Second-Order Political Thinking
Compromise versus Populism
Rostbøll, Christian F.

Published in:
Political Studies

DOI:
10.1177/0032321720910171

Publication date:
2021

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Second-Order Political Thinking: Compromise vs Populism
Christian F. Rostbøll

Published in Political Studies, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720910171

The literature often mentions that populism is in conflict with the politics of compromise. However, the opposition remains vague and undertheorized. This article confronts populism and compromise in a novel way by analyzing them as types of second-order political thinking and ideologies of democracy. Second-order political thinking provides a set of ideas and concepts that frames and regulates how we relate to others in politics, and how we make political decisions for, with, or against them. By contrasting populism and compromise as types of second-order political thinking, we will better be able to understand each and normatively compare them. Thus, we see that (1) compromise is inherently most attractive as second-order political thinking, and (2) populism fails as an ideology of democracy, because it cannot explain the meaning and value of the democratic system as a set of authoritative institutions and procedures.

Keywords: Populism, compromise, democracy, ideology

INTRODUCTION

“[P]opulism needs to be, and can be, kept in check by political leaders earning respect for the political processes of compromise by being willing and able to explain and justify them publicly,’ wrote Bernhard Crick fifteen years ago (2005: 631). Since then the hold of populism has only grown stronger in many countries around the world (Moffitt 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Indeed, it has made many fear for the future of democracy (Levitksy and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018). Crick’s suggestion of confronting populism with the political process of compromise requires a better understanding of the meaning and justification of populism and compromise. This article provides the latter by constructing two ideal types, Populism and Compromise, which I propose that we regard as rival forms of second-order political thinking and democratic ideologies. While first-order political thinking concerns what are the best policies to pursue independently of other people’s views, second-order political thinking is a type of thinking that provides a set of ideas and concepts that frames and regulates how we relate to others in politics and how we make political decisions for, with, or against them.

By contrasting Populism and Compromise as types of second-order political thinking and rival interpretations of the ideology of democracy, we will be able to evaluate them on normative terms. I argue that Compromise has some inherent

---

1 Professor of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. cr@ifs.ku.dk
features that are normatively more attractive than Populism, in particular its commitment to respect every citizen’s right to form her own opinions and be an equal participant in collective self-legislation. Moreover, Compromise has the advantage over Populism that it, without closing the gap between ideology and practice, can connect the two, whereas the ideology of Populism is so remote from actual democratic practice that it necessarily returns to the latter as a destructive force. While Populism cannot avoid creating disappointment with and distrust of ordinary democratic politics, Compromise can show its value. However, there is a danger that the politics of compromise becomes uncritical and discourages expressions of dissent. To avoid this, we must promote Compromise as a second-order disposition of respect for disagreement, rather than a first-order position of centrism.

By contrasting Populism and Compromise, I do not mean to suggest that these are the only possible forms of second-order political thinking. Rather, studying theories of populism, I was struck, on the one hand, by the frequent contraposition of populism and compromise (e.g. Canovan, 2002: 34; Mudde, 2017: 34–5; Urbinati 2014: 151), and, on the other hand, by how vague and undertheorized the contrast remains. Hence, this article aims to provide this missing theorization. Moreover, another obvious candidate for comparison, deliberative democracy, does not provide the same clear idea of second-order political thinking, as we shall see Compromise does. This is the case because deliberation, as commonly understood by deliberative democrats, is mainly about finding the best policies on the first level and less about how to make decisions with or against disagreeing others at the second level. In terms suggested by Simon May (2005), deliberative democracy operates with “reasons of correction,” which concerns the first level of policy, and which are different from “reasons for compromise,” which operate at the second level.

Note that while the notions of Populism and Compromise draw on recent literature on populism and compromise, they are my constructions and not everyone writing on the two topics will agree on my interpretation and emphases. Constructing ideal types of Compromise and Populism poses methodological challenges because neither has canonical texts in the way major political ideologies do. It also poses the challenge that much of the literature on populism is critical. To avoid uncharitable interpretation in the construction of Populism, I include conceptualizations not only from analysts and critical commentators (e.g. Mudde, Müller, and Urbinati) but also from proponents (Laclau, Mouffe, McCormick) and less critical commentators (Canovan), and I concentrate on the aspects where they overlap. Regarding Compromise, the main challenge is the paucity of sources and the lack of any clear tradition. However, within the last couple of decades some important work has been done on compromise (Rostbøll and Scavenius, eds., 2018), and this article aims to contribute to establishing compromise as an essential topic in political theory.
SECOND-ORDER POLITICAL THINKING

In the literature on compromise, it is common to distinguish between first- and second-order commitments or two levels of moral evaluation (May, 2005: 318-19, 2011: 584; Weinstock 2013: 552; Wendt 2016: 23-30). On the first level, we find a person’s policy preferences. My first-order commitments are my views of what would be the best policies to choose and implement if everyone else were or could be convinced to be in agreement with me. However, compromise theorists emphasize, “When an issue is in dispute there is more to be considered than the issue itself” (Kuflik, 1979: 51). Therefore, they introduce a second level of moral evaluation, which concerns how one ought to respond to disagreement on the first level of policy preferences. Thus, second-order moral commitments concerns how I think I ought to relate to fellow citizens and make decisions with them, when they disagree and I cannot convince them of my first-order view.

We should be aware of some presuppositions of the way Compromise theorists make the distinction between the two levels. These are that disagreement is natural and should be respected, as well as the conviction that it is often necessary and valuable to make decisions with our fellow citizens. Compromise draws the distinction exactly in order to make room for and respecting disagreement on the first level. Moreover, Compromise theorists need the second level in order to be able to explain why it makes sense morally to accept a compromise solution, which one at the first level would regard as morally inferior. A compromise is a form of agreement in which all sides make concessions in order to be able to act together, and in which the concessions are motivated by the presence of disagreement at the first level (Margalit, 2010: 20; May, 2011: 583; Gutmann and Thompson, 2012: 10; Rostboll, 2017: 621). We have reasons for compromise when we have (a second-order) reason to make a decision with our fellow citizens in a way that respects the fact that they disagree. This way of understanding the two levels entails a notion of moral compromise where the compromise is not made merely out of self-interest but because of a moral commitment to respect disagreement and attributing moral legitimacy to opponents (Lister, 2007: 18; May, 2005: 318-19; Moody-Adams, 2018: 190-1; White and Ypi, 2016: 146-7).

My suggestion is that we can compare Populism and Compromise as types of second-order political thinking. We have just seen that Compromise operates with second-order reasons and a second-order moral commitment. However, in order to understand Populism as operating at the second level, we must provide a more general definition, which does not already presuppose the commitments of Compromise. Moreover, we must understand the second level more generally as providing a form of ideology or political thinking beyond a narrow moral commitment. Briefly, second-order political thinking is a type of thinking that provides a set of ideas and concepts that frames and regulates how we ought to relate to others in politics and how we should make political decisions for, with, or against them in pursuit of our first-order policy preferences.
Beyond a mere moral commitment, second-order political thinking speaks to three main elements. First, it provides an idea of the circumstances of politics, which explains the composition of society, its divisions and/or unity, as well as the basic motives of citizens, to which politics is a response. Second, it promotes an idea of the logic of politics, as a notion of the core elements, dynamics, and aims of politics. Third, as an ideology of democracy, it includes a notion of democratic legitimacy, which explains what makes the exercise of political power proper and valid.

It is important not to confuse the distinction between first- and second-order political thinking with the common distinction between procedure and substance (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 13, 200-1). Second-order political thinking is indeed very much about the procedures of decision-making but it is also more than that. Moreover, second-order political thinking can be anti-proceduralist, as Populism is (Brubaker, 2017: 365; Canovan, 1999: 10; Urbinati, 2017: 575). Second-order political thinking includes a general outlook on social and political relations as well as the motives and the norms that affect and regulate these. Most importantly, there is no suggestion here that we can understand second-order political thinking as a form of thinking that is without a substantive normative dimension. The idea is, rather, that the second level entails a different type of norms than the first level. The type of norms that exist at the second level concerns how we ought to relate to persons who do not share our first-order norms, interests, preferences, or identity. Should we fight with them or negotiate with them? Should we regard them as enemies or as fellow citizens? Can we impose our own views on them, or do we owe them concessions?

While compromise theorists commonly make the distinction between two levels in order to make room for and deal with disagreement on the first level, the fact that there are other types of second-order political thinking shows that Compromise is itself a controversial position. Thus, by itself the introduction of a second level does not take us beyond disagreement. My suggestion, then, is not that the second level transposes us to neutral territory. Nor is the idea that a constitutional level beyond normal politics can provide such a neutral territory. The ensuing contrast between Compromise and Populism exactly shows that this is not the case. Still, controversies at the second level are special and we can learn something new by analyzing Populism and Compromise as contrasting types of second-order political thinking. Not all disagreements are of the same kind, and there is an important normative difference between disagreeing on policy and disagreeing on whether we ought to make room for and accommodate disagreement at all.

Some readers might think that Compromise and Populism have different structures and that what distinguishes the two exactly is that only the former takes the form of second-order political thinking, that is, that only Compromise accepts that when an issue is in dispute there are other things to consider than the issue itself. While it is true that the distinction between two levels will seem more natural to someone committed to Compromise than to a populist, I shall argue that there is a
sense in which Populism is also a type of second-order thinking. Populists have first-order commitments as everyone else, but what makes them populists is their ideas about how one ought to relate to one’s opponents or, as they see it, enemies. My suggestion fits well with the common observation in the literature that Populism typically operates in combination with another more comprehensive ideology, such as nationalism or socialism (Mudde, 2017: 30-1, 36-8). We may think of the “host ideology” as providing the first-order thinking, while Populism is the type of second-order thinking that populists attach to the host ideology. It might well be that populists do not engage in the type of reflection that Compromise theorists regard as linked to the distinction between two levels, but that type of reflection is also not implied by my definition of second-order thinking. Moreover, it would be wrong to say that Populism does not have ideas about how to relate to disagreeing others; as Populism, it has little else.

**POPULISM VERSUS COMPROMISE**

This section employs the idea of second-order political thinking to provide a comparative analysis of Populism and Compromise. Thus, I regard Populism and Compromise as rival interpretations of (1) the circumstances of politics, (2) the logic of politics, and (3) democratic legitimacy. I arrived at this tripartite framework from studying the literature on both populism and compromise. Thus, it is not a framework that comes from one of them and is imposed on the other. Of course, as in any approach, it will highlight some differences and make others less visible. However, I think the framework brings out well the core features on both compromise and populism, as these are commonly understood in the literature.

To obtain an overview of Populism and Compromise as forms of second-order political thinking, let us begin with a general, schematic characterization of the two. I explain and substantiate this characterization in the tripartite comparison below. *Populism* (1) regards society as divided into two qualitatively different and antagonistic camps, the people and the elite (circumstance of politics). (2) Democratic politics is about winning power back to the people from an untrustworthy elite (logic of politics). (3) Political power should be an expression of the united will of the authentic people (notion of democratic legitimacy). *Compromise* (1) regards society as naturally divided into a plurality of equal individuals and groups who have conflicting legitimate interests and who disagree about policy (circumstance of politics). (2) Democratic politics is about reconciling the different interests and opinions that exist in society (logic of politics). (3) Political power is legitimated by political processes of compromise that accommodate as many interests and opinions as possible, beyond a moral threshold (notion of democratic legitimacy).
Circumstances of Politics

The circumstances of politics concern the composition of society, its divisions and/or unity, as well as the basic motives of citizens, which in combination make politics necessary and possible (Waldron, 1999: 102). Forms of second-order political thinking that regard themselves as democratic will focus on the composition, the unity and/or divisions, of the key democratic concept, namely “the people” or citizens.

There is broad agreement in the literature that it is a defining characteristic of Populism that it regards society as divided into two qualitatively different and antagonistic camps, the people and the elite (Brubaker, 2017: 362; Canovan, 2002: 25; Moffitt, 2016: 3; Mudde, 2017: 29; Laclau, 2005: 74-7, 87; McCormick, 2011: viii, 12, 179, 181). When populists speak of “the people,” they do not speak of all the members of a polity. They speak of ordinary people, common people, the many, or they use the Roman term for these, the plebs. Thus, they use a *pars pro toto* logic, where a part stands for the whole (Arato, 2013: 156-66; Müller, 2014: 485, 490, 2016: 25-32, 98). Ernesto Laclau is very clear on this: “The ‘people’ … is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality” (Laclau, 2005: 81). Thus, “a certain particularity, the plebs, can identify itself with the populus conceived as an ideal totality” (Laclau, 2005: 94). Moreover, this “particularity,” this part of the whole, is valorized either as a privileged political subject (Laclau, 2005), or because of its superior political judgment (McCormick, 2011). In a slogan, populists ask us to “trust the people!” (Canovan, 2002), meaning “ordinary people” and not all citizens. The reverse of this trust of “the people” is distrust of the elite and sometimes other groups who are not regarded as part of “the people” (Brubaker, 2017: 362-3). Thus, it is a fundamental circumstance of politics in Populism that some persons’ motives can be trusted while others’ cannot.

Among populists, there are two different views of the fundamental antagonism between the people and the elite, the discovery view and the constitutive view. According to the discovery view, populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 6, emphasis added). In the constitutive view, populism *creates* this antagonism. Laclau puts much effort into explaining that populism is not an expression of an already given group identity – “the people” – but rather a logic that *constitutes* this popular identity by creating a frontier to “power” (Laclau, 2005: 72-3, 74-7, 90). Even if this constitutive view were valid, I would argue that it is so only from the perspective of the observer of populism or the populist leader. It can hardly be part of the self-understanding and thinking of the followers. The legitimacy of populist demands rests for the followers on the belief that society actually is divided into two camps, and that the populist leader has discovered and expresses the demands of the people.

Whereas the fundamental circumstance of politics in Populism is antagonism, in Compromise it is disagreement (Rostbøll and Scavenius, eds., 2018; Rostbøll, 2018).
Under free and democratic institutions, according to Compromise, people will not only have divergent ideas of what constitutes a good and fulfilling life; they will also disagree on justice. There are some important differences between Populism’s focus on antagonism and the Compromise notion of disagreement. First, disagreement for the Compromise theorist is a natural condition among free persons and not a product of some being corrupt or pursuing illegitimate goals, as in Populism (Crick, 2005: 630). Second, while antagonism in Populism is a hierarchical relation between qualitatively different groups in society, disagreement in Compromise denotes a condition among horizontally related and diverse individuals in society. Third, the notion of antagonism does not prevent populists from talking of “the people” as a unity; indeed, antagonism to the elite is what makes it possible for Populism to speak of “the people.” By contrast, the idea of disagreement as natural requires that one speak of the people as a plurality. Thus, theorists of compromise going back to Hans Kelsen have been reluctant to talk of “the will of the people.” For Kelsen the idea of unitary people is nothing but a “metapolitical illusion” (Kelsen, 2013: 35-6, 40). Fourth, the populist notion of antagonism implies that those engaged in politics is the part that they call “the people,” rather than every citizen. Compromise as second-order political thinking, in contrast, entails that politics happens between a plurality of individuals or groups, without privileging one side in the conflict.

A final difference between Populism and Compromise as second-order forms of political thinking about the circumstances of politics concerns whether we should view the people or citizens engaged in politics in institutional terms. Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 31) suggests that populists rely on “a noninstitutionalized notion of ‘the people’.” This means that the unity of the people is thought to be created or discerned without the mediation of formal institutions. In some versions of Populism, the leader simply knows the will of the people and has no need for formal procedures such as elections to verify that he or she actually has understood the will of the people in the right way (Krastev, 2017: 75). In Laclau (2005: 123), populism is a logic that works by challenging existing institutions and by “a public appeal to the underdog outside the normal political channels.” In this way, Laclau’s populism is anti-institutionalist rather

---

2 For some theorists of compromise, disagreement and compromise are predicated on a commitment to the theory of value pluralism (e.g. Bellamy 1999). Others reject the idea that there is a necessary connection between value pluralism and a commitment to compromise (Overeem 2018). Personally, I don’t think disagreement in politics is natural because of the nature of value or Berlinian value pluralism but, rather, because of what Rawls calls “the burdens of judgment” (1996: 54-58). The burdens of judgment entail that disagreement can arise even when people in good faith apply their reason to practical issues, because of the complexity of the latter. Thus, disagreement that necessitates compromise is a fact about the nature of human beings in free societies, and not about the nature of value. Accordingly, I disagree with the suggestion (made by one referee) that Compromise is based on a point of moral philosophy, while Populism is more political.
than non-institutional. Still, we find here also a sharp contrast to Compromise in which there is no discernable people and popular will except those that are constructed by formal juridical and political procedures (Kelsen, 2013: 36, 42n3; Müller, 2016: 28). In the latter, the people is a juridical construct, and we need formal democratic procedures of election and decision making in order for people to act together. Without legal institutions and decision procedures, “the people” is not delimited and cannot act, but will be “an amorphous blob” (Holmes, 1995: 167).

The Logic of Politics
As types of second-order political thinking, Populism and Compromise have ideas about the core elements, dynamics, and aims of politics, or, in short, they have conceptions of the logic of politics. The key difference between the two is that for Populism, politics is a game with total winners and total losers, while for Compromise, democratic politics is about avoiding that anyone loses completely. According to Populism, democratic politics is about winning power back to the people from an untrustworthy elite (Canovan, 2002: 31). Even when in power, populists will continue to claim this. It is part of the populist narrative that in the past the elite took everything and the people got nothing. The promise is that in the future, the people will get everything they want and deserve, while the elite will get nothing (Müller, 2016: 41-4; Urbinati, 2019: 120-1). This way of speaking and thinking implies an understanding of politics as having an all-or-nothing logic, that is, as a game with clear and complete winners and with clear and complete losers (Krastev, 2017: 75). This is connected to the populist idea that politics is fundamentally about will and decision, and that when one decides one does so against an enemy who should be defeated.

According to Compromise, the fundamental logic of democratic politics is to accommodate citizens with different opinions and interests in a way that secures that no one takes all and that no one losses completely (Weinstock, 2013: 551-2, 2017: 638, 643). To compromise means to accept that one cannot get everything one wants. It also entails an acknowledgement of that in order to achieve improvements, one must act with rather than against other persons or parties with whom one disagrees. If politicians do not act together and make compromises, nothing will be changed or done but we will rather uphold the status quo. This contributes to making citizens even more frustrated (Gutmann and Thompson, 2012: 30, 155). Thus, Compromise does not view politics as an or-all-nothing game in which one can gain a complete victory. Rather than being a matter of making decisions that can defeat an enemy and give you or “the people” a complete victory and realize your highest hopes, the logic of politics in Compromise thinking is to deliberate with and accommodate others, which means that you must give up your highest first-order dreams (Margalit, 2010: 54).

While in Populism, the fact that “the people” cannot get what they want is blamed on the elite, in Compromise this is simply a consequence of the fundamental
circumstance of politics, that is, the fact that the people as a plurality of individuals do not agree on what policy to pursue. To the populist, who claims that the reason why the people do not get what they want is that the elite is corrupt and self-serving, the compromise theorist will reply that the fact of disagreement and the need for compromise in politics point to the reality that in democratic politics no one gets her preferred outcome. Even if political representatives are not corrupt or self-serving, when political decisions are compromises among parties who disagree, no one will not get exactly what she wants.

In the second-order political thinking of Populism and Compromise, deeming antagonism or disagreement the fundamental circumstance of politics affects their respective views of the logic of politics and of what democracy is centrally about. According to Compromise, the point of democratic politics is to talk about our disagreements and finding ways of acting together while acknowledging and incorporating these disagreements. For populists, democratic politics involves a confrontation between two camps with qualitatively different identities. Laclau contends that we fail to understand “the ontological constitution of the political as such,” if we do not understand that politics is about constructing a collective identity and that this requires an antagonism against some other group (Laclau, 2005: 67). On this view, collective identity construction is “a political logic which, as such, is a necessary ingredient of politics tout court” (Laclau, 2005: 18). Thus, from Laclau’s perspective, Compromise simply misses what politics is really about, namely mobilizing and creating collective agents. Perhaps, compromise theorists could accept that before one can make compromises, identities must be constructed and groups formed that then can make compromises. But they cannot accept that identity construction is the be-all and end-all of politics. In the political thinking of Compromise, the central part of politics is the negotiations between already constituted agents who despite their disagreements accept to act together, which requires that they do not see politics as a matter of “us or them,” but as a matter of all getting some of what they aim for and accepting that victories are always partial (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018: 77).

**Democratic Legitimacy**

As supposedly democratic forms of political thinking, Populism and Compromise must have a notion of what makes the exercise of political power democratically acceptable. Above I said that as per Populism, the exercise of political power should be an expression of the united will of the authentic people, while in Compromise, political power is legitimated by political processes of compromise that accommodate as many interests and opinions as possible, beyond a moral threshold. Here, I show that the difference between their respective notions of democratic legitimacy can be explained by their divergent understandings of “the people,” trust, and respect.
Theorists of Compromise are reluctant to talk of “the people.” Still, Kelsen, for example, regards compromise as essentially democratic because it is a way to include several interests in the decisions and avoid rule by one interest alone (Kelsen, 2013: 40). Compromise, he says, maximizes the number of people who can get what they want (Kelsen, 2013: 30-1). Thus, deeming compromise the quintessential democratic practice entails both that one regards the people as a plurality of different individuals who disagree on what they ought to do together, and that they try to act together in a way that incorporates as many of their views and interests as possible. A good democratic compromise is not one that expresses the true will of the people but rather one that acknowledges that the people has no unified will or interest. A good compromise embodies the divergent views and interests of citizens, rather than pretending to have found a unity that transcends these (Crick, 2005: 630; Gutmann and Thompson, 2012: 12; Weinstock, 2017: 637-9).

According to Margaret Canovan, populists “claim to legitimacy … rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty” (Canovan, 2002: 25). However, by “the people,” populists do not mean all citizens but only those they have demarcated as “the real people” (Mounk, 2018: 43). As mentioned, Populism operates with a *pars pro toto* logic, according to which a part of the community, ordinary people or the plebs, are the only legitimate people. This people blame their plight on an unresponsive elite, who as responsible “cannot be a legitimate part of the community” (Laclau, 2005: 86). There is in Populism a fundamental distrust of powers-that-be, ruling elites, and existing institutions. Hence, “populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people … [and] when in government, they will not recognize anything like a legitimate opposition” (Müller, 2016: 20). Populism regards distrust as something that should be encouraged and promoted. Thus, John McCormick writes (2011: viii), “liberty … depends on institutions that respond to and even further encourages a popular disposition of distrust, bordering on animosity, toward wealthy and prominent members of the citizenry and the government.”

The flipside of the distrust of elites – and current institutions – is trust of “the people,” again not meaning the whole population but ordinary people, the poor, or the many. Populists see themselves as reacting against the denigration of the masses, against the lack of respect for ordinary people and their concerns, and against the idea that one cannot trust the people acting collectively (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005: Part I; McCormick, 2011: 163). Hence, Populism entails a certain valorization of ordinary people. This might sound like a common democratic assumption, namely that ordinary people are qualified to partake in ruling, that is, to take on the sovereignty afforded by democratic institutions. But populists regard one group, ordinary people, as being better qualified to rule than another group, the elite. McCormick stresses this point regarding the virtues of the plebeians, drawing on Machiavelli’s claim that there are qualitatively differences between the few and the many, the grandi and the popolo (McCormick, 2011: 5, 23-6, 48, 65, 81, 83; Machiavelli, 1998: 113-18).
The idea that distrust toward other members of society should be encouraged, because it can promote democracy, stands in the sharpest possible contrast to the spirit of compromise. Both the notions of mutual trust and mutual respect are central to Compromise, as second-order political thinking. They are so in two ways (Rostbøll, 2017: 626). First, trust and respect are seen as necessary empirical preconditions of good compromises. If citizens do not trust each other and mutually respect the right to hold opposing views, they will not be willing to concede anything to them on free and equal terms, as required for making a good compromise. And the other way around: if citizens are unwilling to compromise, “they undermine the relationships of respect that are necessary to sustain any morally justifiable democracy under the modern conditions of deep and persistent disagreement” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2012: 35). Second, Compromise regards mutual respect as a core moral norm, and as a norm, which demands that we compromise. Compromises are morally good because of the equal concern and respect they show for political opponents (Bellamy et al., 2012: 280; Bird, 1996: 92). Thus, Compromise views mutual respect as both instrumentally valuable for a well-functioning democracy and as a basic moral norm.

“Compromise” might refer both to an outcome and to a process, but in the standard sense, “an outcome characterized as a compromise is reached as a result of the contending parties' participating in a procedure, also called a compromise” (Benjamin, 1990: 5). It is this standard sense that interests me. It makes clear that compromise is not merely an agreement that embodies disagreement; it is also an actual participatory process of coming to such an agreement. In the standard sense, compromise refers to an actual agreement among two or more persons, and as such, it requires more than the mental process of accepting something. It requires the actual performance of entering into an agreement with other people (Wendt, 2016: 16-17). In this sense, compromise is something arrived at and agreed to (Jones and O’Flynn, 2013: 119-20; Weinstock, 2018: 66).

The fact that a compromise is something arrived at by an actual process among diverse people distinguishes compromise from the fictitious agreement of Populism. The advantage of interpreting popular sovereignty as a compromise is that it includes an actual procedure of reaching agreement and actual consent. This interpretation of democracy accentuates the point that we cannot refer to some merely presumed agreement as “the will of the people.” Compromise promotes an ideal of voluntarism that is beyond the reach of hypothetical agreements. Insofar as a political decision is a product of compromise, it is possible to say that there is a fact of agreement and that this fact confers legitimacy on political decisions, beyond the issue of the substantive merits of the decision made and the external consequences of making a compromise (for example, peace and stability). The fact of agreement realized by compromise can confer legitimacy on political decisions because “it is a way of tracking the presence of a certain relation between fellow citizens” (Rossi, 2013: 562). The most common way of understanding this relationship is with reference to a norm of mutual respect.
The idea of Compromise is not that compromise is the only way to show respect for others, but that political compromise expresses a specific form of respect for others, namely “democratic respect” (Rostbøll, 2017: 626-30). Democratic respect takes outset in the political circumstance of disagreement, connects to the necessity of acting together with one’s fellow citizens, and fulfills the democratic norm of including all citizens in this acting together. In contrast to populists, we here speak of all citizens rather than of “the people” as only a part of the members of the political community. Democratic respect, then, is a form of respect that extends to all co-members and it does so in their common capacity of co-rulers. The suggestion is that Compromise gives a special meaning to the idea of respecting citizens as co-rulers. Compromise does not require that we see “the people” as a unity with a common will. It differs from consensus exactly by not eradicating or abstracting from disagreements but by embodying them. Moreover, the idea of Compromise is that there is more to democratic legitimacy than voting to find a majority. Voting only entails inclusion in the political process, whereas in a good compromise the participants’ views are also incorporated in the outcome. Thus, according to Compromise, democratic legitimacy is strengthened if the opinions of everyone are not merely heard and counted but also have some influence on the outcome (Rostbøll, 2017: 625-6, 630; Weinstock, 2013: 543, 2017: 640-4).

The Compromise notion of democratic legitimacy does not dispense entirely with the majority principle but it interprets its meaning and role very differently than Populism does. As Nadia Urbinati argues, there is a significant difference between “a politics that uses majority rule” and “rule of the majority” (Urbinati, 2013: 45, 2017: 574). Compromise promotes an interpretation of democracy as a form of politics that uses majority rule, but it does not reduce democracy to rule by the majority. Populism treats the majority “as it were the whole people,” an “oracle who declares the will of the sovereign people,” and, therefore sees no need for constraints on majority rule for the sake of protecting minorities (Urbinati, 2017: 579; Canovan, 2002: 34). This connects to the populist understanding of the logic of politics as about winning and losing. According to Populism, gaining a majority means that you have won and can “take it all” and the loser gets nothing. Compromise rejects that the majority expresses “the will of the people” and therefore insists that democratic legitimacy requires that the majority concede something to the values and interests of the minority. Compromise does not deny the value and necessity of majority voting (it is normatively required to respect equality and pragmatically necessary to reach a decision), but it does not see winning a majority as justifying unilateral imposition of one’s will without concern for the views of the minority.

According to Compromise, we can understand majority rule as a compromise by viewing it in temporal terms. Over time, different groups will be able to gather a majority and thus majority rule means taking turns making concessions (Carens, 1979: 133-4). But if different parties are to take turns in making concessions, during its time
in office no party can do simply as it pleases. It must restrain itself at least to the extent that is required in order for keeping open the possibility for another party to win the majority in the future. This requires not violating the rights necessary for continually maintaining a free and fair political process.

Democratic legitimacy as per Compromise also requires that even if you have won the majority, you should seek to make decisions that do not violate the minority's moral minimum. To be sure, moral disagreement may be so profound that it becomes impossible to satisfy the moral minimum of all parties. What one party regards as a moral minimum, say, protecting the national Leitkultur, against the culture of foreigners, may be incompatible with another party’s moral minimum, say, a human right to asylum or freedom of religion. This is an important reminder that moral compromise is not always possible and that the value of compromise has its limits. Nor do proponents of compromise regard it as unconditionally valuable (May, 2018; Rostbøll, 2017: 631-2, 2018; Weinstock, 2013: 538). The important point for our purposes is that the ethos of Compromise is to deliberate with opponents about their and our own values and explore solutions to our disagreements that realize the values of everyone to an acceptable degree (Weinstock, 2017: 638, 643). In Populism, there is no such deliberation with the opponent, no consideration of that not all one's positions can be non-negotiable principles, nor is there an accept of that democratic legitimacy may require concessions to the values or the moral minimum of the opponent. Admittedly, if Compromise accept that we should not compromise about everything, this makes the contrast to Populism less stark. However, there is still a significant difference between (1) the view that the people qua the (imagined) majority or the authentic people owe no concessions to any of the values and interests of the excluded other, and (2) the view that the majority should seek to accommodate many of the values of the minority, even if some values are excluded as below the moral threshold of compromise.

DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

I have contrasted Populism and Compromise as second-order types of political thinking and now turn to the possibility of regarding them as ideologies of democracy. Canovan, one of the most influential scholars of populism, has described populism as “the ideology of democracy” and contrasted this to “the way that democracy necessarily works” (Canovan, 2002: 26). She has formulated the same contrast in terms of “taking politics to the people” (what populism does) and “bringing the people into politics” (the complex ways in which democratic institutions and practices work) (Canovan, 2002: 26). While there are important insights in the paradox suggested by Canovan – between the simplicity of the ideology of populism and the complexity of practical democracy – I argue that we give Populism too much credit by regarding it as the ideology of democracy and that we give Compromise too little credit by understanding it merely as “the way democracy necessarily works.” Moreover,
accepting a strong separation between the ideology of democracy, on the one side, and actual democratic procedures and practices, on the other side, is to buy into a populist outlook, which should be rejected. As types of second-order political thinking about democracy, Populism and Compromise are rival ways of interpreting both the democratic ideology and practical democracy and cannot be distinguished as belonging to each side of the ideological/practical divide.

According to Canovan, ideology is a type of political thought that connects political leaders and their followers (Canovan, 2002: 29-31). A political system cannot do without ideology, because of the latter’s motivational force and its ability to inspire faith and bestow legitimacy on the system and political leaders. Thus, Canovan contends, democracy needs populism as a way to bring politics to the people, to “legitimate the system to voters and to mobilise them for participation” (Canovan, 2002: 28). Populism does so by providing a simple picture of where power lies – in the united will of the homogenous people – and by promising to combine transparency and empowerment. However, Canovan acknowledges that this populist ideology stands in sharp contrast to how actual democratic politics works. And not only that, it is exactly because of democracy’s ideal aim that practical democracy is so complex and opaque. The procedures and institutions required for including all citizens equally in the democratic process are necessarily quite complex. Thus, paradoxically, “empowerment undermines transparency” (Canovan, 2002: 28).

Canovan provides no solution to the paradox between the simplicity of the populist ideology and the complexity of democratic practice. Nor does she seek to narrow the gap between the two by reformulating the ideology or suggesting reforms of the practice. She seems to think that the tension between what she also calls the redemptive power of populism and pragmatic politics is necessary for a well-functioning democracy (Canovan, 1999: 9-10). Thus, Canovan praises the “relative inclusiveness” of practical democracy as “a politics of diffuse talking, some of it public debate, some of it legal deliberation, and much of it formulation of elaborate deals and compromises by political professionals” (Canovan, 2002: 39). She even writes, “Politics of this kind is democratic in the sense that the laws and policies that come at the end of the process have been influenced by inputs from many sources, including channels to which every citizen has some access” (Canovan, 2002: 39, emphasis added).

There are three main problems with accepting Populism as the ideology of democracy and still endorsing representative democracy. Two problems have to do with the relationship between ideology and practice, the last with the populist ideology itself. First, an ideology of democracy must be able to explain why we have the political institutions we have. Otherwise, it is unclear why it is an ideology of this form of government and not some other form of government. In other words, it must show that it qualifies as an ideology of democracy by showing some fidelity to democratic institutions. Canovan herself says that the ideology should be able to legitimate the
system to the citizens. However, if the ideology is as far removed from actual politics in a representative democracy as Populism is, it delegitimizes the system rather than explaining its meaning and value. Moreover, when we speak of particular processes as “democratic,” we must be able to connect this evaluation to the ideology. But it is unclear that Canovan’s appraisal of the politics of compromise as democratic is based on her understanding of populism as the ideology of democracy and not on some other norm of inclusiveness, which is absent in Populism.

A second problem concerns how we see the relationship between ideals and institutions. In Canovan’s approach and, indeed, in populist thinking, institutions are given only instrumental value. Thus, when Canovan describes “pragmatic politics,” as the contrast to the redemptive politics of populism, she refers only to external ends such as peace and stability (Canovan, 1999: 9-10). In this approach, we have either the inherent moral goals of an ideology or the merely pragmatic goals of custodian practices such as compromise. However, in this way one excludes the possibility that practical democracy can have not only pragmatic value but also non-instrumental value. That is, one overlooks the inherent values of political processes of compromise such as respect for differences of opinion and inclusion in common processes of collective but pluralistic self-legislation.

Both of these problems have their roots in an approach that regards ideology, on the one hand, and institutions, on the other hand, as entirely separate issues. I do not suggest that we regard ideology and institutions as identical, or that we collapse the distinction. The ideology of democracy must provide a notion of legitimacy that goes beyond a description of actual institutions, both in order to explain the value of the latter and in order for the ideology to supply a critical standard that provides guidance for assessing the democratic legitimacy of actually existing democracy. Thus, the ideology of democracy must simultaneously provide understanding of our democratic institutions and a critical perspective on them. If it fails in these aims, it becomes either irrelevant or destructive.

The third problem with Canovan’s approach is that it does not justify the inherent features of the populist ideology. She focuses on the populist ideology’s ability to motivate, inspire, and create commitment. However, insofar as this is a common feature of all ideologies (Canovan, 2002: 38), it does not prove why citizens ought to follow this ideology rather than another one with similar effect. What she does say in its favor is that populism is the ideology of democracy. However, it is a mistake to accept as the ideology of democracy, an ideology that is not merely critical of certain existing political practices or politicians but an ideology that by its very nature denigrates practical democracy (Urbinati, 2014: 134). Populism is not merely a critique of corruptions of democratic institutions but an attack on any conceivable democratic system of government. In order to accept an ideology as the ideology of democracy, it must be connectable to actual democratic institutions, and we must be able to justify it as an attractive democratic ideology.
It may be objected that Populism is only an attack on representative democracy and promotes direct democracy. However, while it is true that populist leaders often call for more referendums, they cannot explain how an alternative institutional set-up can realize or approximate their ideal of rule by the authentic people. Populism simply cannot tell which set of political institutions is best at approximating their notion of democratic legitimacy. The reason is that the type of second-order thinking and ideology that Populism entails is at its core anti-institutional and anti-procedural. Canovan (1999: 10, 12-13, 2002: 34-5) explicitly admits this, and Laclau (2015: 268) is “very proud” of the institutional deficit of his theory of populism.

Müller argues that populists are not against institutions in general, but only against institutions that keep them out of power, while they are fine with institutions that keep them in power (Müller, 2017: 595-8). Yet, Müller’s own analysis of populism shows that it has no argument in favor of or commitment to any specific set of institutions (Müller, 2017: 599). Populists might not always be “against institutions” but they treat political institutions and procedures as mere means that can be exchanged at will according to an end that is given independently of them, namely the end of rule by the authentic will of the people. Thus, when I say that Populism is an attack on any conceivable democratic system of government, it is because it is destructive of the very idea that the system – the rules and the procedures – should determine the legitimacy and the authority of the result. Populism can give no authority to political institutions and procedures, because it operates with a notion of democratic legitimacy the connection of which to any institutions and procedures remain and must remain unexplained.

Some might reject the criterion that an ideology of democracy should be able to explain the authority and legitimacy of political institutions. They might see the purpose of an ideology of democracy such as Populism to be to show that no institutions can claim democratic legitimacy. Thus, my criterion seems question begging. However, if you reject the notion that a democratic ideology should be able to say something about the legitimacy of political institutions, you have also rejected the possibility of judging institutions as better or worse. But presumably, when populists promote more referendums, they do so because they think Populism as a democratic ideology requires this, that referendums are better than representative institutions, and that their results are more legitimate and should be authoritative. Therefore, populists cannot reject the suggested criterion if they want to promote alternative institutions as better and more democratically legitimate.

MAKING DISAGREEMENT VISIBLE
Compromise has the advantage compared to Populism that the former is able to set up an interpretation of democratic legitimacy that relates to democratic procedures. As such, it does not delegitimize the democratic system but can provide an understanding of its meaning and value to citizens. However, it might be objected that
Compromise entails an uncritical understanding of democracy and discourages expressions of dissent (Ruser and Machin, 2017).3

The greatest risk of the politics of Compromise is, paradoxically, that it may obscure and even suppress disagreement rather than making it visible and encouraging its expression. Thus, the spirit of compromise might seem to encourage centrist politics and discourage forms of politics that challenges the status quo and provides radical alternatives. This double danger of obscurity and suppression of expression of disagreement can be bad for democratic politics for three different reasons. (1) It is demotivating for citizens, (2) it creates problems of accountability, and (3) it inhibits necessary change. Indeed, Populism can be a response to a form of politics where there seems to be no disagreements among political elites and where current policies are presented as without alternatives (Mouffe, 2018). In order to avoid that Compromise condones and encourages such a form of politics, we must make visible to everyone that a politics of compromise is indeed a politics of compromise and not a politics of centrism or consensus.

Here the division between two levels of evaluation and the specific type of second-order political thinking that characterizes Compromise is central. The key is to understand that the spirit of compromise concerns how one ought to relate to and make decisions with people with whom one disagrees. As such, the spirit of compromise is a second-order disposition, which does not concern first-order policy views but rather how one ought to relate to fellow citizens who hold different policy views. The danger is that this difference is not acknowledged, or that it is invisible in the way we organize the political process. Centrism is a first-order policy position, while compromise-willingness is a second-order disposition. Compromise does not promote first-order centrism but second-order willingness to respect and accommodate opponents. One can be a political radical at the first level, while being compromise willing on the second level. And one can be an uncompromising centrist (Gutmann and Thompson, 2010: 1134-8; May, 2018: 37). Compromise only makes sense and gains value if people disagree on the first-order level of policy preferences. It is imperative, therefore, to stress that compromise gains its relevance and value only on the background of a “vigorous and sometimes contentious politics in which citizens press strongly held principles and mobilize in support of bold causes. Social movements, protest struggles, and electoral campaigns are among the significant sites of this kind of politics” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2010: 1125-6). Thus, for Compromise, polarization on the first level of policy preference is not a democratic problem, as long as it is combined with compromise willingness at the second level. All too often, the two levels are not properly distinguished, leading to the mistaken

---
3 A related concern is that the spirit of compromise unduly restrains the competitive aspect of democracy (Shapiro, 2003: 60).
view that Compromise demands that one does not express dissent or promote radical alternatives to existing policies.⁴

In order for the political process to make disagreements visible, the politics of compromise must not overshadow the oppositional and competitive aspect of representative politics. It is crucial that the politics of compromise does not hide the fact that some alternatives were excluded and that some routes were not taken. For citizens to be motivated to participate in politics and for their ability to hold politicians accountable, they must be able to see that there exists policy alternatives, who holds which views, and who has decided what (Rummens, 2012: 31-7). In this connection, Compromise has the advantage over consensus-oriented politics that it does not claim to be able to deliver decisions that can satisfy everyone’s first-order preferences or transcend disagreement. Still, we should be careful not to apply the imperative to compromise too broadly. Compromising is still only one, even if central aspect, of democratic politics. There are times and domains in which one should dissent and oppose, rather than concede and accommodate.

Some might think that the last point vindicates the need for a populistic element as essential to the democratic process. They might think so, because populists criticize the obscurity of current representative politics and because their antagonistic stance makes disagreement visible. However, the question is whether Populism itself promotes the visibility of disagreement and the encouragement of expression of dissent that is required for motivation, accountability, and change. The answer is that the populist notions of the homogenous people, antagonism, and distrust themselves suppress disagreement and delegitimize dissent. Democracy arguably needs reinvigoration and encouragement of displays of dissent. However, populist politics is not the best way to achieve this, because when it succeeds, it will threaten disagreement rather than promote it. This is the case because Populism does not truly value dissent and its political logic is antithetical to it (Arato and Cohen, 2017: 285-6). Moreover, the populist notion of representation as embodiment has no room for accountability, since the alleged identity between leader and people makes it nonsensical to hold the ruler accountable (Caramani, 2017: 63; Urbinati, 2019: 122). The idea of accountability makes sense only when there is distance and difference between the representative and the represented.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has analyzed and contrasted Populism and Compromise as types of second-order order political thinking and ideologies of democracy. The suggestion is that regarding Populism and Compromise as rival sets of ideas about how to relate to others in politics and how to make political decisions for, with, or against them can

---

⁴ This mistake is made in the argument against compromise by Ruser and Machin (2017: 41-4).
provide a novel way of understanding the meaning and value of each. To understand these two types of political thinking, we must analyze their divergent views of the circumstances of politics, the logic of politics, and democratic legitimacy. Moreover, as alleged democratic types of political thinking, we should seek to understand and evaluate the way in which Populism and Compromise connect democratic ideology and practical democracy. In order for a type of second-order political thinking to be a way of understanding democracy, it must be able to explain the meaning and value of both democratic ideals and democratic institutions, as well as the connection between them. On this basis, I have argued, first, that compromise is inherently most attractive as second-order political thinking, and second, that populism fails as an ideology of democracy, because it in no conceivable way can explain the meaning and value of the democratic system as a set of authoritative institutions and procedures.

I suspect that many readers will find it an unsurprising conclusion that Compromise comes out as more attractive than Populism. However, it is my hope that, by providing a novel framework for analyzing Populism and Compromise, this article has given us a better understanding of why and how we should reach this conclusion. Moreover, I think that the notion of second-order political thinking has brought out more clearly why we have reason to value the practice of compromise in democratic politics. The understanding and appreciation of Compromise is remarkably absent from our tradition of democratic theory. The rise of Populism shows why this negligence of compromise in democratic theory is both a grave theoretical shortcoming and politically dangerous.

Acknowledgments
Earlier versions of this paper were presented as the John Stuart Mill Lecture at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Holland, June 20, 2018; at “How do compromise and democracy get along?” workshop, University of Lausanne, Schweiz, April 26-27, 2018; The Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, USA, January 4-6, 2018; “Compromise and Representation,” conference, University of Copenhagen, December 12-14, 2017; "Compromise and Moral Conflict: Theory and Practice," conference, Universität Bielefeld, Germany, May 18-20, 2017; "How to deal with Disagreement: Liberal Legitimacy and Compromise," workshop, University of Milano, Italy, May 16, 2017; Annual Meeting of the Danish Political Science Association, Vejle, October 26-27, 2017. I would like to thank the organizers and participants. I am particularly grateful for comments from Alin Fumurescu, Stefan Rummens, Patrick Overeem, Enrico Biale, Veit Bader, Eric Beerbohm, Anders Berg-Sørensen, Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen, Jonas Hultin-Rosenberg, Fabian Wendt, Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, and Federica Liveriero. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and reviewers of Political Studies for very helpful comments.
Funding
The author gratefully acknowledges a grant for “Research Stay at Columbia University: Second-Order Political Thinking” (8142-00008B) from the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

REFERENCES


Author biography
Christian F. Rostbøll is the author of *Deliberative Freedom: Deliberative Democracy as Critical Theory* and the editor of *Compromise and Disagreement in Contemporary Political Theory*. His work in political theory has appeared in journals such as *Political Theory, Journal of Politics, European Political Theory, CRISPP* and *Constellations*. 