

Saggi

# Rethinking Party Democracy in the Age of Populism

## Ripensare la democrazia dei partiti nell'era populista

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**Abstract.** Political parties are the core institution of democratic politics. Yet, they are also democracy's most discredited ones, with episodes of corruption cutting widely across the political spectrum and significantly undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. Are parties doomed or is there a way out for them? This article explores the reasons for the demise of party democracy in the early 21st century; resists both the anti-party *Zeitgeist* profusely present in the broader public sphere and the party skepticism that dominates significant portions of the political science and democratic theory literature; and argues that political parties can and must be re-imagined – both internally and in the way they operate on the electoral battlefield. It connects insights across neighboring but usually compartmentalized disciplines, such as empirical political science, comparative politics, and – most distinctively – historical and contemporary democratic theory, to reclaim why political parties matter, explain how they shatter, and start outlining how to make them better. It brings into focus the simultaneous anti-party and hyper-party spin that populism (first as an anti-establishment movement and then as a governmental force) puts on the theory and practice of party democracy. It concludes that intra-party democracy is key to monitoring various venues for democratic undoing and, thus, to enhancing party democracy in the long run.

**Keywords:** political parties, factions, populism, party democracy, representation.

**Riassunto.** I partiti sono l'istituzione centrale della politica democratica. Al contempo, ne sono anche quella più screditata, con episodi di corruzione che li colpiscono indistintamente e ne minano in modo significativo la legittimità agli occhi dei cit-

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tadini. I partiti sono giunti al capolinea o possono ancora avere un ruolo centrale? Questo articolo esplora le ragioni del declino della democrazia dei partiti all'inizio del ventunesimo secolo e sostiene che i partiti politici possono e devono essere ripensati, in modo da garantirne una configurazione internamente democratica e assicurarsi che rispettino le regole del gioco nelle modalità di interazione all'interno e all'esterno delle istituzioni. Così facendo, si propone di offrire antidoti tanto allo *Zeitgeist* antipartitico, ampiamente presente nella sfera pubblica, quanto allo scetticismo nei confronti dei partiti che domina una parte consistente della letteratura specialistica. L'articolo collega spunti di riflessione provenienti da discipline affini ma spesso compartimentalizzate, quali la scienza politica empirica, la politica comparata e, soprattutto, la teoria democratica di impianto sia storico sia normativo, per rivendicare l'importanza dei partiti politici, spiegare come si disgregano, e suggerire come sia possibile migliorarli. In particolare, mette a fuoco la torsione al contempo anti- e iper-partitica che il populismo (prima come movimento di opposizione e poi come forza di governo) impone alla teoria e alla pratica della rappresentanza democratica. Conclude che la democrazia intrapartitica è fondamentale per arginare l'erosione della democrazia dei partiti e per rafforzare quest'ultima nel lungo periodo.

**Parole chiave:** partiti politici, fazioni, populismo, democrazia dei partiti, rappresentanza.

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary political parties experience a major contradiction: while they remain the kernel of democratic politics, they are also liberal democracy's most discredited institution. Episodes of political corruption<sup>1</sup> cut widely across the political spectrum and consistently erode parties' legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, opening windows of opportunity for anti-establishment movements and populist leaders. As a result, the bad scent of parties – a time-honored *leitmotif* in political thought and political history alike – stands also among the most deep-seated and hard-to-shake tropes of contemporary public debate. Is party democracy doomed?

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<sup>1</sup> On which see – for a normative analysis of the public ethics of office accountability – Ceva, Ferretti, *Political Corruption*.

This article resists both the anti-party *Zeitgeist* profusely present in the broader public sphere and the party skepticism that dominates significant portions of the specialized literature, to argue that political parties must be re-imagined and that the future of liberal democracy in our populist age depends precisely on both the depth and the breadth of such reforms. The article consists of three major sections: why political parties matter (I), how they shatter (II), and how to make them better (III). In doing so, it connects insights from neighboring but usually compartmentalized disciplines, such as empirical political science, comparative politics, and – most distinctively – historical and contemporary democratic theory, to offer and develop the following argument: reforming political parties is a necessary condition for a healthier democratic life – one that effectively blends party democracy with intra-party democracy, is at once partisan and participatory, and is based on better, not less, partisanship.

## I

### Why Political Parties Matter

#### 2. Theorizing Parties: A Functionalist Account

In 1942, almost twenty years before publishing his influential study *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy* (1960), American political scientist Eric Schattschneider famously argued that democracy without parties was “unthinkable”. This idea marks the beginning of Schattschneider’s enquiry into the theory and practice of modern democratic life and is found in the opening paragraph of Chapter One (“In Defense of Political Parties”) of his classic *Party Government. American Government in Action*. Right after quoting a line from Sir Henry Maine as the motto that will guide the reader through the following pages (“No force acting on humankind has been less carefully examined than Party, and yet none better deserves examination”), Schattschneider wrote something that is worth citing in full:

The rise of political parties is without question one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as makers of governments, especially of democratic government. [...] political parties created democracy, and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties. As a matter of fact, *the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime. The most important distinction in modern political philosophy, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship, can be made best in terms of party politics.* The parties are

not therefore merely appendages of modern government; they are at the center of it and *play a creative role in it*.<sup>2</sup>

In 1976, one of the most influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century political scientists – Giovanni Sartori (at the time Professor at Stanford, before his move to Columbia University in 1979) – began his *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis* echoing Schattschneider: in representative democracy, he wrote, “[p]arties are the central intermediate and intermediary structure between society and government”<sup>3</sup> – an observation that, still today, few would dispute.

Political representation by means of free and competitive elections organized by parties is the formal defining characteristic of modern democracy. Representatives are selected in a process of regulated rivalry; parties and partisanship are the direct institutional expression of social and political pluralism and of the fact that, in democracy, opposition is expected and legitimate.<sup>4</sup>

On the battleground of democratic politics, parties operate on three main levels, famously conceptualized by Valdimer Orlando Key Jr. in his book *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (1942, same year as Schattschneider’s *Party Government*): the party in the electorate (the voters); the party organization (which helps to coordinate everything the party does in its quest for office); and the party in office (the actual office holders). Activating and coordinating these three parts of their body, parties function as intermediaries between the people and the state, providing a mediation that is, at once, bi-directional and plenary. Parties are bi-directional in the sense that they bring together citizens’ interests, opinions, and values, giving them voice and visibility inside political institutions, but they also need to explain how their public policies are based on mass claims: accordingly, there is a continuum that makes citizens connected to parties and parties accountable to citizens. Parties are also plenary in the sense that they have the distinctive ability to aggregate citizens’ interests around a policy package that is broad enough to possibly become a platform for a future government; they consider the well-being of the entire citizenry (rather than one portion alone); and they embrace a long-term perspective that values the interests and rights of future generations, too. All in all, political parties reduce information and transaction costs at four major levels: political participation, voters’ information, policy packaging, and ally prediction (especially in parliamentary democracies where

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<sup>2</sup> Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 1 (my emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, ix.

<sup>4</sup> Kirshner, *Legitimate Opposition*.

the question of coalition building is key). In other words, parties help to “grease the wheels of representative democracy” in ways that – still today – remain unrivaled.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Parties’ Dishonorable Reputation: The Wide Shadow of a Long History

This quite formal account of parties, focused on the functions that they serve, helps us understand how parties make democratic politics work daily. However, in most of today’s advanced democracies, parties also face a crisis of public trust and legitimacy. Anti-party feelings cut widely across the political spectrum and are neither recent nor temporary. The bad scent of parties in contemporary politics has a time-honored pedigree. As Piero Ignazi has recalled, “the problem is in the name”. The etymology of the term ‘party’, in fact, promises no good: it comes from the Latin verb ‘partire’, meaning ‘to separate’. Parties thus carry in their DNA the genes of partiality and division.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, as Sartori masterfully pointed out, parties are linked to a semantic ambiguity: the very term ‘part’ evokes, at once, the idea of something that is incomplete, specific, singled out (as in the terms ‘partition’, ‘particular’, ‘partisanship’) as well as the idea of a collective, joint endeavor (as in the words ‘partnership’, ‘participation’, ‘participatory’, ‘partaking’). The conceptual ambiguity of parties was perfectly captured during the French Enlightenment by Voltaire, when he penned the entry on “Faction” for the *Encyclopedie*: “A faction” – he wrote – is “a seditious party in a state (*un parti seditieux dans un etat*)” that “does not rejoin (*partager*) the entire State”.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, confusion and overlaps with the older terms ‘sect’ and ‘faction’ sent the political party to the wall for a long time. Sects – again from the Latin verb ‘secare’ (‘to cut’, ‘to divide’) – and factions – from the Latin verb ‘facere’ (‘to do’) – have consistently described small groups that aim at ruthless, harmful doings, either in the sphere of politics or in that of religion (think of the religious sects in the context of Protestant sectarianism). Accordingly, they have always been associated with seditions, conspiracies, machinations. Especially factions have been synonym with a

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<sup>5</sup> Khaitan, “Political Parties in Constitutional Theory,” 103. See also Barber, *The Principles of Constitutionalism*, 167-185, and White, Ypi, “Political Parties”.

<sup>6</sup> Ignazi, *Party and Democracy*. See also Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels*; Bonotti, Bader, *Parties, Partisanship, and Political Theory*; and Muirhead, *The Promise of Party*. On a democratic theory of parties and partisanship within a Rawlsian framework, see Bonotti, *Partisanship and Political Liberalism*, and Badano, Nuti, *Politicizing Political Liberalism*.

<sup>7</sup> Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 3.

form of politics that operates in the dark, undermines freedom, peace, and stability, derails governments from the pursuit of the common good, and thus precipitates regimes into the hell of civil war.

Only through liberal political thought, the notions of difference, pluralism, and toleration started to gradually gain traction and a first distinction between factions and parties was drawn. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, systematic attempts to distinguish parties from factions are found in the work of Lord Bolingbroke, David Hume, and especially Edmund Burke: in 1770, in a passage of *Thoughts on the Cause of Present Discontents*, Burke called for principled partisanship and famously defined parties as “honorable connections” and “bodies of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle on which they have all agreed”.<sup>8</sup> However, despite Burke and his influence on later theories of party government,<sup>9</sup> the unease with political divisions endured and parties continued to walk a fine line separating them from factions. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when representative government and modern constitutionalism crossed paths on both sides of the North Atlantic, the prejudice against parties shaped the language and vision of the two revolutions. The American and French Founders considered their newborn “republics” superior to ancient “democracies,” a term that they deliberately avoided as it evoked memories of polities unraveled, precisely, by factions. The framers of the American Constitution in Philadelphia never resorted to party labels. None of them questioned that government are, and should be, based on periodic elections. Yet, the idea of selecting officeholders by means of competitions among parties was never contemplated. Rather, it

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<sup>8</sup> In a similar key, see, in 1835, Tocqueville’s important distinction between “great” and “small” parties: “Parties are a fundamental defect of free governments, but they do not at all times share the same character or the same instincts. [...] This is a time of intrigues and small parties. What I term great political parties are those committed to principles rather than their consequences, to general considerations rather than to individual cases, to ideas and not to men. [...] In such parties, private interest, which always plays the most significant part in political passions, is concealed more skillfully beneath the veil of public interest. [...] On the other hand, small parties generally lack any political credo. [...] their character is imbued with a selfishness which obviously colors each of their actions. They always flare up without warning; their language is violent, but their progress is timid and over-cautious. The means they employ are as despicable as the very aim they have in view. [...] Great parties overturn society; small ones agitate it; some tear it apart, others corrupt it; the former sometimes rescue it by shaking it to its core, the latter disturb it, invariably to no purpose. America has today lost the great parties it once had; it has gained, as a consequence, much happiness but lost much moral purpose”: Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Ch. 2 (“Parties in America”), 202-209: 203-204.

<sup>9</sup> See Skjösberg, *The Persistence of Party* and – in the Italian literature (classical and more recent) – Valitutti, *I partiti politici e la libertà*; Compagna, *L’idea dei partiti da Hobbes a Burke*; Palano, *Partito*; Biale, *Interessi democratici e ragioni partigiane*.

was assumed that candidates for office would stand out for their reputation, principled behavior, and impartial commitment to the public good. As Richard Hofstadter (Professor of American history at Columbia University) once wrote, the designers of the first American party system—both Federalists and Republicans—had “a keen terror” of party spirit (famously chastised by Washington in his Farewell Address of 1796) and looked upon parties “as sores on the body politic.”<sup>10</sup> However, almost as soon as their national government was born, they found it inevitable to establish parties. The first presidents—Washington and then Adams—soon realized that political divisions were inevitable, precisely because they are intrinsic to human nature and behavior: Madison’s *Federalist No. 10* exemplifies, probably in the most iconic way, the Founders’ pragmatic solution to the problem of factions. The architects of the early American Republic put their best efforts into preventing the rise of a majority faction – that is, a group numerically strong enough to crash any opposition, especially in the legislative. To tame this risk and thus defuse the ticking bomb of a possible majority faction, they put in place a carefully engineered mechanism: biparty system, an electoral framework based on single-member districts, an institutional design revolving around checks and balances, a large territorial republic, and the distinction between state and federal prerogatives.

In the book that has pioneered the recent rejuvenation of the political theory literature on parties, Harvard theorist Nancy Rosenblum reminded that constitutional beginnings were, both in France and in the US, tied to anti-partisan ends: “Like the era of constitutional founding in America, the French Revolution, too, was the occasion for both constitutional creation and renewed hostility to party spirit.”<sup>11</sup> The French clergyman Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, whose writings laid the groundwork for the creation of the National Assembly, explicitly called for a representative system that could safely do without parties. The marquis de Condorcet echoed this position when advising the Girondins on their Constitution: he made it clear that, unlike the English system (based on parties), the French republic needed to have none.

The distaste for divisions continued to permeate political practice for a long time, with the prejudice against parties as factions in disguise travelling well into the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1842, parties were banned in German principalities; only in 1901 did they acquire full legal legitimacy in France; and in several countries, it remained illegal until 1914 to even mention parties in parliamentary debates. Even when mass parties

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<sup>10</sup> Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System*.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels*, 94.

became a real presence in the landscape of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century politics, they continued to be resisted, precisely because they seemed to go counter to the mainstream of what Western thought had always considered desirable in politics and society: union and harmony, consensus and agreement, concord and cohesion.<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of Weimar (1919) mentioned parties only once and with a negative tone: its art. 130 stated that public officials were at the mercy of no specific party and had the task of serving the collectivity. In a similar vein, parties entered the Austrian Constitution of 1920 only through the amendments made in 1925 (for which the contribution of Hans Kelsen was key) and were mentioned in its previous version only in passing.

Openly or latently, we are the children of this long history. The disfavor and the disesteem surrounding parties have been hard to shake and continue to cast a long shadow over their place in democratic politics. The distrust of parties is perhaps due to their ambivalent nature. In liberal democracies, wherein parties mediate between citizens and the state, parties walk a fine line between public and private. Depending on the angle from which we observe them, they resemble either private clubs, with consent-based membership and limited authority over their members, or public bodies, driven by the ambition to steer the state in a specific direction. Their hybrid nature – “insufficiently public” and “inadequately private” in the words of constitutional theorist Tarun Khaitan<sup>13</sup> – is tied to their being, at once, a source of partitions and a medium for partnership.

#### 4. Broken Up but Living Together: The Unhappy Marriage of Parties and Democracy

In 2002, in a volume significantly titled *Political Parties. Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Juan Linz put his finger precisely on the unsettling and contradictory stand of parties in contemporary public opinion: parties are perceived as vital tools to make democracies work, yet they are also disliked or even detested as quarrelsome, costly machineries driven by self-referential elites and selfish politicians that care immensely about their own careers but utterly disregard the citizens that they claim to represent.<sup>14</sup> In other words, parties are reluctantly accepted as a necessary evil in the big picture of democratic politics. Fifteen years later, Piero Ignazi has once again vividly captured the party paradox: in the early 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*.

<sup>13</sup> Khaitan, “Political Parties in Constitutional Theory”, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Linz, “Parties in Contemporary Democracies: Problems and Paradoxes”.

century, parties are giants with clay feet, dominating the political processes of established democracies but suffering from dwindling confidence and trust by the very citizens they are supposed to represent. It is almost as if the alchemy holding party democracy together had vanished, with parties and democracies going their separate ways. ‘Party democracy’ has become a dysfunctional marriage, with the two partners coexisting separated under the same roof, barely tolerating each other, or even – at times – fighting one against the other.

This anti-party sentiment was not always the *Zeitgeist* of party democracy. In the very aftermath of WWII, public feelings towards parties were very different. Parties were not simply tolerated; they were respected. The reconstruction of democracy and the advent of democratic constitutionalism after the devastating experience of two global wars and totalitarian politics gave parties an aura and a legitimacy they had never enjoyed before. Already with the first wave of democratization in the 1920s, mass enfranchisement had affirmed the *functional* role of political parties; but the second wave of democratization, from the late 1940s through the early 1950s, placed them firmly on the map of democratic politics. There was also the acknowledgment that parties had played a role in the struggle against non-democratic regimes (as in the case of the Italian Resistance Movement), which further enhanced their credentials, making them venues for the exercise of popular sovereignty under conditions of pluralism and equality. Accordingly, the post-war years inaugurated a new phase – the most prosperous – in the long history of political parties: the age of party democracy, which propelled them through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the new millennium.<sup>15</sup>

When charting the trajectory of parties from the age of liberal parliamentarism to our present, political scientists highlight four main shifts (or turning points). First, *parliamentary parties* developed (in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century): they were associations of legislative officeholders, with no real presence in the electorate outside political institutions. Second, *mass parties* emerged (in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and proliferated among electors: party scholars further distinguish between “*internal*” and “*external*” *mass electoral parties*, depending on their origin—whether inside or outside the legislative.<sup>16</sup> Third, *catchall/big-tent parties* (in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century)

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<sup>15</sup> For historical and political science overviews, see the essays in Ragazzoni (ed.), “Partiti, Costituzione, democrazia”: specifically Mastropaolo, “La controversa invenzione dei partiti politici”; Ignazi, “La sfida impossibile. I partiti di fronte alla crisi di legittimazione”; and Palano, “La democrazia che si organizza”. For democratic theory overviews, see the essays in Biale, Ragazzoni (eds.), “Partiti e teoria democratica”, as well as the literature referenced *supra*, notes 6 and 9.

<sup>16</sup> Duverger, *Le Partis Politiques*.

emerged, transcending traditional class cleavages and revolving around candidates more than programs.<sup>17</sup> Finally, *cartel parties* emerged in the advanced postindustrial societies of the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War, parties began to share, rather than compete over, resources to protect their shared interests and survive in a world of crumbling party loyalties. Ever since then, the cartelization of parties has inaugurated a new and still undefined chapter in the morphing of party politics.<sup>18</sup> What chapter is this? Or – rephrasing Hamlet – to party or not to party: this is the question on the table for contemporary liberal democracies.

## II

### How Political Parties Shatter

#### 5. Audience Democracy and Hollowed-out Parties

In an influential and alarming book published posthumously in 2013, political scientist Peter Mair argued and demonstrated that the age of party democracy is over, once and for all. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, parties have become so disconnected from society that, when they rule, they “rule the void”.<sup>19</sup> They are “parties without partisans”<sup>20</sup> – organizations that play a *functional* role in the mechanics of democracy but no longer a *representative* role that is truly reflective of citizens’ claims. Supporting Mair’s reading is the empirical evidence of the vanishing of the “party on the ground” (POG: the party’s organized membership among citizens) and the increasing prominence of both the “party in public office” (PPO: the party both in parliament and in government) and the “party in central office” (PCO: the party’s permanent bureaucracy and national executive organs). In other words, parties have incrementally withdrawn from the world of civil society and prioritized their role as governing, rather than representative, agencies.<sup>21</sup> As Mair argues, parties “have become more office-seeking, with the winning of a place in government being now not only a standard expectation, but also an end in itself”. Parties are either governing or waiting to govern, to the point that “there is less and less a sense of opposition” (among party elites that lose the elections) “and more

<sup>17</sup> Kirchheimer, *The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems*.

<sup>18</sup> Katz, Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party”.

<sup>19</sup> Mair, *Ruling the Void*.

<sup>20</sup> Dalton, Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans*.

<sup>21</sup> Arato, Cohen, *Populism and Civil Society*, ch. 2 (“Populism as Mobilization and as a Party”).

and more the idea of a temporary displacement from office".<sup>22</sup> As a result, opposition becomes increasingly the prerogative of social movements, popular protests, boycotts – that is, the wide array of instruments that citizens have available for the process of claim-making beyond the conventional medium of the political party.

Parties are increasingly on trial in the public debate and long is the list of wrongs they are charged with. They are accused of fostering corruption and distributing public resources among themselves and their affiliates; of being unable to offer voters a real political choice, having become ideologically indistinguishable from one another; and, more generally, of being out of touch with citizens. According to Mair, this ongoing crisis of parties feeds into a crisis of democracy writ large – what he calls “the hollowing of Western democracy”. Echoing Mair is Princeton democratic theorist Jan-Werner Müller, who has written about the hollowing – and even the “zombification” – of parties: on his account, the overlap of charismatic leaders and hollowed-out parties results in a toxic combination for liberal democracies.<sup>23</sup>

If it is empirically proven that the age of party democracy, as it developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has come to an end, what kind of democracy are we exactly living in?

In the 1990s New York University Professor Bernard Manin influentially argued that representative government, just like political parties, has morphed over the past two centuries and that we have irreversibly stepped into what he calls the age of “audience democracy”.<sup>24</sup> Defining the shift from party to audience democracy are, according to Manin, four phenomena, all deeply connected to each other. First, leaders overshadow parties, to the point that electors’ preferences are based more on the perceived charisma and image of parties’ leaders than on parties’ actual policy packages. Second, the know-how of spin doctors and media experts is now vital for curating the image and the communication of leaders and thus for determining the performance of parties on the electoral market. Third, the growing attraction to strong leaders has in turn fueled calls for empowered executives, concentrating authority in the executive branch beyond, and sometimes even against, traditional checks and balances. Last, ordinary citizens now look at politics in a different way (and I use the term ‘look’ both metaphorically and literally): in the age of audience- and spectatorship-based democracy, citizens experience the daily events

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<sup>22</sup> Mair, *Ruling the Void*: 88-89.

<sup>23</sup> Müller, “The Zombification of Political Parties”.

<sup>24</sup> Manin, *Principi del governo rappresentativo*; Id., *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*; Id., *The Principles of Representative Government*.

of political life more passively than actively. Having their eyes set on what happens on the stage of politics – be it a TV debate or the virtual arena of social media – makes them spectators more than active participants, witnesses and followers rather than actors, acclaiming their leaders and booing their opponents just as the ancient Romans used to during the gladiator fights at the Colosseum. As a result, the style of public debate – both between contending leaders and among their respective legions of followers – has become, literally, gladiatorial: that is, less civil, more vitriolic, venomous, polarized, intolerant of pluralism and disagreement. It pays off when party leaders resort to a language that is deliberately confrontational more than conversational, and this structural change affects also how their followers interact with each other.

Over the past several years, the proliferation of populism around the globe has further complicated the transformation of democracy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the role that parties play (or do not play) therein.

Democratic theorists – from Jan-Werner Müller to Pierre Rosanvallon and Nadia Urbinati, among others<sup>25</sup> – have argued that populism is the rising ideology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is defined by five key features: a specific conception of the people as one body bound together by a full-throated rejection of party elites; a theory and practice of democracy as direct, polarized, and immediate (in opposition to the traditional intermediations of liberal representative democracies); a mode of representation that champions the salvific, almost messianic ability of the populist leader to embody ‘the People’ and get things done against the gridlock that routinely paralyzes or slows down the decision making in party democracy; a conception of both politics and the economy that emphasizes national protectionism (and the control of borders) as tools for preserving the homogeneity of the “real people” and thus ensuring their security against all categories of undesirables (especially migrants, presented as enemies of ‘the People’); finally, a regime of passions and emotions that are now mobilized and weaponized in the service of the ‘us vs. them’ logic of populist politics.

In her recent book *Me the People*, Urbinati has pushed such diagnoses in new directions, focusing on populism in power and examining how populists reshape the theory and practice of democracy once they gain the upper hand, win the elections, and hold the reins of government. Populist governments capitalize precisely on the shift from party democracy to audience democracy. Challenging the idea that democratic representation is forged by a plurality of parties that compete through elections, pop-

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<sup>25</sup> Müller, *What is Populism?*; Rosanvallon, *The Populist Century*; Urbinati, *Me the People*; Ead., “Political Theory of Populism”. In the Italian literature, see – recently – Masala, Viviani (eds.), *Letà dei populismi*.

ulism promotes a form of “direct representation”, according to which the leader courts his/her audience directly and becomes the very embodiment or incarnation of ‘the People’ beyond and oftentimes against all sorts of intermediary bodies.<sup>26</sup> The populist leader claims to speak for the people and to the people bypassing the intermediation of representative institutions, the media, the whole system of checks and balances; the leader claims to embody the people – to represent them directly – to be the people. This is exactly the underlying logic of populism in power. Populist governments nurture the public illusion, and their own delusion, that a shift is possible from ‘We the People’ to ‘Me the People’ – it is, at once, an illusion and a delusion because, as political scientist Kurt Weyland eloquently put it, “populism does not empower ‘the people’, but invokes the people to empower a leader.”<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Anti-party and Hyper-party: The Populist Appropriation of Party Democracy

The way in which populism manipulates the medium of the political party to break the promise of democracy (i.e., citizens’ empowerment) is extremely intriguing from the perspective of democratic theory – and extremely concerning from the perspective of democratic practice.<sup>28</sup> When in opposition, populism undertakes a crusade to “bring people back into politics and politics back to the people.”<sup>29</sup> It exploits the frustration of large portions of the citizenry that feel invisible to, and betrayed by, parties to promote a Manichean vision of the political space, a Friend/Enemy distinction between the ordinary, hard-working citizens, with no involvement in politics and the simple desire of “not to be oppressed” (*à la* Machiavelli), and the corrupt, power-hungry elites that are never satisfied with the wealth and influence they already have.<sup>30</sup> However, on the bat-

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<sup>26</sup> For a recent overview of democratic theories of political representation, see Castiglione, Polak (eds.), *Creating Political Presence*; Disch, van de Sande, Urbinati (eds.), *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*; Disch, *Making Constituencies*. On populism’s distaste for the politics of indirectness underwriting representative democracy, see Urbinati, “A Revolt Against Intermediary Bodies” and Campati, *La distanza democratica*.

<sup>27</sup> Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept”.

<sup>28</sup> On which see, specifically, Roberts, “Populism and Political Parties”; Urbinati, “The Phenomenology of Politics as Factionalism”; Ead., “Liquid Parties, Dense Populism”; Ead., “Anti-establishment and the Substitution of the Whole with One of Its Parts”; Arato, Cohen, *Populism and Civil Society*, 90-93.

<sup>29</sup> Canovan, “Taking Politics to the People”.

<sup>30</sup> For a fresh take on the emancipatory potential of conflict between few and many in contemporary liberal democracies, see Urbinati, *Pochi contro molti*.

tleground of democratic politics, parties are and continue to be the main contenders. Therefore, populism skillfully employs the political party as a Trojan horse to jump from the *piazza* to the *palazzo* (in the language of Guicciardini's *Ricordi*), to make it past the walls that separate ordinary citizens from political elites. Once they do have political power, populists face the dilemma of how to avoid collusion with the very political establishment that they have viscerally contested and despised throughout the oppositional and campaigning phase of their existence. To do so, they put on the notion of party a spin that is, at once, an anti-party and a hyper-party spin – a distinction that was made in 1943 by leading fascist intellectual Giuseppe Bottai to explain the institutional logic of Mussolini's regime and that helps us understand the mindset of populist governments.<sup>31</sup> In other words, to resist the temptation of becoming like a traditional party, populists in power present themselves as the only legitimate party – an anti-party party that, inside the state, seals the equation between the party-as-one and the people-as-one (an identification that they seek to accomplish also by changing the constitution). Their anti-partyism is symbiotic with their hyper-partyism: they consistently question the legitimacy of the other parties that are involved in the political process and, by doing so, contest two key rules of the democratic game – legitimate opposition and rotation in office (as made evident by the storming of Capitol Hill by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021, and that of the presidential palace in Brasilia by Bolsonaro supporters on January 8, 2023 – in both cases in the very aftermath of electoral defeats). Populism in power stretches constitutional democracy to its limit precisely because it stretches the concept of party to its limit. The anti-party and hyper-party impetus of populism in power entails a revived form of factionalism that breathes new life into the warnings by James Madison about the danger of a majority faction.

Supporting the interpretation of populism in power as a majority faction is the way in which populist governments aggressively brandish majority rule at the expense of minority rights. Their radical majoritarianism entails the idea that winning a procedural majority legitimizes the governing party to claim exclusive monopoly over popular sovereignty, *as if* their people were the whole people. While speaking for and in the interest of all is the task of any government elected democratically, populist leaders in power weaponize their electoral success to handle institutions and constitutions as if they were their own private possession and thus to virtually close the gap between society and the state through the

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<sup>31</sup> I owe Urbinati, *Me the People*, 147, the reference to Bottai.

“direct representation” of both provided by the populist leader.<sup>32</sup> As Robert Michels put it in a key section of his monumental book (1911), party leaders have the tendency to present themselves as the very embodiment of their party: “Le Parti, C’est Moi”.<sup>33</sup> Once in power, the populist leader that denies the legitimacy of the opposition brings this identification to a whole new level, closing the gap between civil society and the state in three steps: from ‘Le Parti, C’est Moi’ to ‘Le Peuple, C’est Moi’ to, eventually, ‘L’Etat, C’est Moi’ (‘Me the Party’, ‘Me the People’, ‘Me the State’). These are three moves for checkmate on the chessboard of populist politics. While it is important to recall that populism is not the same as fascism,<sup>34</sup> populism in power can open a possible pathway to an authoritarian turn, pushing liberal democracy towards regime change rather than, simply, policy change.

What can be done about it? Where to go from here?

### III

#### How to Make Parties Better

##### 7. Giving Parties (Back) Their Due

Trying to reform parties is not the most popular approach today, either among democratic theorists or in the broader public. Two approaches, specifically, stand out. On the one hand, empirical social scientists draw on a comparative study of democratic innovations across countries to envision novel ways to re-engage ordinary citizens in the making of political decisions that will affect their lives: citizen assemblies, mini-publics, direct legislation, and E-democracy are celebrated for their potential to amend the distortions that parties inevitably introduce in the texture of democratic politics and overcome growing skepticism with conventional modes of political participation. On the other hand, some democratic theorists have suggested rethinking democratic representation beyond elections (and thus beyond party competition), as in the case of ‘lottocracy’ – a form of democracy where representatives do not run for office and are not chosen electorally but are randomly selected by citi-

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<sup>32</sup> Urbinati, *Democrazia in diretta*; Ead., *Me the People*, 158-189. On the broader implications of populism for democracy, see the essays in Urbinati (ed.), *Thinking Democracy Now*.

<sup>33</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*: 226-231.

<sup>34</sup> Fintelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*.

zens to serve fixed political terms.<sup>35</sup> The ideological critique of elections as intrinsically aristocratic and the equally simplistic characterization of sortition as intrinsically democratic has made it difficult to nuance and rigorously discuss the relationship between the two forms of appointment to office-holding in modern democracy; at the same time, it has exacerbated the widespread aversion to parties, since electoral politics and party politics march – inevitably – together.

All the while, as Fabio Wolkenstein has aptly pointed out, “parties remain the proverbial elephant in the room”.<sup>36</sup> Despite the promising potential of democratic innovations and the rampant anti-party feelings driving contemporary politics, it is still parties that organize elections, legislatures, and governments. Pushing them out of the picture is tantamount to deliberately ignoring the institutions that are central to elected democratic legislatures and to the practice of democratic law-making. The reluctance to give parties their due is not a prerogative of democratic theorists alone. In the world of real politics, too, we can observe the same attempt to run against political parties or bypass them altogether. The idea that the pathologies of party politics have thrown democracies into a coma has enhanced the rise of anti-establishment parties, both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum, as the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, Podemos in Spain, or the several right-wing populist parties across Europe demonstrate. All of them expressly deny their “party-ness” and strategically brand themselves on the political market as bottom-up movements (it is worth noting that, in the current Italian Parliament, the only party that has the very word ‘party’ in its name is the Democratic Party). Moreover, actors that have been long-term involved in the much-loathed establishment of party politics have also sought to re-invent themselves as movements rather than parties. Emmanuel Macron’s *La République en Marche* is a most evident example, claiming to overcome the pettiness of party interests, re-empower citizens as a whole (‘*la République*’) rather than one specific part, and concealing the high personalization of its leadership with appeals to the nation (it is not by chance that the initials of *En Marche* – EM – are also the initials of its leader – Emmanuel Macron). The reality is: today’s self-professed alternatives to parties are, for the most part, nothing but old wine in new bottles. Their often-announced change is predominantly one of style, rarely one of substance. Even movements that promise to emancipate citizens from party elites through online

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<sup>35</sup> On which see Urbinati, Vandelli, *La democrazia del sorteggio*; A. Guerrero, *Lottocracy*; Lafont, Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality*. For a defense of the democratic normativity of citizens’ electoral participation, see Beerbohm, *In Our Name*, and Chapman, *Election Day*.

<sup>36</sup> Wolkenstein, *Rethinking Party Reform*, 6.

democracy are not immune to the elitism and organizational hierarchism that is well documented among established parties. Paolo Gerbaudo has recently offered a comparative study of various forms of digital parties – from the Five Stars Movement and Podemos to the various Pirate Parties, from La France Insoumise of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the movements supporting Bernie Sanders to those backing Jeremy Corbyn. In the time of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Cambridge Analytica, digital parties have inaugurated a revolution in the organization of party politics that, as Gerbaudo shows, is highly ambivalent: under the spell of “hyper-leaders” and their charisma, the promise of digital parties to be more democratic and participatory breaks vis-à-vis their plebiscitary tendencies, opening the Pandora’s box of new “disfigurements” of democratic life and projecting into our present the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century warnings by Mosca, Pareto, and Michels about the oligarchic dimension of any political party.<sup>37</sup>

The approach that I would like to outline in these last few pages resists the party skepticism of much recent literature in political science and democratic theory. It also tries to escape the resignation about the obsolescence of political parties as key institutions in the life of liberal democracies. While it is tempting to cancel them altogether from our democratic landscapes (and doing so is at times an interesting intellectual exercise), we should be careful not to throw the baby out with the dirty bathwater. Rather, we should think harder about party democracy, see democratic innovations as ways to supplement – rather than supplant – political parties, and invest our energies into devising strategies for making parties more democratic – thus re-inventing parties that already exist and ensuring that new parties avoid well-known problems of elite capture and domination.

In this spirit, I would like to sketch in the last section of this article some ideas about how to restore on new grounds – better suited for our critical times – the precarious legitimacy of party democracy. The goal is not to provide a full-blown theory of how to save parties – a task that transcends the space I have available – but to draw on the most recent proposals by empirically-minded democratic theorists to reconcile parties and democracy, with an eye (or two) on enhancing both party democracy and intra-party democracy. While these last few pages will not offer proper food for thought, their more modest ambition is to offer, at least, some crumbs for future discussion and research.

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<sup>37</sup> Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party*.

## 8. Bulwarks to the Undoing of Party Democracy

When constitutional democracies take parties for granted, they lay the groundwork for their own unraveling. The undoing of (liberal) party democracy can take multiple forms, and different bulwarks have been – or should be – put in place accordingly.

The first undoing happens through parties and movements that are explicit about their antidemocratic vocation. The principles of “militant democracy” protect against the threat posed by parties that explicitly reject the basic rules of the democratic game, and many constitutions written after World War II incorporated such protections into their own design. Shielding party democracy entails limiting certain political rights and freedoms – and thus erecting legal barriers – to avoid empowering, by electoral means, extremist parties that would erode or even abolish institutional checks and balances once in government. Developed as a theory for the first time in 1937 by German-Jewish émigré and constitutional scholar Karl Löwenstein to envision antidotes to the Fascist virus that was taking over parts of Europe at the time,<sup>38</sup> militant democracy makes antidemocratic parties unconstitutional and, by doing so, encapsulates a distinctively democratic ethics for fighting political extremism – or, as Löwenstein put it, democracy’s “will to survive”.<sup>39</sup>

A second threat to party democracy – harder to detect – comes from closeted autocrats that conceal their authoritarian ambitions behind the mask of law-abiding competitors in the electoral process. Overlooking whether a nominally democratic party embraces intra-party democracy not just in words but also in deeds can easily pave the way to authoritarian turns, as the regime changes by the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Viktor Orbán in Hungary demonstrated (despite their ideological differences). Liberal democracies should thus envision and implement ways (for instance, through constitutional courts and independent electoral committees)<sup>40</sup> to ensure that parties playing the democratic game do so also when they orchestrate their own internal life, with the latter offering a reasonably accurate indicator of how seriously they take pluralism and how robust their democratic credentials truly are. On a related note, Jan-

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<sup>38</sup> Löwenstein, “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, I”; Id., “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, II”.

<sup>39</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the potential of, and alternatives to, militant democracy, see Kirshner, *A Theory of Militant Democracy*; Malkopoulou, “Three Models of Democratic Self-Defence”; Malkopoulou, Kirshner (eds.), *Militant Democracy and Its Critics*; Schupmann, *Democracy Despite Itself: Liberal Constitutionalism and Militant Democracy*; Badano, Nuti, *Politicizing Political Liberalism*.

<sup>40</sup> Scheppele, “The Party’s Over”.

Werner Müller has drawn attention to a telling moment in the events preceding the recent American elections: among her final acts as chair of the Republican National Committee, Ronna McDaniel urged her colleagues to endorse the two individuals handpicked by Donald Trump as her successors and, after loud cheering, announced she would not bother asking if there were any “nays.” According to Müller, procedures meant to ensure a democratic process *within* the party were entirely replaced by acclamation and, as Bobbio lucidly pointed out (in an editorial published on May 16, 1984, under the title “Applause Democracy”), “election by acclamation [...] is the exact opposite of democratic election”.<sup>41</sup> Blurring the line between the two procedures for the selection of leadership in liberal democracy can, in the long run, have dire consequences for a democratic political system. After all, as history shows, “turning your party into an autocracy [can be the] first step toward turning your country into one”.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, democratic theorists and practitioners should pour their best efforts into developing, step by step, a deliberative model of intra-party democracy. Three recent examples – methodologically distinct – are worth mentioning here.

As Fabio Wolkenstein and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti have perceptively pointed out,<sup>43</sup> reforming political parties along these lines would entail empowering local party branches as “entry points” to re-energize citizens’

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<sup>41</sup> “I cannot understand how the Socialist Party, which considers itself democratic and at the center of Italy’s democratic system, whose governments it has made possible in recent years, could have allowed its general secretary to be elected by acclamation. Election by acclamation is not democracy, it is the exact opposite of democratic election... In other words, acclamation is not an election, it is an investiture. A leader, who has undergone an investiture, is, at the very moment this occurs, released from all mandates and is accountable to himself and his ‘mission’... Anyone who has the slightest knowledge of the so-called rules of the democratic game, knows very well that if an election is to be considered democratic, it must be the result of votes given by each of the electors *individually* and independently of each other. If at all possible, this should be done *secretly* when it is a matter of voting for a person. Acclamation expresses the opinion, or more correctly the sentiment, the mood, the immediate and purely emotional reaction not of the individual but of a shapeless mass in which individuals no longer count as themselves, but as part of a whole that transcends them: that is of course what a mass is. In order for an election to be democratic, it must be regulated in a manner that allows for dissent, and that is why the golden rule of democratic decisions is majority and not unanimity, which would render any decision-making impossible in the case of voting by a large number of people, such as delegates to a party congress. Acclamation does not allow the expression of dissent, or rather it allows some people to keep their arms folded (I would imagine that some people were not applauding), but no one takes any notice. Election by acclamation is, by definition, a unanimous vote. “By definition” I mean not on the basis of verifiable facts, such as the counting of votes” (quoted from Bobbio, *A Political Life*, 149).

<sup>42</sup> Müller, “The Zombification of Political Parties”.

<sup>43</sup> Invernizzi-Accetti, Wolkenstein, “The Crisis of Party Democracy, Cognitive Mobilization, and the Case for Making Parties More Deliberative”, 97-109.

political participation (a neo-Tocquevillian argument about the importance of local government and intermediary bodies). It would require promoting “deliberative representation” as a meaningful way to conjoin the outcomes of deliberative processes across party branches via “executive committees” that would be internally democratic and thus combine the benefits of top-down and bottom-up power dynamics in the internal orchestration of party life. It would involve introducing function-specific venues for better-informed decisions on issues that transcend the scope of partisan deliberation, wherein arguments *pro et contra* are exchanged with a view on complementing (rather than replacing) the deliberative processes across party branches. Last but not least, it would mean resorting to the wide range of information and communication technology to enable the participation of party members whose work and personal schedules hardly align with those of party meetings (again, without undermining the centrality of party branches and face-to-face deliberations).

More recently, Elena Ziliotti<sup>44</sup> has intriguingly combined Western democratic theory and Confucian political theory to reconceptualize political parties – and the selection of leaders therein – through a cross-cultural understanding of democratic principles that she calls “meritocratic democracy”. Underwriting her project is the notion that democratic rule in the service of common political goals is superior, epistemically, to a purely meritocratic one and that public-minded political leaders are essential to both the longevity and the legitimacy of liberal democracies. Accordingly, she has developed a system of partisan juries tasked with the preselection of candidates for position of party leadership (whose evaluation would be facilitated by trained moderators and include character witnesses’ interviews and experts’ opinions) to reclaim the value of intra-party ethical/meritocratic screenings as under-appreciated resource to compensate for the shortcomings of intra-party aggregative and deliberative practices (and, in turn, to fill significant gaps in Western democratic theories of parties and in Confucian democratic theories alike). In doing so, she encourages a productive and mutually beneficial dialogue between different traditions of political theorizing that has the potential to defuse the ticking bomb of populist one-man or one-woman shows (an unfortunate by-product of the fetishization of charismatic leaders in modern politics<sup>45</sup>) and, more broadly, to address the crisis of party democracy from unusual angles.

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<sup>44</sup> Ziliotti, *Meritocratic Democracy*.

<sup>45</sup> See Viviani, *Leadership and Democracy*.

Finally, the rejuvenated theorizing of the place of compromise in democracy<sup>46</sup> has over the past few years breathed new life in the study of democratic deliberation, specifically within parties. Resisting the dichotomy between compromise-only and no-compromise views of deliberative practices, democratic theorists have started developing a dual-track model of deliberation committed at once to consensus and compromise and thus capable of overcoming the inadequacies of one-sided accounts of the deliberative paradigm.<sup>47</sup> On such terms, political parties help illuminating both sides (consensus and compromise) because they structurally operate on two tracks – as vehicles for coalescing claims around principled political projects and as institutional actors that make laws under conditions of disagreement. Accordingly, party members travel steadily on the consensus track in their role as campaigners, when they are less burdened by the plurality of opinions across the population and focus on mobilizing like-minded electors; yet they inevitably shift to the compromise track in their role as legislators. The two tracks entail two different temporal dimensions, roughly corresponding to the short- and long-term perspectives of party politics (campaigning and governing). A dual-track model of deliberation challenges at its core the conventional (and overly simplistic) idea that compromising and conflictual modes of democratic politics are at odds with each other; rather, it alerts to the ubiquity of compromises in party democracy as facilitators (in the short run) of possible consensus (in the long run) among rival partisan projects unfolding in time (even across generations).

## 9. Conclusion

As Julian Zelizer, Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton, has recently written in an illuminating and spirited pamphlet about party democracy in our times, “[r]eform is a marathon, not a sprint”.<sup>48</sup> If partisanship has become a dirty word on the fierce battleground of most democracies around the world, the antidote to the four Ds plaguing contemporary democratic politics – division, dysfunction, distrust, and disinformation – does not lie in a shock therapy that altogether dismisses parties (and elections) but in a long-term and ambitious agenda that channels

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<sup>46</sup> E.g., Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*; Gutman, Thompson, *The Spirit of Compromise*; Rostbøll, Scavenius (eds.), *Compromise and Disagreement in Contemporary Political Theory*; Knight (ed.), *Compromise* (NOMOS LIX); Baume, Novak (eds.), *Compromises in Democracy*.

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. Bech-Pedersen, Carl, “Compromise and Consensus”.

<sup>48</sup> Zelizer, *In Defense of Partisanship*, 169.

partisan impulses towards more democratic and accountable policymaking. To do so, it is important to dispassionately come to terms with five major approaches to solving the pathologies of hyper-partisanship that have proved similarly short-sighted in the context of American democracy – an exercise that might have important lessons also for other democratic contexts. Madisonians seek to constrain the intrinsic factionalism of politics by means of constitutional design (separation of powers, federalism, bicameralism), dreaming of a republic where the mutual vetoes break down the possible hegemony of any individual group. Nonpartisans long for national unity by means of procedural changes that reduce or entirely erase the partisan dimension of office-holding selection – for instance, through the removal of party labels from ballots or the elimination of primaries in municipal elections in favor of unaffiliated candidates. Advocates of third-partyism urge moving past the “tyranny of the two-party system”,<sup>49</sup> in the attempt to give voice to independents, restore the full agency of electors, and enhance the overall representativity of the political system. Bi-partisans look nostalgically at the era of bi-party negotiations that insulated policymaking from interest groups and electoral pressure (e.g., between the 1930s and the 1960s in American politics) and managed to command support from both major parties in the name of more durable and honorable legislation. Finally, presidentialists blame the institutional and constitutional architecture of modern-day democracies for ineffective, slow-paced, and poor decision making; they call for a “unitary executive” (placing the president on a higher level than the other branches) and an “executive unbound”<sup>50</sup> empowering a strong commander in chief capable of making prompt decisions on the most pressing, complex, and unprecedented challenges of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (a vision that underpins the “presidentialization” of politics on a global scale).<sup>51</sup>

If parties are no angels, they are no devils, either. They are a malleable tool that adjusts to the communication style, leadership paradigm, and overall vision of those who are contingently in charge of the party. Democratic theorists and scholars working at the intersection of political theory and empirical political science have an important task ahead: that of helping leaders and citizens alike to distinguish between different kinds of partisanship (in the quest for “responsible”, “ethical”, “constitutional” partisanship),<sup>52</sup> assess rival theories and practices of political leadership

<sup>49</sup> On which see the classic report by APSA, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System”, and the pioneering considerations of Disch, *The Tyranny of the Two-Party System*; more recently, see Rosenbluth, Shapiro, *Responsible Parties*.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. Posner, Vermeule, *The Executive Unbound*.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. Poguntke, Webb (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics*.

<sup>52</sup> See Muirhead, *The Promise of Party*; White, Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*.

both within and outside parties (in the quest for “normative leadership”<sup>53</sup>), rethink the largely unsettling relationship between money and democracy (especially when it comes to election campaigns and systems of political financing, both in Europe and North America),<sup>54</sup> and escape a cross-eyed vision of party democracy painfully torn between its institutional and extra-institutional moments. To be political means to be partisan, and partisans take a stand with others and for something. Therefore, the vital question is not whether to be, but how to be, partisan.

Building on Nancy Rosenblum’s path-breaking work, a normatively robust and constructively critical rethinking of party democracy must embrace and develop two core ideas: the “creativity of party politics” and the “moral distinctiveness of partisanship”. The former interprets parties as institutions that “create, not just reflect, political interests and opinions”;<sup>55</sup> in doing so, they serve a poietic – not merely a mimetic – function that is intrinsic to the notion of political representation as a process unfolding in time in which lines of divisions are inevitably drawn and perpetually renegotiated. Rosenblum encapsulates her thesis when she writes: “Creativity in politics is almost always identified with founding moments, constitutional design, transformative social movements, or revolution, not with “normal politics”. Modern party politics is the ordinary, not (ordinarily) extraordinary locus of political creativity”.<sup>56</sup> The latter – the moral-distinctiveness-of-party-ID thesis – is what differentiates partisanship as “congruent with standard democratic virtues” from partiality as the primacy of self-interests (either individual or collective) and allows to defend the former vis-à-vis its often-celebrated alternative, “the much-vaunted pose of Independence”. Against the claim that ‘independents’ are morally superior to ‘partisans’, Rosenblum presents partisanship as the political identity *par excellence* in representative democracy, one that pragmatically recognizes “the inevitability of disagreement”<sup>57</sup> and positively embraces the fluidity of political opposition. This “pluralism without foundations”<sup>58</sup> – i.e., the acknowledgement that no party can either speak for the whole or simply reflect pre-given cleavages – is the other side of party creativity. Together, they shape the physiognomy of “civilian” (or “ethical”) partisanship, which proceeds along three lines: inclusiveness (partisans need to be genuinely inclusive if they aspire to become

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<sup>53</sup> Beerbohm, “Is Democratic Leadership Possible?”.

<sup>54</sup> On which see, most recently, Cagé, *The Price of Democracy*, and Bonotti, Nwokora, *Money, Parties, and Democracy*.

<sup>55</sup> Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

the majority), comprehensiveness (they must be able to appeal to citizens beyond their own fellow partisans), and disposition to compromise (they cannot but tolerate short-term disagreement within their own party if they want to ensure the continuity of party-ID, or “preserve the partisan ‘we’”, in the long run).<sup>59</sup>

Ethical partisanship – one that is worn lightly and thus differs from ideological, blind partisanship – means accepting that our partisan conception of the common good is contestable and that parties provide means to pursue generalizable aims, not to unconditionally antagonize the other side regardless of its actual ideas and proposals. Parties that embrace ethical/normative partisanship are also capable of an ethics of political compromise in party democracy built on “principled prudence” and “mutual respect” (rather than “principled tenacity” and “mutual mistrust”) among rival partisans, fostering an open-mindedness that blends the principled and the pragmatic sides of democratic politics, merges the two mindsets structurally at play on the battleground of party dialectic (the “uncompromising” and the “compromising” mindset), and thus eschews the overly simplistic dichotomy between campaigning and governing in the life of democratic parties.<sup>60</sup> As this article has sought to demonstrate, a genuinely interdisciplinary reflection on the broader cultural and social transformations that underlie the weakening of party legitimacy is urgently needed. Doing so requires a richer theoretical framework to capture the evolving patterns of political engagement in the age of populism, analyze the transformations of representative politics throughout the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and rescue parties and partisanship from the multi-level crisis affecting party democracy in our hyper-polarized present. Political theorists willing to undertake this endeavor inevitably walk a fine line beside the pessimism of reason and the optimism of the will, but it is a challenge worth taking.

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<sup>59</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, 356-362.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. Gutmann, Thompson, *The Spirit of Compromise*; Wolak, *Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization*.

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