

Does Populism Not Exist? Realised Democracy and the Crisis of the Populist Category

CONFERENCE PAPER · SISP ANNUAL CONFERENCE
2026

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Conference	SISP Annual Conference 2026, Trento
Panel	2.5
Version	English translation of the Italian original

Abstract

The paper offers a theoretical reflection on the crisis of contemporary liberal democracy by calling into question the category of “populism”. In recent decades, populism has frequently been interpreted as a pathology of liberal democracy, a deviation from the proper functioning of the Western political order or an external threat to the principles of liberal constitutionalism. This contribution instead seeks to advance a different hypothesis: what we today call populism may represent not an anomaly external to contemporary democracy, but one of the structural outcomes of its historical development.

The central argument of the paper is that the category of populism risks becoming theoretically inadequate or “outdated”, since it continues to describe as exceptional transformations that instead derive from the progressive realisation of modern democratisation. From this perspective, populism would be interpreted not as a pathological parenthesis within liberal democracy, but as a mode of functioning of mass democracy under the social, cognitive and technological conditions of the twenty-first century.

The paper develops this argument through the concept of “realised democracy”. The expression refers to a historical configuration characterised by three converging processes: the full extension of the principle of political equality, the progressive expansion of the sphere of the political, and the weakening of the structures of mediation typical of twentieth-century democracy.

First, the democratic principle tends to become generalised well beyond the electoral domain, progressively turning into a broader criterion of social, cultural and cognitive legitimation. The formula “one counts as one” no longer concerns only the right to vote, but tends to extend to the entire public space, producing tensions with some classic assumptions of the liberal tradition, which was historically founded on the limitation of political power, on the distinction between different competences and on the existence of relatively recognised epistemic authorities.

Second, contemporary societies are witnessing a growing politicisation of domains that were once relatively autonomous — economy, science, technology, culture and identity — loading politics with ever wider expectations. Politics is no longer called upon only to govern or administer, but also to correct inequalities, produce recognition, steer social transformations and solve highly complex problems. However, while problems become increasingly interdependent and cognitively sophisticated, democratic competition continues to operate through mechanisms of simplification, polarisation and the immediate construction of consensus.

Finally, the paper analyses the crisis of modern political mediations. Twentieth-century liberal democracy rested on relatively solid structures of intermediation — mass parties, trade unions, ideological affiliations, the political press — which performed organisational, pedagogical and cognitive functions. In recent decades these structures have progressively weakened, while digital disintermediation and the personalisation of

leadership have fostered increasingly direct forms of relationship between leaders and citizens. Representation thus tends to take the form of a “pyramid without steps”: a large and fragmented mass directly connected to highly personalised leaderships, with a progressive erosion of the intermediate levels of filtering and mediation.

In this context, populism can be interpreted as a structural mode of reducing complexity. It simplifies complex problems, constructs immediate antagonisms, personalises representation, delegitimises mediations and turns structural conflicts into easily intelligible moral dichotomies. For this reason, the paper argues that populism should not be regarded simply as the opposite of contemporary democracy, but as one of its possible modes of functioning in the post-liberal context of the twenty-first century.

The aim of the contribution is neither to offer a normative defence of populism nor to claim an absolute incompatibility between liberalism and democracy. Rather, the paper seeks to examine critically the historical fragility of the liberal-democratic configuration and to discuss whether contemporary institutions are still able to mediate effectively between social complexity, mass participation and the cognitive limits of contemporary societies.

In contemporary scholarship and public debate, populism is frequently presented as a pathology of liberal democracy: a deviation from its proper functioning, a threat posed by actors hostile to pluralism or a regressive reaction to the economic and cultural transformations of recent decades. A decisive part of comparative research has sought to make this judgement more rigorous, identifying in populism a specific view of society, morally divided between a pure people and a corrupt elite, and in the claim to realise the general will its fundamental political principle (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This definition has made it possible to build cumulative research programmes and measurement tools applicable to different cases. At the same time, however, the growth of the literature has multiplied the meanings of the category: thin ideology, discourse, frame, political logic, strategy, style, communicative repertoire or form of representation. This plurality does not in itself demonstrate that the concept is useless, but it makes it necessary to ask which phenomena it really distinguishes and which, instead, it ends up grouping under a common name (Brubaker, 2017, pp. 357–360; Hunger and Paxton, 2022, pp. 617–620).

This paper takes this difficulty as its starting point in order to advance a different hypothesis. What is classified as populism may not constitute merely an anomaly external to contemporary democracy, but may also represent one of the possible outcomes of its historical development. Direct appeals to the people, personalisation, the delegitimation of mediations, the simplification of conflicts and the construction of immediately recognisable antagonisms do not belong exclusively to actors conventionally defined as populist. They are repertoires that can be adopted, with different intensities and combinations, also by traditional parties, government leaders and movements lacking a common ideological matrix. Hunger and Paxton's systematic review further shows how often the effects attributed to populism actually depend on the ideologies with which it is associated, such as nativism, nationalism or socialism, leaving its explanatory autonomy uncertain (Hunger and Paxton, 2022, pp. 624–628).

The question, therefore, is not to establish in absolute terms whether populism “exists”. The title of the contribution has an interrogative and critical function, not an ontological one. The problem is to verify whether the category retains discriminating capacity and explanatory performance once one controls for the ordinary features of representative competition and for the systemic transformations of mass democracy. The presence of shared attributes does not automatically invalidate a concept: a distinctive, observable and non-redundant configuration of common properties may survive. The paper instead defines as a “screen concept” the use of the category that names different phenomena at the same time without clarifying the mechanisms that produce them.

To address this problem, the paper explicitly takes up the expression “realised democracy” (Boldrin 2023). In that formulation, populism is presented as the inevitable destiny of realised democracy, a product of technological and socio-economic evolution and of the tension between participatory equality and the rational understanding of decisions. The present contribution takes this intuition as its heuristic origin, but modifies two decisive aspects of it: it does not treat populism as a necessary outcome, and it reformulates realised democracy as a historical-sociological ideal type. The expression therefore does not denote a perfect democracy or the normative realisation of an emancipatory process. It designates a historical configuration in which three transformations converge: the generalisation of the principle of political equality beyond the electoral sphere alone; the extension of the responsibilities and expectations assigned to democratic power; the weakening of the structures of mediation characteristic of twentieth-century democracy. The expansion of political participation and responsibility takes place while collective problems become more interdependent and cognitively complex. At the same time, mass parties, organised affiliations and relatively unified publics lose capacity for selection, aggregation and formation, while personalised leaderships and digital infrastructures promise more immediate relationships with fragmented citizens (Mair, 2009, pp. 5–8; Palano, 2019a, pp. 74–83; Biancalana, 2022, pp. 193–200).

The hypothesis is that this configuration makes repertoires for reducing complexity structurally advantageous. The more the range of things for which politics is held responsible expands, the wider the gap grows between expectations of immediate response and the capacity to govern interdependencies, constraints and consequences that are not easily communicated. Policy complexity can make it harder to understand public action, attribute responsibility and evaluate results; it is not, however, a necessary or uniformly negative outcome of state expansion, since it may also reflect social heterogeneity and allow for fairer treatment (Limberg, Knill and Steinebach, 2023, pp. 575–577). It is precisely within this tension, and not outside democracy, that simplification, personalisation and antagonism can acquire political effectiveness.

The paper therefore neither proposes a normative defence of populism nor postulates an absolute incompatibility between liberalism and democracy. It first subjects the main definitions of populism to a test of discriminating capacity, non-redundancy and operationalisability. It then reconstructs the three constitutive processes of realised democracy and their possible interweaving, without turning them into a necessary causal chain.

Finally, it returns to the initial category to establish what remains of populism after controlling for the transformations of representation, mediation and political communication. The aim is to understand whether the term still identifies a specific phenomenon or whether it describes, at least in part, more general ways in which contemporary democracy organises consensus and reduces complexity.

2. The crisis of the category of populism

The difficulty of defining populism does not arise only from the variety of cases to which the term has been applied. It also depends on the mobility of the concept across different levels of analysis. Over time, “populism” has denoted agrarian movements, regimes, mobilisation strategies, ideologies, discourses, styles and forms of representation. This extension is not automatically an error: the concepts of the social sciences must be able to travel across different contexts. It becomes problematic, however, when the widening of cases is not accompanied by a specification of the attributes that justify their inclusion. The risk is the one identified by Sartori: extending a concept while progressively reducing its connotation, until one obtains a very broad but poorly discriminating category (Sartori, 1970, pp. 1034–1041). Collier and Mahon showed that not all categories need to have a classical structure, made up of necessary and sufficient conditions; radial categories and family resemblances may better fit empirical variety. Even these solutions, however, require explicit rules linking meaning and case membership (Collier and Mahon, 1993, pp. 846–853).

The ideational approach has provided the most influential response to this problem. Mudde defines populism as an ideology that considers society to be divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups — the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” — and argues that politics should express the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Its “thin” nature explains why populism does not present a complete programme and can combine with different host ideologies. Stanley refines this approach by describing a limited but recognisable conceptual morphology, formed by the opposition between people and elite, the idea of the internal homogeneity of the two camps, popular sovereignty and the representation of a crisis that makes it necessary to restore the primacy of the people (Stanley, 2008, pp. 100–102). The main advantage of this definition is its relative parsimony: it does not identify populism with mere emotionality, with simplification or with electoral opportunism, traits that may belong to ordinary politics (Mudde, 2004, pp. 542–544).

The ideational definition, therefore, cannot be refuted simply by observing that all political actors invoke the people or criticise elites. The more demanding question concerns the threshold that turns these elements into a dichotomous and moral view of society. The continuous character of discursive indicators makes it possible to measure different degrees of populism, but leaves open the passage from measurement to classification: what intensity, stability or combination of appeals to the people, anti-elitism and sovereignty justifies distinguishing a populist actor from an actor who occasionally uses the same rhetoric? Aslanidis proposes treating populism as

a discursive frame, observable in texts without attributing to it the more demanding status of an ideology. This solution improves operationalisation, but in turn encounters the problem of distinguishing it from common schemes of blame attribution and collective mobilisation (Aslanidis, 2016, pp. 91–101).

A second family of studies regards populism as a political or discursive logic. From this perspective, the decisive point is not a given ideological content, but the way in which heterogeneous demands are articulated in a chain of equivalence and ordered along a vertical frontier that opposes those “below” to those who hold power. De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon usefully insist on the distinction between the vertical *down/up* axis of populism and the horizontal *in/out* axis of nationalism: people versus elite and nation versus foreigner are not the same opposition, even when they are combined by the radical right (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon, 2018, pp. 651–653). This distinction prevents properties that belong to nativism, racism or nationalism from being automatically attributed to populism.

The essay in which Laclau condenses this approach now makes it possible to specify its structure. The author refuses to look for populism in a pure social or ideological content, inevitably exposed to exceptions, and shifts the unit of analysis to the practices that constitute political agents (Laclau, 2005, pp. 32–33). Its specificity is located in the prevalence of the logic of equivalence over the logic of difference, in the production of tendentially empty signifiers and in the construction of a frontier that interpellates those below against power (Laclau, 2005, pp. 37–40, 44–45). The advantage is to free the concept from the search for a uniform ideological substance; the cost is to bring the conditions of populism very close to those of politics itself, since Laclau states that both presuppose social division and a part that presents itself antagonistically as the whole (Laclau, 2005, p. 48).

An internal difficulty therefore remains, which can now be documented directly. If the populist logic consists in the construction of a collective subject through equivalences and antagonistic frontiers, it is necessary to specify how it differs from the ordinary hegemonic construction of political identities. Every mobilisation must select demands, name a “we” and identify responsibilities or adversaries; not every mobilisation is populist for that reason. The essay clarifies that the distinction is a matter of degree — a movement is more or less populist according to the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics — but also acknowledges that no politics entirely fails to interpellate a people against an adversary (Laclau, 2005, pp. 47–48). This reinforces the need for the test of discriminating capacity: the relationship between populist logic and general hegemonic logic is not refuted, but it remains the theoretical point to be delimited.

A third solution shifts attention from ideology to repertoire or political style. Brubaker treats populism as a relatively flexible set of idioms, tropes, postures and gestures: appeals to “the people”, vertical antagonism, protectionism, claims to immediacy, a low style and the performative representation of crisis can combine without necessarily forming a coherent ideology (Brubaker, 2017, pp. 358–362). Moffitt and Tormey identify in the populist style the appeal to the people as opposed to the elite, the display of bad manners and the representation of crisis, threat or breakdown; they also stress that such performances are linked to contemporary mediatisation (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014, pp. 391–394). This perspective captures the performative and graded dimension of the phenomenon, but once again widens the extension of the category. Personalisation, spectacularisation, direct communication and the production of crisis may also derive from the incentives of media systems and from competition for attention. The problem then becomes establishing whether their populist configuration adds information or renames more general processes.

The main definitions are not simply alternative names for the same object. The thin ideology classifies systems of ideas; the frame and the logic concern discursive structures; style and repertoire classify communicative performances. They may therefore produce different extensions: an actor might episodically use a populist style without having a populist ideology, or articulate a vertical discourse without permanently transforming its own organisation. Treating the definitions as automatically complementary conceals this diversity of empirical

units. A coherent research programme must state whether it is classifying parties, leaders, statements, campaigns, movements or regimes, and must not transfer without evidence properties observed at one level to all the others.

This caution is particularly important when populism is used as an explanatory variable. Hunger and Paxton, systematically examining political science research, document a frequent conflation between populism and host ideologies: especially in studies of the European radical right, results attributed to populism are often operationalised through nativism, immigration, authoritarianism or socio-economic positions (Hunger and Paxton, 2022, pp. 624–630). This does not show that populism has no effects, but it requires separating the contribution of the populist component from that of the ideological programmes with which it combines. Without this control, the label risks absorbing the explanatory power of more precisely identifiable phenomena.

Finally, there is a second dimension of the crisis: “populism” operates not only as an analytical concept, but also as a polemical signifier in public and academic discourse. Studying populism critically therefore requires observing who applies the label, to which adversaries and with what consequences, distinguishing the analysis of the phenomenon from the analysis of the uses of the term (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon, 2018, pp. 657–660). Maiguashca shows how the construction of a global populist wave can aggregate heterogeneous political experiences and reproduce normative oppositions between a liberal centre considered normal and radicalisms described as equivalent (Maiguashca, 2019, pp. 770–775). The polemical genealogy of the category does not cancel its possible scientific value; it does signal, however, that classifying an actor as populist is never an operation entirely separate from the political field in which the word circulates.

The crisis of the category does not, therefore, lead to its pre-emptive abandonment. It calls for a more selective test. It is necessary to distinguish defining attributes from causes and consequences; to specify the empirical unit being classified; to verify whether the boundaries separate positive and negative cases; to check whether the concept adds information with respect to anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, nativism, personalisation, plebiscitarianism and media style. Only after this decomposition will it be possible to establish whether populism retains an autonomous configurational core or functions, in some uses, as a screen concept. This is the task of the analytical residual test developed in the following section.

3. The residual test: discriminating capacity, non-redundancy and explanatory performance

The “analytical residual test” is the procedure of conceptual control proposed in this paper. It does not start from the assumption that a concept is valid only when it possesses an absolutely exclusive property. In the social sciences, different phenomena often share individual attributes; what can make a concept autonomous is also a specific configuration of common properties, provided that it is clearly defined, observable and capable of delimiting cases. The test therefore asks what the category of populism adds after controlling for processes that might produce the same traits: competitive antagonism, anti-elitism, nativism, personalisation, plebiscitarianism, mediatisation and the crisis of representative organisations. The point is not to subtract mechanically every shared attribute, but to verify whether their combination retains a non-redundant meaning.

The first test concerns intensional clarity. For each conception it is necessary to identify the *genus* of the concept — ideology, frame, logic, style or form of representation — and the attributes that constitute its core. The second concerns extensional delimitation: a definition must indicate not only positive examples, but also negative and borderline cases. A concept that changes its unit of analysis depending on the case, alternately classifying a statement, a leader, a party or a regime, produces unstable comparisons. Clarity and differentiation are precisely among the criteria by which Gerring assesses the usefulness of social concepts, together with coherence, depth and theoretical utility (Gerring, 1999, pp. 367–383).

The third test is discriminating capacity. The question is not whether a trait exists in ordinary politics, but whether its configuration makes it possible to separate with sufficient reliability populist and non-populist actors located in the same competitive environment. The moral dichotomy between a pure people and a

corrupt elite might, for example, be distinguished from the normal criticism of opponents by its intensity, stability and claim to exhaust legitimate representation. If, however, the thresholds depend entirely on the researcher's variable decisions, the concept retains an interpretive function but loses classificatory precision. The use of continuous scales improves the measurement of discursive repertoires, without by itself resolving the decision about where to place the categorical boundary (Aslanidis, 2016, pp. 92–93).

The fourth test is non-redundancy. It requires breaking down what is attributed to populism and comparing it with adjacent concepts. The exclusion of immigrants may depend on nativism; the concentration of communication on the leader on personalisation; the immediate relationship with members on the organisational and digital transformation of parties; the delegitimation of guarantees on anti-pluralism. The distinction between the vertical axis of populism and the horizontal axis of nationalism shows that this control can strengthen, and not only weaken, the autonomy of the category (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon, 2018, pp. 651–653). Conversely, conflation with host ideologies can make what is produced by thicker ideological contents appear as an effect of populism (Hunger and Paxton, 2022, pp. 624–630).

The fifth test concerns operationalisability: indicators, sources and thresholds must be applicable by different observers with sufficiently convergent results. Not all definitions need to become quantitative variables, but they must nonetheless specify what evidence could confirm or disconfirm them. The sixth test, finally, concerns explanatory performance and applies only when populism is attributed a causal role. Correctly describing a repertoire does not mean having explained why it emerges, why it is adopted or what effects it produces. To advance a causal claim, it is necessary to control for host ideology, organisation, leadership, institutions, media structure and socio-economic context.

The test therefore allows for three outcomes. The concept may retain full autonomy, if it identifies a delimitable and non-redundant configuration; it may retain a circumscribed usefulness, above all descriptive or classificatory; or it may function as a screen concept when it brings together heterogeneous mechanisms and obscures their specific causes. The verdict need not be uniform across all definitions. It is possible, for example, that the populist style is observable but has little explanatory value, while the moral and exclusive claim to represent the authentic people retains greater discriminating capacity. The following sections suspend this verdict and reconstruct the historical configuration against which the residue will have to be measured again: "realised democracy".

4. "Realised democracy" as a historical configuration

As anticipated, the expression "realised democracy" (Boldrin, 2023) is here subjected to an explicit theoretical reworking. It does not describe the attainment of a perfect political form, nor does it presuppose that democratic history proceeds towards a necessary outcome. "Realised" rather indicates the generalisation of certain promises internal to modern democratisation and their entry into domains that go beyond the mere electoral selection of rulers. The concept therefore has an ideal-typical function: it isolates a configuration in which political equality, the widening of public responsibilities and the weakening of twentieth-century mediations develop jointly, while taking on different intensities and combinations in different political systems. The transformation of the deterministic hypothesis into a probabilistic and configurational mechanism constitutes the paper's first analytical departure from the original formulation.

The first process is the extension of the egalitarian principle. Universal suffrage affirms the equal status of citizens in the formation of political authority; this formal equality, however, coexists with persistent inequalities in participation, influence and representation. Beramendi, Besley and Levi distinguish precisely between the equal consideration of interests and the actual conditions through which participation and representation distribute political power (Beramendi, Besley and Levi, 2024, pp. i263–i268). Realised democracy does not eliminate this gap. Rather, it extends to subjects who recognise one another as politically equal the expectation

that hierarchies, competences and decisions be publicly justifiable. It does not follow logically that all opinions have identical cognitive value; it may, however, reduce the willingness to accept authority based solely on social position, institutional membership or deference.

The second process is the expansion of the sphere of responsibility attributed to politics. The democratic state is called upon not only to guarantee order and rights, but also to govern growth, social protection, health, education, technological risks, identity, the environment and inequalities. The capacity to include previously excluded demands is a democratic achievement, not a pathology. It does, however, produce a tension: legitimacy depends on the capacity to respond to a growing number of expectations, while the accumulation of policies and interdependencies makes it more difficult to attribute responsibility, communicate alternatives and evaluate results. The diagnosis of “democratic overload” formulated in the 1970s interpreted the expansion of participation and demands as a threat to governability (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975, pp. 74–76, 113–114). The concept proposed here does not adopt that conservative prescription: it regards the tension between responsiveness and governing capacity as an institutional problem to be mediated, not as evidence of an excess of democracy.

The third process concerns the transformation of mediations. Mass parties, trade unions, ideological affiliations and the political press did not merely transmit already formed preferences. They selected demands, built collective identities, produced competences and connected society and institutions. Their weakening does not coincide with the disappearance of parties, which retain public resources and decisive functions within the state; it indicates instead a lesser capacity for social rootedness, integration and formation. Mair describes this shift as a growing gap between representative government, oriented towards citizens’ demands, and responsible government, bound by institutions and interdependencies that narrow the range of feasible alternatives (Mair, 2009, pp. 5–14). In the space left by twentieth-century organisations, personalised leaderships, commercial media, platforms and new infrastructures of intermediation acquire centrality.

This configuration meets Canovan’s distinction between the redemptive and the pragmatic face of democracy. The first holds the promise of popular power and political transformation; the second organises conflict peacefully through rules, institutions and contingent compromises. The two faces are opposed but interdependent, and it is precisely the gap between promise and institutional functioning that makes populism a recurrent possibility internal to democracy, not a simply external pathology (Canovan, 1999, pp. 9–11, 16). This thesis does not by itself provide a criterion for classifying populist actors. It does, however, offer decisive support to the premise of “realised democracy”: the appeal to give power back to the people can reactivate promises constitutive of democratic legitimacy, even when it enters into tension with the mediations that make that power practicable.

The three processes do not form a rigid causal sequence. Political equality does not automatically produce distrust of experts; the expansion of public intervention does not necessarily lead to ineffectiveness; digital technologies do not inevitably eliminate intermediate organisations. The configuration emerges from their possible interweaving. Citizens who claim equal consideration direct growing expectations towards institutions called upon to govern complex problems, while the legitimacy of the structures that filter, defer or transform demands declines. The promise of immediacy then becomes politically attractive: the leader, the movement or the platform can present themselves as instruments capable of conveying the citizen’s voice without distortion.

Realised democracy is therefore not synonymous with populism. It defines the environment in which some repertoires commonly classified as populist can also become available to different actors: the direct appeal to the people, the simplification of alternatives, the personalisation of responsibility and suspicion of mediations. The relationship is probabilistic and configurational, not deterministic. The following sections will analyse the three processes separately, before verifying whether populism still constitutes a specific combination of them or a more general mode of adaptation of contemporary democratic competition.

The democratic principle of political equality establishes that citizens possess an equal status with respect to the production of collective authority. It does not claim that they have the same knowledge, that every judgement is equally well founded or that public decisions can disregard competence. Confusing these levels would turn a norm concerning power into an unproven epistemological thesis. Beramendi, Besley and Levi define political equality on the basis of the equal consideration of interests and show how it depends on the actual conditions of participation and representation, not on the assumption that individuals are identical in resources or capacities (Beramendi, Besley and Levi, 2024, pp. i263–i268). Epistemic inequality does not, however, symmetrically authorise an automatic inequality in the right to govern.

The tension arises because contemporary democracies must reconcile two requirements that are both legitimate. Collective decisions require increasingly differentiated specialist knowledge; at the same time, experts do not possess general political authority by virtue of technical competence alone. They may know causal relationships, risks or instruments better, but the choice of objectives involves values, the distribution of costs and judgements on which citizens retain the right to pronounce. Epistemic theories of democracy must therefore also distinguish the normative thesis according to which democratic procedures should possess cognitive value from the descriptive thesis according to which they actually produce better decisions (Hannon, 2025, pp. 651–652). Neither the fallibility of voters nor that of experts resolves, on its own, the problem of authority.

“Realised democracy” radicalises the demand that every difference in authority be justifiable. Hierarchies once sustained by deference, social position or a monopoly of information are subjected to public contestation. This development has an emancipatory dimension: it makes it possible to call into question self-proclaimed competences, professional interests and institutions shielded from control. It can, however, produce a further effect when the rejection of deference combines with distrust, decisional opacity and disintermediated communication. Under such conditions, the formula “one counts as one” can slide from the equal right to participate towards the idea that no cognitive claim deserves particular recognition. This is not a logical consequence of democratic equality, but a possible transformation of the repertoires through which authority is legitimated.

Sorensen and Krämer describe a shift in public truth claims: alongside justifications based on objectivity, procedures and expertise, those based on authenticity, personal experience and immediacy gain prominence (Sorensen and Krämer, 2024, pp. 118–119). Authenticity promises an unmediated correspondence between what a person lives, what they say and what they are. In politics, this promise can make credible those who appear ordinary, spontaneous and free from institutional codes, while technical language may be interpreted as a sign of distance or concealment. The same authors make clear, however, that there is no single populist epistemology: common sense, experience and objective data can be combined selectively (Sorensen and Krämer, 2024, pp. 126–127). It would therefore not be correct to identify authenticity with populism or simply to oppose experiential truth to scientific truth.

The relevant shift concerns rather the form of trust. Traditional epistemic authority operated through institutions, certification procedures and professional mediations. The claim to authenticity moves the criterion towards the perceived relationship between the public and the spokesperson: those who “speak like us”, display recognisable emotions and do not seem to depend on apparatuses are credible. The personalised leader can thus present himself or herself at once as a member of the people and as the privileged interpreter of its experience. Simplification does not consist only in reducing complex information, but in replacing an institutional chain of validation with a fiduciary shortcut: the truth of the representation is guaranteed by the authenticity attributed to the speaker.

This mechanism does not make competence superfluous. On the contrary, the more complex problems are, the greater the dependence on scientific communities, administrations, indicators and technical infrastructures. A paradox of epistemic mediation thus emerges: the functional need for specialised knowledge grows precisely

while the public legitimacy of the institutions that select and translate it may decline. If the response consists in removing decisions from democratic control, competence takes the form of technocracy; if it consists in denying any cognitive difference, decision-making is exposed to arbitrariness and manipulation. A democratic mediation must instead make experts and procedures contestable without pretending that all claims have the same foundation.

The literature on epistemic democracy also prevents us from describing the public as necessarily incompetent. Hannon rejects the idea that disagreement about epistemic authority or the risk of wrong outcomes constitute, on their own, sufficient refutations of the cognitive capacity of democratic procedures, while acknowledging the persistence of ignorance, disagreement and non-epistemic values (Hannon, 2025, pp. 664–665).

Knowledge can be distributed, corrected through debate and incorporated into collective institutions. The problem of realised democracy is therefore not “too much equality”, but the quality of the structures that organise the encounter between political equality and differences in knowledge.

It is in this space that some repertoires commonly described as populist acquire effectiveness: the opposition between common sense and expertise, the denunciation of authorities as self-referential castes, the valorisation of the immediate word and the identification of the leader with the authentic people. Such repertoires are not produced exclusively by a populist ideology; they also respond to a tension internal to democratic legitimation. The specifically populist residue must then be sought not in the simple criticism of experts, but in the possible transformation of that criticism into a monopolistic claim: only one part would be entitled to express true knowledge, the true interests and the authentic voice of the whole people.

6. The expansion of the political sphere and the government of complexity

The second process of realised democracy concerns the widening of what is considered politically decidable and of what public power is held responsible for. Economy, health, education, the environment, technical innovation, security, cultural recognition and identity are not domains that have ever been foreign to politics. The transformation lies rather in the intensity and visibility of the expectations addressed to democratic institutions. Groups and problems once excluded enter the public arena, while decisions previously presented as natural, private or technical become objects of contestation. This widening is one of the emancipatory effects of democratisation: it makes it possible to politicise inequalities and power relations that would otherwise remain invisible.

To analyse its consequences, at least four phenomena must be distinguished. The first is the growth of expectations of responsiveness, that is, of the demand that institutions listen to different interests and translate them into decisions. The second is the extension of the perimeter of public intervention. The third is the historical accumulation of instruments, rules and organisations created to respond to demands. The fourth is the substantive complexity of problems, deriving from the number of actors, levels of government, forms of knowledge and consequences involved. These processes may reinforce one another, but they do not coincide: a more active state does not necessarily have more complex policies, and a cognitively difficult problem does not always require a quantitative expansion of intervention.

The classic diagnosis of the crisis of governability interpreted social mobilisation and the inclusion of new groups as causes of institutional overload. In the report of the Trilateral Commission, Huntington associated the expansion of governmental activities with a decline in authority and argued that the participation of previously marginal groups exerted growing pressures on the political system (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975, pp. 74–76, 102–114). That diagnosis identifies a real tension between demands and decision-making capacity, but it incorporates a controversial evaluation: it risks turning democratic inclusion into the problem and deference into the solution. The objections already reported in the same volume show how the language of overload could also reflect the point of view of elites concerned about a loss of position (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975, pp. 205–207).

The concept of realised democracy adopts a different perspective. The problem is not that citizens put forward too many demands, but that democratic legitimacy simultaneously requires responsiveness, effectiveness and public justification. Responding to new claims tends to add policies and instruments to those already in place; removing consolidated programmes, by contrast, meets distributive, institutional and electoral costs. A “responsiveness trap” is thus produced: non-response directly undermines legitimacy, while response by accumulation can overload administrative, evaluative and communicative capacities (Adam et al., 2019, pp. 1–8). The tension therefore derives from the historical success of inclusion no less than from its organisational limits.

Accumulation should not be confused with a uniform increase in complexity. Analysing twenty-one OECD countries between 1980 and 2015, Limberg, Knill and Steinebach find a general but variable relationship between the growth of policy portfolios and the complexity of policy systems. Complexity is neither a natural outcome nor identical across every sector and country (Limberg, Knill and Steinebach, 2023, pp. 575–577). It can make policies harder to understand, implementation harder to coordinate, responsibility harder to attribute and results harder to evaluate. It may, however, also reflect the heterogeneity of society and allow for differentiated and fairer responses. Simplifying institutions and instruments is therefore not always the same as governing better.

The properly democratic difficulty concerns the growing gap between decisional complexity and the form of competition. Policies operate through long causal chains, delayed effects, supranational constraints and specialist expertise; electoral competition, by contrast, requires recognisable alternatives, attributable responsibilities and communicable promises. A result may depend on decisions adopted at different moments and by different authorities, while public judgement tends to focus on the government or the visible leader. The harder it becomes to reconstruct responsibilities, the greater the incentive to offer explanations that identify a cause, a culprit and a solution that are immediately intelligible.

Simplification is inevitable in any political representation: without selection, no problem could become an object of collective decision. The critical point is therefore not to oppose a complex and true politics to a simple and false one, but to distinguish different modes of reducing complexity. An institutionalised simplification makes alternatives visible, makes uncertainties explicit and preserves the possibility of revision; an antagonistic simplification can compress plurality and interdependencies into a moral dichotomy, attributing every obstacle to the popular will to an intentionally hostile elite. The latter configuration is compatible with populism, but is not produced exclusively by it.

The expansion of the political sphere therefore creates a structure of opportunity, not a sufficient cause. Expectations of response, causal opacity and difficulties of attribution make personalisation, blame and promises of immediate decision politically advantageous. To understand why such repertoires spread beyond conventionally populist actors, however, it is necessary to add the third process: the transformation of the organisations that once aggregated demands, selected alternatives and distributed responsibility over time. This is the role of the crisis of twentieth-century mediations.

7. The crisis of twentieth-century mediations and the transformation of parties

Representative democracy does not connect citizens and decisions through an immediate relationship. Between individual preferences and public authority operate organisations that select demands, build identities, train political personnel and make alternatives recognisable. In twentieth-century democracy, the mass party was the main infrastructure of this mediation. Local branches, activism, the press, collateral associations and ideological affiliations did not merely register an already existing will: they contributed to producing collective subjects, interpretations of society and programmes capable of lasting beyond the single electoral cycle. Mastropaolo reconstructs this function as a work of representation that named and organised groups, aggregated diffuse interests and turned numbers into a political resource, without presupposing an already formed collective subject (Mastropaolo, 2012, pp. 37–43; Mastropaolo, 2021, pp. 15–17, 24–29).

Speaking of a crisis of parties does not, however, mean claiming that they have disappeared. Parties continue to select candidates, organise competition, occupy offices and support governments. The transformation concerns the position they occupy between society and the state. Mair describes a progressive weakening of the representative function and a strengthening of the procedural and governmental role: while rootedness, identification and organised participation decline, parties become more dependent on the resources, rules and functions provided by public institutions (Mair, 2009, pp. 5–14). Calise reconstructs the same adaptive capacity by relating organisational foundations, personalisation, governmental performance and digitalisation: the transformation does not erase the material constitutional centrality of parties, but modifies their structure and principle of authority (Calise, 2023, pp. 101–112). What is created, therefore, is not an absolute vacuum, but an asymmetry: organisations that are still decisive within the state turn out to be less capable of integrating society on a stable basis.

This asymmetry also modifies the temporality of representation. The mass party distributed the formation of the will across congresses, branches, intermediate bodies and relatively long careers. Such structures could be oligarchic, exclusionary and slow; they do not, therefore, constitute a model to be idealised. Tuccari's reconstruction of Michels's sociology shows precisely the ambivalence of organisation: it made dispersed masses politically effective, but at the same time produced specialisation of leadership, dependence and oligarchic tendencies (Tuccari, 2021, pp. 43–46, 53–56). Parties, however, also performed a function of deferral: demands were aggregated, negotiated and transformed before becoming decisions. When associational rootedness weakens and competition becomes professionalised, the pressure to respond quickly to shifting electoral publics grows. Mediation then appears not as the condition of representation, but as an obstacle separating citizens' voices from the place of decision.

Personalisation fits into this transformation without constituting a uniform outcome of it. The weakening of affiliations and the centrality of campaigns make the leader a resource of recognisability, coordination and attribution of responsibility. Calise interprets the "democracy of the leader" not only as the overwhelming power of the leader, but also as the leader's direct exposure to the spiral of rising expectations and to the volatility of consensus (Calise, 2015, pp. 203–212). Comparative data on party politics in Western Europe indicate a growth in personalisation, but also variations across countries, parties and organisational dimensions (Marino, Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2022, pp. 571–576). Not all parties turn into personal organisations, and not all personalisation necessarily concentrates power at the top. Rahat indeed distinguishes different party types in the age of personalised politics, showing that leadership, candidates and collegial structures can combine in different ways (Rahat, 2024, pp. 213–221).

Digitalisation accentuates this ambivalence. Network technologies reduce some costs of communication, coordination and mobilisation and allow members and supporters to participate without going through the traditional forms of activism. They can therefore foster broader consultations, distributed campaigns and new connections between organisation and electorate. Chadwick and Stromer-Galley therefore reject a simple decline thesis: digital media can contribute both to the renewal of parties and to the redistribution of power within them (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016, pp. 283–290). The effect depends on organisational architecture, on control over data and on the capacity of participants to influence decisions.

The promise of disintermediation can in fact produce new, less visible mediations. Platforms, staff, access procedures, algorithms and data managers select what is seen, discussed and put to a vote. Analysing the rhetoric and practices of organisational change in Italian parties, Biancalana shows that the appeal to a more immediate relationship between base and leadership can coexist with the strengthening of leadership and the construction of new filters (Biancalana, 2022, pp. 193–200). The difference is therefore not between mediation and the absence of mediation, but between forms of mediation endowed with different degrees of visibility, accountability and contestability.

This reconfiguration helps to understand the spread of people-centred repertoires. A less rooted organisation can compensate for the weakness of collective ties through the figure of the leader, presented as a direct point of connection between citizens and institutions. The base need not share a dense ideological identity: it can coalesce around campaigns, issues and moments of mobilisation. The leader thus takes on a dual function. At the organisational level, the leader coordinates lighter and more professionalised structures; at the symbolic level, the leader unifies a fragmented public. Personalisation and the appeal to the people do not, for this reason, demonstrate the presence of populism: they may be more general adaptations to the transformation of party competition.

The crisis of mediation also produces a paradox of legitimisation. The more parties are necessary for the functioning of institutions, the more their dependence on the state can reinforce the image of a separate political class. The more they try to bridge the distance through direct consultations and personalised communication, the more they risk weakening the collective arenas that could make that participation lasting and accountable. This delegitimisation does not stem only from recent transformations: Ignazi and Mastropaolo reconstruct a longer genealogy of it, rooted in aversion to partiality, conflict and intermediate bodies, to which is added today the gap between the normative image of the mass party and organisations that have by now become state-centred, professionalised and personalised (Ignazi, 2021, pp. 37–45, 49–53; Mastropaolo, 2021, pp. 29–35). Anti-partyism can thus also be adopted by organisations that perform all the typical functions of a party, but build their legitimacy by denying that they belong to the system of mediations.

The transformation of parties therefore constitutes an explanation that is both competing with and complementary to populism. It explains why strong leaderships, communicative immediacy, criticism of apparatuses and intermittent mobilisation can spread across the political spectrum. It does not rule out the possibility that these elements take on a specifically populist configuration, but it prevents them from being used on their own as sufficient indicators. The next step consists in analysing the ideal type that emerges from their convergence: a “pyramid without steps”, in which the verticality of leadership combines with the fragmentation of the base and with infrastructures of intermediation that are increasingly concentrated and less visible.

8. The “pyramid without steps”: personalisation, disintermediation and digital re-intermediation

The formula “pyramid without steps”, proposed here as a heuristic tool, designates an ideal type of contemporary representation, not a universal description of every party or democracy. The figure combines a broad and fragmented base with a highly visible apex, while the organisational levels capable of stably connecting the two extremes grow thinner. The steps do not disappear materially: officials, consultants, administrators, journalists, activists and professionals continue to operate. They lose, however, visibility and legitimacy as autonomous subjects of representation, because the political relationship is narrated as a direct connection between citizens and leaders.

The pyramid derives from the convergence of three distinct transformations. The first is personalisation: the identity, responsibility and communication of the party are increasingly concentrated on recognisable persons. The second is organisational disintermediation, that is, the promise to reduce the distance produced by apparatuses, procedures and intermediate bodies. The third is digital re-intermediation: the apparently direct relationship is made possible by platforms, databases, recommendation systems, communication professionals and technical rules that constitute new filters. The category of the “technoparty” proposed by Calise captures precisely the restructuring of the party’s traditional human network under the effect of digitalisation, platformisation and leadership (Calise, 2021, pp. 225–234). Confusing these processes would lead to attributing to technology alone what also depends on organisational and institutional choices.

Personalisation, first of all, does not necessarily coincide with the absolute dominance of a leader. It may concern the national leader, local candidates or the individualised choice of voters. Rahat shows that in the age of personalised politics collegial parties survive and different combinations take shape between control by the top, the autonomy of candidates and the role of organisational structures (Rahat, 2024, pp. 213–221). Online political consumption also varies according to characteristics already present offline. Zamir's comparative analysis of more than 140 parties in twenty-five democracies links digital attention to parties and leaders to political and organisational structures, without identifying a uniform effect of platforms (Zamir, 2024, pp. 108–117). The pyramid therefore represents a possible tendency, not a technologically predetermined outcome.

Disintermediation is above all a claim to legitimacy. An organisation can present online consultations, social media communication and direct access to the leader as the restitution of sovereignty to members, while retaining strong control over the agenda, candidacies and data. Biancalana shows how the rhetoric of disintermediation can accompany different organisational practices and even a strengthening of the centre (Biancalana, 2022, pp. 193–200). The promise of immediacy therefore does not prove the absence of mediation; rather, it tends to delegitimise competing mediators and to make less visible those who control the new infrastructure.

Digital technology also changes the form of the public. Palano describes the transition from a relatively unified public, organised around general-interest media, towards a "bubble democracy" made up of fragmented information circuits, horizontal trust and intermittent mobilisations (Palano, 2019a, pp. 74–88). This model does not justify the claim that all citizens live in hermetic bubbles or are shielded from exposure to different opinions. Ceccarini and Turato's Italian survey describes instead a hybrid ecosystem: legacy media retain a significant informational role, and active internet use, especially when it includes political discussion, is associated with greater online and offline participation. Since the data are cross-sectional, however, the authors do not identify the causal direction of the relationship (Ceccarini and Turato, 2025, pp. 25–28). The most solid element is therefore the loss of a single arena capable of ordering collective attention, together with the possibility for political actors to address different publics selectively.

The base of the pyramid is therefore not a homogeneous mass. It is made up of mobile publics that can be activated around issues, identities and campaigns without turning into lasting organised affiliations. Calise calls this transformation the "personalisation of the masses": the collective subject organised by party machines and ideologies fragments into digital individuals, while the power of connection and selection becomes concentrated in platforms (Calise, 2025, pp. 19–23). Leadership performs a function of symbolic unification: it offers a common face to segments that do not necessarily communicate with one another. From this point of view, verticalisation does not eliminate fragmentation, but makes it governable. The leader becomes the shortcut through which different demands are brought back to the same name, while the platform makes it possible to coordinate and measure them.

This structure changes the meaning of participation. Clicking, sharing, donating, voting in a consultation or joining a campaign can broaden opportunities for intervention and reduce specific costs of mobilisation. It does not, however, automatically amount to controlling the organisation. Participation can be intense but episodic, and its decision-making capacity depends on who sets the options, interprets the results and owns the infrastructure. This is why digital media can simultaneously support participatory renewal and the concentration of power (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016, pp. 283–290).

The "pyramid without steps" ultimately identifies a transformation in the regime of visibility of mediation. At the top, leadership appears immediately accountable and accessible; at the base, each citizen can perceive himself or herself as being in a direct relationship with the centre; in between, the operations of selection are entrusted to technical and professional infrastructures that are less recognisable as political institutions. The result is a tension between promised horizontality and actual verticality. This tension is not exclusively populist:

it concerns parties, movements and leaders of different orientations. It does, however, create an environment favourable to a representation in which the leader claims to speak without intermediaries in the name of the people, while every alternative mediation can be denounced as a distortion of its will.

9. Populism as a structural mode of reducing complexity

The three processes of realised democracy converge in a common tension. Political equality widens the demand to justify authorities and hierarchies; the expansion of public responsibility multiplies problems, demands and constraints; the weakening of mediations reduces the capacity of organisations to aggregate interests and to distribute the formation of the will over time. None of these processes necessarily produces populism. Their combination does, however, make advantageous repertoires capable of compressing the distance between the complexity of decisions and the intelligibility of competition. In this sense, populism can be analysed not only as an ideological content, but as a particularly effective mode of political reduction of complexity.

All politics must reduce complexity. To represent means to select certain demands, build connections between different experiences and offer practicable alternatives. A programme cannot reproduce society in its entirety and a decision cannot keep all possibilities open. Reduction becomes problematic when it conceals its own operations and presents the result as the immediate expression of an already given subject. The populist repertoire radicalises this tendency: social plurality is condensed into “the people”; causal relationships are traced back to the action of an elite; the variety of alternatives becomes a moral opposition; the chain of representation is synthesised in the relationship between people and leader.

A first operation is cognitive selection. Interdependent problems are translated into narratives with a limited number of causes, subjects and solutions. This function is not in itself populist: parties, governments, media and experts necessarily simplify. A possible specificity emerges when uncertainty is not only reduced but denied; when technical or normative disagreement is presented as evidence of bad faith and complexity as an artifice constructed by those who wish to prevent the people from deciding. The criticism of expertise then turns into an opposition between authentic experience and institutional knowledge, consistent with the growing political value attributed to immediacy (Sorensen and Krämer, 2024, pp. 118–127).

The second operation is causal attribution. In systems composed of multiple levels of government, markets, independent authorities and transnational constraints, results rarely depend on a single centre. Competition, however, requires visible responsibilities. Populism offers a particularly simple grammar: the people have recognisable interests, while a corrupt elite prevents their realisation. The ideational dichotomy defined by Mudde therefore also performs a cognitive function, because it converts a set of failures, conflicts and interdependencies into an intentional relationship between two homogeneous subjects (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Its communicative success does not, however, prove that anti-elitism is always the autonomous cause of the political conduct observed.

The third operation is antagonistic construction. Every competition divides, names adversaries and draws boundaries. The vertical *down/up* logic, however, makes it possible to articulate different demands as expressions of the same exclusion from power, without necessarily confusing them with the nationalist opposition between inside and outside (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon, 2018, pp. 651–653). This articulation reduces social complexity through equivalences: differences between groups and claims are temporarily subordinated to the common frontier. The discriminating problem remains that of establishing when this operation, ordinary in the construction of collective identities, becomes specifically populist.

The fourth operation is representative personalisation. In the “pyramid without steps”, the leader makes visible the unity of a fragmented base and concentrates the attribution of responsibility. The person functions as an organisational and symbolic shortcut: it makes it possible to recognise a political position without going through its entire programmatic and institutional structure. This operation too cuts across the political spectrum.

Personalisation is documented in different parties and contexts and is not a sufficient indicator of populism (Marino, Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2022, pp. 571–576). It can, however, reinforce a populist configuration when the leader does not simply represent a part, but claims to embody the authentic people without remainder.

The fifth operation is temporal compression. Organisations, procedures and negotiations introduce intervals between demand and decision; the promise of immediacy represents such intervals as illegitimate subtractions of sovereignty. Permanent consultation, real-time communication and the performance of crisis feed the expectation that every problem requires a visible and rapid response. The populist style, based among other things on the performative representation of crisis, threat and rupture, is particularly well suited to this temporal regime (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014, pp. 391–394). In this case too, however, media incentives involve far more actors than the populist family alone.

The mechanism proposed by the paper is therefore configurational. Realised democracy does not automatically generate populist actors; it increases the availability and advantage of repertoires that promise intelligibility, attribution of blame, unity and immediacy. Such repertoires can be adopted to different degrees and combined with different host ideologies. This interpretation is consistent with the frequent overlap found by Hunger and Paxton between the populist label and contents belonging to nativism, authoritarianism or socialism (Hunger and Paxton, 2022, pp. 624–630): the function of reduction can travel together with substantively incompatible political projects.

Interpreting populism as a structural mode does not mean normalising all its consequences. The reduction of complexity can make collective action possible and restore visibility to excluded demands; it can also erase pluralism, constraints and possibilities of correction. The judgement depends on the concrete configuration. The concluding test must therefore separate what belongs to the general grammar of contemporary democracy from what might remain specific to populism. Simplification, personalisation, anti-elitism and immediacy turn out to be widely shared. The moral claim to represent the authentic people exclusively constitutes instead the strongest candidate for the analytical residue examined in the following section.

10. What remains of populism?

Applied to the configuration of realised democracy, the residual test leads to a differentiated result. A substantial part of the attributes commonly associated with populism does not pass the non-redundancy test on its own. The appeal to the people belongs to democratic legitimation; antagonism to competition and to the construction of collective identities; simplification to every representative operation; personalisation to the transformation of parties and media; the criticism of experts to the tension between political equality and epistemic authority. None of these elements, considered in isolation, makes it possible to distinguish a populist actor with sufficient precision.

The same result concerns explanatory performance. The label “populism” cannot be used as a general cause of the crisis of parties, of direct communication, of polarisation or of the policies adopted by different ideological families. The growing state-centredness of organisations, media incentives, nativism, authoritarianism and institutional structures have mechanisms of their own. Hunger and Paxton’s review documents precisely the risk that the effects of host ideologies are attributed to populism without being analytically separated (Hunger and Paxton, 2022, pp. 624–630). In these uses, populism functions as a screen concept: it names a real constellation, but can conceal its specific causes.

This does not make the term devoid of all usefulness. Ideational and discursive definitions identify a recognisable configuration: the construction of two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the moralisation of their opposition, the attribution of sovereignty to a unitary people and the representation of the elite as an impediment to its will (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Stanley, 2008, pp. 100–102). The distinction between the vertical axis of populism and the horizontal axis of nationalism further confirms that this configuration cannot

automatically be reduced to nativism (De Cleen, Glynnos and Mondon, 2018, pp. 651–653). The concept therefore retains a descriptive and classificatory capacity, provided it does not absorb all the properties of the actors to which it is applied.

The most promising residue lies in the passage from the representation of a part to the claim to identify, in moral terms, an authentic and unitary people. Democracy requires every force to construct a “we” and to claim a capacity to represent general interests. A qualitatively different threshold may emerge when opponents are regarded not only as politically mistaken or socially privileged, but as foreign to the legitimate people; pluralism, mediations and guarantees can then be described as artificial obstacles placed against an already unitary popular will. In the interview in which he summarises his own criterion, Müller indeed distinguishes the criticism of elites from the claim to a moral monopoly of representation: the populist maintains that only he represents the people and can exclude from the authentic people the citizens who do not support him (Müller, in Boel, Jensen and Sonnichsen, 2017, pp. 71–72). Urbinati identifies a related mechanism in representation as incorporation: the attempt to close the distance between elected representatives and citizens by personifying sovereignty in a leader tends to superimpose unity on pluralism and to present internal divisions within the people as non-genuine factions (Urbinati, 2021, pp. 31–33, 41–42). These direct sources strengthen the hypothesis of the exclusivist residue, without demonstrating its empirical exclusivity: the passage from the ideational configuration to institutional conduct has yet to be operationalised and verified comparatively.

The title of the paper thus receives a circumscribed answer. Populism “does not exist” only if by this expression one means a unitary cause capable of explaining on its own the contemporary transformation of democracy. It does exist, however, as a graded repertoire and as an ideational configuration capable of organising people, elite and sovereignty according to a moral grammar. The category is outdated when it continues to present as exceptional personalisation, immediacy and the reduction of complexity, which have become more general; it remains relevant when it makes it possible to recognise the exclusivist closure of these processes.

The result neither acquits nor condemns wholesale the actors classified as populist. It shifts the analysis from labels to mechanisms. To assess concrete democratic consequences, it is necessary to observe separately host ideology, organisation, treatment of opponents, relationship with guarantees and use of institutional power. Populism thus retains a limited but not negligible function: it is not the general explanation of post-liberal democracy, but one of the possible ways in which its tensions are articulated and morally closed.

11. Conclusions

The paper has subjected the category of populism to a circumscribed question: to what extent does it retain discriminating and explanatory capacity once one controls for the ordinary features of representative competition and for the contemporary transformations of mediation? The answer coincides neither with abandoning the concept nor with confirming it indiscriminately. Populism loses autonomy when it is used to bring together under a single cause simplification, personalisation, anti-elitism, direct communication and the crisis of organisations. These phenomena have origins, mechanisms and consequences that go beyond the actors conventionally classified as populist.

The concept of “realised democracy” has made it possible to reconstruct the environment in which such repertoires become generalised. Political equality extends the demand for the justification of authorities without implying the cognitive equivalence of opinions. The expansion of public responsibilities increases expectations of response while making the attribution, communication and evaluation of decisions more difficult. The transformation of parties weakens certain forms of rootedness and deferral, without eliminating either organisations or mediation. Personalisation and digital infrastructures thus rebuild the connection between citizens and power through new hierarchies, which are often less visible.

In this configuration, the reduction of complexity is not a pathology external to democracy. It is an inevitable function of representation and becomes politically more important as the complexity of problems and the fragmentation of publics grow. Populism constitutes a particularly effective mode of this reduction: it condenses plurality into the people, attributes obstacles to an elite, organises conflict in moral form and makes the leader the visible point of collective unity. But none of these operations, considered in isolation, belongs to populism alone.

The strongest analytical residue emerges when moralisation combines with the claim to identify the authentic people in a unitary and exclusionary form. It is not enough to support one side or to criticise an elite; the configuration becomes specifically relevant when opponents are placed outside the legitimate people and pluralistic mediations are presented as usurpations of an already unitary will. The analysis makes it possible to formulate this boundary theoretically, but its operationalisation and the verification of its institutional consequences require further empirical comparison. The conclusion must therefore remain open to revision.

The title “Does populism not exist?” thus retains its interrogative character. Populism does not exist as a self-sufficient explanation of the liberal-democratic crisis or as a pathology simply external to an otherwise stable order. It exists as a graded configuration and as a possible exclusivist closure of transformations that belong more broadly to twenty-first-century mass democracy. Shifting attention from the label to the infrastructures of representation makes it possible to understand why similar repertoires emerge in different political families, and why fighting “populism” without rebuilding legitimate mediations, governing capacity and contestable forms of epistemic authority risks leaving intact the conditions that make its adoption advantageous.

The final normative question is therefore not how to restore a lost distance between rulers and ruled, nor how to remove complexity from democratic control. It is how to build institutions capable of mediating without presenting themselves as the owners of the decision, of recognising competences without turning them into domination, and of reducing complexity without erasing pluralism and the possibility of correction. The resilience of liberal democracy depends less on excluding the actors labelled populist than on making the work of mediation visible, accountable and contestable.

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