

The Fragility of Realised Democracy. Populism and Illiberalism as Endogenous Tensions of Contemporary Democracies

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary fragility of liberal democracy by focusing on tensions generated within democracy itself. It introduces “realised democracy” as a heuristic concept describing the expansion of political equality beyond electoral participation, the growing expectation that public power should respond to every social demand, and the extension of political decision-making into increasingly broad areas of collective life. These developments collide with the liberal principles of limited power, institutional mediation, pluralism, and the cognitive differentiation required by complex societies. As political and epistemic mediations lose legitimacy, constraints on majority rule can be portrayed as illegitimate obstacles to the people’s will. Populism and illiberalism are therefore interpreted neither as external pathologies nor as inevitable outcomes, but as recurrent possibilities produced by the internal tensions of contemporary democracy. Recent evidence of democratic decline is used to identify the phenomenon to be explained, while the article develops a positive, non-prescriptive interpretation of its underlying mechanisms.

Keywords: realised democracy; liberal democracy; populism; illiberalism; political mediation.

The diagnosis of a crisis of democracy has become one of the most frequented topics of contemporary political reflection. The formula therefore risks losing precision: it covers abstention, the crisis of parties, polarisation, the rise of populisms, the spread of hybrid regimes and the consolidation of autocracies. And yet, behind this heterogeneity, one fact retains a significance that is hard to evade. According to *Freedom in the World 2026*, in 2025 global freedom declined for the twentieth consecutive year; in many cases, the deterioration did not follow a sudden rupture of the constitutional order, but the progressive erosion of checks and guarantees by actors who came to government through competitive elections (Freedom House, 2026). The problem, therefore, does not concern only the survival of openly authoritarian regimes. It concerns the capacity of democracies to preserve over time the liberal conditions that limit power, protect pluralism and make alternation in government possible.

This suggests changing the question from which the analysis starts. Asking which forces threaten democracy today often presupposes that the threat comes from outside: from anti-democratic ideologies, exceptional leaders or citizens suddenly hostile to freedom. Such a perspective captures real aspects, but it risks leaving in the shadow the more problematic possibility, namely that some illiberal pressures mature within the functioning of democracy and present themselves in the language of popular sovereignty. The weakening of courts, the subordination of independent authorities, the delegitimation of the press and the identification of the electoral majority with the whole people do not necessarily require the rejection of elections. On the contrary, they can be justified as means of restoring effectiveness to a democratic will that is believed to be obstructed by non-elected institutions, slow procedures and mediations lacking direct legitimation.

The present contribution proposes to interpret this dynamic through the category of “realised democracy” formulated by Michele Boldrin in a lecture given at ASERI in March 2023 (Boldrin, 2023). Boldrin uses the expression to describe the extension of “one counts as one” beyond equality of the vote, the widening of the domains subjected to political decision and the resulting tension with the limiting premises of liberalism. Starting from this diagnosis, the essay reworks the category as a historical-sociological ideal type: not a regime defined by a specific constitutional architecture, nor a normatively desirable end point, but a tendency produced by the expansion of the democratic principle, by the widening of the objects of collective decision and by the growth of the expectations addressed to political power. In this way, political equality tends to turn into a more general equivalence of opinions, while representation and competence may appear as hierarchical residues.

The thesis advanced is that this expansion produces a structural tension with liberalism. Liberalism and democracy have been combined historically, but they are not synonyms. The former limits power, protects spheres of autonomy and recognises the legitimacy of dissent; the latter establishes who is entitled to take part in the formation of collective decisions. Their encounter built constitutional democracies, but it did not erase the difference between the two logics. When majoritarian legitimation is taken as a sufficient title to remove every limit, the democratic principle can be mobilised against liberal guarantees. Populism and illiberalism then become endogenous possibilities of contemporary democracy: not necessary outcomes, but political forms capable of organising contradictions produced by democratic development itself.

The argument is descriptive, not prescriptive. It does not seek to establish how much democracy is desirable, to rehabilitate oligarchic limitations on participation or to outline an institutional therapy. It aims to reconstruct a mechanism. Increasing complexity makes competences, procedures and mediations indispensable; at the same time, the expansion of democratic expectations tends to delegitimise precisely these distances. The gap between the promise of full responsiveness and the actual capacity of power generates a demand for simplification and immediacy. It is in this space that the populist appeal to the people and the illiberal twisting of majoritarian decision acquire a political rationality.

Familiarity with the expression “liberal democracy” has encouraged the idea that the two terms describe inseparable aspects of a single model. Their relationship is instead the result of a complex historical composition. As Bobbio recalls, the fundamental problem of liberalism is the limitation of power, whereas that of democracy concerns its distribution (Bobbio, 1995). The liberal principle asks which spheres should be removed from coercive intervention and which guarantees protect the individual; the democratic principle asks who participates, directly or indirectly, in the production of binding decisions. Power can be limited without being democratic, and it can be conferred democratically without remaining limited.

Mény reconstructs the origin of this divergence by observing that liberals were not born as theorists of popular sovereignty: they sought above all to contain the rule of the masses and to protect rights and autonomies from political arbitrariness (Mény, 2025). The subsequent encounter between the popular component – suffrage, elections, parties – and the liberal component – rights, separation of powers, the rule of law – did not eliminate their original tension. It made it institutionally productive. It is precisely this composition that explains why fragility is not an accident arriving from outside, but a characteristic of constitutional democracy: sovereignty must be exercised and, at the same time, contained; power must answer to the majority without belonging entirely to the majority.

Tocqueville had identified this ambivalence early on. In his eyes, the equality of conditions represented the fundamental tendency of modernity, but it could foster democratic autonomy as much as a new conformism. The tyranny of the majority did not coincide only with legislative abuse. It denoted the social power exercised by a dominant opinion capable of narrowing the space for dissent and isolating those who did not recognise themselves in the judgement of the many (Tocqueville, 2017). Likewise, “soft despotism” did not take the form of an absolutist restoration: it arose from the demand for protection of individuals who were formally equal but isolated, willing to entrust to a tutelary power the growing management of their own existence.

Mill explored the same problem by distinguishing self-government from the simplistic idea that the people would have no need to be protected from their own will. The people who exercise power are not necessarily the same as all those over whom power is exercised. The majority can impose preferences, customs and convictions on minorities, stifling that plurality of individual experiments which makes freedom possible (Mill, 2023). Neither Tocqueville nor Mill denied the value of political equality. They showed, however, that the democratic origin of command does not automatically guarantee its liberal quality.

Twentieth-century democratisation made the problem more concrete. Universal suffrage, mass parties and the inclusion of previously excluded groups radically transformed politics. The response of realist theories was not the abandonment of democracy, but its redefinition. Schumpeter rejected the representation of democracy as the realisation of a unitary popular will and described it as a competitive method for selecting leading groups (Schumpeter, 1964). The citizen does not directly produce public policies: he or she chooses, sanctions and replaces those who take decisions. In Kelsen, parliamentary procedure and the role of parties make compromise between different interests possible, preventing one part from identifying itself definitively with the whole (Kelsen, 1981).

These conceptions organised popular sovereignty through distance, competition and representation. In post-war democracy, the vote conferred a temporary mandate, the constitution prevented the winner from disposing of the entire legal order and parties turned conflict into reversible decisions. The equilibrium was never peaceful or fully inclusive, but in that historical phase it made participation and liberal limits compatible.

Fragility re-emerges when this equilibrium is interpreted as a natural coincidence rather than a contingent construction. If democracy is reduced to numerical prevalence alone, every institution that prevents the majority from immediately implementing its programme can be represented as anti-democratic. If, instead, it is identified exclusively with constitutional constraints, conflict and the demand for responsiveness are treated as disturbances to be neutralised. The contemporary crisis lies in the gap between these two reductionisms.

Liberalism cannot derive its legitimacy from limits alone, while democracy cannot turn electoral legitimization into unlimited power. Realised democracy makes this tension visible by pushing it beyond the twentieth-century institutional compromise.

3. Realised democracy: equality, the expansion of the political and responsiveness

In Boldrin's original formulation, "realised democracy" identifies a contradiction between the generalisation of democratic equality and a liberalism founded on the limitation of power, on the autonomy of civil society and on the recognition of cognitive differences (Boldrin, 2023). The concept is here adopted and reworked as an ideal type. It does not describe all political systems uniformly and does not imply that democratisation has everywhere reached its end point. Rather, it makes it possible to isolate three connected transformations: the semantic extension of equality, the expansion of the objects subjected to political decision and the increase in expectations of responsiveness. The first two can be traced directly to Boldrin's diagnosis; the third is a development proposed in this essay. Taken separately, these dynamics belong to the ordinary history of democratisation. Their combination, however, changes the relationship between authority, knowledge and representation.

The first transformation concerns the meaning of equality. In the constitutional model, "one counts as one" expresses the equal political dignity of citizens and the equal weight of the vote. It does not claim that every judgement has the same descriptive validity, nor that the cognitive division of labour can be abolished. In realised democracy, however, the boundary between political equality and epistemic equivalence tends to become less clear-cut. The recognition of a specific competence may be perceived as a claim to remove a decision from the citizen's control; authoritativeness is confused with authority, and the difference between opinions with an inequality of status.

This is not simply a matter of political ignorance. Lippmann had already shown that the "omnicompetent" citizen is an untenable fiction in complex societies. Individuals know most public events through representations, selections and stereotypes; they have neither the time nor the tools to verify every relevant piece of information independently (Lippmann, 2018). The contemporary difficulty arises from the fact that this cognitive dependence coexists with the delegitimation of the subjects charged with selecting and interpreting knowledge. The citizen depends more and more on competences that he or she can control less and less and, precisely for this reason, is encouraged to be suspicious of the mediations on which he or she depends.

The second transformation consists in the expansion of the political sphere. Classical liberalism delimits areas in which public power should not intervene, or should do so only under strict conditions. Realised democracy, by contrast, is accompanied by the expectation that problems, risks and inequalities are susceptible to a political response. Phenomena once considered private, social or natural are translated into demands for recognition and regulation. This expansion does not necessarily depend on a unitary ideological project. It is the cumulative product of the politicisation of new identities, of the increase in administrative capacities and of the attribution to the state of ever broader responsibilities.

The third element is the growth of expected responsiveness. Democratisation is no longer limited to the possibility of choosing and replacing rulers. It requires institutions to listen to, recognise and respond quickly to demands that are numerous, changeable and often incompatible. The failure to solve a problem is read less as the consequence of constraints, trade-offs or legitimate conflicts and more as proof of indifference, incapacity or betrayal. Democratic power is thus subjected to a paradoxical expectation: it must be limited so as not to become arbitrary, but it must appear potentially omnipotent in order to retain legitimacy.

This tension emerges with particular clarity in the face of phenomena characterised by interdependence and uncertainty. Financial crises, pandemics, energy transitions, technological transformations and migration flows are not objects that a single government can fully control. They require specialist knowledge, cooperation between institutional levels, reversible decisions and the acceptance of distributive consequences. And yet

electoral competition rewards the capacity to attribute definite responsibilities and to promise recognisable solutions. The less power is actually able to govern a process, the stronger the political need to represent it as governable may become.

Realised democracy therefore does not coincide with a quantitative excess of participation. Its distinctive feature is the gap between the extension of democratic expectations and the capacity of institutions to satisfy them without contradicting their own limits. The majority is invested with a symbolically unlimited sovereignty, while operating in systems in which the possibilities of decision are fragmented among constitutions, markets, administrative apparatuses, supranational authorities and specialist knowledge. From this gap derives the temptation to identify an obstacle that would prevent the popular will from becoming reality: the elite, the judge, the expert, the bureaucrat, the journalist, the international body or the intermediate body.

The category thus makes it possible to avoid two opposite interpretations. The first attributes conflict exclusively to the irrationality of the masses; the second holds that more intense participation would automatically resolve the crisis of legitimacy. In reality, democratic erosion can arise from the relationship between understandable demands and institutionally unsustainable promises. The problem is not the presence of citizens incapable of thinking rationally, but a structure of incentives in which acknowledging limits is electorally costly and denying them can become a resource for mobilisation.

4. The paradox of mediation in complex societies

Every representative democracy lives on mediations. The political will does not pre-exist in its entirety the institutions that are supposed to express it: it is selected, articulated and transformed through parties, associations, parliaments, the media and procedures. Representation is therefore not an imperfect reproduction of an already unified people. It is one of the processes through which dispersed interests acquire public form and can confront one another (Urbinati, 2014; Saward, 2010). The promise to eliminate mediation does not restore an authentic will; it transfers the power to construct it to less visible or less controllable subjects.

In the post-war period, mass parties performed this function through relatively stable organisations, collective identities and a widespread presence in society. They were not neutral instruments and did not guarantee perfect representation. They did, however, reduce the volatility of demands, train political personnel and connect participation and decision. Their crisis has weakened the channel through which social conflict was translated into governmental alternatives. Mair described the progressive withdrawal of parties from society and their movement towards the state, while voters withdrew from organised participation and elites protected themselves from popular pressure (Mair, 2016). The result is not the disappearance of conflict, but the loss of the structures that made it lasting and negotiable.

This transformation produces a paradox. Increasing complexity heightens the need for political and epistemic mediations, but makes it more difficult to recognise their legitimacy. The more a decision requires specialist knowledge and negotiations that are opaque to the citizen, the greater the distance between everyday experience and the decision-making process. Mediation thus appears necessary at the functional level and suspect at the democratic level. It is associated with elite closure, slowness and the subtraction of power, while immediacy is identified with authenticity.

The digital transformation accelerates this dynamic without determining it on its own. Platforms do not eliminate intermediaries: they replace recognisable mediations with algorithmic infrastructures and opaque proprietary rules. In the "Bubble Democracy" described by Palano, the public of party democracy fragments into homophilous networks, capable of mobilising rapidly but less suited to producing stable allegiances (Palano, 2020). Homophilous selection and group polarisation can also turn information into a signal of belonging (Sunstein, 2017). The point is not that the digital inevitably makes citizens irrational, but that it makes it more advantageous to organise consensus through rapid identifications and morally clear-cut narratives.

In this scenario, the personal leader performs a function of reducing complexity. The leader's biographical unity replaces the organisational unity of the party; trust in the person compensates for the impossibility of controlling every decision; permanent communication simulates a proximity that institutions are no longer able to offer. Technoparties and personal parties thus combine horizontal rhetoric and the centralisation of command (Calise, 2021). The base is frequently consulted, but the definition of alternatives, control over data and the interpretation of results remain concentrated.

The crisis of mediation therefore does not lead to immediate self-government. It produces a new verticality, more personalised and less institutionalised. The citizen who rejects the filter of the party or the expert does not stop depending on interpretations of the world; he or she chooses mediators who deny being such. This denial is central to understanding the passage from realised democracy to populism: the appeal to the people promises to cancel representative distance, while rebuilding it around the exclusive voice of whoever claims to embody the people.

5. Populism and illiberalism as endogenous possibilities

The literature on populism has produced different definitions. The ideational approach describes it as a thin ideology that divides society into a pure people and a corrupt elite and holds that politics should express the general will (Mudde, 2004). Other authors emphasise its style, its discursive logic or the specific transformation of representation it entails. Beyond these differences, the politically relevant core for this work lies in the monopolistic claim: one part claims to represent the authentic people and delegitimises opponents as alien, corrupt or morally inferior (Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2020).

This claim comes into tension with liberal democracy, but it is not foreign to the democratic principle. Populism does not necessarily reject elections, the majority or popular sovereignty. It radicalises a particular interpretation of them. If the people are conceived as a homogeneous subject endowed with a recognisable will, pluralism becomes a problem to be explained: those who dissent can be represented as manipulated or as not fully belonging to the community. If the leader has an unmediated relationship with this people, constitutional limits appear as instruments used by organised minorities to neutralise the majority.

Populism thus offers a response to the contradictions of realised democracy. To social fragmentation it opposes the image of a unitary people; to the complexity of decisions, the clarity of an antagonism; to the powerlessness of government, the promise that the will can prevail once obstacles are removed; to the crisis of mediations, personal identification with the leader. It does not eliminate complexity, but makes it politically narratable. From this point of view, its success is not the effect of a simple misunderstanding. It is the rational outcome of a competition in which simplification makes it possible to attribute responsibility and to turn dissatisfaction into identity.

Defining populism as an endogenous possibility does not mean confusing it with democracy. Democracy presupposes that the outcome of conflict remains open and that no actor can definitively appropriate the people. Populism, by contrast, tends to occupy that symbolic place, distinguishing the authentic people from the empirical population. It is precisely this difference that makes it possible to understand why populism can arise from the democratic lexicon and, at the same time, distort its pluralism. It is not anti-democratic because it rejects the people, but it can become illiberal because it proposes an exclusive representation of the people.

Illiberalism constitutes the possible institutional development of this logic. An electoral victory is interpreted as an authorisation to remove the obstacles that would prevent the majority from governing. Courts, independent authorities, oppositions, the media and professional bureaucracies are subjected to pressure not necessarily in the name of authoritarianism, but in the name of efficiency and sovereignty. Walker has shown how populist constitutionalism does not merely deny the constitution: it attempts to produce an alternative version of it, founded on the supremacy of the substantive popular will over procedural limits (Walker, 2019).

The transition does not depend only on the supply of leaders and parties. The meaning that citizens attribute to democracy is also politically relevant. Declared support for the democratic principle does not in fact imply a shared conception of its contents. On the basis of comparative data from the *World Values Survey*, Chapman et al. show that individual definitions vary considerably and that support for democracy is more robust when it includes, in addition to elections, rights and civil liberties (Chapman et al., 2024). The polysemy of the term therefore makes it possible to support “democracy” while at the same time not recognising liberal limits as democratically essential.

The link with electoral behaviour is specified by Wunsch, Jacob and Derksen. In an experiment conducted in Poland, voters less attached to liberal-democratic norms more readily tolerate candidates responsible for democratic transgressions; a stronger liberal conception, by contrast, increases the likelihood of sanctioning them, even when they belong to one’s own side (Wunsch, Jacob and Derksen, 2025). The case does not warrant a deterministic generalisation, but it identifies a mechanism consistent with the hypothesis advanced here: if democracy is understood mainly as the investiture of the majority, the weakening of checks and balances can be interpreted not as a violation, but as the implementation of the mandate.

Contemporary democratic regression often displays this gradual character. Bermeo observes that the classic forms of rupture, such as the coup d’état, have been partly replaced by “executive aggrandizement”: the progressive expansion of the executive through formally legal changes that weaken controls and reduce the opposition’s capacity to compete (Bermeo, 2016). Waldner and Lust define backsliding as a significant deterioration in the qualities associated with democratic governance, emphasising the difficulty of identifying a single moment of rupture (Waldner and Lust, 2018). Erosion proceeds through separate decisions, each of which can be justified as the implementation of the mandate received.

Freedom House data acquire relevance precisely within this framework. The 2026 report links part of the twenty-year decline to attacks on institutions by elected leaders and observes how illiberal actors maintain the appearance of participation while progressively altering the conditions of competition (Freedom House, 2026). The data do not prove that democratisation produces authoritarianism; they show that elections and regression can coexist and that democratic legitimation can become a resource for concentrating power.

Erosion also takes place within apparatuses that the opposition between leader and people tends to leave in the background. Bauer and Becker treat the professional bureaucracy as a pluralistic institution and distinguish four objectives of populist action towards it: capture, dismantling, sabotage and reform. The centralisation of structures and resources, the politicisation of personnel and norms and the reduction of accountability thus turn an electoral mandate into a lasting capacity to control the state (Bauer and Becker, 2020). The illiberal turn therefore does not consist only in anti-parliamentary rhetoric or in individual constitutional violations. It can become embedded in the administrative machinery through interventions presented as the restitution of the apparatus to the popular will.

This is the point at which populism and illiberalism must be distinguished without being separated. Not all populisms govern, not all populist governments dismantle democracy and not every process of backsliding is populist. Nevertheless, the claim to an exclusive representation of the people offers a particularly effective justification for subordinating non-majoritarian institutions. The relationship is not a logical necessity, but an affinity: the more democracy is identified with the immediate expression of a homogeneous majority, the more liberal limits can be described as usurpations.

This approach also avoids turning populism into a residual category applied to every criticism of the establishment. Conflict against elites belongs to democracy and can broaden the representation of excluded demands. The relevant threshold is crossed when contestation no longer aims to replace a ruling group, but denies the legitimacy of opponents and of the institutions that guarantee the reversibility of power. Populism then becomes the way in which the tension of realised democracy takes on an illiberal form.

6. Fragility as a structural condition

Democracy is often judged against a stabilised representation of the post-war period: organised parties, high electoral turnout, economic growth, national administrations capable of governing a significant part of social processes. Measured against this image, the present appears as a deviation. But that configuration was the product of specific historical conditions and not the natural form of democracy. Its dissolution does not imply the end of elections; rather, it changes the relationship between competition, mediation and limits.

Fragility is therefore not equivalent to an accidental weakness that could be removed while leaving the rest of the edifice intact. As emerges from Campati's reading of Mény, democracy carries within it constitutive ambiguities concerning representation, sovereignty and legitimacy (Campati, 2026). Power belongs to the people, but the people act only through forms that represent them; the majority decides, but it cannot eliminate the rights that make a different future majority possible; institutions must respond to social demands, but they cannot promise to abolish every constraint.

Realised democracy intensifies each of these ambiguities. It expands the democratic promise at a time when the capacity of governments to keep it is declining. It extends political recognition while fragmenting the spaces in which demands can be aggregated. It multiplies access to information while making the criteria for attributing authority to it less shared. It asks for more mediation precisely when mediation is losing prestige. In this sense, fragility does not derive from democracy's retreat from a previous ideal, but also from the incomplete and contradictory unfolding of its promises.

The dissolution of a relatively stable "we" represents a further element. In Palano's reading of Revelli, individualisation, the concentration of economic and technological power and the fragmentation of the public sphere weaken the collective consistency on which democratic participation rests (Palano, 2026a). The popular will is invoked with growing intensity precisely as it becomes more difficult to identify a unitary public. Populism responds to this absence by symbolically constructing a people, but it does so through an antagonistic boundary that distinguishes those who fully belong from those who are placed outside.

It does not follow that democracy is destined to turn into autocracy. The very reversibility that makes it fragile allows it to correct trajectories, replace governments and reopen conflicts. Alongside instances of deterioration, Freedom House records cases in which competitive elections and independent institutions have produced improvements (Freedom House, 2026). These cases do not refute the thesis: they show that endogenous tensions define a field of possibilities, not a destiny. Realised democracy generates contradictory incentives that can be organised in different directions.

The analytical point therefore consists in rejecting both the pathological and the teleological explanation. Populism and illiberalism are not viruses striking an otherwise harmonious organism; but neither do they constitute the necessary fulfilment of every democracy. They are available responses to real contradictions: political equality and epistemic differentiation, sovereignty and limits, responsiveness and powerlessness, immediacy and mediation. Their strength depends on their capacity to present the removal of liberal constraints as a more authentic realisation of democracy.

7. Conclusions

Contemporary democratic decline requires us to question not only the declared opponents of democracy, but the transformations taking place within it. The fact that many processes of erosion are promoted by elected leaders, through formally legal instruments and in the name of popular sovereignty, makes a simple opposition between democracy and authoritarianism insufficient. Before the regime is replaced, the meaning attributed to democracy changes: participation is separated from pluralism, the majority from limits and the electoral mandate from the reversibility of power.

The category of realised democracy makes it possible to read this transformation as the outcome of three converging processes: the generalisation of political equality, the expansion of the sphere subjected to collective decision and the growth of expectations of responsiveness. These processes develop in societies in which complexity increases the need for specialist knowledge and organised mediations. A paradox follows: institutions become more dependent on mediations that citizens perceive as less legitimate. The promise of immediacy thus acquires a competitive advantage over the admission of limits.

Populism organises this gap politically. It constructs the unity of the people in a fragmented social space, attributes the powerlessness of government to the action of identifiable obstacles and concentrates representation in the relationship between leader and citizens. The possible illiberal turn does not arise from the abandonment of the democratic vocabulary, but from its majoritarian radicalisation: if one part coincides with the authentic people, the institutions charged with limiting power can be treated as anti-democratic residues.

This interpretation does not claim that democracy necessarily produces its own negation. It advances a more circumscribed thesis: the compromise between liberalism and democracy remains contingent, and the expansion of democratic expectations can erode its conditions when representation, competence and limits lose legitimacy. Populism and illiberalism are, in this sense, endogenous and recurrent possibilities. Fragility is not only what happens to democracy when it is attacked; it is also the tension that emerges when the promise of sovereignty meets the impossibility of a power without mediations and without boundaries.

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