Democracy, Populism, and the Crisis of Political Legitimacy in Europe

Dr. Anna Kowalska
Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstract
In recent decades, European democracies have confronted a profound crisis of political legitimacy alongside the rapid rise of populist movements. This paper examines the interrelated dynamics shaping this crisis: democratic erosion, socio-economic stagnation, cultural anxieties, and disillusionment with established political parties. Drawing on political theory, empirical case studies, and normative debates within democratic thought, the study analyzes how populism both reflects and exacerbates legitimacy deficits in European polities. After mapping the conceptual terrain of democracy and legitimacy (§2), the paper surveys the rise of populism and its drivers (§3), then explores the legitimacy crisis within European institutions (§4). Section five critically assesses whether populism functions as a corrective to democratic deficits or as a threat to liberal pluralism. The conclusion offers perspectives on strengthening democratic legitimacy in Europe's fractious political environment.
Keywords: Democracy, Populism, Political Philosophy, Legitimacy

1. Introduction

Europe's political landscape has undergone dramatic shifts since the turn of the century. Once-stable party systems have fragmented, voter trust in institutions has declined, and anti-establishment movements have gained electoral traction across both Western and Eastern Europe. Elections in countries such as Hungary, Poland, France, Italy, and Spain reveal growing support for parties commonly labeled "populist," ranging from right-wing challengers to left-wing movements.

This transformation prompts a series of urgent questions: What is the relationship between democratic legitimacy and populism? Does populism merely express deepening democratic dissatisfaction, or does it undermine democratic norms? Can European political systems adapt in ways that both accommodate citizen grievances and preserve core democratic values?

To address these questions, this paper first outlines theoretical foundations for understanding democracy and political legitimacy. It then traces the rise of populism across Europe and analyzes legitimacy crises within representative institutions. Finally, it engages normative debates on whether populism is an inherent threat to liberal democracy or a symptom of democratic deficits that must be addressed.

2. Democracy and Political Legitimacy: Concepts and Frameworks

2.1 Defining Democracy

Democracy is a contested and multifaceted concept. At its core, democracy refers to a system of government in which political authority is derived from the people, typically through periodic free and fair elections, civil liberties, and political pluralism (Dahl, 1971). Robert Dahl's influential concept of *polyarchy* emphasizes institutional prerequisites for democratic governance, including responsive institutions, enfranchisement, and public contestation.

Contemporary democratic theory, however, also stresses procedural, substantive, and deliberative elements:

- **Procedural democracy** emphasizes competitive elections and institutional rules;
- **Substantive democracy** stresses outcomes, such as equality, social justice, and inclusion;
- **Deliberative democracy** values public reasoning and informed discussion as foundations of legitimacy (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

2.2 Political Legitimacy

Political legitimacy concerns the justified authority of political institutions and the normative acceptance of that authority by citizens. A system is legitimate when people perceive its rule as rightful and binding, not merely coercive (Beetham, 1991). Legitimacy has at least three dimensions:

1. **Legal-formal legitimacy** – compliance with constitutional and procedural norms;
2. **Moral legitimacy** – ethical justification of those norms;
3. **Societal legitimacy** – popular acceptance and trust in institutions.

For democratic legitimacy specifically, legitimacy is not merely procedural but also relational: citizens must believe that political systems effectively represent their interests and values, that their voices matter, and that outcomes are just and equitable.

3. The Rise of Populism in Europe

3.1 Populism as Ideology and Strategy

Populism is notoriously difficult to define with precision, but scholars such as Cas Mudde offer generative working definitions. Mudde describes populism as a *thin-centered ideology* that divides society into two antagonistic groups — "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" — and argues that politics should reflect the will of the people (Mudde, 2004).

Populism can thus serve as both an ideology and a political strategy. As ideology, it appeals to moral dualism and collective identity; as strategy, it mobilizes grievances against established elites and institutions.

3.2 Drivers of Populism in Europe

Several intertwined factors have fueled populist currents across Europe:

3.2.1 Economic Discontent

Post-2008 economic stagnation, austerity policies, and widening inequalities have eroded faith in traditional parties that once promised economic security and social mobility. Regions hit hardest by unemployment and decline have become fertile ground for populist messages promising economic redemption and redistribution outside established frameworks.

3.2.2 Cultural Backlash

Cultural anxieties about immigration, national identity, and globalization have empowered populist actors who frame these issues in zero-sum terms. Right-wing populists in Hungary, Poland, France, and Italy tend to combine economic grievances with nationalist and nativist rhetoric, portraying immigrants and supranational institutions (e.g., the EU) as threats to national sovereignty.

3.2.3 Institutional Distrust

Citizens increasingly distrust traditional political parties, parliaments, and intergovernmental organizations. Declining turnout rates in some contexts, rising protests, and skepticism toward technocratic governance reflect a widening gap between political elites and ordinary citizens.

4. Political Legitimacy in Crisis

4.1 Institutional Legitimacy and Representative Democracy

Representative democracy rests on the idea that elected officials act as proxies for citizens' will. However, when political elites are perceived as unresponsive, corrupt, or disconnected from everyday concerns, institutional legitimacy erodes. Scholars like Pippa Norris document declining trust in parliaments, governments, and political parties across Europe (Norris, 2011). Perceptions of unfair representation — whether real or constructed — contribute to legitimacy deficits. Regions that feel left behind economically or culturally often view national governments and supranational bodies like the European Union as unresponsive or even dismissive.

4.2 Supranational Governance and the Legitimacy Gap

The European Union (EU) exemplifies a distinctive legitimacy problem. While the EU has achieved deep economic integration, it has struggled to develop a corresponding democratic legitimacy. Critics argue that the EU's technocratic governance — embodied in unelected bodies like the European Commission and complex decision-making mechanisms — undermines democratic accountability (Mair, 2009).

The 2015 migration crisis and the 2008 financial crisis intensified these legitimacy concerns, as national governments and EU institutions appeared unable to offer clear, decisive leadership. Populist parties capitalized on frustrations, portraying Brussels as an unelected and unaccountable elite.

4.3 Political Polarization and Fragmentation

Political polarization — the ideological distance between political camps — undermines democratic legitimacy by reducing common ground and mutual trust. As parties shift toward more extreme positions to mobilize support, consensus becomes harder to achieve, and moderate voters may disengage from politics altogether.

Fragmentation of party systems, especially in Southern Europe (e.g., Spain, Italy), has produced coalition instability and governance crises. Such volatility reinforces perceptions of inefficacy and reinforces populist critiques of conventional politics as corrupt or ineffective.

5. Populism: Corrective or Threat to Democracy?

While populism often carries negative connotations, scholars debate whether it is intrinsically anti-democratic or whether it reflects underlying democratic deficits that merit normative attention.

5.1 Populism as Democratic Voice

Some theorists argue that populism can be understood as a corrective to unresponsive systems, giving voice to neglected citizens. Ernesto Laclau's discourse theory suggests that populism constructs political identity around collective grievances, challenging entrenched power structures and opening democratic participation (Laclau, 2005).

From this perspective, populism is not antithetical to democracy per se; instead, it highlights democratic exclusions that must be addressed. In contexts where traditional parties have consolidated power and sidelined marginalized voices, populist movements function as expressions of democratic demand.

5.2 Populism as Threat to Liberal Norms

Other scholars caution that populism's majoritarian mantra — "the people" vs. "the elite" — often lacks safeguards for pluralism, minority rights, and institutional checks and balances. Right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Poland have pursued constitutional changes that weaken judicial independence and media freedom, raising alarms about democratic backsliding.

Populism's rhetorical simplification — treating complex political questions as moral binaries — can undermine deliberation and respect for dissent. When political opponents are labeled as enemies of "the people," democratic norms of peaceful competition and mutual respect are compromised.

5.3 Differentiating Varieties: Left, Right, and Competitive Populism

Populism is ideologically heterogeneous. Left-wing variants often emphasize economic redistribution and social justice, while right-wing variants highlight immigration control and cultural exclusion. Some populist movements combine elements across the spectrum.

The normative assessment of populism therefore depends on its content, institutional behavior, and commitment to democratic pluralism. Populist movements that operate within democratic norms and respect civil liberties may differ significantly from those that seek to dismantle institutional constraints.

6. Case Studies: Populism and Democratic Legitimacy in Europe

6.1 Hungary: Viktor Orbán and Illiberal Democracy

Hungary's political trajectory under Viktor Orbán illustrates the democratic challenges posed by populist governance. Elected initially on an anti-elite platform, Orbán's Fidesz party has implemented constitutional changes consolidating power, weakening independent media, and reshaping electoral rules to entrench its majority.

Orbán openly advocates "illiberal democracy," asserting that liberal constraints impede the will of the people. Critics argue that such reforms undermine checks and balances, eroding the substance of democratic legitimacy in favor of majoritarian dominance.

6.2 Italy: The Five Star Movement and Political Fragmentation

Italy's Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) emerged as a digitally mobilized, anti-establishment force. Drawing support from youth and disillusioned voters, M5S campaigned against corruption and technocratic governance. However, once in power, the movement faced challenges reconciling direct participatory ideals with the realities of coalition politics and institutional constraints.

Italy's experience illustrates how populism as a corrective impulse can struggle to translate into effective governance without institutional ballast, producing further legitimacy questions about the capacity of political systems to accommodate disruptive movements.

6.3 France: National Rally and the Reconfiguration of Political Identity

In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly National Front) has mainstreamed nationalist and anti-immigration politics, challenging traditional parties. While never capturing the presidency, the party's electoral strength reflects broader skepticism toward centrist elites and concerns about cultural and economic insecurity.

The National Rally's position complicates democratic legitimacy in France by reframing political identity around ethno-nationalist terms, challenging republican ideals of universal citizenship and pluralism.

7. Addressing the Legitimacy Crisis: Paths Forward

7.1 Democratic Renewal and Institutional Reform

Strengthening democratic legitimacy requires institutional reforms that enhance responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. Proposals include:

- **Electoral system reform** to balance representation with stability;
- **Citizen assemblies and deliberative forums** to deepen public engagement;
- **Enhanced transparency in governance** through open data and participatory budgeting.

Such reforms aim to bridge the gap between citizens and political elites, restoring trust and rebuilding normative legitimacy.

7.2 Economic and Social Policy Responses

Addressing socio-economic grievances that fuel populism requires policies targeting inequality, job insecurity, and regional disparities. Austerity-driven responses after financial crises have been widely criticized for exacerbating disillusionment with democratic institutions.

Policies that promote inclusive growth, social protection, and educational opportunity can help mitigate the material foundations of populist mobilization.

7.3 Media, Information, and Democratic Culture

The rise of social media and fragmented information ecosystems has polarized audiences, spread misinformation, and weakened shared public discourse. Strengthening democratic culture entails media literacy, regulation of platform incentives, and support for public interest journalism.

A healthy democratic public sphere requires spaces where diverse voices can engage in reasoned debate rather than echo chambers that intensify polarization.

8. Conclusion

Europe's crisis of democratic legitimacy cannot be reduced to the rise of populism alone; rather, populism both reflects and reinforces deeper structural challenges within democratic systems. Economic discontent, cultural anxieties, distrust of elites, and institutional fragmentation have created conditions where traditional representative structures are perceived as unresponsive or outdated.

Populism, in its various manifestations, raises critical normative questions about the future of democratic governance: whether populist movements represent a democratic corrective or a threat to liberal pluralism depends on their institutional commitments and political behavior.

Addressing legitimacy deficits requires a combination of institutional reform, socio-economic policy innovation, and cultural renewal.

Strengthening democracy in Europe will demand renewed efforts to make political systems more inclusive, responsive, and capable of addressing citizen concerns without sacrificing core democratic norms. Only through such efforts can democratic legitimacy be restored in a way that both accommodates popular demands and safeguards democratic pluralism.

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