nation.

Populist Politics and Electoral Failures

As Populist fervor increased, opposition organization and political competition re-emerged in Louisiana. By 1887, there were over three hundred chapters of the Farmers Alliance in Louisiana, with membership reaching close to ten thousand. In 1888, the Farmers’ Union Commercial Association of Louisiana was created to fulfill wholesale and retail business for farmers in the state, and highlighted the demand for solutions to the plight felt by smaller, rural farmers. Yet, an indication of Bourbon inaction, when the Sub-Treasury plan first came to Congress in 1890, the Louisiana delegates firmly opposed its introduction. By contrast, also in 1890, T.E. Pritchard, nominee of the Farmer’s Union in Catahoula, defeated an incumbent Bourbon in the Fifth Congressional District with support from both the white and colored Alliance chapters. In 1892, the renewal of the charter for the Louisiana Lottery, a symbol of Bourbon power and corruption, was on the ballot alongside the gubernatorial election. Murphy J. Foster, the Democratic anti-lottery candidate emerged victorious in a five-way race with 44 percent of the vote, when support for the People’s Party in the North, and Central Pine Hills parishes, and for the Republican Party in the sugar-growing parishes, fractured traditionally reliable Democratic support. With this election, Populist-Republican fusion efforts increased within the state with the goal of increased electoral strength.

As economic conditions deteriorated in 1893, Populist fervor in Louisiana manifested in support of Populist candidates for congressional races. The economic
depression strengthened calls for the monetization of silver and increasing the money supply to help plummeting commodity prices. President Grover Cleveland responded by repealing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, depressing silver prices in favor a monometallic system. In Louisiana, the People’s Party attempted to challenge Democrats in the Fourth and Fifth congressional districts, which comprised the North and Central Hill parishes along the border of Arkansas. The elections pitted young Populists against incumbent Bourbons, both of whom used fraud and repression to beat back the challenges. After President Cleveland’s approval of the Wilson-Gorman Act of 1894, a federal two-cent-per-pound bounty on domestic sugar was removed and a tariff on foreign sugar added. This action prompted many of Louisiana’s sugar producers to abandon the Democrats and joined forces with Republicans in 1894, which increased collaboration between Populists and opposition-minded planters. Fractured relationships within the economic and political elite in Louisiana provided an opportunity for Populist-Republican fusion forces to strike against the establishment in the elections of 1896.

The elections of 1896 marked the height of Populist organization in the 19th century. Nationally, Free-Silverite William Jennings Bryan, was the Democratic nominee for President. While Bryan lost the election, his ability to obtain the nomination demonstrates the power of the Populist movement. Bryan, a Nebraska Democrat, had previously attempted to enact fusion with Nebraska Populists, and attracted Western Populists with his oratory and free-silver background. His running mate was Arthur M. Sewall of Maine, whose support of free silver was the limit of his overlap with Populist doctrine. Southern Populists opposed supporting the Democrats, and Bryan refused to
consider a ticket that did not include Sewall. As a result, he never officially accepted the People’s Party’s nomination with Tom Watson as his running mate. Conflicting interests within their movement and limitations posed by the bi-factional, first-past-the-post electoral system of the U.S. forced the Populists to align themselves with the Democrats. Free silver became the defining economic issue, rather than Sub-Treasuries or more radical cooperative proposals. By co-opting this plank, Democrats erased one of the strongest unifiers between Western and Southern Populists. In the end, Bryan and the Democrats were defeated by William McKinley and the monometallic Republicans. With Bryan’s defeat, hope for an independent, nationwide People’s Party ended; and the Republicans assumed control of the White House and both chambers of Congress.

In Louisiana, the Populist-Republican fusion fielded a ticket of three “National Republicans” and four “Populists,” led by the candidate for governor, J.N. Pharr, a National Republican. Governor Foster, the incumbent, ran as the Democratic nominee, on a platform that promised to disenfranchise vast swaths of poor white and black voters if re-elected. The election of 1896 was fiercely contested, with a North Louisiana Democratic daily newspaper stating: “It is the religious duty of Democrats to rob Populists and Republicans of their votes whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself…” Returns showed Foster beating Pharr by almost thirty-thousand votes, but after removing twelve parishes where Democratic control suppressed fusionist participation, Pharr’s lead shrunk to less than two-thousand votes.

With the election won, Foster and his supporters embarked on a series of measures to limit participation in the political process. First, Democrats passed registration and election laws in the following legislative session that would disqualify
poor and uneducated voters starting in 1897. Once these laws were passed, the legislature held a referendum on scheduling a constitutional convention for 1898. The new constitution included a provision that established literacy requirements to vote, which could be disregarded in lieu of proof of property exceeding the value of $300 or if a man’s father or grandfather had voted prior to Reconstruction in 1867. These qualifications targeted primarily black voters, as well as poor and uneducated whites, but did the most damage to the black population. These actions by the Foster administration following their re-election in 1896 were not just anti-liberal; they represented a perversion of democracy intended to enrich and empower a select few.

In Jan-Verner Mueller’s *What is Populism?* he quotes Cas Muddles, a Dutch social scientist, who describes populism as “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” The actions by Bourbon Democrats between 1877 – 1896 were unquestionably undemocratic. The corruption of democratic institutions and inaction by government helped cultivate the anger and opposition that fueled the People’s Party. A Bourbon Democrat stated their justification for rigging the election proceedings was “‘a vast majority of the very best people’ stood behind the ‘brave young Governor.’” The candidate in question was incumbent Governor Murphy J. Foster, a member of the wealthy planter-business elite and fierce proponent of restricted suffrage for the poorer segments of society, both white and black. Political scientist William Riker argues that liberal democracy requires three elements: participation, liberty, and equality. The constitutional amendments and other laws Foster and his fellow Bourbons drafted and passed restricted participation by communities they deemed to be inferior, stripped these individuals of their liberty, and enshrined state-sponsored inequality. For the Populists,
their grievances as small farmers and rural Louisianans had been ignored for too long by the Bourbons, but it would be some time before their calls were heard again. The democratic process was perverted to enrich a privileged minority and demoralized any legitimate political opposition.

Machine Politics, Reform Efforts, and the Emergence of the Kingfish

In the twentieth-century, political climates shifted across the nation, and candidates labeled “reformers” and “progressives” hoped to address economic inequalities and failures of the state. Small independent and tenant farmers in the early twentieth century received little assistance from state or federal governments. The prospects for making a living as a yeoman farmer eroded further as employment grew in other sectors, and the relationships between commercial agriculture and the merchant-business community grew tighter. The financial insecurities that plagued Louisiana’s rural farmers and urban laborers in the nineteenth century accelerated with the emergence of industrialization and extractive corporations that entered the state and cemented relationships with the ruling oligarchy. Bourbon Democrats promoted prosperity for few Louisianans, but with the help of the New Orleans Choctaw Club, they protected the state’s extractive institutions.

The New Orleans Choctaw Club, controlled state politics with the help of Bourbon Democrats through patronage, graft, and close relationships with the business-banker-merchant interests. The Old Regulars came into power in 1900, a continuation of the previous Democratic Ring of New Orleans, they re-structured and expanded their organization into the New Orleans Choctaw Club in 1897. Martin Behrman, a businessman and politician in New Orleans, served as mayor and de-facto leader of the
Old Regulars until his death. Behrman and his allies used their political machine to secure votes of New Orleanians in exchange for political and financial patronage without interruption for twenty years.76 His success came from relationships built with businesses; bankers, merchants, and industrialists dictated policy preferences they believed would promote growth and Behrman ensured they were adopted.77

Electorally, the Ring utilized precinct and ward structures. Men canvassed neighborhoods, ensured constituents were registered and had paid their poll tax, and provided additional incentives to vote for the “right” candidate.78 The control of election machinery was critical: each precinct leader ensured that a reliable number of precinct election officials were Choctaws, whose selection came with expectations to “bring” at least five votes each.79 Behrman believed patronage to be far superior to public services, and despised the progressive “Reformers.” He saw their policies as tools of manipulation in their pursuit for political power.80 Using patronage and corruption to promote entrenched interests, the Old Regulars exploited the political institutions and environment created by the Bourbons at the end of the nineteenth century, which stimulated a spirit of protest and political action in the state.

Some politicians and citizens, like John M. Parker, were interested in reforms. Parker’s opposition to the Choctaw’s officially began in 1910, with the creation of the Good Government League, a political organization seeking to promote efficiency in New Orleans’s city government where he served as President.81 Parker enacted modest reforms to address failures in the state’s infrastructure, education, and economy. His electoral support broke the Bourbon-Choctaw domination over state politics but failed to bring the radical change Populists desired thirty years prior. The lack of substantial reforms by his
administration underscored the limitations of “Good Government,” and the need for institutional reform in Louisiana.82

John M. Parker’s defeat of Frank P. Stubbs in the 1920 gubernatorial election created an electoral blueprint to disrupt the Ring. Ironically, the reform movement Parker represented was criticized by some of the state’s more conservative elements, the same voices that would later support him in his admonishments of Governor–Senator Long.83 Parker and his reformers were particularly interested in urban problems caused by the detrimental aspects of Ring dominance in New Orleans, the industrialization and migration that followed the first World War, and Louisiana’s lack of infrastructure and educational opportunity.84

In this election, Parker made two key strategic adjustments from his previous failures: 1) he established his own “machine” organization within the city of New Orleans; 2) he gained support from traditional Populist strongholds with the help of a young Huey P. Long.85 In New Orleans, Parker established the Orleans Democratic Association, a rival machine that gained control of all state patronage in the city of New Orleans once he took office in May 1920. This initiative propelled Orleans Democratic Association victories in the closest city elections in decades later that year.86 With Long’s support, Parker increased his vote percentages significantly in Northern Louisiana, winning 60-100 percent of the vote in Winn, Caldwell, Catahoula, and West Caldwell, along with a number of parishes in the Central Pine Hills.87 Combining his good-government Reform message with Long’s growing profile as a financial reformer and opponent of corporate greed, Parker forged a coalition capable of disrupting Bourbon-Ring domination.
Parker’s victory elevated the idea that government should provide public services and opportunities for all citizens in Louisiana. It also reinforced the importance of state patronage and extractive institutions in order to succeed politically in Louisiana, specifically as it related to electoral support in New Orleans. As governor, Parker oversaw a Constitutional Convention in 1921, that expanded procedural limitations over the powers of the legislature and governor respectively, and dropped the “grandfather and property clauses” related to suffrage in the spirit of “good government.”

Parker began a “pay-as-you-go” gravel road program and construction of a new campus for Louisiana State University, financed with a combination of Federal grants and a severance tax on the extraction of oil and natural resources within the state. By 1924, his Highway Commission reported the completion of 2,700 miles of a gravel road state-highway system.

In 1922, the Orleans Democratic Organization collapsed, leading to the formation of the “New Regulars,” comprised of ex-Choctaws and Parker’s allies, in opposition to the revival of the Old Regulars, led by Martin Behrman. After Parker’s victory, he spread scandalous information about Behrman and his allies that detailed corruption, anti-labor legislative action, and enrichment from “vice” elements in New Orleans.

Regardless, Parker’s policies improved little for the state’s poorest citizens, as farm ownership continued to fall after 1920, and his limited scope of political action prevented more substantial improvements in public services. Parker’s failure to deliver policies that put citizens interests over those of corporations and elites drew the ire of Railroad Commission member Long, who alleged that Parker allowed Standard Oil lawyers to draft language for the severance tax measure and was too easy on the corporation.
Parker’s moderate approach to reform left him open to attacks from Long as well as the Old Regulars, making him a one-term governor. Parker attempted to reform institutions but failed to amass support capable of withstanding pressure from Behrman and the Choctaw Club in New Orleans, and ultimately from the rise of Long himself.

Henry Fuqua’s narrow victory in the 1924 gubernatorial election illustrated the cultural complexities that influenced Louisiana politically, and the rural insurgency that later culminated in support of Huey P. Long Jr. The Ku Klux Klan’s involvement in the Mer Rouge murders of 1922, which led to Governor Parker raising the militia, made support or denouncement of the Klan the dominant topic of the 1924 gubernatorial race. After the Ku Klux Klan’s re-organization in 1915, it had grown quite powerful in Louisiana and across the South. In 1922, the Klan kidnapped, murdered, and dumped the bodies of two men deemed hostile to the organization in a lake in Morehouse parish. This crime prompted a revival of enforcement of the anti-masking law of 1872, and made the issue of the Klan dominant in the 1924 gubernatorial election. Long, a Northern Protestant, did not take a firm stance on the issue and was relegated to a third place finish. The victor, Henry Fuqua, the Ring candidate, finished second in the first primary before amassing fifty-eight percent of the vote in the second round against New Regular Hewitt Bouanchand, a Cajun Catholic supported by Governor Parker. With the support of the Ring, Fuqua captured the gubernatorial mansion, and exposed Long’s lack of political organization in New Orleans and throughout the state. Yet, Long’s strong performance in the Northern and Central Hills, as well as the Southwestern Florida parishes foreshadowed key bases of political support.
In the end, the problems faced by Louisiana’s public institutions were greater than Parker’s desire for government action. As the price of cotton continued to plummet after its rebound in WWI, farmers continued to struggle as industrialization and globalization marched onward. The Populist insurgency that manifested amongst agrarian communities thirty years prior had a new voice in Winnfield’s Huey P. Long Jr. Long’s popular appeal was powered by his hatred of the Bourbon-Ring oligarchy, his distrust of corporations and banks, and his belief in redistributive and government intervention in the economy.

Huey P. Long Jr. was born in 1893 in Winnfield, Louisiana, the seat of Winn parish, located in the Central Pine Hills of the state. He was the seventh child born to Huey Long Sr. and Caledonia Long, who had moved to Winnfield in 1892. The Longs were farmers of modest means but owned some of the most property within the Winnfield community. Contrary to some speculation, Huey Sr. was never affiliated with the Populists, but he did run for a seat in the state legislature as a Democrat with a Populistic platform in 1900. Long claimed he developed an affection for “persons who had no such physical asset,” as a child, and was horrified after witnessing a local farmer lose his land to a bankruptcy auction. Long was exceptionally bright, but lacked the funds to pay for books and other expenses needed to attend L.S.U. Instead, he worked as a travelling salesman after completing a semester of law school at the University of Oklahoma in 1912. After working as a salesman for a few years, at twenty-one, Long, with the help of his older brother Julius, studied for the Louisiana bar and passed a special qualifying exam in 1915. He initially practiced with his brother, but after a falling out, Long went out on his own and built a practice focused on land-title cases and representing individuals and families against corporations in the state. After working as
a lawyer for three years, Long decided state institutions were in need of reform, which motivated his entrance into politics.¹⁰⁸

Long began his political career when he won a position on the state Railroad Commission, later renamed the Public Service Commission, which provided him a platform to regulate corporations and establish a record that promoted regulation and reform of industrialists and public utilities. At the age of twenty-four, Long entered the 1918 race for Railroad Commissioner for the state’s Third District, comprised of twenty-eight northern parishes; he finished second in the first primary, and unseated the incumbent in the runoff by 635 votes.¹⁰⁹ The commission regulated the practices and rates of railroads, steamboats, telephone and telegraph companies, and other industries throughout the state.¹¹⁰ In his first term, he gained support from his fellow commissioners to expand the commission’s control over pipeline regulation in the state. This was a response to a Standard Oil decision that prevented independent oil producers from accessing their pipelines, which Long argued, led to Louisiana producers being passed over in favor of cheaper Mexican crude.¹¹¹ Even after he convinced his fellow commissioners to support legislation that expanded their purview, Governor Pleasant, a conservative previously backed by the Ring, refused to call a special session of the legislature to address the problem.¹¹²

From 1920 – 1924, Long supported and then turned against the newly elected Governor Parker, as well as continued to use his position on the Railroad / Public Service Commission to regulate public services and build upon prior reforms that benefited Louisiana. Long claimed that he supported Parker for Governor after the latter assured him of his intentions to tackle the oil “freeze” on independent producers perpetrated by
Standard Oil. However, once the legislation materialized, Long deemed Parker’s compromise inadequate and became a strong voice of opposition against his program and administration on all fronts. After the constitutional convention of 1921, the Railroad Commission was re-named the Public Service Commission, and its regulatory influence marginally expanded. Long assumed the chairmanship of the Commission in 1921, following the death of the previous chairman, John T. Michel, and used his new-found position to reverse a prior decision that allowed the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company to raise their rates by 20 percent. Long reversed this rate hike, and the new agreement compelled the company to issue refunds to all telephone users in the state, as well as a commitment to improve its infrastructure within the state. Long also lowered streetcar fares in Shreveport, continued to pressure Standard Oil over their pipelines, and was instrumental in passing the 3% severance tax on oil gleaned from state wells. These victories culminated in Long’s announcement in 1923, on his thirtieth birthday, that he would run for Governor in the 1924 cycle.

As discussed above, Long finished third in the 1924 gubernatorial election. However, he learned from his setback and expanded his influence throughout the state, further strengthening his resumé of reform. Long was re-elected to the Public Service Commission in 1924, sweeping all twenty-eight parishes in his district, and continued to push for lower rail rates for the shipment of oil and other freight throughout the state. He campaigned for Edwin S. Broussard, a Cajun from South Louisiana, against J.Y. Sanders, the Ring candidate, for a U.S. Senate seat in 1926. Long appeared with Broussard regularly, and when Broussard captured a narrow victory, claimed credit for the win. These campaign activities with Broussard helped Long establish a base of
support in the state’s southern parishes. However, in this same election, Dudley J. Leblanc, an anti-Long candidate, was elected to the Public Service Commission. As a result, Long lost his chairmanship; the committee amended or removed many of his key accomplishments; and Long distanced himself from the body. In the meantime, Long expanded his law practice, moved his family to Shreveport, and prepared for the 1928 gubernatorial election.

Long entered the campaign stronger and more prepared than in 1924, capturing the Governor’s mansion in 1928. His platform remained much the same, with an emphasis on state spending combined with higher taxes on corporations to fund better roads, free bridges, free schoolbooks, improved schools, and lower rates for natural gas to New Orleans residents. With the issue of the Klan no longer a dominant factor, Long focused on promoting his program and presented himself as a reformer. He touted his record of taking on special interests and government failures to provide much-needed services for all Louisianans, but specifically those who had been marginalized and ignored by the state’s traditionally conservative politicians. Long had the backing of Colonel Ewing, a major publisher with newspapers in New Orleans, Shreveport, and Monroe; as well as financial backing from Robert S. Maestri, who would become a reliable and important figure in the Long machine. His opponents were O.H. Simpson, the Lieutenant Governor promoted upon Fuqua’s death in 1926, backed by the New Regulars, and Riley J. Wilson, a congressman backed by the Old Regulars. In the Democratic Primary, Long had a majority in thirty-eight parishes, and a plurality in nine more, which gave him a commanding victory over the other two candidates. Perry Howard claimed that Long’s victory in the 1928 gubernatorial primary broke Bourbon
rule, as Long appealed to white farmers across the state, and marked an important shift in the state’s political climate.¹²⁸

Once in office, Long oversaw ambitious expansions in public spending, the state bureaucracy, and his own executive power. Decades of Bourbon, and Bourbon-Ring rule, saw administrations that promoted extractive economic institutions and political repression to benefit a narrow constituency of political and economic elites. With a history of inaction and indifference towards the plight of small farmers and entrepreneurs by local, state, and federal governments, the people of Louisiana longed for a savior. This became the Kingfish’s moment; the rural knight in the white suit, whose promise of “Every man a king, but no one wears a crown” rang out throughout the state, and eventually, the nation.

¹ Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 153.
² Howard, 159.
³ Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 21.
⁵ Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 233 – 34, 261; Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana, 170 – 71.
⁶ Hair, 99.
⁷ Hair, 99.
⁸ Hair, 101.
⁹ Hair, 27-8.
¹⁰ Hair, 26.
¹¹ Hair, 27.
¹² Hair, 112.
¹³ Key, Southern Politics in State and Nation 160.
¹⁴ Hair, 120.
¹⁵ Hair, 122.
¹⁶ Hair, 122.
¹⁷ Hair, 127-8, 141.
²² Hicks, The Populist Revolt 88-90.
23 Hicks, 89-90.
24 Hicks, 304.
25 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise 33.
26 Goodwyn, 47
27 Hicks, The Populist Revolt 104 – 05.
28 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise 39
29 Goodwyn, 46
30 Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 144 - 46.
31 Hair, 147 – 49.
32 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise 58-9.
33 Goodwyn, 71.
34 Goodwyn, 79.
35 Goodwyn, 84 – 85, Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 150 – 51.
36 Hicks, Populist Revolt 135.
37 Hicks, 136.
38 Goodwyn, Democratic Promise 126-7.
39 Goodwyn, 126 – 27.
40 Goodwyn, 126 – 27.
41 Goodwyn, 134.
42 Goodwyn, 166.
43 Hicks, The Populist Revolt 187 – 88; Goodwyn Democratic Promise, 167.
44 Hicks, 187 – 188; Goodwyn, 167.
45 Hicks, 187 – 188; Goodwyn, 167.
46 Hicks, The Populist Revolt 187-88
47 Hicks, 187 – 88.
48 Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 153.
49 Hair, 156 – 57.
50 Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 175
51 Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 209.
52 Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 177.
54 Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 239
55 Hicks, The Populist Revolt 315.
56 Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 242.
57 Hair, 247.
58 Hicks, The Populist Revolt 328.
59 Hicks, The Populist Revolt 352-4.
60 Hicks, 369.
61 Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 183.
62 Key, Southern Politics of State and Nation 158-9.
63 Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest 260
64 Hair, 262.
65 Hair, 268.
66 Hair, 276.
67 Hair, 277; Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 190.
69 Hair, 264-5.
70 Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 189.
74 Hofstadter, 193 – 94.
75 Howard, Political Tendencies in Louisiana 194.
79 Reynolds, 115.
80 Reynolds, 163.
81 Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana*, 201
85 Howard, 212-14
87 Howard, 214.
88 Howard, 217.
90 Scott, 11.
92 Reynolds, 211.
93 Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 220.
94 Key, *Southern Politics of State and Nation* 158.
95 Brinkley, *Voices or Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Depression* 19.
99 Howard, 228-29.
100 Howard, 228 – 29.
101 Long, *Every Man a King* 2.
102 Long, *Every Man a King* 3; Williams, *Huey Long* 21.
104 Long, *Every Man a King* 2 – 4.
105 Long, 8, 13 – 14.
106 Long, 16 – 17.
108 Long, 37.
110 Williams, *Huey Long*, 120.
112 Long, *Every Man a King* 46; Williams, *Huey Long* 127.
113 Long, 47 – 48.
114 Long, 49, 52; Williams, *Huey Long* 140.
115 Williams, *Huey Long* 145.
116 Long, *Every Man a King* 66; Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* 47.
118 Sindler, 48; Long, 63 – 4.
119 Long, 70.
120 Long, 80, 85; Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* 50.
123 Long, *Every Man a King* 86 – 87, 94.
Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 231.

Howard, 232; Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* 55

Chapter 2 Weighing the Kingfish: Long’s Programs to Improve Infrastructure and Education in the Populist Spirit

This chapter discusses Long’s programs on state infrastructure and education. Louisiana’s lack of roads and modern infrastructure isolated rural populations, suppressing opportunity. Similarly, Louisiana had some of the highest rates of illiteracy and many people relied on work dependent on the state’s natural resources.\(^1\) In his “Evangeline Oak Speech,” during the 1928 campaign when visiting St. Martinville, Louisiana, Long said:

> And it is here under this oak where Evangeline waited for her lover Gabriel, who never came. This oak is an immortal spot, made so by Longfellow’s poem, but Evangeline is not the only one who has waited here in disappointment. Where are the schools that you have waited for your children to have, that have never come? Where are the roads and the highways that you send your money to build, that are no nearer now than ever before? Where are the institutions to care for the sick and disabled? Evangeline wept bitter tears in her disappointment, but it lasted through only one lifetime. Your tears in this country, around this oak, have lasted for generations. Give me the chance to dry the eyes of those who still weep here!\(^2\)

Prior to Long’s election, previous administrations kept levels of taxation low, facing opposition from business interests and wealthy citizens, and generally refused to issue debt to finance public services and initiatives.\(^3\) Long reversed this trend and steadily increased state expenditures through bond issuances and enacted taxes to offset the issues.\(^4\) Over the next eight years, Long and his machine borrowed and spent more public money than the previous three administrations combined; often shifting oversight of funds to state boards and agencies controlled by the Governor.\(^5\)

Allegations of fraud, graft, and manipulation trailed Long and his machine amidst their tenure. Expanded state funds allowed Long to address failures that plagued Louisianans, especially among rural populations and their children.\(^6\) The funds also allowed Long and his machine to politicize public institutions and defraud the state,
which they justified as necessary to sustain their power in the face of relentless and coordinated opposition by political and corporate interests.⁷

These initiatives are of particular interest because they aimed to help the traditionally ignored majority of Louisianans, especially the poorer, more rural population. These programs expanded the scope of government intervention into Louisiana’s economy and evoked key features of the Populists’ economic philosophy and desired role of the state. Long targeted enemies of the Populists through his words in newspapers, speeches and circulars, as well as through state actions that levied taxes on corporations and industry, which in turn helped fund and expand public services.⁸ These programs, which were major components of Long’s campaigns for Governor, met serious resistance from the state’s political and economic establishment. Their enactment became integral to Long’s reputation as a faithful representative of the sovereign will of the people.⁹

In addition to better understanding Long’s connection to populism historically, investigating Long’s use of state power and influence on institutions allows one to analyze him within a contemporary context, drawing on definitions and arguments presented by political scientists Jan Werner-Müeller and William Riker. Müeller’s “Three Populist Techniques for Governing and Their Moral Justification,” which includes: “Colonization of the State, Mass Clientelism, and Suppression of NGOs.”¹⁰ Of these three components, this chapter’s analysis focuses specifically on the first two, although Long’s actions in both contexts impacted civil society and interfered with NGOs such as the press. “Colonization of the State” is defined as “attempts to change existing laws and norms to give an individual or administration control over previously apolitical
institutions, with the goal of creating a state whose functions support the political aspirations of the party in power, as well as suppress public and private attempts to check their power.\footnote{11} “Mass Clientelism,” is defined as “the exchange of material and immaterial favors by elites for mass political support,” a feature in many democracies, particularly Louisiana, prior to Long.\footnote{12} Additionally, Long’s influence on public services, specifically his consolidation over disbursement of funds and hiring decisions, and the moral imperative he attached to the passage and completion of these programs illustrated Riker’s analysis of populist institutions and the populist interpretation of voting, respectively.\footnote{13}

The difference identified by Müeller, and of interest in this investigation, was Long’s use of patronage to benefit a specific constituency or group that could affectionately be deemed “the people,” with the rest of the population denounced as “enemies of the people.” This distinction created a moral justification for discriminatory actions and policies. Müeller’s discussion highlighted the quote, “For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.”\footnote{14} Riker’s discussion of the populist interpretation of voting focused on the idea that the people’s desires, represented through elections, created a moral imperative for government to enact the supposedly preferred policies by any means necessary. A failure to do so constituted a violation of the people’s liberty.\footnote{15} Enacting policies preferred by voters relates to his discussion of populist institutions. Long’s centralization of power and subsequent control over public institutions allowed him to guide state services and agencies so they fulfilled the promises he made to the people. Beyond the targeted use of government funds, the levels of patronage and graft that occurred under the Long/Allen administrations were brazen and cost the state and
taxpayers millions of dollars. Yet, they were justified as the cost of doing business in a state where patronage and business interests had historically exerted a heavy influence on the legislative and regulatory processes.

Street by Street: Long’s Expansion of Modern Roads and Infrastructure

When Long took office, Louisiana had less than three hundred miles of concrete roads and only three major bridges within the highway system. The Parker administration made road construction a priority, erecting a provision in the new state constitution that funded highway construction through a two-cent gasoline tax and an annual license tax on motor vehicles, but prohibited the Legislature from issuing bonds to fund road construction. A special bond issue allowed for two highways near New Orleans, but attempts at any further issues were rejected. The taxes, both of which were increased during Parker’s administration, brought revenues between $2 and $4 million dollars per year from 1922 – 1924, and increased to more than $6 million by 1928. The Parker administration also established the state Highway Commission, comprised of three appointees to oversee spending of highway-fund revenues and report on progress, beginning in 1922. Under Parker, the commission was characterized as a “no-nonsense, highly motivated, and surprisingly apolitical entity.” While the Parker and subsequent Fuqua-Simpson administration made important strides, limited revenues hamstrung further building and maintenance.

Once in office, Long introduced constitutional amendments that allowed bonds to be issued for highway building. Biographer T. Harry Williams characterized Long’s thinking: “He was determined to give the people roads, the roads that they wanted, the roads that would enlist them as grateful followers of Huey Long. He knew that there was
only one way to get the money that would be required—through a bond issue.” This required a constitutional amendment, forcing Long to raise support from two-thirds of both legislative chambers and a popular majority of parishes in Louisiana through a referendum. Long drew upon the Populist doctrine that embraced state action to combat economic insecurity for rural citizens. He expanded the state’s ability to stimulate economic development and address the under-provision of public goods, which in this instance, were the products of modern infrastructure, like reliable roads and bridges. Long’s early push for bond issues came from his desire to deliver on campaign promises and to help the people, both key factors in the populist interpretation of voting and its conception of the will of the people.

To ensure non-partisan oversight of the Highway Commission’s spending, Long agreed to establish an advisory board that included “eleven prominent businessmen,” appointed by the Governor, many of whom allegedly opposed him. By March of 1928, Long abandoned his commitment to independent oversight, preferring supervision by loyal allies rather than potential opponents. Led by O.K. Allen, a newly-elected state senator and childhood friend of Governor Long, the Highway Commission refused to provide details of its spending plans to John Legier, chairman of the financial advisory board. According to Numa F. Montet, attorney for the Highway Commission, the Commission “does not concede the legality of the highway advisory board and will continue to function through the state board of liquidation in all matters relating to the paved road program.” This sentiment was approved and echoed by Governor Long, who said, “This was orally done, however, through me… after conferring with the board.” Long contradicted his promise to voters and legislators when he subverted the
role of the advisory board, and relied instead on the state board of liquidation, which he thoroughly controlled. By diverting oversight and disbursement of funds, Long disregarded the standards and laws he had just recently established, and ensured his actions would not be monitored by anyone he did not control. This is an early example of Long’s “Colonization of the State,” as well as how he shaped institutions to fit the populist interpretation. He switched control of state money from an entity billed as at least apolitical, at the very least, to one loyal to the state’s executive and at his command. Long’s disregard for checks and balances that limited his control over state apparatuses and centralized style of governance was apparent from his early days as Governor.

When faced with impeachment in 1929, the Highway Commission played a prominent role in the allegations against the Governor, and Long’s subsequent response. On March 25th, the legislature introduced nineteen charges against the Governor, eight of which became formal impeachment charges. After Long failed to pass a new occupational licensing tax on oil, legislators introduced allegations of impropriety and fraud committed by the Governor. Testimony from Long’s former bodyguard and state employee Harry “Battling” Bozeman, claimed the Governor directed him to assassinate a member of the legislative opposition, and when he refused, he was offered a Highway Commission position that only asked him to “collect a paycheck.” Impeachers slated Bozeman to testify last, and used his allegations to agitate legislators during the session. Yet, few if any of the leaders of the impeachment proceedings actually believed Bozeman’s story, simply using him to further slander Long.

Once charges were brought, Long enlisted state trucks and employees to distribute circulars in his defense. The Highway Commission distributed “The Cross of Gold;
Standard Oil Company vs. Huey P. Long,” which outlined Long’s legislative successes, and alleged Standard Oil bribed legislators to oppose his measure and impeach him.³⁵ Standard Oil was no defender of democracy; their Louisiana Branch President and a powerful lobbyist reserved an entire floor at the Heidelberg Hotel, located in Baton Rouge, to meet with lawmakers, and allegedly offered up to $20,000 to reject adoption of the tax.³⁶ By contrasting his misuse of state resources with Standard’s shady lobbying tactics, Long distinguished between his improprieties, which he framed as justified, and the behavior of a nefarious corporation motivated by power and greed, at the expense of Louisianans. This was a fair point, as Standard Oil was notoriously influential within the state legislature. The Baton Rouge refinery provided thousands of jobs, and the company capitalized on their importance to evade taxation and avoid responsibility for negative externalities caused by their extraction within the state.³⁷

Long later used Orleans levee-board trucks to distribute circulars against Sen. Edwin Broussard’s re-election campaign in 1932.³⁸ Broussard, an incumbent and fierce opponent of the Governor, was in competition with Long’s preferred candidate, John M. Overton. Long claimed his circulars were the only way to tell people the “real truth,” which was absent from the information produced by former Governor Parker and the Times-Picayune, sources of frequent criticism of Long and his administration.³⁹ Long’s use of the Highway Commission and state employees as his personal advance team amidst, and after, being impeached for improper use of state power demonstrated the lengths he would go to enact his programs and fulfill his promises to the people. These instances also illustrated the tactics Long employed to refute damaging allegations produced by his political-corporate enemies and engender support among his followers.
Under Long, the Highway Commission continued paving roads and improved the state’s infrastructure, thanks to expanded funds from bond issues. After two years, the Highway Commission reported over fifteen hundred miles of new highway were placed under construction, a three-fold increase from the same time in 1928. New building projects were spurred by Long’s $30 million bond issue of 1928, with the cost of new projects in 1930 increasing by almost $15 million. When broken down by road-type, the Commission reported that 853,469 miles of gravel road were laid compared to only 65,729 miles of concrete road. Increased expenditures and construction continued after Long’s $60 million issue in 1930, when the Commission reported a record 1,232,906 miles of concrete road laid in their biennial report. Chairman Allen’s report for 1930–1932 asserted that Louisiana led the nation in road construction for the year 1931, and provided employment for more than 15,000 persons. This increase in performance and employment corresponded with a steep rise in public debt, with bonded debt increasing from $29,415,400 to $110,392,250 in less than two years. Long’s liberal spending methods created funds that led to expanded roads and an improved highway system. This showcased his ability to mobilize state resources and deliver on a key campaign promise in order to fulfil the wishes of his constituents.

As roads were paved and bridges planned; newspapers, – which Long denounced as “enemies of the people,” publicized instances of waste and corruption associated with the Highway Commission and its road program. Contrasting Long’s assertions of concrete roads at the lowest prices, the *Times-Picayune* reported that the commission cancelled orders for paved roads made with gravel, and instead opted to use more expensive and less reliable shells. Another article claimed the Highway Commission, in
conjunction with cement mills, fixed cement prices that benefited the commission and producers, at the expense of local merchants, contractors, and citizens.\textsuperscript{47} Similarly, Long’s Public Service Commissioner and later political adversary, Francis Williams, exposed that the Highway Commission purchased thousands of tons of rock from a Winnfield quarry at an inflated price only after its acquisition by out-of-state buyers. An “advisor” to Long’s New Orleans Real Estate Board suggested the Governor get involved; even though the quarry had been previously owned and operated by Louisianans, and charged almost a third of the price.\textsuperscript{48} Further, the \textit{Times-Picayune}, in conjunction with the New Orleans \textit{Item-Tribune} and New Orleans \textit{States} claimed that Long’s intention in passing expanded bond issues was not a genuine interest in infrastructure, but rather, an attempt to generate revenues that he directed as he pleased.\textsuperscript{49} These assertions contradicted Long’s rhetoric on the Highway Commission and shed light on how state funds fueled his political machine.

Long replied to allegations of fraud with an article titled, \textit{“Who Should Rule, the People, or the Old New Orleans Ring and Their Lying Newspapers?”}, and claimed that his Commission could only be guilty of paving more roads at a lower cost.\textsuperscript{50} Long’s response exemplified the idea that his actions as Governor were a manifestation of what the people wanted; opposition against him was not just a personal afront, but an afront to the citizens of Louisiana who had issued him his mandate. This instance highlighted how Long employed a moral justification to deflect from his administration’s improprieties. In his view, these allegations were publicized and exaggerated to strip him of power and return the state to the status-quo; a betrayal of the will of the voters.
Shunning traditional media, Long promoted progress on his road program and other achievements through circulars, articles, and speeches that conveyed his message independent of the state’s biased newspapers. Rather than rely on writers whose language he could not dictate, Long wrote and distributed circulars himself, establishing the **Louisiana/American Progress**, his personal press organ, to communicate with supporters. This circular ran following Long’s election to the US Senate, and O.K. Allen’s as Governor of Louisiana (See Image 1). Long characterized his political enemies as old, weak, untrustworthy animals. On roads, he claimed the state indebtedness was exaggerated, and his enemies were more concerned with regaining influence than providing for the people. Long writes, “This stranded element of Sanders, Parker, ‘Squirt’ Ewing, ‘Kinky’ Howard and their newspapers, send ‘news’ to the four corners of the world to lie on this state, trying to wreck the credit and standing of Louisiana.” When he claimed the state’s press lies, and specifically damaged the reputation of Louisiana, Long framed himself as the victim, the every-man who dared to work for the people. He cast his critics as politically motivated journalists who had unfairly spurned his administration for diverging from the legislature’s status-quo of government inaction and fiscal restraint. He positioned himself, Allen, and their political allies, as representatives of the “real people;” those who opposed him, were targeted as corrupt, self-aggrandizing enemies of the people and the state. Not only did Long attempt to discredit Louisiana’s four major news outlets, he also spun his expanded spending as a moral imperative, where the only remedies to the administration’s failures were more money and more power. Long facilitated a connection between himself and his followers outside of
established channels, which increased his popular appeal and marginalized traditional institutional gatekeepers.

Although Long, manipulated highway construction and spending for political purposes, his programs unequivocally improved Louisiana’s infrastructure. Once he passed the first road bond issue, Long presented “his” map to the Highway Commission’s engineers. His map was a “patchwork pattern,” with many parishes expected to receive one or two partially paved roads, that in Long’s words “would give them a taste for more,” which meant further bond issues.53 He used the promise of paved roads as a political bargaining chip, and punished political opposition for deviating on other matters by restricting appropriations for maintenance and construction in specific parishes.54 On costs, Long claimed that the state would pay $15,000 per mile of paved road, a reduction from estimated costs provided by state engineers.55 In reality, Long’s Public Service Commissioner asserted the Highway Commission was spending almost $40,000 per mile through the “Long graft method.”56 Even as Long’s opponents lodged accusations of fraud and political malpractice, by the end of his term as Governor, the state had almost two thousand miles of concrete roads paved or under construction, led the nation in road construction, and had completed or begun construction on more than forty bridges across the highway system.57

By 1932, Long’s administration raised and spent upwards of $100 million through the Highway Commission, more than half from public bond issues, but produced tangible results on roads and bridges. Notably, Louisiana received far less federal aid, which required submission to federal financial oversight, than neighboring states like Mississippi and Texas.58 However, by the end of 1935, the Long-Allen administrations
paved over three thousand miles of concrete roads, built a highway system that connected to sixty-one of sixty-four parish seats, and provided employment in some of the darkest days of the depression.59

The Highway Commission and Long’s road program were far from perfect. Long and members of his machine used the body to siphon funds from state contracts that eventually wound up in control of the organization, but at least he built the roads and bridges the state needed, compared to the unconnected state he inherited.60 Long’s politicized disbursement of highway funds coupled with blatant graft, illustrates Müller’s ideas of Colonization of the State and Mass Clientelism, two keys to his understanding of populist governance in action.61 Long’s centralization of command and disbursement of resources ensured that only he and those most loyal to him knew how money was spent. Long saw this not only as justified, but necessary, because better roads were the sovereign will of his voters, making their completion crucial to his mandate to govern. Long’s highway program rightly became a seminal achievement of his time in office, as it showcased his ability to deliver necessary public services that had been long denied by his conservative counterparts. At the same time, it became a vessel for the collection and disbursement of money and patronage that powered his political organization.

The Old College Try: Long’s Education Agenda

Long seized upon issues of educational opportunity and affordability early in his career. This was a personal issue to him: as a young man, he lost the chance to attend LSU on an academic scholarship because he could not afford to purchase books.62 Historically, Louisiana invested little in education. Its illiteracy rate was the highest in the
nation prior to Long’s tenure, holding that unwelcome distinction well into the twentieth century. Long’s education program, like his road construction projects, included major accomplishments that improved the lives of many Louisianans, as well as recurring patterns of corruption, fraud, and political interference. Long used funds from bond issues and leveraged increased capital allocations to exert personal control over spending and hiring decisions, mainly within higher education, to advance his machine and punish adversaries.

Prior to Long’s election, few governors showed interest in expanding educational opportunities, with the exception of John M. Parker. As part of the 1921 Constitutional Convention, the state allocated up to six and a half million dollars of severance tax revenues for L.S.U. until 1924, with additional tax revenues committed in the future. Parker established Louisiana’s first State Board of Education, and the L.S.U. Board of Supervisors, tasked with managing and overseeing the development of higher education within the state. Yet, Parker did not pursue any programs that supported primary or secondary education, and did not allocate any additional revenues towards their improvement. Urban residents in Louisiana completed on average three to four more years of schooling than their rural counterparts, which Parker did nothing to address. Parker, a Progressive reformer from New Orleans, chose to expand L.S.U. and offer the chance at a higher education to rich and poor alike, but ignored barriers to entry that were pervasive among the state’s rural population.

Long argued education was critical in addressing inequalities of wealth throughout Louisiana and the nation as a whole. In 1918, Long argued in an opinion piece for the New Orleans Item that a lack of education was the root cause of “industrial
unrest,” and economic inequality would remain until attitudes towards education changed. In his first term as Governor, Long championed legislation that gave funds for free schoolbooks to all students in the state, and supported courses to teach all illiterate adults how to read and write. His free schoolbook initiative extended to students of private and parochial schools, based on the argument that funding should support students directly, regardless of the institution they attended, and made no attempts to segregate the benefits by race or religion. Long’s legal argument was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1930, and cemented the political loyalty of Catholic Cajuns in southern Louisiana, as many of their children attended private schools run by the church, but still reaped the benefits Long promised. These programs provided opportunities for all students and their families to advance themselves academically, and hopefully, financially.

Soon after Long implemented these programs, he faced opposition on multiple fronts over the free books, which he did not soon forget. In the legislature, a number of senators who hailed from Long-friendly parishes unsuccessfully attempted to restrict free schoolbooks to public school students, a bid to disqualify Catholic children from receiving books. In Caddo and Bossier parishes, local school boards and influential residents took legal action against the State to prevent distribution of books. The final obstacle came from The Ohio Oil Company, which martialed its lawyers and challenged the new severance tax that funded the books. Long personally defended the case brought by the corporation in Louisiana; his victory, secured revenues for the near future. These skirmishes gave Long the opportunity to defend his legislative agenda against established political and economic interests, whose behavior placed them
squarely at odds with the interests of the majority of citizens in the state. Rather than seek compromise with oil interests, like former Governor Parker, Long stood by his supporters and his programs, delivering on a key campaign promise his first year in office.

Once victorious, Long featured the schoolbook and literacy initiatives in his political communications as evidence of his commitment to voters, arguing that he deserved more power as the opposition continued to undermine his efforts. One circular from 1930 titled, “THEY CONDEMN LONG BECAUSE,” highlighted the schoolbook initiative as a program that motivated corporate interests, specifically Standard Oil, and rival legislators, to agitate against him and his supporters.75 Under the header “SCHOOL CHILDREN,” he claimed that the “SAME GANG” that tried to take books from children “ARE TRYING TO RUIN HUEY P. LONG TODAY.”76 These claims were not unfounded, as an impeachment attempt against Long followed his proposal of an occupational licensing tax on oil. This tax was intended to guarantee funds for the free schoolbooks, since legal challenges had delayed the full realization of the revenues.77

With regard to his literacy program, the Louisiana Progress displayed a cartoon (See Image 2), that depicted Long as a knight on a horse, slaying the dragon of illiteracy, “The Governor’s Greatest Victory.”78 Another circular, titled “Because He Has Kept the Faith” and Because Ransdell Has Not,” showcased Long’s achievements on education and illiteracy beside a letter of from the President of the American Federation of Labor that supported Long’s efforts and called for his election to the U.S. Senate.79 In each communication, Long framed himself as a defender of the common man, locked in combat against nefarious special interests. Long embodied the voice of the people, and he portrayed himself as the only man up to the task, a justification for centralized power
when allegations of impropriety arose. Twice he characterized his “foe” as reptilian: first, Standard Oil as a rattlesnake; and second, illiteracy as a dragon. He positioned himself in opposition to these sub-human, cold-blooded monsters, that were dangerous threat to the citizens of Louisiana. By depicting his opponents as lethal reptiles, Long emphasized that those in the opposition were not part of the people, especially not his people. The circulars and cartoons related to Long’s early educational success cast him as a warrior for the people, whose devotion was not to be repaid with money, but with more power.

Long’s successful work on schoolbooks and illiteracy was notable, and educational opportunities improved broadly. In a circular titled “Take the Money – Vote as You Please,” Long highlighted his conviction to “fight” for “schools and schoolchildren” and his desire to “give students free books or see them educated.” His expansion of textbooks and the campaign to end illiteracy increased school enrollments by more than twenty-five percent, and over one hundred thousand illiterate citizens were taught to “read, write, and cipher.” In comparison with his immediate predecessor, the Simpson administration allocated 14.7 percent of state expenses towards public education, compared to 9.7 percent under Long, and 12.2 under Allen, as state expenditures grew expeditiously Long still spent proportionally more. Louisiana’s illiteracy rate improved from last in the nation to second-to-last when it overtook South Carolina, but it remained a legitimate issue, as thousands were still illiterate. Overall, Long’s record on primary education showed his willingness to follow through on a key campaign plank that helped launch his political career.

However, the gains were not equally distributed, as the state further consolidated its control over local institutions, giving Long and his machine greater power and
Influence. Inequalities in expenditures for the education of white children versus black children widened over the Long-Allen tenures, greater than the discrepancy in 1916. Poorer rural white districts were allotted increased funds through an “Equalization Fund” meant to bridge gaps between them and whites in more urban areas. This fund led to an elongated school year and a greater minimum pay scale for teachers. However, in 1933, public schools were forced to end the school year early because checks for teachers were “worthless.” When questioned why the General Fund that supported education through taxes and fees did not step in to help, Long replied, “that is for the people to find out.”

In previous administrations, many of the decisions that surrounded funding and hiring were controlled by local parish boards. However, by 1934, the Long-Allen administration centralized control and superseded these bodies, dictating not just the allocation of funds, but the employment status of anyone employed within public education in the state.

Even though instances of politization and impropriety arose, Long’s educational programs improved opportunities for many Louisianans and their children.

Turning to higher education, Long expanded the size and prestige of LSU, which included adding a medical school in New Orleans, with the expressed goal of educating more Louisianans. Long claimed his interest in L.S.U. and higher education came from a necessity to keep up with the demand for an educated and skilled population. Accordingly, the number of undergraduates increased, especially those interested in medicine. In 1930, he told L.S.U. administrators to draw up plans for new buildings in Baton Rouge and New Orleans as soon as possible. When asked about funding, Long replied “That is part of my job.” Similar to the paved roads program, Long used public education programs to strengthen his control over spending and state bodies, offering
further opportunities for graft and influence over public institutions. These efforts included the use of patronage to advance his political goals and enrich those who were loyal, as well as punishing those who opposed his “popular vision” for Louisiana.

Long mobilized funds for higher education projects through his ability to allocate and oversee bonded debt, drawing funds originally ear-marked for the Highway Commission, and then for the construction of a new state capitol. In 1930, he made $1.8 million in unspent road bonds available to begin work on buildings in Baton Rouge and the Charity Hospital in New Orleans, as well as $350,000 through the sale of land intended for the building of his new capitol building. These financial maneuvers were highly irregular to some, but a non-issue in the eyes of the Governor. In addition to these early funds, Long increased expenditures to the University to cover rising construction costs as well as administrative expenses, rising from around $1 million in 1931, to $2.87 million in 1935. Long built new dormitories, expanded the marching band, and paid particular attention to the football team. Long’s control over state funds and domination of personnel gave him near-total control over the planning and function of the University.

The state spent massively on LSU, and on education in general. Yet, characteristic of the Long machine, spending far outpaced revenues brought in through taxation and other means. Some derided these moves as fiscally irresponsible, as it appeared the state overpaid on projects and worked closely with contractors and businesses that were connected to Long and his machine. For example, when Long purchased land from L.S.U. for the Highway Commission offices, the state paid more than three-times the value of the land and plant, with money designated for paving roads. On education, the
state spent over $4 million on L.S.U. in fiscal year 1932, but less than $3 million on public schools and other universities in the state combined. At L.S.U., President James Monroe Smith, whose success Long attributed to the fact that “there ain’t a straight bone in Jim’s body,” oversaw construction of a new field house, music building, and dormitory totaling almost $2 million. Even though the dormitory was deemed “inadequate,” the project generated over $200,000 in fees for Long’s “pet architectural firm.” A month later, Governor Allen and now Senator Long, lobbied the federal government for over $150 million in loans, more than triple the proportional funding in terms of the state’s population, to pay for various public works projects. The most prominent endeavor was the expansion to Charity Hospital, which now housed LSU and Tulane medical students. Some of these projects were likely tainted by graft and political motivations, but this was the cost of doing business in the Pelican State. Even as some claimed Long’s spending was politically motivated, deficit spending and investments in public works became key policy tools used in the nation’s battle against the Great Depression. Long’s early adoption of these programs likely helped stabilize the state’s economy and prevent further despair.

At LSU, Long’s influence loomed large. True to form, he enriched supporters and ostracized opponents. When a letter of protest against him appeared in the campus newspaper, twenty-six journalism students were suspended, five of whom were expelled, including the current and former editors of the newspaper. Not only were students fired from their jobs and threatened with the loss of their education, but Long appointed a “censor” that ensured future issues of the paper were more appreciative of the Kingfish. Students claimed that President Smith said “he would fire the whole faculty and student
Further, Long siphoned University and public education funds to provide scholarships and other forms of aid to hundreds of students in exchange for the political allegiances of themselves and their families. Reports showed that by the end of President Smith’s tenure, more than half of L.S.U.’s students were on some kind of state-sponsored payroll. Long’s domineering behavior interfered with the expressed goals of the state’s university, and in some circumstances, prevented students from reaping the benefits he often promoted and championed as a representative of the “people.”

In terms of Charity Hospital and Long’s plans for a state medical school, his interest led to the use of educational positions and decisions as a means to disburse patronage and raise his own profile, sometimes to the detriment of students, faculty, and patients in “his” new medical school. In 1932, soon-after Long took his place in the Senate, multiple doctors resigned from L.S.U.’s department of surgery, when the head of the department, Dr. Emmett Irwin, was replaced by Dr. Urban Maes. Long justified the move because he believed the change would boost the school’s “rating.” Dr. Martin O. Miller, one of the doctors who resigned, laid the blame squarely on Long, saying his actions were “political maneuvers” and not motivated to advance the study of medicine, which could impact the institution’s accreditation. Dr. Irwin asserted the same, and made it clear that Long was the force behind his position change, as neither L.S.U.’s President nor the head of the medical school had any influence over the decision. In an exchange between Long and Dr. Irwin, the Senator told Irwin that if he remained loyal “I’ll make you the biggest man in the United States,” which included a reduced position
at the medical school, and the newly created “chief surgeon of the dock board,” a body the Senator’s machine controlled.  

Another example of Long’s disregard for established laws and norms and its impact on higher education arose when he returned from Washington to deal with loans for the hospital’s construction. He “hijacked” a committee hearing over appropriations for construction on Charity Hospital, took the bill away from the committee, and convened his own meeting away from members of the hospital’s board and legislators alike. Long planned to cover the costs of interest on loans by raising the occupational licensing tax on corporations. When told that was illegal and unacceptable based on the terms of the loans, he responded, “I don’t want to hear any of them damn rulings, they can change them. I know what the law ought to be.” These two episodes, first with Dr. Irwin, and then with appropriations for Charity Hospital, both illustrate the power Long amassed over legislators, administrators, and state employees. He did not tolerate opposition, crushing it by ignoring or changing laws he disliked, or, flouting established law and procedures.

Long’s legacy on public education, like roads, produced some tangible, beneficial results; but time and again, the Governor-Senator disregarded rules that checked his authority and avoided accountability every way he could. His speeches and rhetoric on the issue of education centered on providing for those left behind, an appeal to the constituencies and sensibilities that once allowed the People’s Party to be a brief but legitimate political force in the state. Similarly, his combination of bond issues, increased taxation on corporations, and expanded state spending represented a shift in the use of the state to promote the advancement of all citizens. Yet, many of Long’s accomplishments
were marred by allegations of fraud, mismanagement, and a disregard for the non-partisan nature of public institutions. He promoted individuals who showed total fealty, or were at least malleable, and maligned opposition whenever it arose. This form of governance put Long’s own fortunes above those of the people he championed. Though his programs served the general public in revolutionary ways, he simultaneously manipulated funds and defrauded the public in the pursuit of political capital and centralized control.

**Murkier Than a Swamp: The Legacy of Long’s Work on Roads and Education**

In investigating these programs and Long’s use of executive authority, I believe there was an inherent contradiction between Long’s expressed policy goals, the strategies he used to achieve said goals, and the function of a liberal democracy that safeguards and promotes the rights of its citizens. This contradiction manifested in the divergence between the ideas espoused by Populists in the nineteenth century, and Long’s own neo-Populist platform, whose style of governance and treatment of the opposition was not always democratic or “popular.” However, I think the role of prior administrations and their corporate allies’ behavior, specifically, their failure to provide adequate public services and their constant opposition to Long, created issues of credible commitment and incentivized behavior that was undemocratic and authoritative. In short, those unsavory actions may have been the only way to deliver upon the promises mandated through Long’s election.

In my analysis of these programs, it should be clear that Long’s opponents were not champions of fairness or government accountability. Both in Louisiana, and across the United States, industrialization’s re-ordering of labor and the means of production
that began in the early twentieth century combined with domestic and international migration into urban centers, leading to the emergence of machine politics in cities. Further, opposition to these developments came in the form of good-government “reformers,” who touted the moralizing aspects of politics and democracy, and a minimal role for state interference in the market. Additionally, Louisiana has a long and complex history with respect to corruption and inaction by the state, and high centralization of power within the executive branch. However, Long’s spending on public programs rose to levels that were inconceivable in the state prior to his tenure. These funds stimulated investments in infrastructure that were sorely needed, as well as improved opportunities and facilities for educational advancement for many Louisianans. It is also true that Long used state funds to promote himself and his machine politically, penalized individuals and constituencies identified as disloyal, and rejected offers for federal funds when he could not dictate their disbursement.

On the surface, Long’s policy goals had much in common with the role of government espoused by members of the People’s Party. He advocated for policies that mobilized the state to reign in corporate interests that were deemed too powerful and held too much influence with incumbent politicians and the market. He acted through the introduction of taxes and levies on businesses and consumption within the state, portrayed as mechanisms that would make sure everyone paid their fair share. Through bond issues and expanded tax revenues, Long put government expenditures towards the construction of roads, bridges, and new buildings for L.S.U. in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Long’s focus on providing for the masses and emphasizing the marginalization they endured under previous administrations evoked historian John Hick’s
characterization of the Populist movement, which he saw as a two-fold attempt to hold corporate interests and wealthy citizens in check, and erect a government run by the “other” elements of society, separate from traditional political and economic elites. Long’s programs brought much needed attention and investment in public services to Louisiana, and gave citizens opportunities that had been scarce, even non-existent, before his tenure.

Rhetorically, Long targeted the close relationships between politicians and business, specifically Standard Oil and bankers like J.P. Morgan, as well as established newspapers and the public press, drawing attention to the corruption and cronyism firms and legislators engaged in prior to his tenure. For the Populists, government’s close relationship with bankers like J.P. Morgan and others on Wall Street amounted to a conspiracy to enrich and empower a select minority, and neither the Democratic nor Republican establishment offered much parity. Populist speeches and publications, usually distributed by independent newspapers and circulars, challenged the connection between traditional media outlets and corporate interests, whom they claimed worked in conjunction to guarantee a narrow view of economic and political issues. Long made similar claims, told constituents to read his Louisiana/American Progress for the “facts,” and on more than a few occasions asserted that the state’s newspapers were liars beholden to plutocrats and “moneyed interests” like Standard Oil. Long’s claims were not unfounded; he and his administration rarely received positive coverage in the state’s leading papers, who published unflattering stories and cartoons, often aimed at his increased spending and public programs. Long’s efforts may not have been perfect, but they often represented a legitimate attempt to help his constituents.
Richard Hofstadter highlighted how nineteenth-century Populists simplified economic issues and made them personal. They divided society into groups of “robbers” and “robbed,” and stoked tribalism and resentment among traditionally marginalized populations.¹¹ Long benefited from and employed this tactic, which newspapers and the media amplified with multitudes of negative reactions and articles about the administration’s actions. Long was no saint, and he was not above political mudslinging. Neither were his opponents, who, unlike Long, offered nothing to the people but more reports of his failures and improprieties.

In the context of the strategies and policies pursued by the nineteenth century Populists, Long’s administration, both in legislation and rhetoric, represented a brand of neo-Populism adapted to the issues that faced rural populations and laborers as industrialization accelerated and the nation faced another debilitating financial crisis. Through the state’s expanded role in promoting services and employment, Long created jobs for skilled and un-skilled labor alike. His administration also invested in programs like higher education and free schoolbooks, which allowed under-educated rural populations to have an opportunity for advancement. When Long spoke and wrote about his legislative program, he offered little room for nuance or compromise, emphasizing the righteousness of his position. Voters and legislators were either supporters or enemies; there was no in-between, and he made the price for being on the “wrong” side well-known. He craved control, even more so once it became apparent that compromise with the opposition was never an option, resulting in further centralization and expansion of state power over citizens and civil society. This embrace of ideological and political
purity illustrated the moral justification inherent within the traditional Populist doctrine that Long continued.

With regard to Long’s use of state power in the context of Müller’s definition of populist governance and Riker’s characterization of populist institutions, Long’s claims of success and service overlapped with instances of corruption, fraud, and malpractice within state programs and institutions. As stated earlier, these programs were critical to Long’s “colonization of the state,” by establishing a system of “mass clientelism,” as well as “suppressing NGOs.” Additionally, Long’s direction of these efforts relied on his centralization of authority and simplification of command over public administration. This consolidation of power provided flexibility and mobilized public services, but also contributed to instances of corruption and an increasingly autocratic government structure.

On the colonization of the state, Long’s prevention of oversight of funds spent by the Highway Commission, his elevation of James K. Smith to the Presidency of L.S.U., appointments within Charity Hospital, as well as his attacks on the state’s press all contributed to his goal to capture state government and fuel his political machine. On infrastructure spending and the Highway Commission, Long relied on the loyalty of political appointees to suppress investigations into fraud, corruption and mismanagement, which allowed his opponents to deride his work and lodge accusations of fraud and political interference. This would not have been possible without the unflinching loyalty of O.K. Allen, a trend that continued once Long took his seat in the U.S. Senate. The power Long exercised over state boards and bodies illustrated Riker’s definition of
populist institutions, which Long shaped to fit his style of governance and address the
issues he raised on the stump.

At LSU, Dr. Smith was notoriously subservient to the Governor-Senator and
allowed the Kingfish to use the university as a generator of political support, public
enthusiasm, and a testament to his control over public institutions. Improved
opportunities for students became a secondary concern, as Long spent his energy and
resources on projects like erecting the nation’s largest collegiate swimming pool and
engendering political support from the student body. At the medical school, he was more
focused on receiving a good rating rather than employing the best faculty and
surgeons.\textsuperscript{118}

As for the state’s newspapers, they featured heavily in Long’s circulars and
speeches, always characterized as lying, beholden to corporate interests, and enemies of
the people. On this point, his attacks on papers had some legitimacy, and Long’s erection
of parallel institutions offered him a way to air his grievances and connect directly with
constituents, reminiscent of the People’s Party of the past. Eventually, his disdain went
beyond rhetoric, as he directed the legislature to enact taxation on gross receipts of
advertising for the state’s largest papers, which aimed to harm those that were critical of
him and his machine.\textsuperscript{119} In these instances, as well as others discussed previously, Long
weaponized executive power and authority to bend enterprise and institutions within the
state to his will.

Long could not have kept his hold on political allies and voters without the use of
patronage. While this trend predated his administration, Long’s system benefitted from
expanded state expenditures and increased control over state boards and agencies,
important considerations as it relates to the idea of Mass Clientelism. The Highway Commission under Long/Allen produced numerous instances of fraud, mismanagement of funds, and side-dealings that were publicized throughout the state. Long was far from the first Louisiana politician to use his authority to secure political support. In fact, V.O. Key characterized his tactics “as native to Louisiana as pine trees and petroleum.”

Long’s system of patronage and the allegations of abuse became such an issue because the amount of state money that he controlled far exceeded that of previous administrations. This made political affiliation and loyalty to the machine a key determinant of whether public services would be provided to an individual, a city, or even a parish.

In Long’s defense, he faced a large and organized opposition to his legislative program, especially in his first years as Governor. Influential politicians, former Governors, and the state’s main newspapers were all arrayed against him. In addition to members of the legislature, he faced challenges lodged by parish boards and corporations to prevent him from fulfilling campaign promises, most notably free schoolbooks for the state’s children. Long’s disbursement of patronage engendered political and electoral support from citizens across the state, a time-honored tradition in Louisiana politics. However, with expanded revenues directed to the majority of citizens rather than a privileged minority, Long aroused a fierce opposition.

Long joined the corporate and political opposition to his programs into one entity, which allowed him to simplify the state’s political arena into pro and anti-Long forces, divide the population along political lines, and reinforce the designations with state resources and programs. Long did not create this union. He simply called greater
attention to its existence, which, he argued, plotted to undermine his progress on inequality and the expansion of state services. Many of the enemies he identified were similar to those of the Populists, but his use of government to punish his opponents and interfere in their lives, especially in economic and political matters, was antithetical to the message of a state that promoted equal opportunity and support as articulated by the People’s Party.

However, the use of the state to limit opportunity and enrich a select few did not start with Long. Since Radical Reconstruction, Bourbon Redeemers and their counterparts in New Orleans used their economic position and political influence to keep many Lousianans poor, illiterate, and on the margins of society. Long’s expansion and improvement of public services represented an amalgamation of the ideas expressed by the original People’s Party within the realities of Louisiana’s political and economic environment. Müller’s and Riker’s analyses of populist governance and populist institutions respectively, help to frame and understand Long’s motivations, appeals, and actions as the leader of a neo-Populist movement and his impact on public institutions.

Even with expanded funds and fealty among bureaucrats and boards, Long still had to win elections. Populists and Long shared the goal of expanding the right to vote and making government more democratic and more accountable to the will of the people. As with his interest in infrastructure and education, Long’s actions on voting and the legislative process left a complex legacy that blended expanded franchise with instances of voter suppression and fraud. Furthermore, Long embraced the use of special legislative sessions that simplified and strengthened his control over the laws of the state. In my next chapter, I will touch on the history of voting rights and the franchise in Louisiana prior to
Long, discuss his expansion of franchise, the various methods used to influence elections in his favor, and the use of special sessions to limit the opposition’s influence on legislation and further centralize power.
ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

WASHINGTON, D.C.
REPORT OF FEDERAL COUNCIL

IN CAMPAIGN TO REDUCE ILLITERACY
IN FOUR SOUTHERN STATES: LOUISIANA
LEADS—NUMBER OF EACH STATE
TAUGHT TO READ AND WRITE

GEORGIA 46,874
ALABAMA 40,726
S. CAROLINA 48,365
LOUISIANA 105,331

The Louisiana Progress
The People's Defense
PUBLISHED EVERY THURSDAY

The Governor's Greatest Victory

The road opened out two ways before us—
out swinging coats!
6 Long, Every Man a King, 108 – 110.
11 Müeller, What is Populism? 45.
13 Müeller, What is Populism? 46.
14 Riker, 14.
15 Sindler, Huey Long’s Louisiana 103.
16 Sindler, 43.
19 Scott, 19.
20 Scott, 16.
21 Scott, 32.
23 Long, Every Man a King 108.
24 Williams, Huey Long 306.
27 “Highway Board Seeks Showdown Over Its Power”
28 “Highway Board Seeks Showdown Over Its Power”
29 Brinkley, Voices of Protest 24.
30 Williams, Huey Long 380.
34 Williams, Huey Long 366.
36 Williams, Huey Long 353-4.
37 Williams, 100 – 01, 141 – 44.


44 Sixth Biennial Report, (Chairman’s Comments on General Features), 9.


52 “Answering Ten Months of Lies.”

53 Williams, *Huey Long* 332.


59 Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* 103; Williams, *Huey Long* 546-7;

60 Williams, *Huey Long* 756-7; Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm* 241-2; Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* 103.

61 Mielr, *What is Populism*? 41.


64 Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* 43.


66 Key, *Southern Politics of State and Nation* 160.


68 Long, 107 – 08.

69 Long, 107 – 08.


71 Sindler, 59; Williams, 307 – 08.


113 Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 352 – 54.

114 Goodwyn, 354 – 57.


117 Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* 64.


120 Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* 157.


123 Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* 537; Howard, *Political Tendencies of Louisiana* 209; Brinkley, *Voices of Protest* 15 – 16.
Chapter 3 Weighing the Kingfish: Long’s Influence on Elections and the State Legislature and Centralization of State Power

This chapter discusses Long’s impact on elections and the legislative process within Louisiana and his centralization of power. The issues of the franchise and the responsiveness of legislators to the needs of their constituents were key for the People’s Party, especially in Louisiana. The Bourbon-Ring elements that controlled the state after Reconstruction and throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used their power to disenfranchise voters and create an oligarchical society. The state legislature was similarly manipulated to ensure power was concentrated and retained by an elite minority.¹ After the elections of 1896, states across the South, including Louisiana, enacted laws and constitutional amendments that disenfranchised black voters, as well as discouraged the participation of poor white voters.² As a result of these measures, marginalized Louisianan’s who had previously joined the People’s Party now withdrew from politics and expressed apathy towards elections in Louisiana.³ Public institutions were not just ill-equipped to address the needs of Louisianans; they became tools that reinforced inequality and stripped weaker segments of the population of opportunities to advance and to contribute to society.

Long’s ascension energized voters, especially within communities that had supported the People’s Party, who were drawn to his message. Before his election, Long mounted a statewide campaign that directly engaged with citizens, driving from town to town to meet with local constituents.⁴ Once in office, he expanded government to address inequalities and inefficiencies that plagued public institutions. He also expanded the voter rolls through his removal of the poll tax, which the Bourbon’s had used to restrict and
influence voting among the state’s poorer population. Long’s efforts echoed the Populist pursuit of popular rule and greater democratic participation, an idea historian John Hicks captured with the phrase “people not plutocrats, must control the government.” The Populists saw expanded suffrage as just one way to enhance people’s influence in government. They also supported initiatives such as the direct election of U.S. Senators, referendums on legislation, easier paths to edit state constitutions, direct election for the President and Vice President, limits on corporate influence in politics, and mobilization of the state to restrict monopolies among others.

In order to advance his neo-Populist agenda, Long played an instrumental role in all facets of the legislature. While Governor, Long helped direct and craft legislation, and used his bully-pulpit and control of patronage to ensure his programs were adopted. Long’s activity in the legislature and centralization of governance is well documented, even when he technically had no sanctioned role in the legislative process. After Long took his seat in the U.S. Senate he would return to the state for special sessions of the legislature and directed the body as a quasi-dictator with no position in the state government. He was quoted saying “a perfect democracy can come close to looking like a dictatorship,” and “a man is not a dictator when he does the will of the people.” Long claimed to serve at the pleasure of the people, and in his public communications and programs, he did just that.

As in my discussion of Long’s infrastructure and public education programs, his initiatives in elections and the legislative process were similarly tainted by instances and allegations of fraud, illegality, and politicization of state jobs and services. Many of these allegations were reminiscent of and often less severe than the documented instances of
intimidation and fraud committed by Bourbon administrations, especially as they pertained to elections. Indeed, Long’s use of patronage and boss politics in the city of New Orleans, and eventually the rest of the state likely evolved out of necessity, as this practice had dominated the state’s political environment. Fraud, corruption, and vote-buying were all commonly deployed by the state’s establishment. Even though establishment politicians claimed to be conservative defenders of democracy and liberty, their actions repeatedly undermined critical features of a liberal democracy and allowed for Long and his allies to use similar tactics, as well as hone their own.

An investigation of Long’s behavior with regard to elections and his treatment of the legislature allows one to further evaluate his place as a populist, both in the traditional American context, as well as a more contemporary view provided by political scientist Jan Werner-Müller and others. Further, this chapter discusses how Long used his power to influence and control democratic institutions within Louisiana, as well as how his tactics were shaped by existing practices and historical trends. When evaluating Long’s actions on voting and democracy, it is important to consider Müeller’s definition of illiberal democracies as “regimes that hold elections but do not observe the rule of law and violate checks and balances in particular.” This relates to the words of Cas Muddle, whom Müeller referenced, in his statement that Populism is “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” Müeller’s definition echoes the political environment under the Bourbons and Long, both of whom submitted to elections but took various steps to entrench their power and disenfranchise the opposition. Muddle’s quote points to the negative influence Bourbon-Ring tactics had on the state’s democratic institutions, and how Long exploited their failures to empower his administration.
Similarly, political scientist William Riker’s discussion of the populist interpretation of voting and description of populist institutions in comparison to the liberal interpretation and institutions provides a lens to understand Long’s attitude towards elections and the function of the legislature within the state. Riker argues that the populist interpretation of voting is incompatible with liberal democracy because the claim that the sovereign will represents the preferences of all voters is not credible and can be used to limit potential alternatives. In Long’s case, this is illustrated when he uses elections as a referendum on his administration, and his victories mandate a continuation of his programs. Further, populist institutions require an eradication of constitutional checks on power that prevent the leader from expressing the popular will, but these same checks are integral to liberal institutions. Long’s dictatorial control over special sessions of the legislature once he had entered the U.S. Senate provided a clear example of a populist institution that is incompatible with the tenants of liberal democracy. The administrations led by Bourbon-Ring coalitions prior to Long unquestionably engaged in undemocratic behavior and used the guise of democracy to deprive Louisianans of rights and opportunity. Considering these obstacles and the tactics used by Long, historian Henry Dethloff argued Long’s subversion of democracy disqualifies him as a continuance of American Populists, who stood for expanded suffrage, popular democracy, and rule by the people, not by a domineering executive, also raises important questions about how populism has evolved and manifested since the People’s Party.11

This chapter will begin each section with a brief discussion of voting and legislative practices in the eras that preceded Long to provide context and remind readers of the issues discussed in the first chapter. Next, Long’s tactics as they pertained to
elections, both before, during, and after he is a Governor and U.S. Senator, will be
examined. Further, the chapter will discuss the role he played in the legislature, both
before and after he entered the U.S. Senate, as he still possessed an outsize influence in
the Louisiana legislature.

The Levers of Democracy: Elections with Long and his Machine

As discussed in the first chapter, many voters in Louisiana were disenfranchised
or had their votes manipulated by Bourbon Democrats and their allies. Political scientist
William Riker, author of *Liberalism Against Populism*, argued that voting was a central
act of a democracy, and required guarantees of participation, liberty, and equality for all
citizens.\(^1\) The lengths Bourbon politicians went to restrict participation by blacks and
poor whites violated all three of those guarantees, and established a system that cannot be
described as a liberal democracy, and instead represented an oligarchy.

The Louisiana Democratic party held a dominant position in the state’s politics
since the end of Radical Reconstruction.\(^2\) Its control was ensured through its supporters’
loyalty to the party of the Lost Cause, combined with a program of voter intimidation,
ballon stuffing by state and local officials, and legislative disenfranchisement.\(^3\) In the
1894 Congressional elections, People’s Party candidates were defeated in races where
fraud was not only rampant, but blatant. One Democratic official stated that the number
of votes cast at a certain precinct were “just as many… as we need.”\(^4\) This theme
continued in the 1896 elections, where Democratic officials used their control of election
machinery to manipulate ballot totals in their favor, giving their candidate, Murphy J.
Foster, the victory.\(^5\)
Beyond ballot manipulation, Democrats physically discouraged Populists and blacks from voting with violence. For example, a Populist candidate in East Baton Rouge Parish was shot. A black woman in St. Landry Parish was whipped with barbed wire to discourage Populist-Republican fusion activities.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to these tactics to achieve electoral victories, the Democrats engaged in systematic efforts to legally disenfranchise poor whites and blacks on a level unmatched by other southern states.\textsuperscript{18} Democrats added restrictions to suffrage such as the poll tax and other onerous requirements. These requirements raised the cost of voting for supporters of the Populist-Republican fusion to such a level that it appears to have outweighed the benefits of participation. Between 1897 and 1900, voter registration among whites fell by 38,551, and by 125,124 for blacks. The impact was dramatic. For example, the gubernatorial election of 1900 saw only 76,870 votes cast, compared to 206,324 in 1896, a decrease of 168\%.\textsuperscript{19} To add insult to injury, in 1906, the state Democratic Party made race a factor in membership, and barred anyone from registering as a Democrat unless they personally registered and met the requirements codified in the state constitution. This practice that continued until the 1940s, and was a factor that entrenched one-party rule, which was steeped in White Supremacy and disdain for thousands of Louisianans.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition to the repressive tactics of the Bourbons in the late nineteenth century, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the rise of the Choctaw Club or Ring political machine that operated in and around New Orleans. The Ring operated through a series of local precinct leaders who canvassed their neighborhoods to ensure fellow citizens had paid their poll taxes and would vote for the “proper” candidate.\textsuperscript{21} Martin Behrman, leader
of the ring, saw patronage and vote-buying as far more effective than the use of public services to gain electoral support. In his view, the services were not guaranteed to fix the failure these policies aimed to address, and interfered in the efficient collaboration between business and government.\textsuperscript{22} The Rings techniques were so effective that even John M. Parker, the Progressive Reformer, had to establish his own machine-patronage system to defeat the Ring and capture the Governor’s mansion.\textsuperscript{23}

The combination of Bourbon repression, legal and otherwise, as well as Ring patronage and control of the city of New Orleans presented a bleak picture for democratic governance and accountability for elected officials. This is the environment that Long entered, the one he claimed would now benefit those who had been ignored and derided for generations.

\textbf{Swimming Up-Stream Before Going with the Flow: Long’s Elections}

The 1924 gubernatorial election was Long’s first run in a statewide election. The race demonstrated Long’s ability to appeal to apathetic rural populations to return to the political process and to vote. Historian Perry Howard showed that Long’s first run for Governor garnered him pluralities in all fifteen parishes that encompassed the North and Central Pine Hills, previously Populist strongholds, as well as five of eight eastern Florida Parishes, which illustrated the class-based appeal of his platform.\textsuperscript{24} Differences in religion and culture previously kept Northern and Southern parishes divided in elections, but Long’s neo-Populist message broke through traditional barriers to collaboration. Further, Long’s impact on overall voter turnout was substantial. The election saw almost 100,000 more votes cast than in the election of 1920. Additionally, the 1924 race resulted in voting by the highest percentage of registered voters since 1912.\textsuperscript{25}
Unfortunately, for Long, the 1924 election also demonstrated the continued power of the Ring. Even with a strong showing, Long could not break the Ring’s stranglehold on New Orleans. Rather, Henry Fuqua, the Ring-backed candidate, prevailed. The machine had once again delivered the votes it needed to maintain its standard 10,000 vote margin of victory in the city.\textsuperscript{26} The issue of the Ku Klux Klan loomed large, which segregated votes along ethnic and religious lines. This became an advantage for the anti-Klan, Southern Cajun Bouanchand. The Klan issue was a disadvantage for Long, but numerous sources concur that Long’s dismal showing in New Orleans was what primarily prevented him from victory.

In 1928, Long learned from his previous failure and emerged from the Democratic primary on top. His victory was accomplished both through driving increased voter turnout and improving political connections and organization in New Orleans and other key areas. After supporting of Edwin S. Broussard in his re-election to the U.S. Senate in 1926, Long established connections in the Southern region of the state.\textsuperscript{27} Overall turnout increased by 49,386 votes, and in the thirty-eight parishes where Long won majorities, voter turnout was on average 106\% higher than in 1920.\textsuperscript{28} These parishes, located in both the Southern and Northern regions of the state, had high levels of independent farm ownership where the Populist message had resonated with family farmers, as opposed to communities dominated by large plantations, where levels of individual ownership were low.\textsuperscript{29} Long’s messaging was essentially the same in 1928 as it was in 1924; if elected, he promised to provide the people paved roads, free bridges, free schoolbooks, more public services, and cheap natural gas rates for the city of New Orleans through bond issues offset by taxes on corporations and wealthy elites.
Beyond increased rural support, Long improved his political operation and gained important supporters. In 1928, Long gained support from new financial backers like Robert S. Maestri, a New Orleans real-estate mogul who helped defray campaign costs. Also, Long gained the support of Colonel Robert Ewing, publisher of the New Orleans States and Shreveport Times, a luxury he did not have in the 1924 election. Increased participation among voters across the state sent a powerful message to many local officials, which T. Harry Williams highlighted as the crucial factor in Long’s ability to gain support from local sheriffs, judges, and civil servants. Even though Long won less than 20,000 votes in Orleans parish, his popularity in the rest of the state overcame his deficit in the city. The Ring candidate, Riley J. Simpson enjoyed the customary 10,000 vote margin over the second-place finisher, O.H. Simpson. Long expanded his vote totals across the rest of the state by more than 40,000 votes, evidence that increased turnout propelled him in the primary, and made him Governor.

Long’s first election after becoming Governor pitted him against incumbent Joseph E. Ransdell for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1930. Long claimed he ran to give the people an opportunity to voice their opinion on his achievements, and whether his programs should continue, or if the state should return to the old guard. He used this election as a referendum on the policies he enacted while Governor, and if victorious, would ensure that his programs would be continued and expanded. This justification represents Riker’s populist interpretation of voting, with Long using this election to derive a mandate through the sovereign will of the people, expressed in their electoral support of his program. The race was an ugly one, marred by personal attacks and Long’s use of state power to aid/secure his victory.
During the campaign, Ransdell attacked Long’s loyalty to white voters and his character. On racial issues, Ransdell claimed that Long was the preferred candidate among “negroes.” On character, in the days before the election, Ransdell attempted to smear Long by arranging Sam Irby and James Terrell, a former Highway Commission engineer, and the estranged husband of Alice Lee Grosjean, Long’s secretary and purported mistress, respectively, to file a lawsuit against the Governor. They planned to file the suit in Shreveport, accusing the Governor of slander and “breaking up the home” of Terrell and Grosjean in an attempt to embarrass Long and damage him with little time to recover before the election.

Long’s ferocity in both his attacks and counter attacks more than matched Ransdell’s. As a general matter Long preferred to focus on class issues and personal assaults. He attacked Ransdell on his age and voting record that favored special interests over working-people. In response to Ransdell’s racial argument, Long’s *Louisiana Progress* published an editorial that included a letter from Senator Ransdell offering a minor job to a black man named Walter Cohen, followed by the call “Go to the polls and vote for the right of labor and White Supremacy – that means a vote against Joseph E. Ransdell.” Long often avoided using race as a political tactic, but understood the political and social realities of race within Louisiana at this time. More dramatic was Long’s response to the Ransdell-inspired lawsuit. Long arranged for the State Bureau of Identification, a state police force that answered only to him, to kidnap the two men, and hold them “hostage” on remote Grand Isle. They were only released after the election and forced Irby to read a prepared address over the radio, claiming that Long was “the best friend I have in the world.”
The combination of Long’s influence over state officials, distribution of patronage, as well as increased electoral support in New Orleans and southern Louisiana led him to beat Ransdell handily.\textsuperscript{39} Overall, Long saw a proportional increase in his support state-wide, helped by greater support in Orleans parish, as well as other Southern parishes that were near the city, like Jefferson and St. Bernard.\textsuperscript{40} After the election, vote totals from wards in Jefferson Parish and St. Bernard Parish showed Long won ninety-nine percent of the vote; and in St. Bernard, he won more votes than there were registered voters.\textsuperscript{41} Long’s victory over Ransdell showed how his expanded base of support coupled with his manipulation of elections assured him the popular mandate he relied on to do the work of the people.

The investigation and subsequent hearings on the 1932 election of John M. Overton to the U.S. Senate exposed instances of state interference and potential fraud by Long and his machine. It also served as an example of the lengths the opposition was willing to go to disrupt his success. The race in question pitted Representative John M. Overton, an unwavering supporter of Long back before his days as Governor, against incumbent Edwin S. Broussard, whom had supported Long in 1928, but had since broken with the Senator and was now his avowed enemy.\textsuperscript{42} Broussard claimed he had done far more for the state than Long or Overton ever could, and when he lost, made a formal complaint with the Senate special committee on campaign expenditures to investigate fraud by the Long machine in the election.\textsuperscript{43} The investigation began shortly after Long had taken his seat in the Senate, and argued that because Overton was the preferred candidate of Long’s machine he must have had knowledge of the actions taken on Overton’s behalf. An investigation was opened, and the Honest Election League, an anti-
Long and pro-Broussard organization, submitted a brief that detailed the fraud perpetrated by Long and his machine in the hopes to disqualify him and Overton from the Senate.\textsuperscript{44}

The first charge focused on deducting percentages of state employee salaries to fund the political campaigns of Long machine candidates.\textsuperscript{45} Specifically, there was evidence that Long’s machine deduced money from employee’s salaries to fund the Overton campaign and other machine-backed campaigns. Other charges related to the machine’s manipulation of state funds included the machine’s practice of spending state funds strictly in cash and intentionally keeping no records of their transactions.\textsuperscript{46} The deduction of public employee salaries and enlistment of individuals on state payroll as election commissioners were deemed illegal under the Federal Fair Practices Act, but Louisiana had no such legislation that applied to its own elections, which limited any action that could be taken.\textsuperscript{47}

The second major charge detailed the campaign’s use of “Dummy Candidates” to secure election commissioners loyal to the machine, which Broussard and the League argued led to voter fraud in favor of machine-backed candidates, especially Overton.\textsuperscript{48} In Louisiana elections, any candidate who paid the filing fee to run in an election was able to name a number of potential poll commissioners. Prior to the election, names were drawn randomly to determine the election commissioners in an attempt to promote fairness among campaigns. Broussard’s campaign alleged that the Long-Walmsley alliance had candidates in twenty-five parishes pay a filing fee to compete in the election, submit pro-Long-Walmsley commissioners, and then drop out of the race after the commissioners were selected.\textsuperscript{49} Many of the men who were submitted as commissioners
were shown to either be state employees or have close connections to the Long machine. However, beyond some admissions by underlings in the Long machine, much of the evidence presented was circumstantial, and Broussard could not actually prove fraud in any of the parishes or wards where machine-backed commissioners grossly outnumbered the opposition.\textsuperscript{50} Further, without any credible confessions from Long, Overton, or any other key members of the machine, the investigation concluded and Long and Overton took their places within the Senate. The investigation and findings of the Overton-Broussard election exposed some of the illiberal tactics Long’s machine employed to win elections, but instances of moderate fraud were nothing new to Louisiana, and the machine survived once again.

When the 1934 elections approached, pro-Long candidates faced off against Ring-backed candidates which Long used to draw attention to the corrupt practices of the Ring and their attempts to manipulate elections and re-assert their control over government. In the 1932 elections, Long and his machine were aligned with Mayor T. Semmes Walmsley and the New Orleans Ring. This reflected the agreement to collaborate on a slate of candidates and disburse patronage following Long’s victory over Ransdell in 1930.\textsuperscript{51} The relationship did not last, and by 1934 Long was once again at odds with the Old Regulars. In a number of circulars, he showed how the Ring and their candidates planned to abuse the system of dummy candidates to benefit themselves politically. This was after representatives from both pro and anti-Long factions helped draft and pass legislation that promoted fairness over manipulation with regard to election commissioners.\textsuperscript{52} Long claimed that the use of dummy candidates led to his first gubernatorial defeat in 1924, and that the Ring and their allies had long employed the
practice to steal elections. Another point of contention between the campaigns was the issue of voter rolls and registration. Long claimed attempts for interference were driven by the Ring who had a long history of fabricating votes and elections for their benefit. Long himself had a checkered past with issues of voter rolls and registration. In 1930, his registrar was found to be illegally striking Democratic voters from the Orleans parish rolls and disqualifying their registration days before the primary election was to be held.

Pro and anti-Long forces both went to great lengths to exercise control over election machinery, which incentivized both sides to commit fraud and engage in undemocratic behavior.

**Long’s Record on Suffrage**

Long’s actions expanded the number of registered voters to its highest levels in state history, but he also retained measures and strategies used by prior administrations to disenfranchise the opposition and manipulate vote totals in his favor. The repeal of the poll tax was his greatest achievement on this front, which expanded voter eligibility and removed the ability for wealthy individuals or political organizations to subsidize support by paying the poll taxes of poorer citizens.

Long’s elimination of the poll tax strengthened his record on promoting popular governance and expanding suffrage to formerly disenfranchised citizens. In 1934, Long directed the legislature to vote on and pass a constitutional amendment that removed the poll tax as a requirement for suffrage. Long claimed with the repeal of the poll tax over 250,000 men and women would now be able to vote. Voters approved the amendment by a five to one margin. His estimates were conservative, as white voter registration among men increased by 61% between 1930 and 1936, and 127% among women in the
same time frame, adding almost 300,000 voters to the registration rolls. In North Louisiana, the increases were even more pronounced, with over 130,000 new registered voters, with the largest increases among women. The repeal of the poll tax allowed poor citizens to register and vote independent of patronage or influence from wealthy benefactors. This helped Long, as he advocated for Louisianans to exercise their right, support his program, and contribute to the sovereign will of the people.

Even though Long expanded the number of eligible voters and removed a key barrier to participation, he retained others that were politically beneficial, and even implemented new legislation that increased state control over elections. Long was quoted saying, “I’m always afraid of an election, I’m always afraid of an election. You can’t tell what will happen.” In July 1934, a measure passed that established a Board of Supervisors of Elections in every parish, with two of the three members appointed by and subject to the dismissal of the Governor. The board would appoint all election commissioners and poll watchers for every precinct, which gave Long and the state control over election machinery in every parish. Additionally, the state was now responsible for appointing individuals tasked with administering oral understanding tests to potential voters, one of the restrictions used to disqualify black and poor white voters. These restrictions remained, but now could be used politically, as evidenced when an anti-Long Rhodes scholar failed one of these tests. Even though voters continued to approve of his programs and support candidates tied to his machine Long enacted legislation that undermined local control of elections and ensured opponents could not defraud pro-Long candidates.
However, unlike the Bourbon Democrats and their allies and many other Southern politicians of the era, Long did not enact policies that targeted the state’s black population and did not regularly rely on the issue of race to bolster his electoral support among Louisianans. The constitutional amendments that robbed black citizens of their right to vote in 1898 were defended on the basis that delegates were given a “mandate” to eliminate voters deemed “corrupt and illiterate,” which meant overwhelmingly black Louisianans. Beyond the suffrage restrictions constitutionally enshrined in 1898, in 1906 the state Democratic Party added race as a requirement for membership, which excluded the miniscule number of blacks still registered and eligible to vote. The number of registered black voters remained below 4% of the state’s total adult black population, never more than 3,600 voters, for the first four decades of the twentieth century. Long never attempted to restrict black participation, and with his repeal of the poll tax, removed a key barrier to suffrage for all poor voters, regardless of their race. Also, as noted above, Long centralized the selection of poll officials who administered the understanding tests required to register to vote. Like the poll tax, this device was used to disenfranchise poor white and black voters alike. Long’s elimination of these requirements promoted expanded suffrage for populations that were previously targeted and disenfranchised by the Bourbons.

Beyond suffrage, Long did not restrict public services on the basis of race, and black citizens enjoyed the benefits of Long’s programs just as poor whites did. When Long was asked about his programs that helped black Louisianans and how he thought they should be treated he replied, “treat them just the same as everybody else, give them an opportunity to make a living.” To the dismay of some, Long welcomed the creation
of black chapters of Share Our Wealth clubs both in Louisiana and across the country. A leader from a New York club noted how Long addressed him “as a man,” and did not speak to him differently because of his race. Long’s focus on socioeconomic divisions rather than racial ones allowed Louisiana’s black citizens to enjoy many of the benefits the Long program provided, a rarity within the South, and especially Louisiana.

However, Long was not a champion of equal rights for blacks and did not go out of his way to support them. Some worried that the removal of the poll tax would lead to greater black voter participation, but Long assured legislators that registration laws would be sufficient to prevent that. Long’s promotion of suffrage was based on his class-based movement and appeal. Along with rural white farmers, the black population were among the state’s poorest and most vulnerable. By repealing the poll tax but retaining other restrictions, Long expanded suffrage to voters who were highly likely to support him, but did not go far enough to arouse suspicions he wanted to promote the rights of the black population.

Rhetorically, Long occasionally evoked racial prejudice when he spoke from the stump, but on very rare instances, and never with the frequency of Theodore Bilbo in Mississippi or Tom Watson or Eugene Talmadge in Georgia, all of whom made careers out of race baiting. This is evidenced by Long’s circular that replied to Senator Ransdell’s claims that he was the “preferred” candidate among “negroes.” Long understood that the issue of race was divisive, and when necessary, used appeals to White Supremacy to distance himself from the issue. However, Long’s extension of services and assistance to the black population were products of his commitment to fighting inequality and poverty, not racism. While Long was not an advocate for the rights of
black citizens, he did not exploit anxieties over race like many other Southern politicians of his era.

Long saw voting and popular participation as important to the maintenance of his movement and a gauge of the popularity of his programs throughout the state. Elections became opportunities for Long to exercise power over his opponents and expand his popular mandate for the next legislative or electoral contest. Many presented these actions as evidence that Long was a dictator and had no respect for Democracy, but political interference and influence over elections had been key components of Louisiana’s political environment for decades. Long may have exacerbated these issues, but through his manipulation, forced perpetrators of the status-quo to come to terms with the distorted system they nurtured and allowed to flourish.

The Kingfish Stands Alone: Long and His Direction of the Legislature

As with elections, periods of Bourbon-Ring domination influenced the character of the legislature as well as its functions. When Long entered the legislature, it was characterized by inaction and general apathy towards the needs of the majority of Louisianans. Prior to Long, the legislature restricted state spending and neglected public services. The legislature served the elites, and the people were expected to accept whatever they were given.

From the end of Reconstruction to the start of the twentieth century, Louisiana’s legislature was not only ineffective, but compounded many of the problems that plagued rural and impoverished communities through their resistance to providing basic public services. Throughout the 1880s, the state was defined by corruption and a disregard for the rule of law, which Bourbon leaders accepted and allowed to fester. Voters had few
options when it came time to vote, and even if they did participate there was no expectation that legislators would consider laws or programs aimed to address the needs of many in the state.\textsuperscript{72} Limits on taxation written into the Constitution of 1879 were a response to the large public expenditures used by Reconstruction governments and effectively restricted investment in public services, especially education.\textsuperscript{73} There was no state income tax, and the constitutional ceiling on taxation meant only 1.25 mills from state tax revenue was spent on public education, less than half the amount committed to retiring state debt.\textsuperscript{74} The state’s public education system suffered greatly under the Bourbons, a major factor in Louisiana having the highest rates of illiteracy in the nation.\textsuperscript{75} Beyond education, public employees and institutions were underfunded, sometimes defrauded during Governor McEnery’s administrations, which led to abhorrent conditions in state medical, and mental facilities as well as other public institutions.\textsuperscript{76}

Even with the emergence of the People’s party, Populist representatives had no influence in the introduction or passage of legislation, and needed support of Democrats to have any proposals considered.\textsuperscript{77} When the Populists joined forces with the Republicans to build a new coalition, they were violently repressed.\textsuperscript{78} The Bourbon Democrats governed to entrench their power and ensure their place in society would not be challenged legally or otherwise by the majority of Louisianans. They neglected public institutions and made state government corrupt, ineffective, and closed-off to the people it was supposed to serve.

In conjunction with the Bourbons and the planter elite were the Old Regulars, who used their system of patronage to guarantee votes for the “right” candidates that maintained the status-quo within the legislature. Behrman and the Ring cultivated close
relationships with bankers, merchants, and industrialists and ensured they elected representatives who legislated with these interests as their guide.\textsuperscript{79} Even when John M. Parker was able to disrupt the Old Regular – Bourbon Democrat alliance, he was hamstrung by a legislature that generally resisted expanded public services or taxation, and opted for more conservative approaches to addressing Louisiana’s deficiencies.\textsuperscript{80} The “gentleman’s agreement” that Parker reached with Standard Oil and other extractive industries over a severance tax on oil was limited and moderated by legislators friendly with oil interests.\textsuperscript{81} Historian Glen Jeansonne argues the state’s abundant natural resources should have generated revenues that could sustain expanded public services and opportunities for Louisianans, but political greed and inept governance led to their plunder.\textsuperscript{82}

\textbf{Long’s Climb to Power}

Long’s rise to power began with his first legislative session as Governor in 1928. He immediately began work on promises he had made to voters but faced frequent opposition that grew steadily over time. In his own words, Long claimed that two opposition leaders said that he would get a year to govern before they would put a stop to his agenda, specifically with impeachment.\textsuperscript{83} Long’s first legislative session included passage of a constitutional amendment that allowed for the issuance bonded debt to kick-off his highway and infrastructure program; passage and defense of an initiative that provided free school books for the all of the state’s children; and negotiation of a deal that supplied natural gas to the city of New Orleans at a more affordable rate than previously offered.\textsuperscript{84} He also consolidated his control over important state boards and agencies, critical to the disbursement of patronage and control over state employees.\textsuperscript{85}
The use of patronage to guide legislation and attract political support was a privilege Long described as “the spoils of war,” and he relied on and expanded its use to engender support for himself and his machine throughout his tenure. Long’s first year of legislation was characterized by programs and laws designed to help the constituents who had elected him and fulfill promises he made from the stump, ensuring their passage through a combination of political will, bribes, and state patronage.

In 1929, one year after Long took office, his enemies made good on their promise to halt his progress through impeachment. Long’s impeachment represented a turning point in his treatment of the opposition as he intensified his use of the state to entrench his power and subjugate the opposition. The official impeachment proceedings against Long covered a multitude of charges, nineteen in all, eight of which were adopted. They were preceded by Long’s attempt to pass a five-cent occupational licensing tax on the refinement of oil during a special session of the legislature. This tax was aimed at his old nemesis, Standard Oil, whose refinery in Baton Rouge was the largest in the South. Long did not have the votes for his measure, and when chaos erupted in the House chamber following a “malfunction” of voting machines on a motion to adjourn, the first allegations that underpinned impeachment proceedings were revealed.

Long survived impeachment through his recruitment of fifteen Senators who became known as the Robineers, after they signed a “round robin” document that stated they would not vote to impeach, and they would not consider any of the evidence presented against Long. In return for their support, Long rewarded these men in a myriad of ways including judgeships, lucrative state contracts to firms they held stake in, and key positions on state boards. After the impeachment proceedings concluded, Long
removed any appointees or state board members who had proven to be disloyal, and
began his march towards the U.S. Senate, and beyond. Once he overcame the threat of
impeachment, the use of patronage and control over state agencies expanded from tools
primarily used to whip votes, to ones that marshalled loyalty to the machine and forced
the opposition into a state of subjugation and submission.

Long’s victory over Ransdell for a seat in the U.S. Senate led to a brief but vital
period of cooperation between Long and the Old Regulars that was key to the furtherance
of Long’s agenda within the state. Before the primary election was held, Old Regular and
anti-Long forces, with the help of Lieutenant Governor Paul Cyr, halted the Governor’s
attempt at passing a second bond issue that totaled more than sixty million dollars for
roads and schools. Long had been informed by his state bank examiner that loans that
sustained New Orleans’ finances could be deemed potentially illegal and attempted to
audit the city. After Cyr and the anti-Long’s blocked his bond issuance, Long directed
state banks to halt issuances to the city as well as restricted the city’s ability to collect
taxes through his control of the Tax Commission, threatening New Orleans with
bankruptcy. After Long’s victory later that year against Ransdell for the Democratic
nomination, Walmsley and the Old Regulars made peace. When Long called a special
session he successfully passed a constitutional amendment for a $75 million bond
initiative that included annual financing for road maintenance and construction in New
Orleans, as well as support to help pay-off debt incurred by the city.

During this brief period of cooperation, Long enjoyed legislative and electoral
success that engendered further support from the people and secured the position of a
long-time ally in the Governor’s mansion. Long enacted his second bond issuance, saw
the election of O.K. Allen as Governor and enjoyed widespread success in the 1932 elections. The election of Allen was specifically important because not only was he loyal to Long, he was completely subservient to him. Long’s control of Governor Allen was key to his retention of power over the state government once he no longer held a position within it. The victories Long reaped when allied with the Old Regulars laid the groundwork for his dictatorial control over the state legislature.

The truce lasted for less than three years and was broken by 1933, when Long found himself on the losing side of the mayoral contest in New Orleans in 1934. The Old Regulars decided to align themselves with the Roosevelt Administration, which had previously broken with Long over his criticisms of the New Deal and his Share Our Wealth alternative. When Roosevelt attempted to funnel patronage to Long’s enemies, specifically in New Orleans, the Senator ensured that federal money remained unspent, and deprived citizens of millions of dollars in federal aid. However, the period that followed this split, 1934 – 1935, Long recovered from these skirmishes and guided the legislature like never before.

Long returned from the Senate and asserted his place in the legislature at the end of the 1934 Regular Session, as O.K. Allen and the machine struggled to pass legislation without the Kingfish’s direction. He dictated the passage of bills which included a law that restricted the handling of voter registration records to members of parish election committees, a majority of whom were appointed by the Governor. The bill was originally drafted by anti-Long legislators as a defense against dummy candidates that prevented the removal of registration books for any reason other than a court order. But Long, acting officially as an “interested citizen,” had the committee chair attach an
amendment to the bill that changed its meaning, and denied the original sponsors the right to withdraw the bill, a first in the history of the state legislature. 99 Another measure dealt with the collection of Louisiana’s first state income tax. The law allotted three hundred thousand dollars for the collection of new income taxes, which were projected to yield two million dollars in tax revenue, even though it was stated that the cost of collecting income taxes in other states was around six percent of the projected revenue, which equated to $12,000 based on the projected revenues. 100 These laws were contested by members of the opposition, but were never in danger of defeat as Long whipped votes and commanded the Senate floor. This finale of the Regular Session foreshadowed Long’s increasingly autocratic control over the state legislature.

Long’s dictatorial power over special sessions of the legislature demonstrated the extent of his domination over the state government. Between August 1934, and September 1935, Governor Allen called seven special sessions of the legislature, each of which Senator Long presided over and directed personally. 101 In substance, the bills passed in these sessions illustrated how dominant Long had become in the state, and how he marshalled state authority to destroy his opposition. In August 1934, after both chambers suspended rules with a simple majority vote, a first in the state’s history, Long proceeded with bills that stripped cities and parishes of the right to choose their own local fire and police chiefs, which expanded to all policemen and firefighters in the next session. They also forced the city of New Orleans to increase expenditures to public employees and simultaneously restricted their ability to tax, collect license fees or borrow from banks. 102 Long also passed bills that allowed him to activate the state militia with no cause, expanded the powers and numbers of his Bureau of Criminal Investigation, a
plain-clothes police force that answered only to him, and allowed the state attorney general to supersede district attorneys whenever they desired to “protect the interests of the state.” In sessions held in November and December of 1934, Long shifted control over local tax assessments from towns and parishes to his Tax Commission, required parish school boards to gain approval of the State Budget Committee, chaired by Governor Allen, on all decisions related to employment and pay, and made all deputy sheriff appointments conditional on approval from the Bureau of Criminal Identification. All of these measures were designed to starve local and parish officials of their power, and simplify the division of power within state institutions, which were increasingly concentrated with the Governor and high-ranking appointees. In all, four hundred and sixty-three measures were passed during this period, with many, if not all, designed to enrich the power of the Long machine.

Long’s control of the legislature in these special sessions was absolute to the point where Long became a one-man government. Long re-organized the legislative process to allow him to govern effectively as a dictator. He channeled all legislation through the committee on ways and means, where he often served as the only witness to testify on the contents of legislation and dictated whether or not the bill would pass or fail. When legislators asked when they would be told what was in the bills, Long responded, “Tuesday, when they are passed.” Each bill was considered and passed in two minutes. In the November Session, Long passed thirty-four out of thirty-five bills out of committee towards approval in seventy minutes. Witnesses, journalists, and observers were dumbfounded by this display of power, some termed the state’s governing body as the
“Longislature.” Long characterized his style of governance as “perfect democracy,” and justified his dictatorial methods as promoting the interests of the people.

Under the thumb of Governor-Senator Long, Louisiana’s legislature was mobilized to support its citizens like never before. From his first days in office, Long made passage of programs that fulfilled campaign promises his highest priority. His vision of an active and responsive state diverged sharply from the historical character of the Pelican State’s governing body, which was usually most concerned with low taxes and maintenance of the political and social status quo.

Long’s early gubernatorial years saw him occasionally compromise with the opposition and marshal patronage to glean support for his proposals, a practice familiar to Louisiana, and a contrast to his later autocratic domination of the legislative process. His interactions with the opposition were generally hostile, as many in the anti-Long camp refused to see him as anything but a tyrant. His critics pointed out that his “every-man” persona was in conflict with instances of financial enrichment and political self-service. Long’s use of patronage and influence to assemble political support and enact his programs had long been a practice within the state. However, Long’s use of these methods to promote policies that benefited the people rather than the political establishment and their corporate allies stimulated anti-Long support. Eventually, Long consolidated enough power and popular support where he could bypass any opposition and control the legislative process single-handedly.

Long’s command of the legislature, particularly after he had assumed his seat in the U.S. Senate speaks to the level of influence he cultivated as well as the personal control he held over people. He reduced the legislature to a rubber-stamp committee
whose only job was to push a button when he called. For Long, this was all justified because he carried out programs for the people. The issues of balance of power and an “ends justify the means” mentality loomed large over Louisiana throughout Long’s reign.

*Every Man a King, But One Wears the Crown: Discussion of Elections and Governance*

Long and his machine had a sordid record when it came to free elections and democratic governance. As a movement that represented the “people” it seems intuitive that a key measure of the success and popularity of the machine was reflected by their performance in elections. Using this metric, Long and his machine consistently won elections for state and national offices and referendums for constitutional amendments, often by wide margins.\(^{111}\) Through their electoral victories and expanded participation, Long and his machine’s legislative program became, in their view, the voice of the sovereign people, which within Riker’s populist interpretation of voting, justified the program itself, as well as the means used to enact the people’s will.\(^{112}\)

In addition to the broad support he engendered, Long also faced consistent opposition, but with varied intensity throughout his tenure. This opposition was most commonly represented on the front pages of the state’s major newspapers, within the legislative chamber, and according to Long, among the “multi-millionaires and the billionaires and their crooked United States government politicians.”\(^{113}\) He responded with animosity towards his enemies expressed both verbally, through speeches and circulars, as well as legislatively, where he used the state to punish industries, localities, and office-holders who dared to oppose him. Long and his machine had elements of an illiberal regime as Müeller defines it, but to lay the blame entirely on them would be unfair and historically inaccurate. It is this relationship that should guide the analysis of
Long as it relates to American Populism traditionally and in the contemporary sense, as well as the impact of his neo-Populism on state institutions and individual opportunities amidst a period of instability and uncertainty.

With regard to traditional Populism and the People’s Party, Long’s electoral agenda and legislative success led to numerous programs that promoted the Populist message of a strong state designed to serve the people. Electorally, Long sought to maximize voter turnout among constituencies that were likely to support him, as evidenced by his repeal of the poll tax and use of circulars that urged citizens to share information with their neighbors, get out to the polls, and vote for the ticket that represented their interests.\textsuperscript{114} Once he was given a mandate to govern, Long drove the legislature to pass the legislation he wanted. Long’s legislative record promoted key foundations of the People’s Party through his promotion of a more active role for the state in restraining the influence of corporations and the elites, providing economic opportunity and public services, and expanding suffrage to previously disenfranchised citizens.

The experience of the People’s Party in Louisiana, both electorally and legislatively, was bleak. Even when they organized support independently, and later fused with the Republicans, established Democrats denied them participation and influence at every turn. When they attempted to exercise their right to vote, they were attacked and threatened with violence aimed at themselves or their property or were cheated out of hard-fought positions. In contrast, Long recognized that in order to enact the reforms he promised, he had to engage in tactics similar to those of his opponents. The practice of patronage exchanged for votes and political support was long established
in Louisiana, and if one side was doing it, Long deduced he might as well do it too, but he would do it bigger. He was not afraid to break a few laws or supersede some norms to do so because he was carrying out the preferences of the people. Unlike the People’s Party, Long was able to enact programs that benefited the people because he utilized and embraced some of the tactics used by the political establishment that had been marshalled against the Populists.

Further, Long’s simplification and centralization of institutional power, especially through special sessions, aligned with Riker’s characterization of populist institutions. Long enacted policies that were mandated by the people based on their electoral support for his program and legislators loyal to him. Long removed legal and constitutional barriers that restricted his authority to enact the policies chosen by the people. This process produced a legislature where Long dictated every step of the law-making process and justified his actions as the work of the people.115 Through this justification, Long established a moral imperative to break laws and ignore democratic principles, but unlike previous administrations in Louisiana, he aimed to improve the lives of a majority of his constituents, not enrich and secure a select few.

At the same time, many of these practices were emblematic of those used by the opponents of the Populists, those who suppressed their voice and opportunity, and antithetical to much of traditional Populist philosophy. Populists supported everyone’s right to vote, including blacks, a belief that Long rejected and chose not to pursue. Beyond the issue of race, Long’s use of the state not just to pick winners and losers, but to subjugate those that opposed him was striking. He deprived people and their families of opportunity because of their political affiliation, as had been done to members of the
People’s Party only thirty years before. Rather than use state services to promote unity in a time of crisis, Long chose to force his enemies into a position of subservience. The policies he pursued and implemented were often beneficial to the people, and resulted in their enduring electoral support, a key difference between Long and the Bourbon-Ring coalition administrations that preceded him. Nineteenth century Populists wanted greater opportunity, an idea Long echoed and actively promoted. But in addition to the positive benefits he provided to citizens, he used his power to subjugate the opposition and dominate state government in a manner that was unparalleled by any other leader in the state’s history.

At the heart of this conflict is the issue of credible commitment and social trust as it relates to elections and democratic governance. The experiences of the People’s Party and Long in his early years in office displayed that the state’s political and financial elite took extreme steps to protect their interests and exclusive place in society. As they claimed to fight for democracy and the dignity of man, they implemented mechanisms like the poll tax that prevented citizens from voting and actively discouraged participation in elections, a central mechanism of liberal democracy. They embraced constitutional amendments that prohibited the state from borrowing money or collecting taxes to pay for public services outside of special projects that they themselves were likely to benefit from. Long had no reason to believe he would be given a fair chance, so why bother with fairness. This question represents what Müeller and Cas Muddle argue allows Populism to take root in democracies, and why it can be so effective. Years of inaction and entrenchment by the ruling factions of the state, under the guise of liberal democracy, created apathy for many. As Long’s machine grew, and power retention became critical
to his political survival, his grip over state institutions as well as individual employees expanded. Opposition to populist government is opposition to the people, according to Müller and Riker, and Long would likely agree, as long as it was his machine in government.

Beyond the motivations and tactics of anti and pro-Long factions, the question of how they served the people and shaped institutions is critical. With the history of Louisiana’s elections and the character of the legislature, was Long’s tenure a real departure from the environment that had persisted within the state, or, was he a continuation of illiberal democratic regimes who happened to be more inclined to spend state money and soak the rich than his predecessors? Long’s agenda led to the adoption of numerous policies and programs that promoted the economic and political views of the Populists. His successes brought tangible and significant benefits to a population that had long been ignored and marginalized by the political establishment. By the same token, in order to achieve these victories, Long resorted to undemocratic and dictatorial means in the face of sustained opposition. He subverted democracy in order to benefit his supporters, which is the main fear held by Müller in his discussion of populist governance. However, Long’s programs were popular enough that the people were willing to sacrifice some of their democratic rights in exchange for a leader that represented their interests and responded to their needs. The state’s opposition failed to offer any semblance of an alternative to the reforms enacted by Long. This simplified the choice for many voters, who preferred a government that may have been undemocratic but produced tangible benefits to the corrupt and ineffectual status-quo offered by the anti-Longs. This sentiment is captured by an L.S.U. professor who said:
There are many things Huey does that I don’t approve of. But on the whole he has done a great deal of good. And if I had to choose between him without democracy, and getting back the old crowd, without the good he has done, I should choose Huey. After all, democracy isn’t any good if it doesn’t work. Do you really think freedom is so important? Long may not have been the most honest politician, but he legitimately represented the interests of the common man, the people, which had rarely if ever happened in Louisiana beyond the People’s Party. The failures of democracy to address the concerns of the people played a key role in Long’s success. This sentiment was echoed by Hodding Carter, a journalist and member of the opposition who discussed Long’s successes and influence in his article, “Huey Long, American Dictator.”

Looking back, I know now that part of our failure arose from an unwillingness to approve any Long-sponsored proposal for change, regardless of its merits. We offered none of our own except a plea for democratic rule, and that sounded hollow in contrast. Yet, at the end, it became the one thing of importance to Louisiana. Had all Americans lived some of those years under him, democracy would be more secure today, because democracy would have come to have a more precious meaning.

Long’s tenure illustrated the dangers that accompany the populist ruler. He undoubtedly provided services that a majority of the people wanted and erected a state that promoted improvements in people’s lives. At the same time, the cost of his successes required individuals to relinquish their democratic rights and accept the erection of a dictatorship. For many citizens, this situation proved to be preferential to the corruption and inaction that characterized the state’s democratic alternative. The willingness to abandon democracy in exchange for favorable legislation demonstrates the apathy induced by the ineffectiveness of the state’s democratic government and the hopelessness felt by its
citizens. For Long's supporters, they deduced it was better to reap the benefits his tenure provided than pay the price of a return to an ineffectual and corrupt liberal democracy.

6 Hicks, *Populist Revolt* 406.
10 Müeller, 8.
14 Howard, 159; Hair, 113 – 15.
15 Hair, 241 – 43.
16 Hair, 262 – 63.
17 Hair, 261.
19 Key, 268; Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 190.
22 Reynolds, 163.
26 Howard, 209, 228; Williams, *Huey Long* 211 – 212.
29 Howard, 237 – 38.
33 Long, *Every Man a King* 211.
34 Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm* 196.
36 Long, *Every Man a King*, 221; Circular, “‘Because He Has Kept the Faith’ and because Ransdell has not,’ Paid by Representatives of the Working People in Louisiana, 1930, William B. Wisdom Collection, Broadside: Box 1, Folder 35.
Sindler, 73 – 74.


Honest Election League, 5.

Honest Election League, 34.

Honest Election League, 3, 14, 16 – 17.

Honest Election League, 16 – 17.

Honest Election League, 26 – 27.

Williams, *Huey Long* 527.


Williams, *Huey Long* 738.


Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 233.

Howard, 223.


Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm* 302.


Jeansonne, 40.

Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 188 – 89; 276 – 78.


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Epilogue for Weighing the Kingfish

In my thesis, I analyzed the tension between Huey P. Long Jr’s. neo-Populist message and legislative agenda and the undemocratic and illiberal tactics he employed to control government and centralize state power. My goal in this thesis was to discuss and consider the nature of populism and whether it is compatible with liberal values. I believe given the evidence provided, Long’s neo-Populist rhetoric and policies produced tangible benefits for his supporters in line with the historical goals of the People’s Party. However, Long’s embrace of undemocratic methods and dictatorial power once in office plainly illustrate the dangers populist movements pose to liberal democracies and their potential to lead to authoritarianism. The organization Long erected in Louisiana stood alone with regard to its dominance over public services and state institutions; within ten years of Long’s first state-wide election he exercised near-absolute power over the state legislature and government. The periods prior to and including Long’s tenure show how a society with weak democratic institutions and ineffectual officials can create the conditions for a populist movement to be successful. In the case of Long, he promised to provide the services and solutions that voters wanted, and once in office delivered tangible benefits to Louisianans by expanding the role of government and popular participation. But with the expansion of the state, Long centralized control over public institutions and services, which he used to dominate the political environment and suppress his opposition in keeping with the traditions of the state’s corrupt and undemocratic political establishment.

Rhetorically Long, simplified economic and political issues for his audience, and offered them a binary choice; are you part of the “people,” or are you an “elite,” an
enemy? Long expanded this ultimatum to the legislative arena, where opposition to his legislation was decried as a violation of the will of the people, and opponents were denigrated as elites and corporate pawns. The Populist notion that the people’s voice was infallible as interpreted by a powerful leader can be a persuasive argument for action, as well as signal the “beginning of the end” for a liberal democracy. Long’s embrace of autocratic and undemocratic tactics once in power was notable and led to comparisons between the Kingfish and Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini.¹ These comparisons disregard the historical realities of Louisiana politics and fails to account for the oligarchical conditions created by Bourbon Democrats and their Ring allies. Populist movements coalesce when public institutions fail to address the issues of citizens. Long gained popular support by acknowledging the issues that faced a majority of Louisianans and justified his centralization of institutions and undemocratic actions as the only way to fulfill the policies preferred by the people.

In my first chapter, I discussed the elements and parties that preceded Long and fostered the political and economic environment of Louisiana that led to Long’s ascension. The Bourbon Democrats and their allies used their power and influence to oppress a majority of the state and rob them of economic opportunities and civil rights.² Economic insecurity and political marginalization in Louisiana, and across the nation, manifested in the Populist revolt and the People’s Party. The movement protested weak public institutions and ineffectual responses to economic volatility that left farmers and workers insecure and impoverished, especially in Louisiana. However, the Louisiana Bourbons responded by manipulating vote counts, and deprived Populists of the chance to participate in free and fair elections.³ The actions of the Bourbons represented an
undemocratic liberalism, where under the guise of a liberal democracy, they abused their power and established an oligarchy. This denigration of democratic institutions and flaunting of the rule of law contributed to apathy among voters and conditioned citizens to corruption and inaction by the state.

The dominance cultivated by the Bourbons continued into the twentieth century through their profitable alliance with the New Orleans Choctaw Club, which delivered voters for the establishment’s preferred candidates and suppressed legitimate democratic competition. The Ring used its political and economic power to influence voters and retain the political status-quo that restricted public services as illiteracy and poverty were rampant. They continued to employ anti-democratic and corrupt means to entrench their power, which eroded people’s faith in the efficacy and legitimacy of the state’s democracy. The dominant role of patronage and influence of corporations over legislators polluted state institutions and created a government that was undemocratic and dominated by a select few.

The emergence of John M. Parker and his agenda of Progressive Reform was a change welcomed by many, but his conservative use of executive power and willingness to compromise with the establishment limited his ability to enact structural reforms. His election illustrated increased popular support for government reforms and public services. Unfortunately for Parker and many Louisianans, his tenure only produced modest results. He faced opposition from the Ring and Standard Oil on the right, and an increasingly hostile Commissioner Long on the left. Parker’s failure to establish a secure base of voter support within New Orleans coupled with his restrained use of executive power
prevented him from accomplishing many of the goals he promised, which paved the way for Long.

Long used his campaigns in 1924 and 1928 to establish himself as a friend of the common-man, evoking Populist themes with his promises to expand state services and govern as a representative of the people. He stumped across the state, driving to meet with constituents, and promised them paved roads, free schoolbooks, cheaper utilities, and better schools. This message remained even after he finished third in the 1924 gubernatorial race; he knew what the people wanted. Long’s entrance into elections brought increased turnout and enthusiasm from voters who had previously stayed home on election day. Long’s campaign appeals and political platform were steeped in the Populist tradition, which captivated voters and elicited support from communities that had abandoned politics.

In my second chapter, I explored Long’s legislation related to infrastructure and education that demonstrated his advancement of policies promoting the Populist’s desired role of the state to fulfill the needs of the people. His bond issues expanded the power of government to address issues of under-provision and the economic concerns of citizens, driving forces of the Populist movement. This would not have been possible without popular democratic support in elections and referndums, which Long argued represented the will of the people. Long’s work on infrastructure, specifically road and bridge construction, modernized and expanded Louisiana’s infrastructure and stimulated employment and economic development within the state. On education, Long provided free schoolbooks for all children and literacy classes for all adults to combat illiteracy. Long’s decision not to segregate these benefits on the basis of race or religion
distinguished him from politicians in Louisiana, and throughout the South, emphasizing the class-based, popular element of his movement. He also improved educational facilities at all levels in an effort to educate the population and provide citizens opportunities to advance themselves and combat inequality. Long’s legislation on infrastructure and education provided tangible benefits to the people that had long been denied by the state’s ineffectual establishment politicians.

However, Long also used these programs and the expanded role of the state to centralize power and embrace anti-democratic tactics as a means of enacting his reforms. Graft, patronage, and political manipulation were all present within Long’s infrastructure program, he himself would not deny it; but unlike previous administrations, he actually paved roads, built bridges, and provided employment to thousands of Louisianans. Long’s work on infrastructure and education provided a clear example of the tension between actions that fulfilled the wishes of the people, while simultaneously engaging in tactics often employed by the establishment that Long unseated and vilified.

In my third chapter, I explored Long’s rise and consolidation of power through elections and his domination over the legislature. In just ten years, Long went from a failed gubernatorial bid to exercising complete control over the state legislature while serving as a U.S. Senator. Elections and popular participation were central to the Populist
notion of a government that represented the people, and Long embraced this notion, framing elections as referendums on his legislative efforts. Riker’s populist interpretation of voting states that a majority vote represents the sovereign will of the people, and a rejection of this idea deprives citizens of their liberty. In contrast to the Bourbons, Long expanded the franchise through his repeal of the poll tax and sought to increase popular participation rather than suppress it. During his tenure, popular participation and voter registration increased significantly, which lent credibility to his claims of a popular mandate provided by the people. Prior to Long, Bourbons and Ring-backed legislators focused on protecting the interests of the few at the publics expense. Long diverged from this tradition and drove the legislature to expand public services and raise taxes on corporations and the wealthy. He erected a government for the people and limited the economic and political influence of elites. His legislative achievements were profound, and he was rewarded in turn with popular support for himself and his machine. Long’s expansion of suffrage and mobilization of the legislature to satisfy the needs of the people represented his commitment to the Populist idea of a government by the people, for the people.

However, Long centralized the control over counting ballots and elections generally, which ensured that men loyal to the machine determined the outcomes of elections. These were similar to the tactics that had originated with and been used by the Bourbons and the Ring to entrench their power. Long subscribed to the populist interpretation of voting, which when combined with his erection of populist institutions, gave him influence over democratic processes that he exploited just as his enemies had before him. Weak democratic institutions and a legacy of corruption allowed Long to
retain the undemocratic tactics of the establishment and use the state to enhance and further their effectiveness.

Further, Long’s control over the legislature illustrated the contradiction produced by the populist interpretation of voting and his embrace of autocratic methods. He used special sessions of the legislature to suspend normal rules and control the legislative process even when he had no position in state government. These sessions were democratic in name only, as Long alone dictated which bills would pass and which would not. The populist interpretation of voting states that the sovereign will of the people is amalgamated through electoral support of a singular leader, which coalesces in the general will. In Long’s case, he represented the people, and therefore was the only one who knew what the people wanted and had an obligation to enact policies according to their perceived preferences.

Not only is this interpretation illogical, it encourages authoritarianism because it puts one man over everyone else in government, and to disagree with him constitutes a violation of the people’s liberty. Long’s subversion of democratic processes echoed Müeller’s interpretation of illiberal democracy as well as the colonization of the state. The Louisiana legislature might have been in session, but everybody knew what the outcomes would be before casting a vote. Similarly, Long’s abuse of special sessions illustrates the concerns Riker raises in his discussion of the problems and inconsistencies of the populist interpretation of voting and populist institutions within a liberal democracy. Long’s domination over the legislature was the antithesis of popular government and illustrated his autocratic tendencies. However, Long also used these
sessions to further his agenda, which focused on providing benefits for the people, the
overriding goal of the Populists and key to his retention of power.

In all of these instances, there was friction between Long’s neo-Populist platform
and rhetoric, which promoted the vision and preferences of the people through
legislation, with the reality of Long’s increasingly centralized and dictatorial control of
state government. I believe this friction was caused because the populist interpretation of
voting as discussed by Riker is inconsistent with the expectations of a liberal democracy.
Even though Long engendered substantial popular support through elections, he
centralized government so that only a few select officials had any influence over
legislative or administrative decisions. Further, Müeller’s argument that populism is a
form of illiberal democracy was represented through Long’s disregard for separation of
powers, checks on authority, and interference with democratic institutions.

However, I believe Long’s illiberal tactics manifested as a result of the state’s
historically undemocratic and corrupt government. Based on Riker’s three elements of
liberal democracy, Louisiana following Radical Reconstruction, but especially after 1896,
cannot be considered a liberal democracy because of the state-sanctioned
disenfranchisement and marginalization of black and poor white voters. State government
and its institutions were tools of the oligarchy and offered little to the people in the form
of public services or assistance, no matter the situation.

This tension between the wants of the people and the means used to deliver results
led to issues of credible commitment and efficacy of institutions, which I believe are
increasingly important in our contemporary environment. The period of Bourbon-Ring
domination represented a bastardization of the role of the state, which was mobilized to
retain a tiered and divided society. Decades of corruption and patronage entrenched undemocratic elements within the state’s political system. This allowed a popular leader like Long, whose elections marked high points of voter participation for the period, to employ similarly undemocratic tactics to pursue his own ends. When he was faced with allegations of fraud and impropriety, all he had to do was throw the accusations right back, highlight his popular mandate, and the point became moot.

Even though Long was undemocratic, his policies tangibly benefited the people; they could drive on their new roads, their children had free schoolbooks, they could visit the campus of L.S.U., whereas the establishment offered little in comparison. The best they did was paint Long as a tyrant who did not respect democratic institutions, but neither did they. This contradiction speaks to the legacy of Populism, its influence on Long’s neo-Populism, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions in Louisiana. If instead of disenfranchising competition the Bourbons had allowed the Populists to participate or attempted to reform some of their practices so citizens had more influence in government, Long’s popular crusade may have never materialized.

Today, populism has re-emerged in the political landscape of the United States, and around the world. In order to understand why people turned to a popular leader like Long, it is crucial to understand the economic, political and social currents that preceded and influenced Louisiana society, respectively. The same approach should be used today when discussing the factors that drive people to support movements that are illiberal and often authoritarian in nature.

Long focused on wealth concentration and economic insecurity as two key problems within American society. As inequality rises in contemporary times, there are
some interesting parallels between the 1920s and today. Long believed that a small group of elites had too much money and too much power, which he used as justification for raising taxes on property, income, and capital ownership.\textsuperscript{10} Today, income inequality is almost identical to the levels of the 1920s and ‘30s, and the concentration of wealth among the top ten percent and one percent of earners reached similarly high levels.\textsuperscript{11} Polls show that a majority of Americans are concerned about economic inequality, and eighty-four percent believe that government should raise taxes on wealthier individuals.\textsuperscript{12} Among those who believe that there is too much inequality, two thirds believe the nation’s economic system “requires major changes.”\textsuperscript{13}

The COVID-19 pandemic has furthered the economic divide, as American billionaires saw their wealth increase by $1.3 trillion, and low income earners sustained the largest economic losses.\textsuperscript{14} The Biden administration seems to favor more redistributive policies and has advocated for measures to address inequality and the power of large multi-national corporations.\textsuperscript{15} The struggle over economic inequality and opportunity represents an issue where people expect a government response. If none materializes, it could create space for a Long like figure to offer alternative solutions and be a representative of the people against the ineffectual plutocrats.

Coupled with concerns over inequality, Americans are highly skeptical of public institutions, specifically those within the federal government, but do not want to reduce their power. Sixty percent of Americans believe the government does a “somewhat bad” or “very bad” job in helping people get out of poverty.\textsuperscript{16} Public trust in the federal government is at twenty percent, and has been at a historic low point for over a decade.\textsuperscript{17} American’s distrust of government is driven by poor institutional performance, political
polarization, large-scale global “shocks,” and issues related to economic inequality and mobility. Long emphasized the failures of ineffectual democracy in Louisiana during his campaigns for public office, and highlighted how he would expand the state and remake it in the interest of the people. Polling from 2018, shows a majority of respondents believe “significant changes are needed,” in the design of government, but they do not want to see a reduction or slow-down in public spending. In the context of Long, this would be an ideal environment for his brand of neo-Populism, which espoused a stronger and more active role of the state in reducing inequality and advancing the interests of the people. In an environment where institutions are weak and people have little faith in elected officials, a popular leader like Long could justify their authoritarian and undemocratic tendencies with an “ends justify the means” argument, just as Long did in Louisiana.

Additionally, Donald Trump’s election as President in 2016, signaled populism’s legitimate return to politics in the U.S. While he and Long do share some similarities, there is clear divergence over the issues each employed to engender support. As I mentioned in my introduction, I was initially drawn to Long because of potential connections between him and former President Trump. They both had antagonistic relationships with the media, were distrustful and spiteful towards elites, and reshaped the political environment they inhabited; Long in the bi-factional Democratic party of Louisiana, Trump in the Republican party, respectively. A profound distrust of elites was a common theme for both Long and Trump, but beyond just a distrust, both of their tenures illustrated the lengths establishment actors will go to in order to retain their influence and privilege. This refusal by the establishment to acknowledge their failures
motivates voters to support anti-establishment populist movements and distrust the status-quo.

However, upon closer investigation, Trump’s brand of right-wing populism draws upon xenophobia and cultural dislocation rather than economic insecurities, much like George Wallace’s appeals to racism in the ‘60s and ‘70s. In a paper on populism and the economics of globalization, Dani Rodrik argues that Trump’s populism emphasizes a “cultural cleavage,” where the religious, racial, and cultural identity of the “people” is challenged by an outside group whose values undermine and threaten the popular will. Right-wing populism in this sense is motivated by differences in ethnicity and identity, whereas Long and left-wing populism relies on an economic cleavage, where there is a group of powerful wealthy elites and everyone else.

This distinction is important, because while Long and Trump may seem similar on the surface, this divergence influences the voters they attract and the policies they pursue. I think a question of greater importance is whether a left-wing populist will emerge following the conclusion of the Biden administration, and how this will impact the Democratic electorate. If nothing else, I believe the experience of Long should help inform our understanding of Trump’s meteoric rise and unexpected victory. Specifically, that his popularity is no accident, and the issues he raised should be taken seriously in order to prevent further distrust and polarization within our political system. If these problems are ignored, voters will leave the electorate all together; or, they will shift their allegiance to another candidate who motivates them just as Trump did. I believe the more likely scenario will be the latter, which could lead to substantial threats to the legitimacy of democracy and the integrity of democratic institutions moving forward.
5 Howard, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana* 232 – 33.
8 Williams, *Huey Long 519; Kane, Louisiana Hayride* 212.
13 Pew Research. “Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority.”

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The sources listed in this first section represent a collection of mainly primary and secondary sources in the form of books, journals, reports, government documents, public opinion polls, and online content. In the second section I list all sources and evidence drawn from the William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey P. Long. This collection includes materials produced during Long’s political career and relating to his assassination and spans a wide range of medium. It is housed in the Tulane University Special Collections Repository as part of the Louisiana Research Collection.


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