

# Different Approaches to Populism: Representation, Style, and the Future of Democracy\*

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## Abstract:

The four reviewed books belong among the most influential contemporary contributions to theories of populism. Approaches described by authors are different, and together they do not provide a coherent view of defining features of populism. Moreover, they remain in disagreement on whether to evaluate populism as a threat or deepening of democracy. To overcome such a difference of opinions, I propose to focus more on the role of populist representation instead of defining features of populism. In addition, I suggest applying a populist style approach that provides a helpful description of populism since it outlines populism as a useful and valuable concept when describing contemporary political changes and does not understand it necessarily as a democracy's dead-end.

**Keywords:** Populism; democracy; representation; political style; leader

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Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2016.

Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*. London, Verso 2018.

Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2017.

Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2019.

The vital questions that have haunted the study of populism from its very beginning concern the defining (i.e., essential) features of populism and populism's relationship to democracy. In this review essay, I compare four

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seminal works on populism and describe how diverse an answer to such questions might be. I also consider a possible strategy to overcome the theoretical heterogeneity in the field of populism by emphasizing the political style approach. Such an approach presents populism as a helpful concept delineating a possible evolution in democratic politics.

Theoretical approaches to populism are often divided into three groups: ideational, strategic, and discursive.<sup>1</sup> However, these ideal types are often mixed, which is also the case with the influential works of Nadia Urbinati, Chantal Mouffe, Benjamin Moffitt, and Jan-Werner Müller. Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* represents mainly the discursive approach. The same goes for Moffitt's approach, with the difference that, on the one hand, it builds on the discursive approach, but on the other, it reacts to specific contemporary political configurations and is more versatile and can thus be combined with different approaches. Müller's *What is Populism?* straddles the ideational and strategic approach, while Urbinati's *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* arguably uses a predominantly strategic approach.

In this review essay, I start by defining key features of populism and its relation to democracy. The comparison of Urbinati's, Mouffe's, and Müller's important approaches illustrates the difficulty of defining the core features of populism. It also helps us to unwrap the core argument of Urbinati's theory. Nevertheless, this review essay shows how the abovementioned approaches differ, and therefore I assume that the question of general characteristics or key features of populism would be shared by Urbinati's, Mouffe's, and Müller's theories are insurmountable. Furthermore, all these theories of populism differ in relation to democracy. Secondly, I suggest a solution to overcome these differences by focusing more on populist representation as one of the defining features of populism. For that, I use Moffitt's theory, which characterizes populist representation from a different perspective.

The possible solution follows Urbinati's theory of populist representation as an embodiment complemented by Moffitt's theory of populism, focused on political style. Populistic representation, according to Urbinati, brings a complex paradox that every populist must overcome to be a successful politician in a democratic regime. The paradox consists in them simultaneously being the contestant of partisan democratic representation and a part of that representation. I propose that focusing on a political style to overcome such a paradox is appropriate. The political style approach, used and deepened by Benjamin Moffitt, overcomes the paradox of populist representation and therefore opens the possibility of considering populism as

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1 See Rovira Kaltwasser, C. – Taggart, P. A. – Ochoa Espejo, P. – Ostiguy, P., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2017.

a phase of democratic evolution that could indicate the future of democracy, which is utterly contrary to what Urbinati suggests.

In short, by focusing on the transformation of communication toward the highly personalized connection between the people and populists, and the performance of populist leaders in front of people, we can find in populism a helpful concept that could delineate a potential evolution in democratic theory and praxis.

### What is Populism?

A generally accepted essential feature of populism is the division of citizens of the political unit between the people and the elite. This feature became part and parcel of populism theories and is also shared by Chantal Mouffe, Jan-Werner Müller, and Nadia Urbinati. However, building on this tension between the people and elites, populism can be seen either as a threat to democracy or an instrument of its strengthening and deepening. I will briefly sketch both of these options and focus on significant similarities or unifying elements that underscore the defining features of populist politics.

In *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe claims that populism is an essential feature of politics, and it also means that she does not ponder populism as a threat to democracy. According to her, populism emerges in a historical moment when unsatisfied demands destabilize the dominant hegemonic formation, making populism the signal of its crisis.<sup>2</sup> Building on Laclau's theory of populism, she constructs the people as a homogenous political entity. Mouffe describes Laclau's theory of populism as "a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdogs' against 'those in power'."<sup>3</sup> Laclau sees the people as a political entity constructed around popular demands. The simplified logic of such a construction is based on the chaining of such demands. One of the demands begins to represent the totality of unsatisfied demands, and its particularity becomes empty. However, it is still recognizable as different from others, and moreover, it subsumes the totality of other demands.<sup>4</sup> The people are thus based on social demands addressed to "those in power". It is constructed as homogeneous through the exclusion of one particular demand that represents the totality of other demands.

Populism has, according to Mouffe, the power to change the situation when a concrete hegemonic formation has lost its pluralistic character and

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2 Mouffe, Ch., *For a Left Populism*. London, Verso 2018, p. 11.

3 Ibid.

4 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*. London, Verso 2005, pp. 67–128.

ignores people and their demands. Calling such a hegemonic and contemporary formation post-democracy, she claims that it oppresses the vital pillar of the genuinely democratic regime.

Mouffe's understanding of the *democratic paradox* sees liberal democracy as combining two traditions or two pillars: the democratic pillar and the liberal pillar. The tension between the two constitutes any democratic regime. While the first defends egalitarian practices necessary to define the people, the latter stands for liberal discourse and its tendencies to abstract universalism.<sup>5</sup> These two logics remain in tension and ensure that the democratic regime is pluralistic. This tension expressed along the left–right axis cannot be overcome in political terms. Mouffe considers Western liberal democracy as post-democracy because neoliberal hegemony has disturbed the tension between the two pillars and established the liberal direction of politics as the only possible – or even conceivable – way of ruling public affairs.

The historical moment that gave birth to the populist hegemonic formation<sup>6</sup> was the fall of the Keynesian welfare state in Great Britain in the 1970s and the replacement of this hegemonic formation with the new and populist hegemonic formation – Thatcherism.<sup>7</sup> Mouffe suggests that the contemporary crisis of neoliberal hegemony leaves the door open to a new populist formation. Such a formation would overthrow neoliberalism and establish a truly political populist – and therefore, democratic – regime. Populism as a strategy unites the people around dominant social demands and establishes an antagonistic relation between the people and the elites. And in concrete political situations, populism becomes a key to overthrowing the “There is no alternative!” of hegemonic neoliberalism, thereby proving itself as a genuinely democratic strategy.

Mouffe's description of the populist moment springs from a particular historical situation. However, her concept is more general because it is not dependent on a concrete ideological background. The people as political actors can be formed around any social demand in opposition to ruling elites. Moreover, as we have seen, in Mouffe's approach, populism is a phenomenon not only related to democracy, but integral to democracy.

Jan-Werner Müller, in his book *What Is Populism?*, takes a stance antithetical to the one advocated by Mouffe. Müller starts by describing populism as a moralistic vision of politics. In his view, morality plays a crucial role in distinguishing between the morally pure people and the immoral, corrupt elite. However, this is insufficient. Populists are not only anti-elitists but also anti-

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5 Mouffe, C., *For a Left Populism*, p. 15.

6 Hall, S., *The Hard Road to Renewal*. London, Verso 1988.

7 Mouffe, C., *For a Left Populism*, pp. 27–38.

pluralists – only populists represent the people. When populists compete for power, they label other political rivals as a part of immoral, corrupt elites. When populists are in government, they do not respect any opposition.

According to Müller, populists do not stand against representation but rather consider representation as that of a single public interest that the people claim. “The people” refers to a homogeneous entity pre-existing the democratic process, an imagined pre-political entity<sup>8</sup> disregarded by a ruling elite. Populists thus do not tolerate plurality in representation because only they can exclusively represent the true needs of the people. Müller calls this a *pars pro toto* logic in response to the moralistic conception of the people. This logic claims that one part of the people can stand for the whole people. Populists use this logic to present themselves as representatives of the people as a whole against corrupt elites, even though they substitute the part of the people that supports them for the moral whole.<sup>9</sup>

In Müller’s view, populism is built on a moralistic understanding of politics, which affects the construction of the people and their relation to the elite. It presupposes the people as a homogenous entity existing prior to democratic institutions and claims that only the people can fulfil their destiny as a democratic actor.<sup>10</sup> The democratic conception of the people is always open to redefinition, but populism has an unchangeable and holistic idea of the people. Populism claims to fuse people into one political and final homogeneity, thereby excluding all citizens who do not share the people’s moral distinction. In Müller’s view, therefore, the principle of representation is based on the moral designation of the people and the populist party or leader who represents the imagined whole of democratic actors. At the end of *What Is Populism?*, Müller writes: “Populists are not against the principle of political representation; they just insist that only they themselves are legitimate representatives”.<sup>11</sup> It demonstrates the antidemocratic appeal of populism which purposefully ignores significant parts of society. Müller sums up his observation: “The core claim of populism is thus a moralized form of anti-pluralism.”<sup>12</sup>

Müller only briefly describes the relationship between democratic and populist representation because he is more interested in the moralistic distinction between the elite and the true people. He thus understands pop-

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8 Müller, J.-W., *What is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2017, pp. 19, 63, 102.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

ulism in the framework of representation determined by a moralistic position. This aspect deserves further consideration. Comparing Nadia Urbinati's approach to Müller's, we can see that they share scepticism about populism and its effect on democracy. However, Urbinati doesn't consider populism as being built on an appeal to morality or to morality grabbed by ideology. Instead, Urbinati brings a different, more detailed understanding of the importance of representation for populism.

Unlike Müller, who writes about the moralistic distinction of populism, Urbinati is interested in its evolution as a disfiguration of democracy and as its permanent shadow. Her prescription is not to step back toward "classic representative democracy" or to deepen democracy with populist elements. Instead, she aims to investigate "the risks that arise when democracy stretches toward populism".<sup>13</sup> The analysis of these risks suggests measures that the people should provide to democracy and leads to her theory of *diarchy*, which we might consider both as an analytical tool and as a liberal representative democracy's normative design.

Urbinati evaluates populism from the perspective of her theory of representative democracy, which precisely describes basic processes in representative government and considers populism as a developmental phase of democracy. According to Urbinati, and in contrast with Mouffe, populism cannot enrich contemporary democratic praxis. Urbinati writes: "We study populism because populism is transforming democracy".<sup>14</sup> This is a basis for her research on populism. She approaches populism from her seminal theory of representative democracy as a *diarchy*. She postulates this complex theory of democracy in her former book *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, in which she characterizes democracy as representative proceduralism with two separate powers of the democratic sovereign – "will" and "opinion".<sup>15</sup> She uses this theory as a critical background in considering populism in *Me the People* because the *diarchic* system of representative democracy is the background against which partisanship and populism grow.<sup>16</sup>

There are two key features in the theory of democracy as a *diarchy*. Firstly, the two abovementioned powers are powers of the sovereign citizen. Secondly, they are fundamentally different, should remain separate, and must communicate with each other. Urbinati's concept can be summed up as fol-

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13 Urbinati, N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2019, p. 208.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

15 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2014, p. 22.

16 Urbinati, N., *Me the People*, p. 87.

lows: “Diarchy is my name for a mediated or indirect kind of self-government, which presumes a *distance* and *difference* between sovereign and the government.”<sup>17</sup>

This concept is based on representation and proceduralism. In this case, proceduralism must be understood in a broader sense because it contains not only ballot counting but also freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. Urbinati’s proceduralism aims to make a non-institutional sphere of public opinion the element of political freedom. Democracy is thus “a combination of decisions and judgment on decisions: devising proposals and deciding on them (or those who are going to carry them out) according to majority rule.”<sup>18</sup> As we mentioned above, will and opinion must mutually communicate, and the public sphere is the place for it.

Building on her notion of representative democracy as *diarchy*, Urbinati sees populism as a disfiguration of democracy, as it tends to merge will and opinion. It calls for blurring the distinction between these two powers. This concentration is established through a strong leader who overcomes the separation and distribution of power among political voters, parties, and other democratic institutions.<sup>19</sup> The role of the leader mirrors the people’s unanimity and its anti-establishmentarianism,<sup>20</sup> as well as the criticism of parties and a superficial appeal to direct representation.<sup>21</sup>

In *Me the People*, Urbinati sees populism as a threat to democracy and a product of democracy’s inadequacy to counter its changes and malfunction. The question of the defining features of populism is a question of the nature of the relationship between populism and democracy and the evolution of democracy, which has developed into a mixed government.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, according to Urbinati, this development (i.e., populism) is pathological.

Now we see that none of the three theories of populism has substantial similarity to the others. The first considers populism as an essentially democratic concept, which provides the true emancipation of the people. The second considers populism as a shadow of democracy. The third has some similarity with the second; however, it does not see it as built on a moralistic vision of politics. Hence, I conclude that these three conceptions of populism cannot say about populism more than that it is a phenomenon related to democracy that divides society between two antagonistic groups and the

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17 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

18 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 33.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

20 Urbinati, N., *Me the People*, pp. 74–76.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 190–191, 208.

leader plays an important role in populist regimes. Of the abovementioned approaches, Urbinati's approach seems to be the most elaborate. It clearly describes the effect that strong leadership has on democracy as *diarchy* by merging two citizens' powers together.

For Urbinati, the disfiguration caused by populism takes place in political representation. The populist leader is the main proponent of such disfiguration. In *Me the People*, she thoroughly describes the form of populist representation, focusing on the special connection between the people and a leader. This is where Urbinati's approach to populism differs from Mouffe's and Müller's theories, since she attaches more importance to the special bond between the people and a leader, as I will explain in following section. I will also explain how Urbinati elaborates on the role of the key player of populism and which paradoxes the leader always bears in populist politics.

### The Leader and the Paradox of Populistic Representation

Urbinati claims that populist representation differs from the democratic kind mainly in that it is based on embodiment. According to Urbinati, democratic representation, as described above, presupposes, on the one hand, a clear distinction between the represented and the representatives, and on the other, effective communication between both groups, even outside of elections. Democratic representation combines particularity and universality, unity and plurality, and therefore effectively mediates between the electorate and the representatives. Urbinati writes:

“The fact that political representatives are required to share their ideas only with their electors – not with the whole nation as a homogeneous body – means that political representation is itself a refutation of populist democracy. Indeed, in order to acquire the moral and political legitimacy to make laws for all, representation must articulate partisan pluralism without superimposing an unreflective unity over an indistinct mass of individuals.”<sup>23</sup>

Populists stand against partisan representation and see representation as embodiment. Political representation in democracy is a process of unity and plurality. It is “a process of partial unification, not holistic majorities.”<sup>24</sup> Pluralism of political interests, and therefore parties, is a political construction made by free and equal citizens according to their antipathies

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<sup>23</sup> Urbinati, N., *Me the People*, p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



and sympathies. On the other hand, the embodiment is a different type of representation based on the attempt either to fuse political diversity or to reject such diversity. The claim of a populist leader to embody the people stands in opposition to pluralistic party democracy and representative institutions that detain the majority's power. Urbinati suggests that populists do not refuse representation but apply a different form of representation – representation as embodiment.<sup>25</sup> Representation as an embodiment means that the leader has a special bond with the people. Urbinati describes this bond as follows:

“Like a prophet in relation to God, the leader has no will of his or her own but is rather a vessel of the sovereign will – the mouth from which the *vox populi* manifests itself. This is the symbolism of representation as *incarnation* or embodiment of the sovereign people, and it is the most radical alternative to mandate representation.”<sup>26</sup>

This type of representation assumes that the people's collective identity is embodied in a leader. In the eyes of populists, this quasi-divine logic should bring a collective political subject to life. However, this connection makes no basis for the responsibility or accountability of the leader.<sup>27</sup> Populists, therefore, consider overcoming mandate representation as a sign of inclusive politics. This inclusivity means that the people are finally represented directly and can make real decisions through their leader. Due to this direct representation, mediators – parties, global organizations, and institutions defending the demands of minorities – are finally overcome.

The overcoming of representation based on the political parties and institutions is, according to Urbinati, not so simple. Direct representation based on embodiment forms a paradoxical situation. This paradoxical situation has a double logic. The first is a paradox of populist mobilization associated with anti-establishmentarian rhetoric. Populists running for office make strong proclamations against the establishment and antagonize non-populist parties, making them traitors of genuine people and true popular democracy. However, when they reach power and become part of the establishment, they have to seek a consensus with other parties. At the same time, populists have to present themselves in front of the people as refusing practices of other political agents because they had previously marked them as non-democratic traitors of the people. This means that populists are born from

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25 Ibid., p. 115.

26 Ibid., p. 125.

27 Ibid., p. 128.

democracy as a *diarchy*, and pretend to be true democrats; however, they remain antagonistic to other political agents. In other words, their goal is to perform being someone else.<sup>28</sup> This paradox has, above all, another dimension: populists need to pretend that they are outsiders in relation to the establishment, but when they either strive for power or obtain a position of power, they must be insiders to play the game successfully. Here again, populists need to pretend to be someone else and it is vital for them to be successful in this performance.

The second part of the paradox is related to the leader. So far, we have not addressed the difference between a populist party and a populist leader. However, the second part of the paradox clarifies the relation between party and leader. Urbinati compares the populist leader to a *demiurge*,<sup>29</sup> implying that the leader makes a crucial impact in creating populist politics. The critical question then remains whether a populist leader can do without a populist party. Urbinati suggests that on the one hand, political movement, unlike political party, is suitable for populism because the permanent mobilization and vague shape of populist politics need a “tool that is elastic and malleable enough to adapt to the various leaders’ tactical needs.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Urbinati claims that populists need a party because a leader needs a tool “that is structured enough for them to dominate but not so structured that it limits their power.”<sup>31</sup> I would also add that populism needs a party structure to collaborate with other political agents in the democratic game. Moreover, populists need to employ some strategy and structure to help them handle being present simultaneously with the people and in the representative institutions.

Despite the need to deal with such a paradox, Urbinati writes that populists do not jeopardize the whole system of representative party democracy. They rather focus on the form of representation in the paradoxical situation and try to handle the paradox. Urbinati concentrates on direct representation – a relation between the people and the leader. She claims that the *pars pro toto* logic is implausible for populists because populists do not represent the whole but only pretend to do so.<sup>32</sup> The inherent need to pretend that populism is something else, and its insuperable paradox, which populists must handle repeatedly, reveals populism not as a structural logic of political space but rather as the style of pretending. This argumentation leads to the consideration of populism as a political style. Such an approach has been

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28 *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 135–138.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 191.

recently revived and deepened by Benjamin Moffitt in his book *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*.

Urbinati's approach stresses the role of the leader as the creator of populist logic and the representative of the people. Therefore, a leader's position opens space for the abovementioned paradox. On the other hand, Moffitt's approach shifts towards the role of political style, which might help us understand how populists successfully overcome the paradox. This shift is based on the assumption that embodiment is a form of representation. While Urbinati agrees with this assumption, she adds that this form of representation is different from the *diarchic* system of representative democracy.<sup>33</sup> Despite the widespread belief that populism is a form of direct democracy, populism is a form of representation disfiguring the *diarchy* of will and opinion. However, it is still a form of representation, attributing to the leader a mandate to represent the electorate embodied in the person of the leader.

Therefore, we must focus not on the content or structure of populism in relation to direct democracy but on the significant and distinct role of the leader as populism's critical figure, which pretends not to be a part of the establishment, even though he has already seized power. A leader also pretends to be a critic of the party system despite relying not only on tools of direct democracy. The pretending seems to be a crucial feature of the representation as embodiment. It is actually a misrepresentation of populist representation.

Furthermore, I suggest considering populist representation as a performance that can be analysed as a political style that elucidates the means populist leaders use to adapt to changing political conditions. In addition, the political style approach elucidates that an important characteristic of populist politics may also be based on the logic of the leader's performance in front of the people, rather than simply on the construction of the people or the moral qualities of the people articulated by the leaders.

## Political Style

In his seminal work, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Benjamin Moffitt frames populism as a political style. Moffitt does not intend to describe the nature of populism; instead, he focuses on the role of performance, representation, and rhetoric as defining features of populist style. Moffitt reacts to "the decline of ideological cleavages, the displacement of the class character of politics, and the alienation of ordinary citizens from traditional party politics amongst other fac-

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33 Ibid., pp. 130, 157.

tors.”<sup>34</sup> Moffitt claims that politics has changed, and political style is now more important than before. He reminds us that style and content are linked together and need to be examined together. Political style overlaps with the discursive approach,<sup>35</sup> which is keen on language, speech, written text, etc., and moves beyond aesthetic and performative features such as images, self-representation, body language, design, and “staging”.<sup>36</sup>

Adopting Moffitt’s approach has several implications linked to his definition of political style:

“Political style can be understood as the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life.”<sup>37</sup>

Firstly, populism as a political style considers the people as the true holders of sovereignty – and therefore, the opposition of the elite – and as an audience for populists, who render people through their actions and performances. Secondly, populists use “bad manners” to attract attention and build a bond with the people. Thirdly, populists attract attention to the people by using particular rhetoric and narratives. These include a crisis narrative, simplifying political debate and enabling populists to establish themselves as vital political agents.<sup>38</sup> Moffitt’s approach puts at the centre of interest not only populism as a political style but also the people as an audience.

Although Urbinati’s approach to populism differs from the one suggested by Moffitt, these two approaches intersect and complement each other. To overcome the paradox explained above, the populist leader must engage a specific populist style, pretending that he is someone else – the symbolic actor accepted as the leader of the people. Urbinati emphasizes the role of the political structure of populism in line with her theory of democracy as *diarchy*, and Moffitt emphasizes populist style, which explains how populist politics as “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences” can work. Two principally different approaches to populism – as a disfiguration and as a political style – meet in this synthesis: the former explores populism without relation to cultural variables, the latter is based on them.

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34 Moffitt, B., *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2016, p. 39.

35 Represented by Ernest Laclau (Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*).

36 Moffitt, B., *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 40.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 43–45.

Contrary to Urbinati's claim that populism cannot be reduced to political style, I argue that both approaches complement each other, especially when the paradox of populism appears on stage. The proposed mutual compliance of these two approaches sheds new light on the relationship between populism and democracy. Populism does not have to be understood as a dead-end of democratic evolution and can be seen, as I propose, as an appropriate concept that describes the evolution of current democratic regimes. Moreover, focusing on political style enables us to see the populist government as not necessarily shifting away from democracy.

### Democracy and Its Future

In this review essay, I described the three significant theoretical approaches to populism and explored whether conceptualizing the defining features of populism using Mouffe's, Müller's, and Urbinati's approaches does not lead to a synthetic and coherent definition of populism. The fourth approach, the political style approach elaborated by Moffitt, then serves as a mean to overcome the theoretical closure described by Urbinati.

As described above, Mouffe's approach to populism is based on a specific assumption about making the people independent of actual political content. She provides a theoretical framework based on the role of social demand that constitutes the people as political agents and the political sphere in general. According to her, politics – and therefore, populism – are based on the form of making political agents. To the contrary, Müller emphasizes morality as a strategy that enables populists to declare themselves as representatives of the whole political society – the people.<sup>39</sup> Urbinati's theory of populism is keen on disfiguring the *diarchy* by merging will and opinion, and this disfiguration makes a new form of government, i.e., a new strategy to govern. Conceptualizing the defining features of populism using all of these theoretical approaches, as I try to show above, thus does not lead to a cohesive definition of populism, as in the case of their relation to democracy.

Moreover, the relationship between democracy and populism is also, among political theorists, evaluated differently. Mouffe makes clear that populism helps to restore the democratic balance between the two pillars of democracy. Müller, based on the populist's moralistic imagination of politics, and the distinction between the people and elite, claims that populism is a permanent shadow and a threat to democracy. Urbinati suggests that democracy faces challenges on two fronts – from the oligarchic few and the

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39 Müller, J.-W., *What is Populism?*

popular many.<sup>40</sup> Populism, she asserts, cannot tackle the problems it reacts to, but it points out the malfunction of the constitutional government and the inadequacy of representative institutions. Populism reveals one of the mutations of representative democracy that needs to be analysed and answered. Populism is, therefore, a dead-end of democratic evolution.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, I argue that populism is not, in fact, a dead-end of democratic evolution. I also argue that populist studies need an appropriate theoretical framework to describe its inner logic with a focus on political style. When politics is considered a space of imagination, populism can be a key concept to describe contemporary political processes and profound political changes, e.g., a crisis of party structures, the hollowing ideological cleavages, and the personification of politics. If we adopt a general approach to democracy focused more on the role of the performance of speeches and acts and its effect on representation, populism would thus be a useful concept for further studying democracy. Moffitt's theory, which elucidates a paradox of populism presented by Urbinati, suggests that we can think about politics as being about space, where the appearance in front of the audience is the most crucial feature of populism, perhaps according to the evolution of democratic politics more important than the disruption of *diarchic* order in democracy.

As mentioned above, Urbinati does not consider populism as a political strategy contributing to the deepening of democracy. However, Moffitt's theory leaves space for the possibility that overcoming similar paradoxes, as mentioned above, might be more common in democratic politics in the future. This is because democratic politics might move – or perhaps it has already moved – closer to political style and has deflected from the conflict of ideas or ideologies. Other similar examples of dealing with such phenomena might serve Bernard Manin's conception of *Audience democracy*<sup>42</sup> or Jeffrey Edward Green's theory of *Ocular democracy*.<sup>43</sup>

Benjamin Moffitt's theory understands the future of the relationship between populism and democracy as open, allowing for different conclusions. It allows us to consider whether populism shifts the essence of politics to a solid regime competing with democracy or remains democracy's appendix, causing troubles to the vitality of the whole democratic system but has no other use except for providing a warning whenever something goes

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40 Urbinati, N., *Me the People*, p. 204.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 207, 208.

42 Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997.

43 Green, J. E., *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011.

wrong. Moffitt's theory leaves this possibility because it does not, in general, depend on ideational or moral principle. It considers populism as a common phenomenon of the new form of politics.

The question of the relationship between populism and democracy remains open. Future research might focus on the theoretical elaboration of populist and democratic representation or on the role of social media and its influence on democratic politics and the influence of leaders as proponents of populist representation.