

# Editorial

## Democracy and Opinion: On Nadia Urbinati's Democratic Theory

In the vast landscape of democratic theory, few voices are as eminent as that of Italian political theorist Nadia Urbinati. She is especially well-known for her work on representative democracy and her elaboration of democratic proceduralism. However, her focus covers many other topics ranging from the study of democracy's disfigurements like populism or plebiscitarianism to the study of significant figures in the history of political thought, including John Stuart Mill, Marquis de Condorcet, and Hans Kelsen, to name just a few.<sup>1</sup> Apart from that, Urbinati is also an established public intellectual known for her intriguing comments on more than just Italian politics.

In her work on representative democracy, Urbinati challenges the conventional wisdom of many streams within contemporary democratic thought that see representative government as either an elitist project opposed to the government of the people or the second-best option after direct democracy. Contrary to these views, Urbinati affirms that representation is an integral part of democracy's functioning and that representation should not be seen as opposed to participation. This view is premised on a profound appreciation for the role of public opinion in shaping democratic governance. Urbinati challenges both elitist and minimalist democrats, who identify rep-

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1 As Giuseppe Ballacci mentions in his article, Nadia Urbinati is a prolific writer publishing both in English and Italian. While Urbinati's complete bibliography is beyond the scope of this editorial, the following list of publications highlights her key works concerning the issues discussed in this volume. Urbinati, N., *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2002; Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2006; Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2014; Urbinati, N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2019.

representative democracy with electoral democracy,<sup>2</sup> by arguing that representative democracy does not hinge solely on elections but comprises a dynamic process in which public opinion plays a central role. As she argues in the postscript to this volume, “Representation is activated by elections, but it does not end with them.” In her view of representative democracy as diarchy, Urbinati affirms that sovereign democratic citizens are endowed with two powers – the powers of “will” and “opinion”. While “will” is contained in civil law and decisions made by state institutions and magistrates, “opinion” refers to the informal sphere of civil deliberation and judgment. However, even if both these powers originate in the right of citizens to vote, they must be considered “different and should remain distinct, although in the need of constant communication”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, democracy presupposes that citizens not only are voters but also constantly influence political decision-making through opinion, even though opinion has no formal authority. This makes democracy “a government by means of opinion”.<sup>4</sup>

According to Urbinati, the essential role of opinion in democracy also allows us to identify two fundamental dangers in the realm of opinion formation that democracies currently face. The first is growing social and economic inequality, which transforms economic power into political power, especially in the form of the concentration of media ownership. The second is demagogic polarization, which simplifies political discourse (reducing it to yes or no alternatives) and gives rise to hostile factions. However, these trends should not be seen separately, as they complement each other and weaken citizens’ ability to make their voices heard. They also find their expression in three pathologies – or “disfigurations”, as Urbinati calls them – of current democracy that modify its diarchic nature, i.e., in unpolitical democracy, which turns opinion into an instrument of the search for objective truth; in populism, which abolishes the diarchic structure by seeking to make opinion identical with will; and lastly in plebiscitarianism, which reduces opinion to its aesthetic dimension.

All of the papers in this volume delve into a discussion of some key aspects of Urbinati’s work, covering her views on representative democracy, populism, and oligarchy. Some of these articles also emphasize the Central European experience of democracy’s transformation, both continuous and specific vis-à-vis the Western experience. This seems especially important because, as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have suggested,<sup>5</sup> the current

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2 See e.g., Schumpeter, J. A., *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London, Routledge 2003 (1942).

3 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 22.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5 Krastev, I. – Holmes, S., *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. New York, Pegasus Books 2020.

of history has shifted. While in the 1990s and at the turn of the new millennium, it was Central and Eastern Europeans who were in the position of learners who were supposed to accept and imitate liberal and democratic principles and values, it is now the other way around, with many Western politicians learning from and attempting to imitate Central and Eastern European would-be-autocrats and illiberal models of democracy.

This brings us to the topic of the volume's first paper, "How to Think about Liberal and Democratic Principles: Three Models of Illiberal Democracy", authored by Milan Znoj. The paper deals with a pressing issue – not only in the Central European context of illiberal democracy. Znoj analyzes the concept of illiberal democracy, discussing three theoretical approaches to the relationship between liberalism and democracy and showing the different conceptions of illiberal democracy that stem from them. Firstly, Schumpeter's competitive elitism, which tames democracy by liberalism; secondly, Schmitt's view of the contradiction between liberalism and democracy; and finally, Urbinati's theory of democracy, which acknowledges their inner coherence and therefore understands illiberal democracy as an oxymoron. However, Znoj argues against Urbinati that the idea of the coherence of liberalism and democracy does not necessarily lead to a denial of the usefulness of the illiberal democracy concept. Znoj suggests that illiberal democracy can be seen as a systematic weakening of liberal principles in forming political will and opinion, bringing democracy to the threshold of authoritarianism.

Jan Bíba, in the article "Powers of Will and Opinion: Nadia Urbinati and the Constructivist Turn", focuses on the issue of constructivism in political representation. Constructivists stress that representation does not merely reflect the existing reality and identity of the represented but that the process of representation creates this identity. However, according to Bíba, this assertion poses a challenge to theories of democratic representation, as constructivism carries the risk of elitism and the confusion of representation with manipulation. Bíba, therefore, compares three constructivist theories of representation (those of Nadia Urbinati, Ernesto Laclau, and Michael Saward) and concludes that – compared to the two other views – the combination of constructivism and proceduralism in Urbinati's work provides a convenient starting point for tackling the danger of elitism and manipulation present in constructivism.

In his article "Nadia Urbinati on Populism, Representation, and Rhetoric: Some Critical Remarks", Giuseppe Ballacci also discusses the question of manipulation, particularly via rhetorics in democracy and populism. Ballacci's reading of Urbinati's concept of populism suggests the existence of a critical lacuna concerning the role of rhetoric in her theories of both populism and democracy. It seems that, on the one hand, Urbinati recognizes the vital role

of rhetoric in democracy and populism; however, on the other, she does not provide a systematic analysis of rhetoric and the ways in which it operates. Ballacci claims that this deficiency has effects on Urbinati's theory of populism. While her notion of populism presupposes the significant role of rhetoric and political style, she leaves out what characterizes and differentiates populist and democratic use of rhetoric. Hence, Ballacci argues for the critical need to establish standards differentiating between populist and democratic rhetoric; however, he also suggests that such a differentiation must be a work of judgment, taking into consideration many aspects including the speech's context, its audience, and its political views and ends.

The role of rhetoric and style in thinking about democracy brings to the fore its aesthetic dimension, which is a central topic of Michael Råber's article "The Aesthetic Dis- and Configuration of Democracy: On Nadia Urbinati's Conception of Democratic Opinion and the Aesthetic Function of Democratic Politics". Råber claims that Urbinati's discussion of the aesthetic dimension of democratic politics is limited, as she believes that the diarchic model of democracy is organized primarily around the voice and speech, which prompts her to see visual and theatrical representations of the people as one of the sources of democracy's disfiguration. The reason for this could be found in the fact that Urbinati tends to identify the aesthetic dimension of democratic politics with plebiscitarianism and the politics of passivity. However, the paper suggests that citizens' aesthetic sensibilities are crucial not only for democratic citizenship but also for providing a space for political participation.

Pavel Barša's article "Beyond 'Democracy vs. Populism': Urbinati's Theory of Populism from a Central European Perspective" turns again to discussing the Central European experience. Barša suggests that the recent history of Visegrád countries demonstrates the failure to subsume under one undifferentiated notion of populism the national-conservative movements with authoritarian tendencies and the post-ideological movements concerned with government effectiveness and fighting corruption. Hence, the paper argues for a new understanding of populism that avoids the Manichean opposition of populism versus democracy and allows, therefore, for an empirical assessment of the anti-democratic nature of the populist movement in question. Barša suggests that Urbinati's notion of populism is ambiguous in this respect. On the one hand, her understanding of populism is based on the dichotomy between populism and democracy, but on the other, her emphasis on populism's anti-establishmentarianism and anti-partyism enables the inclusion within the category of populism actors critical of established modes of party organization and traditional partisan ideologies, who do not necessarily subvert democratic order.

In his article “Transformations of Democracy and the Problem of Wealth: Some Remarks on Oligarchy and the Czech Case”, Ondřej Lánský focuses on the issue of economic inequality and oligarchy in democracy. Lánský points out that Urbinati addresses the danger of oligarchy, especially in media ownership concentration and opinion formation. However, Lánský suggests that this approach is inadequate because it is limited by the proceduralist conviction that the adverse effects of economic inequalities on democracy result from an inadequate application of democratic procedures. Lánský, therefore, argues for the need to reconceptualize democratic theory through Jeffrey Winters' oligarchy theory. At the same time, he uses the empirical example of the Czech Republic to demonstrate the disproportionate influence of economic power on opinion formation.

The following section of the volume contains two review essays. The first one, “Different Approaches to Populism: Representation, Style, and the Future of Democracy” by Kristián Těmín compares Urbinati's seminal view of populism with other influential theories, including the works of Chantal Mouffe, Jan-Werner Müller, and Benjamin Moffitt. Těmín's starting point is a paradox, described by Urbinati, consisting of the tension between the populist's anti-establishmentarian rhetoric and their participation in democratic processes that make populists part of the establishment. Building on a literature review, Těmín suggests overcoming this paradox by enriching Urbinati's view of populism with Benjamin Moffitt's understanding of populism as a political style. The proposed partial overlap between Urbinati's and Moffitt's theories opens the possibility of understanding populism as not a dead-end of democratic evolution but an open question about the relationship between populism and democracy.

The second review essay, “The Theoretical Debate about the Sortition Turn” by Kateřina Labutta Kubíková examines the debate sparked by the recent resurgence of interest among political theorists in sortition. Labutta Kubíková compares three theoretical approaches to sortition: Helene Landemore's project of lottocratic representation, James S. Fishkin's combination of sortition with deliberation as a complement to existing elected institutions, and Nadia Urbinati's rather critical view of sortition. Labutta Kubíková concludes that proponents of sortition have to deal with two problems in particular: first, the relationship between sortition and representation, and second, the question of sortition's accountability. Nevertheless, these obstacles should not necessarily lead to a rejection of sortition. According to Labutta Kubíková, while the sortition should not supplant elections, it can enhance citizens' participation by complementing them through informal institutions enhancing civic deliberations.

The volume closes with Nadia Urbinati's postscript, "Facing Political Transformations in a Time of Vacillating Certainties", where Urbinati outlines her theory of representative democracy and the challenges it must face. She also takes the opportunity to reply to some of the comments and criticisms expressed in some of the volume's articles concerning her views of populism, rhetoric, and the relationship between aesthetics and democratic politics.

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