Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Alternatif Politika, 2026, 18 (2): 183-206
https://doi.org/10.53376/ap.2026.07

THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION AND POPULISM: A COMPARATIVE READING OF MOUFFE AND ROSANVALLON*

TEMSİLİN KRİZİ VE POPÜLİZM: MOUFFE VE ROSANVALLON ÜZERİNDEN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI BİR OKUMA

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparative analysis of Chantal Mouffe's and Pierre Rosanvallon's approaches to populism through the framework of democratic representation. Rather than treating populism as a self-contained political phenomenon, the discussion situates it within the broader transformations that have reshaped representative institutions in contemporary democracies. For Mouffe, populism constitutes a political intervention aimed at bringing back into view forms of conflict that have been depoliticised under neoliberal hegemony. Rosanvallon, by contrast, understands populism as a simplifying dynamic that narrows the institutional, plural and mediated structures through which democratic representation ordinarily operates. The article demonstrates that this divergence illuminates a wider theoretical debate about the limits, functioning and institutional conditions of

* During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT by OpenAI. The standard ChatGPT model available at the time of use was used solely for limited language editing, improving clarity and readability, and checking the fluency of academic expression. The tool was not used to generate the article's conceptual framework, scholarly argument, analysis, interpretation, sources, or conclusions. The author reviewed and edited the text in full and takes complete responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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* Makale Geliş Tarihi / Article Received: 25.12.2025
Makale Kabul Tarihi / Article Accepted: 30.04.2026

representation in contemporary democratic settings. From this perspective, populism appears less as a mere symptom of democratic crisis than as a phenomenon that renders visible the boundaries and structural tensions inherent in representative politics.

Keywords: Populism, Democratic Representation, Crisis of Representation, Political Legitimacy, Democratic Theory.

ÖZ

Bu makale, Chantal Mouffe ve Pierre Rosanvallon'un popülizm yaklaşımlarını demokratik temsil kuramı çerçevesinde karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemektedir. Popülizm burada, tek başına bir siyasal olgu olarak değil, çağdaş demokrasilerde temsilin geçirdiği yapısal dönüşüm bağlamında ele alınmaktadır. Mouffe, popülizmi neoliberal hegemonya altında depolitize edilen siyasal çatışmayı yeniden görünür kılmaya yönelik bir siyasal müdahale olarak yorumlarken; Rosanvallon, popülizmi demokratik temsilin kurumsal, çoğulcu ve aracılı yapısını daraltan bir basitleştirme eğilimi olarak değerlendirmektedir. Makale, bu karşıtlığın çağdaş demokrasilerde temsilin sınırları, işleyişi ve kurumsal koşullarına ilişkin daha geniş bir teorik tartışmayı görünür kıldığını göstermektedir. Bu çerçevede popülizm, demokratik temsilin krizi karşısında ortaya çıkan bir semptomdan ziyade, temsilin sınırlarını ve kurumsal gerilimlerini görünür hâle getiren bir olgu olarak ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Popülizm, Demokratik Temsil, Temsil Krizi, Siyasal Meşruiyet, Demokratik Kuram.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of populism has become a defining feature of contemporary politics, challenging the stability of liberal democracies worldwide. This article treats this development not simply as a reaction to economic dislocation, but as a symptom of a deeper transformation in the mechanisms of political representation through which demands are mediated, authorised, and translated into representative politics. This shift is best understood in light of the 2008 financial crisis, which exposed structural tensions within the neoliberal order, including widening

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https://doi.org/10.53376/ap.2026.07

inequality, austerity-driven governance, and the growing insulation of political decision-making from popular pressures. These economic pressures also had important political consequences. Over time, mainstream parties grew increasingly similar in their policy agendas, leaving voters with a narrower range of policy choices. Yet the economic crisis was merely the catalyst for a more profound crisis of representation. As mainstream governing parties weakened their links to society and became more state-centred, the gap between citizens and politics widened. These developments have led some scholars to speak of a wider "populist moment" in contemporary democracies (Mouffe), while others describe the consolidation of a broader "populist age" marked by deep transformations in the representative model (Rosanvallon). Rather than choosing between these diagnoses, this article argues that the tension between them exposes a fundamental disagreement over what political representation can and cannot achieve under contemporary democratic conditions.

Populist leaders construct a sharp divide between a unified and virtuous 'people' and a political elite they depict as self-interested, and on this basis claim that only they can speak for the 'true will' of the people. This mode of populist rhetoric has been mobilised in several Western democracies by movements appealing to voters who feel economically or culturally 'left behind'. In parts of Central and Eastern Europe and the broader Global South, it has often been associated with majoritarian forms of governance that pair nationalist assertiveness with an unmediated link to the electorate, often at the expense of liberal checks and balances. What is at stake in this construction, however, is not merely a rhetorical strategy but a competing conception of how political legitimacy is generated and sustained.

Conceptually, however, the concept of populism itself remains notoriously contested. The term is used to describe a wide range of political actors and contexts, carries predominantly negative connotations in public debate, and has generated competing analytical definitions within the academic literature. Laclau's (2005: xi, 18-19, 153) intervention is particularly significant in this respect, as it reframes populism not as a deviation from democratic politics but as one of the fundamental logics through which collective identities and political frontiers are constructed. Mouffe's later work radicalises this insight by framing left populism as a democratic response to the post-democratic condition produced by neoliberal hegemony, and as a way of restoring equality, popular sovereignty, and the agonistic character of democratic politics (Mouffe, 2018: 35-36, 40, 68, 79; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 114, 193). Contemporary populism research has approached this debate from different angles, including ideational, discursive, and democratic-theoretical perspectives. Authors such as Bonikowski (2017) have emphasised the analytical diversity of populism as a concept, while Urbinati (2019) and Vergara (2020) have drawn attention to its implications for

representative democracy, plebiscitarian leadership, and constitutional mediation. A broader line of debate has also focused more directly on the relationship between populism and democracy; in this respect, Abts and Rummens (2007) remain particularly important for clarifying the tension between populist claims to popular unity and the pluralist structure of democratic politics. Situating Mouffe and Rosanvallon within this broader literature helps clarify that their disagreement is not simply about populism as a political style or strategy, but about the democratic conditions under which representation, legitimacy, and "the people" can be articulated.

To clarify how these developments have altered the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions, two recent interventions are especially instructive: Pierre Rosanvallon's account of populism as a crisis tendency within representative democracy (Rosanvallon, 2020: 145-166), and Chantal Mouffe's counter-position, which sees left populism not as a democratic threat but as a way of channelling contemporary forms of resistance to the post-democratic neoliberal order towards a more egalitarian democratic project (Mouffe, 2018: 39-58, 79-86; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 114, 193). The contrast between these two approaches raises a central question: what does their disagreement reveal about the contemporary crisis of representation, and how might their competing diagnoses help us better understand the relationship between populism and democracy? Rather than positing two incompatible logics of representation, this article argues that Mouffe and Rosanvallon articulate two different conceptions of representative democracy and two contrasting ways of understanding the relationship between populism, political conflict, and institutional mediation under contemporary conditions. To address this question, the article develops a comparative conceptual analysis of how each theorist interprets representation, the dynamics of conflict, and the possibilities for democratic renewal.

Despite the growing body of work on populism, the relationship between populist politics and democratic representation has seldom been examined through a systematic comparison of Mouffe's and Rosanvallon's positions. Existing studies tend to engage with each author separately. Cunha and Cassimiro (2022), for example, offer a valuable reconstruction of Rosanvallon's theory of populism as a form of "polarised democracy", but they treat Mouffe only indirectly and do not pursue the deeper theoretical implications of the contrast between their approaches. Conversely, Cervera-Marzal (2022) clarifies several widespread misreadings of Mouffe, particularly with regard to her understanding of leadership and democratic conflict, yet does not develop a sustained engagement with Rosanvallon's critique of populist simplification. As a result, the theoretical stakes of their disagreement remain under-theorised, particularly with regard to the limits of democratic representation under conditions of populist mobilisation. This article addresses this gap by placing their arguments in direct

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dialogue and by showing how their different conceptions of "the people", political conflict and institutional mediation bring the stakes of the contemporary populism–democracy debate into sharper focus.

Methodologically, the article develops a comparative conceptual analysis based on close readings of Mouffe's and Rosanvallon's major works, supported by selected secondary literature on populism, representation, and democratic theory. This allows the identification not only of the main lines along which their arguments diverge, but also of the shared analytical terrain on which their debates take shape. In addition to its comparative conceptual focus, the analysis also incorporates an evaluative dimension, by examining how each author understands the democratic possibilities and risks associated with the current populist turn. Rather than seeking a full synthesis between these approaches, the comparative reading is used as a diagnostic tool to bring into view the tensions and limits within competing conceptions of representative democracy. The following section, therefore, sets out the wider theoretical context for these discussions, focusing on the major strands in contemporary populism research, the different understandings of democracy that inform them, and the frictions these generate within contemporary representative regimes.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE POPULISM–DEMOCRACY NEXUS

Several distinct strands of scholarship have shaped recent debates on the relationship between populism and democracy, each advancing a different understanding of what populism is and how it relates to representative institutions. This section reviews the principal approaches that organise debates on populism and democracy—populism as a thin-centred ideology, a political style, a discursive logic, and a moralised form of anti-pluralism—and shows how they rest on different assumptions about political representation, conflict, and mediation, thereby clarifying the contrast between Mouffe and Rosanvallon.

Mudde and Kaltwasser treat populism, first of all, as a thin-centred ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps – "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" – and demands that politics be the unmediated expression of the people's will. Within this framework, anti-elitism is not incidental but constitutive: populist actors claim to embody the only authentic voice of the people and set this against self-serving, unrepresentative elites (Mudde, 2004: 543; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 11-16). They also emphasise the ideological thinness of populism, understood as its capacity to attach itself to a wide range of "host" ideologies on both the right and the left, a feature that reflects its appeal to an undifferentiated people and its avoidance of programmatic specificity that might expose internal divisions (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 6-

7). This exclusive claim to represent "the people" carries clear anti-pluralist implications, insofar as populism tends to deny the legitimacy of rival political voices and to reject a genuinely pluralist understanding of democratic competition (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 7-8, 81). Finally, they locate the main point of tension not in democracy as such, but in the liberal-constitutional components of contemporary democratic systems, evident in populism's suspicion of intermediary institutions and its recurrent hostility to constitutional adjudication and judicial review, which are portrayed as illegitimate constraints on popular sovereignty (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 81-82, 116-117). This understanding foregrounds a conception of democracy in which representation is reduced to immediacy, leaving little room for institutional mediation or pluralist contestation.

Moffitt departs from ideational accounts by approaching populism not as a coherent ideology but as a political style, defined by a repertoire of performative practices through which leaders seek to present themselves as the authentic voice of "the people" (Moffitt, 2016: 24-30; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 386-391). At the centre of this style is the active construction and dramatisation of crisis: populist actors do not merely respond to crises but routinely frame and intensify them in ways that heighten political urgency and sharpen polarisation (Moffitt, 2016: 45-67). This performative repertoire rests on leader-centred communication, emotional expressiveness and a sharpened "us–them" distinction, which function less as ideological commitments than as stylistic techniques (Moffitt, 2016: 48-59; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 394-396). Moffitt further argues that the mediatisation of contemporary politics provides a particularly favourable environment for this style, insofar as media logics privilege dramatic, personalised and affectively charged performances (Moffitt, 2016: 84-100). From this perspective, the relationship between populism and democracy is located not primarily at the level of institutions or programmes, but within the communicative dynamics through which political representation is enacted (Moffitt, 2016: 113-125). From the perspective of this article, the significance of the stylistic approach lies less in its descriptive power than in how it shifts attention from institutional mediation to the performative enactment of political representation.

Laclau conceptualises populism as a distinctive political logic rooted in the articulation of heterogeneous social demands into a shared political project (Laclau, 2005: x-xi, 224, 232). The underlying theoretical premise of this conception is anti-essentialist: because society can never achieve full closure or a final fixation of meaning, political identities cannot be read off from a pre-given social order but must be discursively constructed (Laclau, 2005: x, 94, 224, 232). At the heart of this logic lies the claim that "the people" is not a sociological given but a discursively constituted subject, formed through the linking of disparate demands within an equivalential chain (Laclau, 2005: 93, 224). This process rests

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on the construction of a line of political division (Laclau, 2005: 74, 93, 123). Populism names the moment when dispersed grievances are brought into a common political frame and condensed into a broader collective identity (Laclau, 2005: 74, 93). Central to this operation is the empty signifier—most clearly "the people"—whose unifying force derives from the partial suspension of fixed particular content and its capacity to represent the chain as a whole (Laclau, 2005: 70, 96, 123, 171, 232). On this view, populism is not a deviation from democratic norms, but one of the mechanisms through which political demands are reorganised and the boundaries of representation are redrawn. It is precisely this conception of populism as a logic of articulation that Mouffe later reworks into a normative project aimed at reconfiguring democratic conflict under neoliberal conditions.

Müller shifts the emphasis away from ideological or stylistic accounts and towards the claim to exclusive moral representation that, in his view, distinguishes populism from other forms of democratic representation (Müller, 2016: 19-20, 39-40). At the centre of this claim lies the idea that populists speak not for one part of society but for the people as a whole – "the 100 per cent" (Müller, 2016: 3-4, 20-22). Those who fall outside this constructed unity can then be cast as not properly belonging to the people at all, which is precisely what gives populism its anti-pluralist character (Müller, 2016: 3-4, 19-24). Such a claim is difficult to reconcile with democratic arrangements that presuppose the coexistence of free and equal citizens holding divergent views (Müller, 2016: 3-4). The same logic also informs how political opposition is treated: rivals are not seen as legitimate competitors but as "enemies of the people" whose presence is taken to undermine the authentic popular will (Müller, 2016: 3-4, 39-40). Müller's concern is not limited to the language through which populist claims are articulated. He is equally interested in what happens when such claims are carried into government practice (Müller, 2016: 4-5). In his account, populist actors who present themselves as the sole representatives of the people tend, once in office, to treat political institutions as instruments to be secured rather than as arenas of plural contestation (Müller, 2016: 57, 63-66). This is visible in recurrent attempts to bring key state bodies under political control, often justified as necessary expressions of the people's will (Müller, 2016: 65-66). Still, for Müller, they illustrate a more profound difficulty: the strain that exclusive claims to representation place on the pluralist foundations of democratic politics (Müller, 2016: 3-5, 57, 63-66). Müller's critique thus centres on the moral closure of representation, a concern that resonates strongly with Rosanvallon's diagnosis of populism as a pathology of democratic mediation (Rosanvallon, 2020: 145-166).

Much of the contemporary literature reflects an unresolved tension in how populism is situated within democratic theory. On the one hand, Urbinati notes that some contemporary readers see populism as a legitimate claim to power by

"the ordinary many" and even as an opportunity to rejuvenate democracy (Urbinati, 2019: 2, 19-20). On the other hand, she argues that populism in power tends to turn elections into plebiscites or acclamations, weaken mediating institutions, and narrow the space for plural judgement and institutional scrutiny (Urbinati, 2019: 7-8, 191-192). What follows from this tension is not a simple verdict for or against populism, but a disagreement about how far democratic representation can absorb conflict without eroding political plurality. Across these accounts, the people are repeatedly invoked as a unified subject, yet the consequences of this move for democratic life are interpreted in markedly different ways. This spectrum provides the context in which the divergence between Mouffe and Rosanvallon becomes analytically significant, since each offers a different assessment of whether the populist rearticulation of "the people" can deepen democratic life or instead signals a distortion of the representative model. A comparable tendency can be identified in earlier populist imaginaries that treated "the people" as a morally unified and immediately knowable subject.[1] This offers a historical counterpoint that sharpens Rosanvallon's claim that modern representation depends on mediation and cannot rest on any direct embodiment of a pre-given social whole.

2. CHANTAL MOUFFE: LEFT POPULISM AND AGONISTIC DEMOCRACY

Chantal Mouffe's contribution to contemporary democratic theory is centred on the claim that modern politics cannot be understood without recognising the constitutive role of conflict. Drawing on her long-standing collaboration with Ernesto Laclau, she rejects both the liberal aspiration to rational consensus and the widespread tendency to treat populism as a deviation from democratic norms. Instead, she argues that political identities take shape through processes of articulation, that antagonism is intrinsic to the political, and that democracy depends on institutions capable of transforming antagonism into agonism—that is, into a form of contestation among adversaries who accept the legitimacy of each other's claims. These premises inform her recent formulation of left populism, which she presents as a strategy for mobilising democratic energies in response to what she describes as the depoliticising effects of neoliberal hegemony. The following section examines the theoretical framework of Mouffe's project, first by setting out its conceptual foundations and then by turning to its expression in her account of left populism and agonistic democracy. At the same time, this emphasis on conflict carries implications for how democratic

[1] A useful early example is the nineteenth-century Russian Narodnik movement, which idealised the narod ('people' or 'nation' in English) as an authentic and morally unified social subject that could be directly known and politically invoked without strong mediating institutions (Volkov, 1982: 91-94). The comparison is not one of historical equivalence, but of a similar representational imaginary.

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representation is understood, particularly regarding the role of institutions in mediating political divisions.

Hegemony, Conflict, and Political Articulation

The starting point of Mouffe's project lies in the theory of hegemony she developed with Ernesto Laclau, in which political identities are understood not as the expression of pre-given social interests, but as the contingent outcome of discursive practices of articulation. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the social field is marked by a constitutive incompleteness that prevents any final fixation of meaning, thereby opening a space for hegemonic practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 111-115, 134-135). Within this framework, social demands acquire political significance only insofar as they are linked through practices of articulation organised around particular key points that give them a provisional fixation on meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 113-114, 135). Laclau later develops this line of reasoning in *On Populist Reason*, where he conceptualises populism as a political logic that unifies heterogeneous demands into an equivalential chain, constructing "the people" as a political subject (Laclau, 2005: xi, 18-19, 93, 121). The term that anchors this chain functions as an empty signifier, whose unifying capacity derives from its lack of fixed semantic content (Laclau, 2005: 171). Through such acts of naming—illustrated in Laclau's discussion of the Italian Communist Party and the construction of "the people"—a fragmented set of grievances is condensed into a coherent political identity (Laclau, 2005: 182-183). This understanding of hegemony and articulation provides the conceptual foundation for Mouffe's later formulation of left populism, in which the formation of collective identities is treated as an inherently political and contingent process rather than as the reflection of stable social categories. In line with the purposes of this article, the importance of this framework lies less in its ontological claims— namely that society lacks final closure, identities are discursively and contingently constituted, and antagonism is constitutive of the political— than in how it informs Mouffe's understanding of representation as a contingent and conflictual process.

The Left Populist Strategy

Mouffe situates the emergence of left populism within what she describes as the long crisis of neoliberal hegemony. In her later work, she argues that the convergence of centre-left and centre-right parties around a post-political consensus has narrowed the space of democratic contestation, deprived citizens of real alternatives, and created fertile terrain for right-wing populism, while also opening a space for a left populist strategy capable of re-politicising the public sphere (Mouffe, 2018: 4-5; 2005: 65-69). Drawing on a Schmittian understanding of the political, she maintains that collective identities are constituted through

we/they distinctions and that antagonism remains an ever-present possibility, so democracy cannot be grounded in the elimination of conflict through rational consensus (Mouffe, 2005: 10-11, 15-18; 2000: 12-13, 100-103). Yet, against Schmitt's friend/enemy conclusion, Mouffe argues that the democratic task is to construct political frontiers in ways that transform enemies into adversaries within a shared symbolic space, organised around a conflictual consensus on liberty and equality (Mouffe, 2000: 12-13, 111-112; 2005: 19-21, 29-31). From this perspective, a renewed democratic project must articulate a collective will and establish a chain of equivalence among democratic demands so as to challenge neoliberal hegemony while remaining committed to agonistic pluralism and the radicalisation of democracy (Mouffe, 2013: 7-9, 22-25).

More specifically, Mouffe's distinctive contribution lies in how she conceptualises the construction of "the people" as a democratic and hegemonic practice. For Mouffe (2018: 62-63), "the people" is not an empirical referent or a sociological category, but a political construction that emerges through the articulation of democratic demands and the formation of collective identifications. Here Mouffe explicitly builds on Laclau's formulation in *On Populist Reason*, particularly his account of how "the people" functions as an empty signifier capable of unifying disparate demands (Laclau, 2005: 72, 94-95, 171). Yet Mouffe departs from Laclau by emphasising the normative direction of this construction: a left populist frontier must oppose neoliberal sedimentations while remaining inclusive and committed to democratic pluralism, rather than defining the people in ethnic, moralised or exclusionary terms.[2] On this view, left populism is a hegemonic practice aimed at transforming antagonism into an agonistic confrontation that widens the horizon of equality and social justice.

Another key dimension of Mouffe's approach concerns the role of political passions in sustaining political identification. Challenging the common view that democratic politics should rely solely on rational deliberation, she argues that mobilisation is always shaped by passion—understood not as impulse but as the affective commitment that links individuals to a shared political project. Any successful hegemonic project must therefore channel such passions towards democratic ends. This position builds on Laclau's earlier claim that affect is constitutive of political subjectivity, since empty signifiers become effective nodal points only when they attract strong emotional attachments (Laclau, 2005: 110-

[2] Critics have nevertheless argued that populist constructions of "the people," including those defended in more democratic or left-populist terms, may slide towards anti-pluralist or moralised forms of opposition if the distinction between adversary and enemy is not institutionally and normatively sustained. For representative critiques along these lines, see Abts and Rummens (2007), Müller (2016), and Urbinati (2019).

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111, 119, 169-170, 249). [3] Mouffe further develops this argument in *Agonistics*, where she insists that under neoliberal and post-political conditions the problem is not the disappearance of political passions but the absence of democratic channels through which they can be expressed. When agonistic forms of identification are blocked, passions are denied a democratic outlet and tend instead to be rearticulated through nationalist, religious, or exclusionary forms. The task of a left-populist strategy is therefore not to suppress affect but to mobilise frustration, indignation, and hope towards democratic ends by constructing collective forms of identification around egalitarian objectives (Mouffe, 2013: 12–13). In this sense, the construction of "the people" is not merely a rhetorical device of mobilisation but part of the representative constitution of a collective political subject under conditions in which existing institutions no longer offer real alternatives or adequate voice (Mouffe, 2013).

Alongside the affective dimension of hegemony, Mouffe assigns a central place to political leadership, a point that has often been misunderstood in the secondary literature. Some critics have taken this emphasis to suggest a drift towards a Schmittian conception of decisive authority. Yet this reading overlooks the precise way in which Mouffe reworks, rather than adopts, Schmitt's understanding of the political. For Schmitt, the political is defined by the friend–enemy distinction and by the sovereign power to decide in moments of exception. Mouffe draws on Schmitt's conflictual understanding of the political but rejects the friend–enemy logic as a basis for democratic politics, together with its decisionist and exclusionary implications. Leadership within a left-populist project is not an expression of unaccountable personal power but a necessary moment of political articulation within a broader hegemonic strategy. Leadership gives symbolic form to dispersed demands so that actors can recognise themselves as part of a shared political project (Mouffe, 2018: 70).[4] As Cervera-Marzal (2022) also shows, accusations of Schmittianism often rest on reductive readings of her work; far from rejecting representative democracy, Mouffe explicitly distances herself from Schmitt's claim that liberalism and democracy are fundamentally incompatible. Her position, therefore, diverges sharply from Schmitt's

[3] Here affect should be understood in a Laclauian, not merely psychological, sense. For Laclau, affect is not external to discourse but is constituted through the differential cathexes of a signifying chain; hegemonic signifiers become politically effective only through radical investment, and naming functions as the retroactive quilting of an otherwise unstable discursive field—close to the Lacanian point de capiton. In that sense, the construction of "the people" depends on cathectic investment in empty or hegemonic signifiers that partially fix meaning and organise identification (Laclau, 2005: 110-111, 119, 181, 249; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112, 135).

[4] Mouffe's understanding of affect and political identification here is closely tied to Laclau's discourse theory and its Lacanian inflection. Collective identities are not pre-given, but are partially fixed through hegemonic articulation, as dispersed social demands are linked into a chain of equivalence around nodal points; in this sense, the Lacanian notion of *point de capiton* (quilting point) helps explain how political meaning is provisionally stabilised.

decisionism. Rather than grounding politics in an enemy relation culminating in sovereign exclusion, Mouffe (2000: 80-107) seeks to transform antagonism into agonism, so that adversaries confront one another within a shared democratic space while recognising the legitimacy of their mutual presence. Leadership, in this sense, becomes not a suspension of democracy but a mechanism through which democratic identification is mobilised and sustained.

This transformation, however, is not secured by the conflictual character of the political alone. In Mouffe's framework, agonistic contestation depends on a shared ethico-political commitment to democratic principles, together with institutions capable of channelling conflict without turning opponents into enemies. The passage from antagonism to agonism should therefore be understood not as something automatically guaranteed, but as a fragile democratic accomplishment sustained through hegemonic practices, institutional mediation, and the mutual recognition of opponents as legitimate adversaries.

Agonistic Democracy: Conflict, Pluralism and Democratic Contestation

For Mouffe, conflict is not a contingent failure of democratic politics but one of its constitutive conditions. Agonistic democracy, in Mouffe's sense, denotes the transformation of antagonism—where opponents are treated as enemies—into agonism, a mode of political contestation among legitimate adversaries. Against liberal and deliberative models that seek democratic stability through rational consensus and the neutralisation of disagreement, Mouffe argues that such approaches obscure the hegemonic and conflictual character of political orders and thereby misrecognise the nature of the political itself. Because every social order rests on exclusions and power relations that cannot be fully reconciled, democracy cannot be understood as the achievement of a definitive agreement. Its task is instead to provide legitimate institutions and practices through which conflict can be expressed in an agonistic rather than antagonistic form. Mouffe therefore distinguishes antagonism, in which political opponents are treated as enemies to be destroyed, from agonism, in which adversaries recognise one another as legitimate participants in a shared political space despite enduring disagreement. Crucially, she offers no final guarantee that this transformation will hold once and for all: antagonism remains an ever-present possibility. What sustains agonistic democracy, in her view, is a conflictual consensus around the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality, together with the presence of democratic channels through which dissent can be confronted without turning opponents into enemies (Mouffe, 2000: 12-13, 100-103; 2005: 2-5, 19-21, 29-31).

Crucially, agonism does not rest on any shared substantive consensus regarding political ends. What adversaries share is not a common vision of the good, but a commitment to sustaining their struggle within democratically

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constituted limits. In this sense, agonistic democracy institutionalises conflict without neutralising its stakes, enabling competing hegemonic projects to confront one another while preserving the conditions of political pluralism. It does not aim to dissolve conflict but to provide institutional and symbolic frameworks for legitimate contestation. By criticising consensus-oriented liberalism, Mouffe reasserts the centrality of political struggle to democratic life and insists that democratic vitality depends on the visible articulation of competing projects rather than on their premature reconciliation (Mouffe, 2005: 10-34). While agonistic democracy offers a powerful response to the depoliticisation of contemporary politics, it also rests on a conception of representation that prioritises conflictual articulation over the stabilising role of institutional mediation.

3. PIERRE ROSANVALLON: REPRESENTATION, MEDIATION AND DEMOCRATIC COMPLEXITY

Pierre Rosanvallon approaches populism from a different angle than Mouffe. Rather than treating it as a strategy for re-politicising democracy, he analyses populism as a response to the long-term erosion of representative mediation in complex societies. His work therefore shifts attention from political mobilisation to the institutional, historical and social conditions under which democratic legitimacy is produced and contested.

Democratic Representation as a Multidimensional Structure

Rosanvallon's account of democratic representation begins from the premise that modern democracy cannot be reduced to the electoral expression of popular sovereignty alone. He argues that representative government rests on a plurality of sources of legitimacy rather than a single electoral mandate, and he reconstructs these sources as three complementary dimensions: impartiality, proximity, and reflexivity (Rosanvallon, 2008). Impartiality refers to the role of independent institutions capable of embodying a general interest that transcends partisan conflict; proximity designates the growing democratic demand for institutions that remain attentive and responsive to ordinary experience; and reflexivity captures the expectation that representative institutions adequately reflect the complexity, diversity and evolving structure of contemporary societies. This framework builds on Rosanvallon's earlier argument that the "people" cannot be directly present in modern politics, since political equality requires an abstract conception of individuals at the cost of a disincorporation of the social body (Rosanvallon, 1998: 12, 19). Democratic representation thus operates through institutional mechanisms that give political form to social plurality rather than mirroring a pre-existing collective subject (Rosanvallon, 1998: 22). Rosanvallon further argues that democratic legitimacy today cannot rest on electoral authorisation alone but depends on the ongoing capacity of institutions to justify their exercise of power

and sustain public confidence beyond the moment of election (Rosanvallon, 2015: 252, 297, 341-342). Taken together, these elements form what Rosanvallon conceptualises as a multidimensional structure of democratic representation, in which legitimacy is dispersed across several complementary registers rather than concentrated in a single majoritarian source. Rosanvallon's account cannot be reduced to a deliberative or procedural model of democracy centred on rational consensus. In this respect, unlike Habermasian approaches that privilege communicative agreement, his framework emphasises reflexivity, proximity, and the dispersed practices through which power is monitored, contested, and corrected. More broadly, Rosanvallon's approach is anchored in a historically informed reflection on democratic representation and legitimacy, one that links popular sovereignty to institutional mediation and extra-electoral forms of oversight rather than to the direct embodiment of a unified people.

For Rosanvallon, this multidimensional configuration of democratic representation has become increasingly fragile as traditional mechanisms of representative democracy have eroded over time. He traces this erosion to a long historical process in which citizens have gradually shifted from trusting authorised representatives to exercising more diffuse and vigilant forms of democratic power, conceptualised as counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006). Practices of surveillance, denunciation, and public evaluation initially functioned as correctives that complemented representative institutions, but their expansion has progressively destabilised the very sources of legitimacy on which representation depends. This development has been reinforced by the weakening of intermediary bodies such as political parties, trade unions, and civic associations, which previously structured the relationship between citizens and the state (Rosanvallon, 2008). As these mediating institutions have declined, electoral authorisation has increasingly lost its capacity to generate sustained belief in political authority. The resulting gap between citizens and governing institutions, therefore, reflects not merely a crisis of confidence, but a more profound structural transformation of the representative model itself—one that populism does not originate but rather exposes and intensifies by offering an illusory promise of immediacy and unity. For Rosanvallon, however, this does not imply dispensing with "the people," but rethinking it as a plural and mediated democratic presence rather than a unitary subject of direct representation (Rosanvallon, 1998: 12, 19, 22; 2020: 145-166). For Rosanvallon, this erosion does not point towards a return to immediacy or plebiscitary shortcuts but instead underscores the need to attend more closely to the plural and mediated processes through which democratic legitimacy is generated (Rosanvallon, 2006; 2008; 2020). In this view, weakened democratic institutions are renewed not by the direct self-expression of a unified people, but through the dispersed agency of citizens, intermediary bodies, and oversight institutions that subject power to scrutiny, public judgement, and revision over

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time. From this perspective, populism appears less as a source of democratic renewal than as a symptom of the weakening of those mediating structures through which democratic legitimacy is ordinarily produced. In analytical terms, this model treats democratic representation not primarily as a problem of political mobilisation, but as a question of how legitimacy is reconstituted through layered and institutionally mediated democratic practices.

Populism as a Simplification of Democratic Representation

Rosanvallon's starting point is the claim that populism represents not simply a new style of political mobilisation but a systematic simplification of the democratic process. Contemporary democracies, he argues, are inherently mediated systems in which representation operates through multiple electoral, institutional and social channels that cannot be reduced to a single expression of a unified popular will (Rosanvallon, 2008). Populism challenges this structure by presenting political mediation not as a constitutive feature of democratic life but as an illegitimate obstacle to popular sovereignty. Rosanvallon characterises this orientation as a drive towards a simplified conception of democracy, in which representative institutions, intermediary bodies and counter-majoritarian mechanisms are recast as artificial constraints imposed by distant elites (Rosanvallon, 2020). What is lost in this process is the plural and multi-layered character of democratic legitimacy—its reliance on institutional differentiation, judgement and mediation (Rosanvallon, 2008; 2020). Populism thus reduces democracy to the immediate expression of an undivided people, weakening the mediations through which democratic representation becomes possible. Rosanvallon's critique thus rests on the assumption that democratic representation necessarily depends on complexity, differentiation and temporal mediation, all of which are flattened by populist appeals to immediacy.

A central dimension of this democratic simplification, in Rosanvallon's account, is the homogenisation of the people. Whereas modern democracies rest on the recognition that society is composed of diverse and often conflicting social worlds, populism constructs "the people" as a single and morally unified subject whose will is treated as immediately knowable (Rosanvallon, 1998). This construction suppresses the structural heterogeneity of contemporary societies—differences of class, gender, geography and experience that render any notion of a fully consolidated people analytically untenable (Rosanvallon, 1998: 12, 19). Rosanvallon describes this operation as a process of homogenisation through which internal plurality is erased to sustain the claim that populist leaders alone embody the authentic general will (Rosanvallon, 2020). The result is a narrowing of the representative space, as voices that do not conform to the populist construction of the people are marginalised or dismissed as illegitimate. This stands in contrast to Rosanvallon's conception of democratic life as requiring

sustained attention to those rendered socially invisible or voiceless, whose experiences resist incorporation into a unitary political identity (Rosanvallon, 2014). In Rosanvallon's account, the simplification that characterises much populist reasoning does more than overlook social diversity; it limits the ability of democratic institutions to register and work with that diversity. Populist projects, he argues, seek to bypass the institutional and temporal procedures through which democratic legitimacy is normally formed and revised, and replace them with claims to an immediate and unified popular will (Rosanvallon, 2008; 2020). The issue is not only that some groups become less visible, but that the institutional and temporal structures that allow social plurality to be represented are set aside. Taken together, these arguments lead Rosanvallon to view democratic representation as a fragile arrangement that depends on mediation and on time—conditions that stand in clear tension with populist strategies centred on immediacy and continuous mobilisation.

Complex Democracy and the Limits of Majoritarian Representation

Rosanvallon does not approach democracy simply as a system of electoral authorisation. He is concerned, more broadly, with how modern democracies organise representation in societies marked by social diversity and growing distance between citizens and political institutions. Elections continue to play a central role in his account of democracy, but he is sceptical of the idea that electoral authorisation alone can sustain democratic legitimacy over time. In complex societies, he suggests, the trust placed in representative institutions depends on a wider set of expectations than those captured by periodic voting. As noted above, this broader account of legitimacy encompasses dimensions such as impartiality, proximity, and reflexivity, as well as practices of civic vigilance and public scrutiny that operate beyond the electoral moment and address some of the limits of representative authorisation (Rosanvallon, 2006; 2008).

In this framework, impartiality occupies a vital place. Rosanvallon argues that democratic authority has always rested on more than majority rule, and that institutions capable of maintaining a degree of neutrality and distance from partisan competition play a stabilising role in democratic life (Rosanvallon, 2008). Bodies such as constitutional courts, regulatory agencies, and independent oversight institutions matter not because they stand above politics, but because they introduce forms of judgement that are less directly tied to shifting electoral majorities. Rosanvallon is wary of populist arguments that treat such institutions as illegitimate constraints imposed by distant elites. From his perspective, impartiality helps to secure basic expectations of equality before the law, protect minority claims, and lend continuity to public decision-making. Practices of vigilance, evaluation, and public scrutiny, which he discusses elsewhere,

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complement this role by responding to the limits of electoral authorisation without displacing it (Rosanvallon, 2006).

Rosanvallon treats proximity and reflexivity as further dimensions of legitimacy whose importance has grown as democratic societies have become more complex. By proximity, he does not refer to the emotional closeness often cultivated by populist leaders, but to institutional arrangements that keep public authority attentive to ordinary experience and socially accessible. In this sense, proximity concerns forms of engagement through which institutions allow citizens to recognise themselves within the political order (Rosanvallon, 2008). Reflexivity refers to something different: the capacity of democratic institutions to acknowledge their own limits and to revise their practices in response to criticism and conflict. Representation, in this view, appears less as a settled structure than as a process that remains open to adjustment as social conditions change. Where populist rhetoric tends to equate responsiveness with the immediate expression of a unified popular will, Rosanvallon emphasises the mediated forms of interaction—such as dialogue and institutional learning—through which democratic authority is built and maintained over time.

These concerns reappear in Rosanvallon's discussion of counter-democracy, which he defines as the range of practices through which citizens monitor and contest public power outside elections. Such practices include ongoing forms of surveillance exercised by journalists, civil society organisations, and social movements, as well as moments of interdiction, when collective mobilisation seeks to block or delay particular decisions (Rosanvallon, 2006). He also draws attention to practices of public judgement, through which governments and policies are assessed across different arenas. Rather than treating these activities as signs of democratic breakdown, he understands them as ways of responding to the limits of electoral representation by keeping power exposed to scrutiny between elections.

Rosanvallon is careful to distinguish practices such as scrutiny, protest, and public judgement from forms of anti-democratic resistance. While these activities are often interpreted as signs of distrust, he treats them instead as characteristic features of contemporary democratic engagement. In his view, modern citizenship cannot be reduced to periodic acts of electoral choice, since the complexity of social life generates demands and conflicts that extend well beyond the electoral moment (Rosanvallon, 2006). Practices associated with counter-democracy therefore provide ways of holding political authority to account between elections, through forms of oversight that remain dispersed but politically consequential. In this respect, Rosanvallon departs from liberal-deliberative frameworks, particularly Habermasian models, which tend to privilege communicative justification and the rational testing of claims in the public sphere. By contrast, he

emphasises the dispersed, conflictual, and extra-electoral practices through which democratic legitimacy is continuously monitored, challenged, and corrected. This understanding stands in contrast to populist framings of extra-electoral contestation, which tend to dismiss such practices as illegitimate challenges to a singular popular will. For Rosanvallon, however, it is through these non-majoritarian forms of engagement that democratic life remains open to contestation and revision over time.

A related concern appears in Rosanvallon's discussion of invisibility. He notes that large segments of society—such as precarious workers and care providers—are only weakly reflected in existing systems of representation, even though public decisions have a direct impact on their daily lives (Rosanvallon, 2014). Where such experiences fail to find a stable place within representative frameworks, claims to speak in the name of "the people" become correspondingly fragile. Representation, in this sense, depends on institutional capacities to register social differences and render them politically intelligible. He is sceptical that populist appeals to a unified people can address this difficulty in any sustained way, since the compression of internal diversity into a single collective figure tends to leave existing patterns of invisibility largely untouched. His account of complex democracy places greater emphasis on the slower and more demanding institutional work through which marginalised experiences are brought into democratic view.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: REPRESENTATION, MEDIATION, AND DEMOCRATIC CONFLICT

Both Mouffe and Rosanvallon begin from a shared diagnosis of contemporary democracies: they treat the current crisis not as a temporary disruption but as a structural transformation in the relationship between citizens and political institutions. For Mouffe (2013), the rise of post-democratic governance is rooted in a neoliberal consensus that has narrowed the horizon of political contestation and displaced central social conflicts from the democratic arena. Rosanvallon (2006) describes a comparable process, marked by the weakening of intermediary bodies, declining trust in political authorities, and the emergence of what he terms an "age of distrust". Both Mouffe and Rosanvallon draw attention to a growing mismatch between inherited forms of representation and the expectations placed on democratic institutions in socially diverse societies. This convergence provides a background against which their differing interpretations of populism take shape.

For both theorists, the crisis of representation is inseparable from a structural reconfiguration of the relationship between political elites and ordinary citizens. Mouffe (2005) emphasises that the convergence of centre-left and centre-right

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parties around a shared neoliberal framework has produced a "post-political" arrangement in which fundamental ideological choices are displaced by technocratic governance, narrowing the range of legitimate alternatives and fostering a sense of political dispossession. Rosanvallon (2008) describes a comparable process of disintermediation in which the traditional representative link is weakened, and political power is experienced as simultaneously distant and intrusive. As intermediary structures weaken and decision-making becomes more insulated, political authority is increasingly experienced as remote, a shift that helps to explain the spread of mistrust and contestation. In this sense, populism is treated not as an isolated mobilisation but as a response to broader changes in the organisation of democratic representation.

Here, Mouffe and Rosanvallon diverge sharply in their interpretation of the political meaning of the populist response. For Mouffe (2018), contemporary populist mobilisations—particularly on the left—attempt to reintroduce conflict into a depoliticised public sphere by constructing a new collective subject capable of challenging neoliberal hegemony. In this respect, she extends Laclau's insight that populism names a logic of political articulation through which dispersed demands are linked into a common project, while reworking it in a more explicitly democratic and egalitarian direction. Rosanvallon, by contrast, interprets populism as a reductive response to the growing complexity of contemporary democracies. Rosanvallon (2020) argues that populism simplifies political reality by constructing a homogeneous figure of "the people," privileging immediacy over mediation and rejecting the institutional pluralism on which democratic legitimacy depends. This diagnosis converges, in part, with Müller's anti-pluralist critique, since both emphasise the dangers of claims to exclusive representation, even if Rosanvallon places greater analytical weight on the erosion of mediation, judgement, and institutional complexity. In Mouffe's work, populism thus appears as a possible resource for democratic renewal, whereas in Rosanvallon's account it figures primarily as a sign of democratic fatigue.

This divergence rests on distinct understandings of political representation. For Mouffe (2005), representation is not a neutral transmission of pre-existing interests but an active process of articulation through which collective identities are constituted and contested. Because political identities are contingent and relational, democratic politics requires institutional spaces in which adversaries can struggle over the meaning of "the people" without negating each other's legitimacy. Here the influence of Laclau remains decisive: representation is tied to the political construction of a collective subject rather than to the mirroring of a pre-given social unity. Rosanvallon (2008), by contrast, approaches representation through the prism of democratic legitimacy's multiple dimensions—impartiality, proximity, reflexivity, and judgement. From this standpoint, populism threatens representation by collapsing these dimensions into a single plebiscitarian register.

By claiming an unmediated link to a unified people, populist leaders marginalise the plural mediations—parliaments, independent authorities, and civil society practices—through which democratic judgement is ordinarily exercised. In this respect, Urbinati's account of populism as a form of "direct representation" helps clarify the point at which appeals to popular mobilisation begin to turn elections into plebiscites or acclamations, thereby narrowing the institutional mediation and plural forms of judgment on which representative democracy depends (Urbinati, 2019: 7, 164, 168-169). Urbinati's broader argument is especially useful here because it also clarifies how populist representation departs from the party-based mandate model of representative democracy. Whereas mandate representation links electoral authorisation to advocacy and retrospective accountability, populist leadership claims to embody the people directly in the figure of the leader, thereby weakening intermediary parties and narrowing the space for plural judgement (Urbinati, 2019: 168-169, 191-192).

For Mouffe, the construction of a political "people" is a condition of democratic contestation; for Rosanvallon, the homogenisation of the people marks a regression that undermines the institutional complexity of modern representation. Yet both approaches reveal important limits when assessed against the structural foundations of representative democracy. Mouffe offers a compelling account of how collective political subjects are constructed under conditions of depoliticisation but pays less sustained attention to the institutional infrastructures through which representative government secures continuity, accountability, and the mediation of conflict over time. Her emphasis on political frontier-building and hegemonic mobilisation is analytically productive, yet it leaves relatively underdeveloped the constitutional, administrative, and party-organisational conditions that sustain contestation beyond moments of mobilisation. Rosanvallon, by contrast, provides a richer account of the plural institutional supports of democratic legitimacy, but gives less attention to how fragmented grievances are transformed into effective collective agency capable of challenging entrenched power relations. His defence of mediation, reflexivity, and institutional complexity is normatively significant, yet it may understate the extent to which representative orders themselves can become socially closed, politically inert, or insufficiently responsive to emerging conflicts. Read together, these limits suggest that representative democracy depends both on durable mediating structures and on capacities for political rearticulation when those structures no longer command democratic confidence. A related tension can also be identified in earlier forms of plebiscitary politics, where anti-elitist mobilisation likewise coexisted with simplified and majoritarian conceptions of democratic legitimacy,

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often at the expense of the mediated and plural foundations of representative government.[5]

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: REPRESENTATION, POPULISM, AND DEMOCRATIC STAKES

Debates on populism are often framed as disputes over regime type or political style. The analysis developed in this article suggests, however, that there are more fundamental debates about democratic representation. From this perspective, the question of whether populism constitutes a democratic threat or a democratic opportunity is analytically insufficient on its own. What is at stake instead is how democratic societies organise representation under conditions of social heterogeneity, political conflict, and declining trust. Mouffe approaches populism as a strategy for reactivating democratic contestation by constructing new collective political subjects, whereas Rosanvallon interprets it as a logic of simplification that narrows the plural and mediated processes through which democratic legitimacy is produced. Their disagreement, therefore, concerns not populism as such, but the normative principles that should govern the relationship between conflict, mediation, and legitimacy in modern democracies. In this sense, the Mouffe–Rosanvallon contrast clarifies the competing democratic responses to the contemporary crisis of representation. As the preceding analysis has shown, the contrast between Mouffe and Rosanvallon reflects less a disagreement over the democratic value of populism than a tension between competing normative priorities within democratic theory. Neither framework is sufficient on its own. The structural durability of representative democracy depends not only on institutions of mediation, oversight, and accountability, but also on the capacity to reorganise political demands when those institutions lose public legitimacy. Any adequate theory of contemporary representation must therefore explain both institutional resilience and moments of democratic rearticulation.

Mouffe's approach foregrounds the mobilising force of political conflict and offers a compelling response to the exclusions generated by the contemporary crisis of representation, yet leaves unresolved the normative and institutional conditions under which antagonism can be stabilised in agonistic democratic form rather than relapse into enmity. Rosanvallon, by contrast, offers a richer account of how democratic legitimacy is dispersed across plural mediating institutions, but is less able to explain how socially fragmented grievances are politically articulated into collective democratic agency. The article's contribution lies in showing that the crisis of representation is most fruitfully understood through the tension between these two perspectives: democratic renewal depends both on the political

[5] One historical illustration is Jacksonian populism, though the reference here is purely illustrative and not intended to imply a direct line of continuity with contemporary populism; see Jones (2021: 51).

articulation of conflict and on the institutional pluralisation of legitimacy. The disagreement between the two theorists is therefore best understood not as a clash between democratic and anti-democratic positions, but as a dispute over which dimensions of democratic representation should be given priority under conditions of crisis.

The normative tension identified above helps to explain why populism is so often interpreted as both a democratic resource and a democratic risk in contemporary debates. On the one hand, populist mobilisations can bring marginalised demands into the political arena and challenge forms of representation perceived as closed or unresponsive. On the other hand, they may weaken the plural and mediated structures through which democratic judgement and accountability are sustained. Which of these tendencies prevails depends less on populism as such than on the institutional and representative frameworks within which it operates. Read together, the perspectives developed by Mouffe and Rosanvallon underscore that the democratic consequences of populism are not predetermined but shaped by competing ways of organising conflict, mediation, and legitimacy. This shifts analytical attention away from assessing populism in isolation and towards the broader question of how contemporary democracies respond to the enduring crisis of representation.

This article has argued that contemporary debates on populism are best understood as debates about democratic representation. By placing the work of Chantal Mouffe and Pierre Rosanvallon in systematic dialogue, it has sought to move beyond the familiar opposition between populism as a democratic threat and populism as a democratic opportunity. The comparison shows that the current crisis of representation cannot be reduced to a single pathology but reflects competing understandings of how democracy should organise conflict, mediation, and legitimacy under conditions of social heterogeneity and declining trust. From this perspective, populism appears less as the cause of democratic malaise than as a focal point through which different democratic responses to that malaise take shape. The analysis also contributes to the literature by bringing together two bodies of work that are often discussed separately, thereby clarifying the normative stakes that underlie their divergent assessments of populism. Seen this way, the democratic effects of populist mobilisation cannot be inferred in advance but vary with the institutional settings in which political conflict is organised and legitimacy is produced. The durability of the current crisis of representation also makes it unlikely that populism will disappear as a marginal or short-lived episode in contemporary democracies. Rather than inviting a final verdict on populism's democratic merits, this situation calls for closer attention to the enduring disagreements over how representation should be organised and sustained under conditions of recurring conflict and institutional strain.

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