

KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Antiestablishmentarianism Is Democratic

by Nadia Urbinati

If antielitism means that populism is an ever-growing possibility in democracies, this is because democracy is rooted in an anti-establishment spirit.

Populism pertains to the interpretation of democracy, and democracy is a complex form of politics, with both institutional and extra-institutional elements. Particularly in its representative form—the form within which populism emerges—democracy is a diarchy of decision-making and opinion forming in which the practices of monitoring, contesting, and changing decisions play a role that is no less essential than the role played by the procedures and institutions for making and implementing decisions. Democracy is both the name of an institutional order and a name for the way citizens act politically or participate, in a broad sense, in the public life of their country. Structurally, it is never wholly accomplished because it is a *process* through which free and diverse citizens pursue plans that can be, and often are, different or even contrasting. Democracy, therefore, denotes political autonomy as liberty from subjection and of dissent. Even before autonomy came to be associated with fundamental rights, arguments supporting it were understood to be arguments for reclaiming equality of power and for guaranteeing equal consideration under law. These claims can be used to justify acts of public resistance and opposition—verbal or even violent—against those who disrupt democracy from within. Ever since it originated in ancient times, democracy has been both a call to and a practice of liberty because it has been a claim to political equality and a claim to freedom of dissent.

The democratic diarchy of decision and judgment is particularly important in representative democracy because this form of democracy pivots on a structural tension between politics as potentials and promises and politics as institutional actualizing, but it never relies on an

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entrenched dualism between “the few” who are ruling and “the many” who are ruled. According to the political conception of representation, the activation of a communicative current between civil society and political institutions that derives its legitimacy from free and regular elections is not only unavoidable but essential, even constitutive. The generality of the law (which the artificial identity of the citizen represents) and the standards of impartiality epitomized by the rule of law (*erga omnes* being the criterion of legality) need not be achieved at the expense of the visibility of the citizens’ social conditions. What is needed is to avoid giving those conditions a “political” translation into the institutions, which—if it occurred—would break the status of equal citizenship. The

multiple sources of information and association that citizens activate through media, social movements, and political parties all make possible the *transformation of the social into the political*. We call this complex process of reflection “electoral representation,” which consists of filtering the inputs coming from social groups through political proposals and eventually legislation. Political parties are the agents of this process. We can thus say that the electors’ immediate physical presence (right to vote) and the citizens’ mediated presence (right to free speech and association) are inextricably intertwined in a society that is itself a living confutation of both the dualism between, and the merging of, the “inside” and the “outside.” Representative democracy is a law-making system that lives on a permanent attempt to bridge (without ever merging) the social and the political.

It is interesting to observe that in the chatter that historians consider to be the first document of the democracy of the moderns—*The Agreement of the People* (1649)—the Puritans listed both their democratic desiderata (individual



suffrage and electoral representation) and the potential risks coming from the new elected class. It was as if they wanted to alert their fellow citizens to the fact that having a government legitimated by their explicit and electoral consent would never guarantee them a secure political autonomy. Mistrust in those holding power was not even allayed by the advent of written constitutions: such constitutions confirm the fact that the contestation of the holders of power and their decisions are endogenous to democracy, not an accident, not a sign of dysfunction. The noncoincidence between institutions (state) and democracy (between the electors and the citizens) is a safety valve, and it is also the most robust thread in the rope that binds the political history of democratization. It is not unreasonable to think of representative democracy as a political order that is based on a permanent tension between legitimacy and trust, decision and judgment.

Democracy thus includes the habit and thought of antiestablishmentarians, and this reminds us of the fact that it is “government by public discussion, not simply enforcement of the will of the majority.” Antiestablishmentarianism is ingrained in democratic procedures, which structure politics as contestation and discussion about decisions. Hans Kelsen situated the worth of the dialectic between majority and opposition exactly here. This dialectic, he explains, proves that democracy is not identifiable with unanimity because it presumes dissent and presumes a deliberative decision-making process that includes dissent. Such dissent is never expelled or repressed, even when citizens’ preferences converge on different

results or reach majority decisions. The central role that Kelsen accords to compromise has its roots here because the dissenters, when they agree to obey the decisions passed by the majority, make the first and most fundamental compromise—the agreement to suspend their

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resistance, and to accept compliance, without feeling that they are being arbitrarily subjected. Without this compromise, no political community of free and equal members in power would be possible.

For all these reasons, the act of counting votes in order to achieve a majority decision presumes an antiestablishmentarian habit of judgment on the part of the citizens. It also presumes the idea that an opposition is possible and legitimate: It exists and will permanently exist. This reminds the majority that its majority is temporary and never completely established. If victory were permanent, it would erase the majority-minority dialectics and so erase democracy itself.

Antiestablishmentarianism is a constitutive quality of democracy thus, not a sign of crisis or weakness. A minority that knew, *ex ante*, that it would never have the chance to become a majority would not be a democratic opposition or minority. Rather, it would consist of some



few subjected to, or dominated by, the rulers. The opposition needs to conceive of itself—and be conceived of by the majority—as a legitimate, antiestablishmentarian threat in order to be democratic and to avoid becoming a subjected victim or a subversive force of destabilization always ready to rebel. The opposition needs to maintain the attitude (or habit of the mind) that it acts to dethrone the majority. Otherwise, democracy would be inconceivable.

To summarize, antiestablishmentarianism does not belong to populism but is a category that populism takes from democracy. The thing that makes *populist* antiestablishmentarianism distinctive, and makes it different from democratic antiestablishmentarianism, is the way in which it is constructed: according to the binary assumption that breaks politics and its actors into two different groups, defined according to the position they occupy in relation to state power. Democracy derives antiestablishmentarianism from its permanent majority-minority

dialectic; populism derives it from the assumption of the existence of predefined polarized groupings and enmity.

Democracy and populism thus prefigure two conceptions of the people and of a government based on people's consent. If the latter were to be actualized and become a ruling power, it would jeopardize the democratic permanence of antiestablishmentarianism. The reason lies in the populist interpretation of authority as a synonym for "possession" and—as noted earlier—for factional politics. But authority is the *condition of power* itself, and none of those who exercise its functions possesses it: certainly not an elected majority, nor even a leader whom a majority chooses to be representative of the supposed "good" people against the supposed "bad" people. Authority, derived from the people and owned by nobody, is the democratic combination of two contradictory principles that populism wants to sever by assuming, *ex ante*, that they correspond to two antithetical groups: the few (the establishment) and the majority (the people).

I have advanced two arguments about populist antiestablishmentarianism: (1) If antielitism means that populism is an ever-growing possibility in democracies, this is because democracy is rooted in an antiestablishment spirit that belongs to democracy and keeps the political game between the majority and the opposition alive. And yet, (2) antiestablishmentarianism is the thing that connects populism to a specific form of representation and proves that it does not exclude all elites but rather wants to institute a different kind of elite.

Populism can hardly claim originality as to the antiestablishmentarian argument; in fact, it does not propose solutions that are primed to overturn representative government altogether. But it can claim originality in the way it uses the antiestablishmentarian rhetoric. Let me explain this idea.

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I have argued that the attack against the political establishment is the “spirit” of populism in power. Populism is a revolt against the pluralist structure of party relations in the name not of a “partyless democracy” but of “the part” that deserves superior recognition because it is *objectively* the “good” part (since its identity is not the result of ideological constructions or partisan visions). This argument reveals the enormous difference between party democracy and populist democracy. It is the pillar on which populism builds the political program that it will bring to completion if it achieves a majority, as we are already seeing in those countries in which populism rules today. Indeed, the populist people claim to be a simple and objective representation of the people’s needs here and

now, while parties and party leaders project their programs and solutions in a more or less distant future. Economists and political scientists have stressed “the pervasive connection between the short term protection characteristics of populists’ policies and the supply of antielite rhetoric.” The “irresponsibility” of the populist leader is the result of the antiestablishmentarian logic and translates into an irresponsible populist government because of its programmatic lack of concerns for future consequences of its political decisions. Paraphrasing Jürgen Habermas, I would call this phenomenon “populist short-termism.”

If there is a “utopian” (or dystopian) kernel in populism, this kernel is to be found precisely in the connection between antiparty sentiment and the politics of the “objective” reality of the people here and now. This connection resonates with the myth of politics as a domain of problem solving in which partisan personnel and visions are wrong and will become increasingly useless. It echoes a worldview that incorporates the epistemic ambition of the wisdom of the crowd as instinctively clear and originally sincere. This wisdom can be a guide to decisions at the government level that are wholly concerned with tangible “data” and issues, not



with “predigested” interpretations made by some select few. Mistrust of the “intellectuals” and the “experts” of the establishment is like a tonic for populism. Indeed, anti-ideologyism and antipartyism have marked it since its early appearance in the United States in the late nineteenth century, and they are certainly what make it still attractive to many who treat it with benevolence as the sign that there is an

ancestral goodness in the people. The technological revolution has given this ancient myth or dystopia the certainty of actualization.

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