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**Title:** Citizenship in the Age of Populism

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***Abstract***

The tension between citizenship and democracy is well documented in the literature on citizenship. The paper revisits it through the lens of populism. It engages with the critics and proponents of the phenomenon and it argues that the juxtaposition that they all stage between the people and the citizens does not just intensify the tension between the exclusionary politics of citizenship and democracy's universalising aspirations, but it also threatens to restrict the appeal of citizenship to mainstream liberal theory. The paper concludes by suggesting that the kind of affectivity, which democratic mobilisations draw on, and that one associates with the 'people', is often missing from citizenship practices – and this further undermines the connection between citizenship and democracy.

**Keywords:** people, affect, democracy, liberal theory, rights

## **Citizenship in the Age of Populism**

Thinking about citizenship from the angle of democratic theory opens up intricate questions about its relation with democracy: Is citizenship the primary vehicle for democratic practice? Is it the only form of democratic subjecthood? For many democratic theorists, the answer to these questions is a straightforward yes. Concerned as they are with processes of voting and the operation of representative institutions, they suggest that citizenship is the primary, if not only, form of democratic subjecthood. For those theorists, democracy – understood as a regime of government – is impossible without citizenship and all those processes that formal access to citizenship enables: voting, legitimacy, accountability, transparency, participation. Of course, the case here is not that non-citizens are not considered democratic subjects. It is, rather, that they are of no direct interest to the standard theories that the canon of democratic theory divides – pluralist, elitist and deliberative democratic theory (see Held 2006). On this account of democratic theory, non-citizens are of direct interest only to those, usually identified as radical democrats, who are concerned with processes of politicisation and other ways of becoming political. It is from this perspective of radical democratic theory, that the paper revisits and rethinks the relation between citizenship and democracy.

Central in a radical democratic perspective is the idea that the institutions, which citizenship is tied with, while important, do not exhaust the meaning of democracy. Democracy is to be found in other sites and, also, taken up by subjects who might not have access to the formal rights of citizenship. The name of these subjects varies in the literature: from the poor, to the inexistent, and the people. But the idea which these names express remains the same: without references to the excluded, democracy makes little sense. It is this idea that serves as the paper's point of departure. If democracy makes little sense without references to the excluded, then where does this leave citizenship? What does citizenship offer to democracy, as an analytical category, once the connection between democracy and the excluded is thrown into sharp relief? The rise of populist politics, with its focus on the people – understood as the marginalised and the excluded whom contemporary democracies have forgotten – brings this question to the forefront of debate. The paper engages in this debate by showing how the tension between citizenship and democracy, that is already latent in radical democratic debates, changes in the populist age. For what populism does is to draw added attention to the ways that exclusive citizenship practices limit democracy. The tension, therefore, between

democracy's universalising aspirations (that are now seen to lie with the people) and citizenship's exclusionary politics intensifies.

To explore the various facets of this tension, it is important that we are first clear on the terms used. In this paper, I approach citizenship in Marshallian terms, as a status that gives access to a set of rights. Certainly, there are other ways of understanding citizenship, more in line perhaps with the emphasis that I place on politicisation. Nonetheless, this liberal, rights-based, account comes with a particular benefit for my discussion: it points to that, which is specific to citizenship in contrast with other terms, namely, rights and, by so doing, it stops one from outrightly dismissing citizenship's relevance for democracy. At the same time, the rights-based account reveals that what citizenship brings to democracy is a certain degree of protection against arbitrary abuses of power, but also freedoms to exercise citizenship rights. These freedoms and protections ensue, however, against the background of growing revocations of citizenship by democratic states and the increasing criminalisations not just of citizens who are deemed 'unfit' (the poor, uneducated, excluded), but also of key citizenship activities such as protests. The point, therefore, here is not that liberal accounts of citizenship afford rights-holders protections and freedoms that are missing from other understandings of citizenship. Instead, liberal accounts of citizenship make apparent at one and the same time the distinctiveness and limits of citizenship. And this is important for the discussion that I want to set up here, because it exposes a further facet of the tension between citizenship and democracy: the rights which distinguish citizenship are not, in the end, sufficient for the exercise of democracy.

To be sure, the tension between citizenship and democracy is not strictly speaking new. Theories of citizenship, that stress its critical dimension, have been for a long time awakened to the need to deepen its connection with democracy by drawing out the ways that (non)citizens mobilise to challenge the politics of democratic states. The tension is, also, not surprising when one considers how states often use citizenship to limit access to the rights and privileges it offers. Still, the tension between the two takes an interesting twist in the age of populism in that it is now the people that appear to enable democracy. If this is correct, then questions arise about the centrality of citizenship outside the literature that is concerned with rights and institutionalisation – in other words, outside mainstream democratic and liberal theorising.

The age of populism is a term that I use intentionally to capture both the phenomenon and theories of populism. Populism as a political phenomenon is manifest in the political landscape of a number of countries (from Italy to the US and UK). It is distinguished by the rise of leaders that claim to correct democracy, by listening to and representing the true will of the people. Portrayed as the excluded and the dispossessed, the people challenge the political establishment in populist narratives and, by so doing, they give substance to democracy. The impact of populist politics on democracy is precisely what theories of populism disagree about. For they distinguish between those that critique populism on the assumption that it undermines liberal democracy, by manipulating its citizens; and those that see in populism a type of democratic politics that lodges the excluded right at its core. The work of Ernesto Laclau (2007), and more recently Chantal Mouffe's account of left populism (2018), exemplify the latter position while the work of Nadia Urbinati (2019) exemplifies the former.

In particular, in her most recent work Chantal Mouffe (2018) suggests that a progressive left populism could serve as a strategy for democratic revival. Left parties argues Mouffe must fully exploit the present populist moment to revive the democratic values that decades of neoliberal hegemony have eroded, leading to poverty and discontent. They are in good position to initiate this revival, because it is through parties that demands become expressed and elaborated in the political arena (2018, 55-56). More importantly, it is through parties that collective subjects become constructed according to Mouffe. And subject construction is key to the emergence of a new democratic hegemony. Therefore, it is neither visions of a populist regime nor promises of restoring national sovereignty that drive left populism for Mouffe (2018, pp. 23-24, 80). It is the intention to extend and revive the idea of democracy that is currently in trouble. Notice here that left populism is a strategy for democratic change for Mouffe. It is not a phenomenon that she seeks to come to terms with in order to explain its impact on democracy.

This strategy draws its force from the use of 'people' as a name. Ernesto Laclau (2007) – on whose work Mouffe relies here – explains further what the name 'people' does for populism. First, it weaves together a plurality of frustrations and unfulfilled demands that they must somehow gather together and unify if a new hegemony is to come into being. Second, it creates the 'front' of unresponsive institutions that the excluded subjectify to challenge, for it is in the struggle against unresponsive institutions that the frustrations and demands of the excluded take on their popular character (i.e. when the excluded become a people). The

people does not exist prior to such processes of subjectification. It is not the single political or national group of most accounts of populism. This is what, in the final analysis, explains its force as the name that connects left populism with democratic revival.

Nadia Urbinati (2019) strongly disagrees with this argument. In *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* she challenges this connection between populism and democracy, that one finds in Mouffe's work, arguing that as a 'project of government' populism seriously disfigures democracy (2019, 3). It eliminates checks and balances and the distance, necessary in a constitutional democracy, between the leader and society. More than that, the people, which populist leaders prioritise, is a misleading term in that it is a term that manipulates the citizens to believe that 'it is possible for them to be ruled in a representative manner without the need for a separate political class or the establishment' (Urbinati 2019, 8). It also falsely conveys the idea that there is such a thing as an 'authentic', united, people with an ethical legitimacy to unmediated rule (Urbinati 2019, 93). Indeed, populism for Urbinati is also a strategy to gain power - as it is for Mouffe. The difference is that this is a strategy put to anti-democratic ends (2019, 94). For this reason Urbinati suggests that: it is not the people but 'the individual citizens who are both the actors in and the normative foundation of democracy. Neither the few nor the many play this role (2019, 70). The citizens form their will and opinion through processes of representation and a democratic proceduralism that ensures democratic practice. To gloss over the opinions that citizens form (of their representatives) and their will as this is expressed through voting and participation in civil society is not just to undermine the contribution of citizenship to constitutional democracy but also to kill democracy tout court.

This juxtaposition between the people and the citizens, implicit in various accounts of populism, is precisely what makes the tension between democracy and citizenship appear under new light. For it presses home the need to reflect on how democratic practice might be deepened. The people is an important bone of contention in this reflection because, from the perspective of the critics of populism they lose the 'reasoning' state of mind of the citizen and they become manipulated; while for the proponents of left populism, the people subjectify to express their voice and take issue with the inequalities and socio-political exclusions that they face in their daily life. Citizenship is not the issue for the latter group of theories, because the people of populism are dispossessed of the rights of citizenship. It is this dispossession, the

fact that democracies often forget the people, that brings added visibility to the question of how inclusion can be achieved from the standpoint of an already exclusive citizenship.

From this standpoint, the people is a fruitful subject to consider in a discussion of the relation between citizenship and democracy. Its seeming inclusivity, which sharply contrasts with the exclusivity of citizenship, taps into growing concerns about the exponential rise of inequalities and discontent with democratic politics. Of course, references to the people can be dangerous when the focus is on national sovereignty, as is often the case with right-wing populism – this is why I suggest that the inclusivity of the term ‘people’ might be ‘seeming’. Nonetheless, aspirations to inclusivity remain strong, precisely because the term embraces the have-nots. But there is another reason why the people is a fruitful subject to consider when reflecting on the relation between citizenship and democracy. It is a subject that has a strong affective appeal. Ernesto Laclau’s (2007) work foregrounds this affectivity when he suggests that naming – and populist politics more generally – immediately taps into the affective register.

The affective register refers to two forms of affect in my discussion. The first explains the mobilising effects of populist politics, the second grapples with the challenges posed by popular discontent with democracy. Understood as a ‘radical investment’ in Laclau’s work (2007, 110), affect is that libidinal tie or attachment to the idea of change that bonds and unifies the ‘people’. It is also what drives and grounds their actions. In this particular sense, the focus on affect is in line with a broader literature that assigns feelings and emotions (with which affect relates but is not identical with) a primary political role. It designates a somatic, fluid and energetic experience that at one and the same time creates and shapes, motivates and mobilises popular constituencies (see Cossarini and Vallespín 2019). The second aspect to affective experiences that a focus on the people helpfully taps into, concerns growing disaffection from democracy – the ways that emotions like anger, fear, and grievances against unresponsive institutions prompt both affective investments in certain ideas (such as the people) and affective disinvestments from others (such as democracy).

Theories of left populism are especially awakened to such experiences – particularly to the more difficult to measure experience of disinvestment. They help us to get near this experience, for they peg the rise of the people, which on one level affect helps unify, to an unresponsive democracy that the forgotten people are gradually losing affect for. In so doing,

reflections on the rise of populist politics bring attention not just to the affects that mobilise; but also crucially, to the popular affects that have begun to divorce from democracy – as a result of lowered living standards, growing insecurity and precarity.

Of course, the question arising here is why affectivity is not on offer when it comes to citizenship; and why it matters if it is not. The answer to the second part of the question is that democracy cannot survive without affect. Seen to attach to the democratic relation, to the way that collectivities relate to and, ultimately, feel about democracy, that might be described as intense (or not), affectivity at once sustains and triggers democratic mobilisation. When affectivity is, thus, missing, action and care *for* democracy both decline. Is this affectivity missing from citizenship? If citizenship action is seen to lie with voting – since this is what, in the final analysis, access to the rights of citizenship enables - then it is difficult to reconcile what Isin (2008) refers to as routine and formal citizenship action with affectivity. While much certainly depends on the context within which voting takes place, it is safe to assume that when affectivity arises, it is because of partisanship rather than the action of voting per se. If, on the other hand, one thinks of what Isin (2008) captures with the term ‘acts of citizenship’ (that is, spontaneous and disruptive politicisations), then affectivity is latent, but is usually pushed to the sideline.

Two caveats are important to mention at this point. First, that it is the routinisation and ‘rationalism’ of a rights-based citizenship, as this is safeguarded by institutionalised procedures, that critics of populism propose that we protect from falling prey to the manipulating discourses of self-centred populist leaders. Secondly, while populism is always a dangerous phenomenon in its right-wing manifestations, it is also a phenomenon that exposes and often thrives on the limits of citizenship (particularly the disinterestness of citizens); and the fact that it mostly facilitates a routinised, administrative kind of political action. Where does this leave the category of citizenship?

Citizenship is a difficult subject when probed from the angle of democratic theory. What is difficult about it is that, for all the richness of the debates it has inspired, it is often credibly seen to limit, rather than enable, democratic action. Yet for all its problems, the injuries that a rights-based citizenship brings to the fore and challenges are no small thing; even more so when one considers continuing struggles for the protection of voting rights in the US. This



makes the (dis)affectivities that loom large in the background of citizenship – and the ways these influence democratic practice – more pressing to confront than ever.

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