Democratic Populism as an Effective Tool Against Corruption

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Chapter I: Introduction

From Brexit to Trump, the salience of populism has increased over the past decade. While usually associated with a scornful, or even authoritarian[1], attitude, this paper argues that populism retains certain redeeming qualities. This paper will attempt to unravel one of these qualities of populism by exploring populism's suitability for addressing the real-world issue of corruption. Though populism is typically defined rather vaguely within philosophical literature[2], this vagueness also leaves open the possibility to adapt populism to different political climates in order to advocate change. Stated concretely, this paper will attempt to answer the following question:

How could the redeeming aspects of populism help address practical issues of corruption in politics?

Two key variants of populism will appear in the process of answering the question: "conventional populism" as found in Hungary or the American right-wing and Chantal Mouffe's agonistic democracy. The argumentation will compare the two concepts in regard to their likely success in countering corruption. This approach will focus on the practical effectiveness of underlying mechanisms within each theory and the likelihood of their implementation. This argumentation will be built up over three thematic chapters, each exploring the above stated assessment from a different angle:

To begin, the theme of socio-economic inequality will be used to provide insight into the nature of corruption. In the practical setting, political discourse may not weigh the views of all citizens equally. Specifically, the wealthy few have their views heard at a disproportionately higher rate, through various channels of influence[3], which subsequently helps them normalize corruption.

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[1] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 86.
[2] Ibid., 9.
[3] "As inequality grows, so does the political influence of the rich," The Economist, published July 21, 2018, https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2018/07/21/as-inequality-grows-so-does-the-political-influence-of-the-rich.

In this respect, populism may be a particularly fitting means of addressing this democratic deficit through the importance it places on empowering the masses.

This will be followed with a chapter introducing Mouffe and the application of her agonistic democracy. Effectively, her beliefs are that universality on certain issues is maintained through power relations, and it is therefore necessary to reignite discourse on every possible topic. This can be enabled in part through large-scale reform of political institutions in order to enable more decentralized articulation of public opinion. As the general public is highly supportive of restricting corruption, this would especially affect that issue. Additionally, this chapter will also stress how agonistics in theory succeed over conventional populism in regard to corruption due to its decentralization of power relations within movements.

The final chapter will consider strong leadership in order to emphasize the electoral advantages of conventional populism. Populism's focus on the figure of a strongman leader is a source of concern that elicits comparisons to authoritarianism. Nevertheless, leaders benefit their movement by stabilizing it and formulating its message in a way that appeals to the wider public[4]. Of course, if strong leaders truly are indispensable in real-life populist movements, this may put into question the practical viability of agonistics.

The overall thesis is that Mouffe's populism could in theory effectively address the issue of corruption. In doing so, it exemplifies some of the redeeming qualities that can make populism a force for positive change. Nonetheless, typical voting behavior complicates the picture as populist movements tend to lose focus from their policy goals and instead veer towards authoritarianism. As such, the practical value of agonistics may be limited unless it gains further electoral appeal.

Chapter II: Systemic Incentives for Corruption

Here, I want to introduce the topic of socio-economic inequality and analyze its role in the incentives for corruption. Socio-economic inequality refers to the distance between different

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[4] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 62.

socio-economic groups in a society, with populism often emerging out of this socioeconomic distance. This enables corruption as it politically empowers the elite, who also are the only societal group benefitting from the presence of corruption. Subsequently, populism will be linked to the topic as undoing this empowerment of the elite and thus proposed as a solution, though imperfect.

Defining Corruption

To begin, a specific definition of corruption would be fruitful. This is, of course, not so simple. Looking at the concept historically, it ranges from Plato's definition of corruption as a deviation from the natural form to today's political turn as the misuse of public resources for private gain[5]. Issues emerge in getting specific on acts that constitute corruption, as politicians change the definition based on convenience in order to either conceal their own corruption or attack their opponents.

Additionally, there is the question of interpreting the place of legal corruption. As Burke notes, while certain acts of alleged corruption may be legal, this will not necessarily shield them from public scrutiny[6]. Within public opinion, the severity of corruption is based on culture and tradition rather than law. As such, there always remains further room for interpretation, which may be abused. In-fact, Streeck goes as far as to describe the Western democracies as "barely disguised oligarchies" [7] due to the extent to which this subtle corruption is allowed to continue. This subtle systemic corruption through mechanisms such as, for example, revolving doors between business and politics is particularly important to this paper due to its increasing subtlety and influence [8].

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[5] Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "To Corrupt: The ambiguity of the language of corruption in ancient Athens," *Corruption* (2012): 43.

[6] Jonathan Mendilow, "Introduction to Populism and Corruption," in Populism and Corruption, ed. Jonathan Mendilow (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 19.

[7] Wolfgang Streeck, "Barely disguised oligarchies," Published May 15, 2015, https://wolfgangstreeck.com/2015/05/15/barely-disguised-oligarchies/.

[8] Daniel Nyberg, "Corporations, politics, and democracy: Corporate political activities as political corruption," *Organization Theory* 2, no. 1 (2021).

Nevertheless, the idea of corruption remains unfavorable with the general public. In addition to polling[9], one can also consider the veil of ignorance as introduced in the theory of justice by Rawls[10]. Here, one imagines their ideal setup of society without knowing their place in this hypothetical society. Subsequently, the question is whether one would prefer a world where corruption is allowed or restricted. It is vital to remember that corruption is a particularly pressing issue in the context of politics due to the power held by politicians. Most would then agree that averting corruption is a sensible goal considering the loss in decision efficiency and its stiffening effects on economic growth[11]. However, constraining corruption is also difficult as politics lacks the same definite set of ethical guidelines and the same enforcement procedures as present in other professions[12]. Perhaps this disconnect points to the key relationship with populism as it empowers the public to step in as will be explained further on.

The Utilitarian Politician

A model of politicians as utility maximizing agents and its repercussions can serve as an informative starting point to show how corruption spreads throughout the political system. Specifically, public choice theory will be applied, which sees politicians as caring about their self-interest above all else. In other words, it is the probability of different states of individual utility that ultimately guides their voting record. Although such a model of politician decision making may not be entirely accurate, it is still an indicator of wider actions.

Getting more specific, the two major variations of utilitarianism can help uncover how the effect of public choice theory will differ wildly based on assumed preferences. Firstly, Bentham's utilitarianism formalized a view of humans as merely seeking pleasure and avoiding

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[9] "Poll: Voters list a corrupt political establishment as a 'big problem' over healthcare, gun violence," The Hill, published May 9, 2019, https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/499771-poll-voters-list-a-corrupt-political-establishment-as-a-bigger.

[10] Julian Reiss, "Inequality and Distributive Justice," in *Philosophy of Economics: A Contemporary Introduction*, ed. Julian Reiss (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 264.

[11] Noel D. Johnson, William Ruger, Jason Sorens, and Steven Yamarik, "Corruption, regulation, and growth: an empirical study of the United States," *Economics of Governance* 15, no. 1 (2014).

[12] John Uhr "Professionalising Corruption? Investigating professional ethics for politicians," *Corruption* (2013).

pain by stating that these features "govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think"[13]. Later on, Mill adopts Bentham's notions of these lower pleasures but also distinguishes more advanced higher pleasures[14]. The difference is pertinent as one can see public choice theory being relatively more applicable within Bentham's utilitarianism, considering the emphasis placed on personal utility. Politicians with a Benthamite mindset would mostly contemplate their own circumstances. Once Mill's utilitarianism is applied, these politicians would likely begin to care about the wider implications of policy. For example, building a community center instead of accepting to a bribe to build a casino could be a higher pleasure in Mill's view as it represents a lasting accomplishment. According to Bentham, assuming they do not face any political backlash, the politician would favor building the casino as receiving the bribe simply yields them more personal utility.

Nevertheless, utility functions will differ between politicians, which can be used to pinpoint how corruption is maintained in the system. Even if politicians in general are assumed to have Mill utility functions, what different politicians consider as a higher pleasure may still vary. Would all politicians necessarily see a community center as a higher pleasure? In light of this, the strategic promotion of politicians becomes crucial. In the US, political parties are largely run in a centralized manner[15]. More importantly, the donor class is close to this far-reaching party apparatus. As the donor class fosters close ties with the party, it makes sense that the party would choose politicians willing to cooperate with donors. Consequently, even if many aspiring politicians were to prioritize the welfare consequences of proposed policy, political parties would simply cherry pick candidates more likely to fall in line. Although such a model is somewhat simple, it still highlights how corruption may be disseminated in an established political system.

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[13] Jeremy Bentham, as quoted by "The History of Utilitarianism," Last revised Sep 22, 2014. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/#JerBen.

[14] Jacob Viner, "Bentham and JS Mill: The utilitarian background," *The American economic review* 39, no. 2 (1949).

[15] William T. Goodman, "How Much Political Party Centralization Do We Want?," *The Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (1951): 537.

<u>Normalization of Corruption</u>

Next, socio-economic inequality can also affect a politician's identification of key issues and consequently the weight they assign to corruption. As suggested previously, a politician is not necessarily completely self-focused and may assign some value to the public good to gain higher pleasures in the form of a sense of accomplishment. However, how does a politician decide which legislation is the most beneficial for the general public? To some extent, this will be determined by their perception of the state of the country and the demand for different policy. Yet, this is the point where socio-economic inequality complicates things.

The effect of such inequality on the politician's perception of issues can be seen if one considers the politician as having a Bayesian mindset. This would see politicians constantly reconsidering their policy stance based on the responses to previous actions related to that given policy[16]. For example, a politician would reconsider voting for tax cuts, if similar previous votes mostly earned them criticism. Socio-economic inequality will have a clear effect on this perceived response to a given stance. If the political scene is surrounded by corporate lobbyists, they will make sure that politicians see corporate friendly views at a disproportionately higher rate. As such, with increasing inequality, corporate interests are likely to be further overrepresented. Moreover, politicians may not even realize this bias present in their views.

Similarly, in a more indirect manner, inequality poses an issue for the correct functioning of deliberative democracy. According to Habermas, there should be a public sphere, which represents the united views of the populous[17]. These views should subsequently be reflected onto the political through a process of communicative power. Yet, the presence of inequality muddies up the process. As Dahlberg notes[18], Habermas does not fully account for the power relations introduced by corporate involvement in the media, which has only become stronger over time. In the contemporary setting, mass media are typically run by the corporations, who

[16] John G. Bullock, "Partisan bias and the Bayesian ideal in the study of public opinion," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (2009): 1109-1124.

[17] "Jürgen Habermas," James Bohman and William Rehg, last substantive revision August 4, 2014, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/habermas/.

[18] Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Internet, deliberative democracy, and power: Radicalizing the public sphere," *International journal of media & cultural politics* 3, no. 1 (2007): 52.

may subsequently be motivated to overrepresent the views of their wealthy owners. The overall effect of this would be that politicians will perceive relevant issues in a way that is biased in favor of this social group. As a result, views from the public sphere may not be accurately translated into political action.

Finally, one can see how all of this would complicate the legislative ability to address corruption. Afterall, it is especially wealthy individuals who benefit from the political corruption discussed in this paper. It is also these individuals, who have a great deal of influence over politicians, as illustrated above. Therefore, politicians may be nudged to underestimate the need to address different subtle forms of corruption. Subsequently, largescale corruption may go on despite its perception as one of the most crucial political issues[19]. Nyberg[20] describes this process in in a rather poignant manner. The analysis suggests that corporations have an increasing influence over all forms of public discourse, and through this influence also entrench their position in the system. Simultaneously, related to public choice theory, the iron law of institutions indicates that politicians are predominantly interested in maintaining their power within the system. Other outcomes such as the success of the system become secondary[21]. Therefore, seeing the interaction of these two processes, one can gain some insight into the difficulty to address corruption. Corporations have an embedded role in the system and politicians go along to assure career stability.

Elite Unresponsiveness and Populism

As the two prior sections bring to light, systemic corruption finds several mechanisms to sustain itself despite public frustration. It is this misalignment that could very well play a formative role in the appeal of populism. As perceived legislative progress on issues that people care about remains negligeable, frustration emerges leading to an increased vote share for populist

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[19] "Poll: Voters list a corrupt political establishment as a 'big problem' over healthcare, gun violence," The Hill, published May 9, 2019, https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/499771-poll-voters-list-a-corrupt-political-establishment-as-a-bigger.
[20] Nyberg, *Corporate Political Activities*, 11.
[21] "Iron law of institutions," Academic, last modified 2010, https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/11159672.

parties. These parties appeal to these unsatisfied voters by adopting the allegedly ignored positions, while also utilizing relevant rhetoric relating to direct democracy and unresponsive elites. In reality, systemic corruption goes beyond elected bodies, making the fulfillment of more ambitious promises unlikely. Yet, it is the perception that mostly matters to these disillusioned voters.

Furthermore, while they are somewhat overlooked in philosophical literature, economic undercurrents also play an instrumental role in the rise of this populist discontent. More specifically, though there may always be some baseline dissatisfaction with unaddressed corruption, inherent economic reasons can abruptly increase its salience[22]. When individuals see the economy as not working in their favor, this will send them searching for an answer. Here, populism may be appealing since it is viewed as something different from the conventional style of politics that has led to the current flawed state of affairs. Although corruption may have a relevant role in enabling the disadvantage of populist voters, reality is more difficult. In the end, populists can try to gain legitimacy by using corruption as an inflated catchall scapegoat.

These economic sources of discontent may relate to asymmetric economic growth and its neglect by politicians. While globalization, automation and other systemic changes over the past 70 years have resulted in economic growth, the effects have not been the same across the economy. Increasing benefits for higher income groups have been mirrored by declining opportunities for the working class, at least in the context of developed economies. This is a generally recognized fact and one that politicians are most likely aware of at a conscious level[23]. However, acknowledging an issue and appreciating the extent of its urgency are not the same. While this inequality may mean that the individual faces an existential crisis, the politician will lack the same urgency in addressing the problem.

Ultimately, the suspected increasing similarity between established political parties leads to populism being seen as the only answer. There is a certain perception that large dominant

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[22] William A. Galston, "The populist challenge to liberal democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).
[23] Ibid.

political parties on the center-left and center-right are becoming increasingly similar over time resulting in a decrease in proper representation. Mouffe suggests that this started with Margret Thatcher and spread around the Western world in the form of hyper-individualist Neoliberalism[24]. Notably, the process took place not only with right-wing parties but also left-wing parties, who now embraced accelerated globalization at the cost of tackling inequality[25]. If this homogenization actually occurred, there would be definite consequences for the ability of politicians to respond to societal concerns. Elections can be considered as a means of representing the people, but this convergence will see largely similar governments emerging regardless of outcome. In-fact, there may be some intention behind this. As suggested previously, multinational corporations are gaining more power in the system over time. However, it is also those corporations that particularly benefit from this inert individualist political culture. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that they may be encouraging these developments through strategic support of candidates[26].

The Flaws of Current Populist Alternatives

The discussion above suggests the need to enable an alternative style of politics in order to address corrupt, and populism seemingly fits the bill. Yet, the past would indicate the limits of this approach. Conventional populism is not likely to represent the populous any better than liberal democracy, on the contrary. As noted by Galston[27], the term "illiberal democracy" may be fitting. Illiberal democracy presents a system of government where elections are held, while other liberties may be further restricted. Populists transform the system in their favor and likely decrease representation in the process. Hungary serves as a prime example of such transformation. The last decade has seen Orban politicizing government agencies meant to hold the government accountable and clamping down on freedom of speech. Using populist argumentation, this should allow for more streamlined policy implementation of the will of the

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[24] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso Books, 2018).
[25] Michael J. Sandel, "Populism, liberalism, and democracy," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 4 (2018).
[26] Nyberg, *Corporate Political Activities*, 4.
[27] Galston, *Populist Challenge*, 7.

people[28]. However, Orban has taken advantage of this change and corruption has seen a sharp increase in the country ever since his initial victory[29].

Furthermore, even though certain democratizing aspects of populism may be adopted under populist leadership, these ultimately only serve to benefit the specific populist party in charge. For example, consider the practical application of direct democracy, which populists all over Europe consider as a cornerstone of proper representation[30]. Although Hungary's populist government does use referenda, these are enacted top down rather than bottom up. As such, they are mostly used to highlight support for parts of government policy that are popular with the wider public [31]. As a result, referenda only serve as a means justify certain government policy using the electorate. At the same time, referenda cannot restrict the government's unpopular policies as would be the case in Switzerland, which is otherwise held up as a guiding example by populists. This can be seen as a part of the overall centralization of the Hungarian political structure over the course of Orban's rule[32].

Finally, once more considering the latent economic sources of discontent, the flaws of current populist parties become apparent. The question remains whether they would necessarily have any solutions to these difficult concerns or even wish to find them. Instead, they may simply feel content focusing on the symptom while ignoring the disease, so to say. For example, putting up a show on immigration is significantly less complicated than addressing systemic economic inequality. More importantly, the presence of these hidden problems and the reactionary nature of the electorate typically play an instrumental role in the populist's electoral success[33]. As such, it would be beneficial for the populist to maintain the same

[28] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 81

[29] "Transparency International Corruption Index: Hungary Ranks Second Worst in EU," Hungary Today, posted on January 27, 2022, https://hungarytoday.hu/transparency-international-corruption-index-hungary-ranks-second-worst-eu/.

[30] Steffen Mohrenberg, Robert A. Huber, and Tina Freyburg, "Love at first sight? Populist attitudes and support for direct democracy," *Party Politics* 27, no. 3 (2021): 530.

[31] Lilia Ilikova and Andrey Tushev, "Right-Wing Populism in Central Europe: Hungarian Case (Fidesz, Jobbik)," *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana* 25, no. 12 (2020).

[32] Noemi Lendvai-Bainton and Dorota Szelewa, "Governing new authoritarianism: Populism, nationalism and radical welfare reforms in Hungary and Poland," *Social Policy & Administration* 55, no. 4 (2021): 564.

[33] James Dennison and Andrew Geddes, "A rising tide? The salience of immigration and the rise of anti-immigration political parties in Western Europe," *The political quarterly* 90, no. 1 (2019).

property distribution as before their rise to power. Through this negligible difference on key underling issues, populism could simply be seen as a form of "authoritarian neoliberalism"[34].

As this Chapter suggests, liberal democracy in its current form fails to address corruption, and in doing so enables the very worst kinds of populism. Instead, for populism to properly represent the people and find the necessary solutions, it will need to change at its core. As expressed by Mouffe, what ends up as the dominant form of populism may either weaken or strengthen democracy[35].

Chapter III: Dampening Corruption through Democratic Reform

The previous Chapter set the stage by outlining systemic incentives that complicate efforts to address corruption. Mouffe's agonistic democracy will now be introduced as a potential means to tackle some of these issues. First, basic concepts of agonistics will be introduced, which will be followed by an argument applying these concepts to corruption and a relevant case example. By relating agonistic democracy to corruption and comparing it to conventional populism, the argument will be made for it as a valuable theoretical tool against corruption.

De-Normalizing Perceptions of Corruption?

In their cultural critique, Adorno & Horkheimer (A&H) present a framework of modern individualized society that could prove useful as background for the following analysis. They see the modern culture industry as aimed at instilling a widespread universal mindset characterized by capitalist individualism and an acceptance of the status quo[36]. This is done by transforming culture into mere entertainment by presenting the "same everyday world as paradise"[37] rather

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[34] Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, *New Authoritarianism*, 562.
[35] Mouffe, *Left Populism*, 42.
[36] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Noeri Gunzelin Schmid, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002).
[37] Ibid., 113.

than empowering the imaginations of the masses to think of alternatives. Thus, society remains continuously stiffened with the same options. These options are all deeply capitalist at heart, much to the dismay of Marxists like A&H[38]. This situation also means that a continuous pursuit of material possessions takes a prime role in society. Not only that but it would appear that recent developments in globalization have made these forces more widespread since the days of A&H[39].

Consequently, the above-mentioned theory can provide valuable insights for voting in the presence of corruption using a hypothetical model. As suggested previously, there is good reason to believe that voters care about corruption. Yet, in elections individual issues are not what is at stake. Instead, voters are effectively forced to strategically choose between issue packages. Their choice likely depends on personal utility even more so than with the previous example of the politician, based on the individualist culture painted by A&H. More importantly, the overvaluing of materialist goods could be pivotal[40]. As possessions are overvalued in the calculation of expected utility for different voting options, status quo bias could emerge as more anti-establishment possibilities would pose more risk to material possession. It is also these anti-establishment options, which would place the most stress on the issue of corruption. Yet, their simultaneous uncertainty reduces the appeal to the voter as possible societal benefits take a secondary position.

In their critique, A&H help to identify several valid issues, despite present criticism of their ideas. In particular, Gunster[41] highlights how their framework is often viewed as too simple to capture the complexities of reality. Still, he then stresses the value of individual components of the underlying theory, which are also the most relevant for the purposes of this essay. In particular, they underscore why people's mindsets will have to expand in their ability to appreciate new radical responses to contentious issues such as corruption. It is here that Mouffe's brand of populism could play a key role.

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[38] Ibid., 116.
[39] Mouffe, *Left Populism*, 10.
[40] Ibid., 117.
[41] Shane Gunster, "Revisiting the culture industry thesis: Mass culture and the commodity form," *Cultural Critique* 45 (2000): 41.

Radicalizing Democracy

Chantal Mouffe presents a framework for imagining populism within liberal democracy that in theory accounts for many of the mentioned flaws. Most importantly, she recognizes the need for agonistic confrontation to occur on all possible issues. This means that the often-neglected emotional part of politics is allowed to come to the surface as individuals take on identities corresponding to their various political opinions. Then empowered debate can occur on the issues in a more decentralized manner. Despite this decentralization, this debate follows rules to guide it towards concrete resolutions. These include, for example, respecting one's ideological opponents. Ultimately, agonistic democracy may be a valuable tool against corruption as it introduces new systemic processes to dampen the influence of corruption in its ever-evolving forms.

However, agonistics still remains an attempt to rescue liberal democracy from itself. Mouffe interprets modern protest movements as calling "for a radicalization, not a rejection, of liberal democratic institutions"[42]. It is necessary to allow different issues into public discourse in order to avoid a situation where demagogues can gain influence by representing these overlooked issues. The significance can be seen with the titular issue of corruption in particular. In contrast to conventional populism, an agonistic approach would see citizen groups forming to promote the issue in public discourse. Specifically, the aim would be to gradually empower people rather than a leader to find a solution to the problem. As such, the central demagogue who would otherwise eventually subvert liberal democracy is no longer necessary for popular movements to make progress.

In-fact, Mouffe paints a critical picture of today's Western politics as exhibiting signs of "post democracy," in the limits it imposes on discussing certain issues. This is why agonistic democracy is necessary to revive the "struggle between different projects of society"[43]. Otherwise, liberal democracy will be reduced to its liberal aspect while democracy is left

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[42] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London, UK: Verso, 2013), XVII.
[43] Mouffe, *Left Populism*, 15.

behind. Such a system assumes universality on some issues, which is actually largely based on power relations. In other words, the idea of agonistic democracy rejects the notion of consensus on any issue and lends at least some legitimacy to the always present opposing views. In doing so, it differs substantially from conventional populism, which follows a set of policies assumed to represent "the people". Instead, agonism would constantly try to rearticulate the response to, for example, corruption from the bottom up, rather than having the leadership of an anti-corruption party themselves define what the populous believes.

Finally, keeping in mind the mentioned detrimental effect of strategic voting, agonistic politics could also be viewed as conveniently "depackaging" democracy. Although Mouffe overall believes in representative democracy, she also states the need to expand current political structures by experimenting with different forms of non-representative democracy[44]. Additionally, she believes that identity plays a central role in politics. This needs to be recognized and individuals should assemble around specific issue based political identities accordingly. Combining these two ideas reduces the impact of strategic voting as expression of one's political views becomes possible in new forms. The extend of this would depend on the form of non-representative democracy that emerges. Still, it would ultimately help decrease inaction on corruption, as legislative progress on the topic would be less reliant on fringe parties. Instead, it could be influenced more directly by the citizenry.

<u>Empowering the People</u>

At their core, agonistic politics are better able to actually live up to the idea of populism as representing "the people". Mouffe's framework is focused on articulation of what the populous at large believes by finding new ways of open discourse. In this context, "the people" actually includes everyone. Meanwhile, conventional populism typically choses a specific group as "the people" and those outside the group as the enemy. In this, it already limits its abilities to truly allow for a properly inclusive system of representation to emerge.

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[44] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 69.

More specifically, agonistics embody anti-authoritarian characteristics that allow them to curb corruption. Effectively, agonistic democracy promotes the idea of decentralizing power relations and encourages leadership to empower the public rather than centralize power[45]. As such, electoral success will see populists give up powers of office to the public rather than claim new powers on behalf of "the people" as with conventional populism. This also limits the potential for corruption as it typically emerges from the abuse of power. As leaders give up their powers, the scale of corruption will decrease over time. Although corruption at lower levels of power becomes more likely, generally speaking corruption tends to decrease with decentralization due to its increased complexity[46].

Additionally, this interconnected structure of populism decreases reliance on leadership which further discourages corruption within the movement. As suggested earlier, agonistic politics should include a wider movement being actively involved in government matters alongside the elected party leadership. Consequently, the wider movement is able to hold the government accountable if cases of corruption come to the surface. Although Mouffe does not provide a specific ideal form of public engagement, this could include, for example, civilian councils that reprimand politicians. In this regard, the decentralized structure of agonistic democracy is also a benefit as the movement becomes less dependent on certain individuals remaining in power. Instead, higher flexibility is enabled instilling a more wary attitude in politicians, thus further reducing the chances of corruption. In contrast, the partisan attitudes towards corruption within conventional populism pose an issue in addressing it. Specifically, corrupt populists can divert attention towards their imagined battle with the international elite. For example, voters of Poland's ruling populist party PiS appear to accept corruption within their party as a necessary sacrifice to fix a broken system[47].

Mouffe's agonistic democracy is also able to prosper in terms of application due to its explicitly stated distinction from "antagonism proper"[48]. Antagonism views political opponents as

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[45] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 74.
[46] Raymond Fisman and Roberta Gatti, "Decentralization and corruption: evidence across countries," *Journal of public economics* 83, no. 3 (2002).
[47] Mendilow, *Populism and Corruption*, 16.
[48] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 139

enemies and conflicts as having no solutions. The outcomes of such a view are rather dire, as conflicts will continue indefinitely without resolution. Meanwhile, agonistics is presented as a more sustainable approach to antagonism. Here, political opponents are just "adversaries" and approach each other with an open mind. Most importantly, toleration of the adversary's views allows for some type of resolution based on preset rules. This increased stability would help agonism generally appeal to a wider portion of the public as a form of radical democracy. Moreover, it also presents more potential for politics to begin to address corruption as it empowers the passing of contentious solutions.

Not Just Protest

Understanding how Mouffe's agonistics incorporates elements of protest into political structures can help highlight the beneficial mechanisms it introduces. Regular protest could be seen as simply functioning within the contemporary individualistic context of liberal democracy, where individuals with similar views come together to advocate for these views. However, Mouffe's framework requires deeper engagement from participants that goes beyond just groups trying to persuade others of their opinion[49]. Instead, mutual respect and a general empowerment of discourse can advance development on contested topics. Although conflict continues indefinitely, there is also acceptance of the opponent's success. In some ways, this potential for resolution, while still maintaining active dissensus, highlights the benefits of such de-individualized discourse. Singer[50] finds an applicable way of interpreting the key role of power relations here. They are a force preventing correct understanding between different social groups. As such, better overall understanding is facilitated by breaking them up, but it will also lead to this healthy constant state dissensus.

In contrast to some protest theories, Mouffe also imagines an agonistic countermovement as cultivating various channels of expression in an attempt to articulate public opinion. This actively includes not only the protesters, but also. for example, politicians and artists. In-fact,

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[49] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 9
[50] Brian CJ. Singer, "Populism and the separation of power and knowledge," *Thesis Eleven* 164, no. 1 (2021).

Mouffe would very much agree with A&H on the key role of artists in helping to articulate people's views and bring out their latent desires[51]. As people's mindsets expand, discourse on a given topic can better represent their true desires. This can be compared to Judith Butler, who puts into the forefront "bodies in their plurality lay[ing] claim to the public"[52] as constituting a movement. Butler focuses on individuals simply making themselves heard, while Mouffe tries to maximize the possibility of arriving at new possible solutions altogether. Yet again, this places into perspective the importance that articulation plays in agonistics.

The more distinguishing feature of agonistics is the interconnected role of politicians and a wider movement. Mouffe reflects on purely extra-parliamentary political movements such as Occupy and notes their limited impact. Subsequent comparisons with similar movements in Latin America suggest the benefit of more complex framework including both elected leadership and a wider movement connected to it. This is substantially different from typical forms of Western populism. The role of the movement is not only to bring a leader to power, but also to shape their rule. Consequently, political outcomes can better reflect the actual opinions of the wider public as they remain actively involved and can more directly promote anti-corruption action within parliament.

This organization of agonistic democracy also reflects its anti-utopian views. Mouffe views utopia as a pipedream, that cannot be realistically achieved[53]. In its place, a situation of constant political conflict and rearticulation should be maintained. This is a strict contrast to conventional populism, which envisions a specified utopia as the desired end goal of its project. Mouffe would find this unrealistic as there will always be those who disagree with aspects of utopia and are left out once it is established. In-fact, this could be related to the current state of affairs. Although society is far from utopia, as Mouffe suggests, universality is simply assumed with certain issues. However, this universality can be deceptive and a mere by-product of power relations. A true utopia would just be more of the same. For example, what if the

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[51] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 84.
[52] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 71.
[53] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, XI

architects of a hypothetical utopia permitted corruption as a necessary evil? Should questioning their logic become impossible?

Success with Radical Democracy?

One does not have to go far for an example in support of agonistic intervention as an effective tool against corruption. Specifically, the changing attitudes towards corruption in its most direct form, bribery, may be considered. Originally, acknowledging bribery in international trade used to be a taboo topic until not too long ago with very little interest in addressing it within government circles[54]. Not only did organizations such as the IMF tolerate the presence of bribery, but some economists even argued for its general benefits. The tide turned when the US openly recognized the extent of the problem to the dismay of the international community. Within a few years, different elements of civil society gradually mobilized and decided to call out politicians for ignoring the issue. The ensuing coordinated movement dragged it out of the shadows, and practical action on the subject became a realistic possibility. Perhaps some parallels can be made between this example and the potential for agonistic politics as a tool against systemic corruption.

Firstly, the starting point with international bribery was somewhat similar. It was accepted as an established component of international trade and debate on the subject was limited due to the influence of those benefiting from it. This could be related to the current state of wider systemic corruption, where subtle forms are allowed to go on, if they follow certain rules. Meanwhile, measures to address them are not seen as necessary due to their general acceptance within the system by those close to the levers of power[55]. Although the public may be generally concerned, there is less awareness about what specific changes must occur.

Secondly, the example shows that tackling corruption also requires the active participation of the public. Until wider debate on the topic broke out, the status quo prevailed. Moreover,

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[54] John Brademas and Fritz Heimann, "Tackling international corruption: no longer taboo," *Foreign affairs* 77, no. 5 (1998).
[55] Nyberg, *Corporate Political Activities*, 11.

public interest advanced discourse through several mechanisms, including more journalistic reporting on the topic, which then only raised public interest further. This could be interpreted as a personification of the multi-layered process promoted by Mouffe. The journalist takes on the role of the artist helping to articulate desires of the public by presenting stylized facts[56]. However, they are also influenced by the public as it guides the direction of their reporting.

Yet still, it was ultimately the efforts of the US combined with this public interest that elicited action. Initially, the US alone campaigned international bodies to crack down on bribery, but their efforts required the involvement of the public. This is similar to Mouffe's ideal for protest movements, which should include both political parliamentary elements and extra-parliamentary protest elements[57]. Each side plays an indispensable role in the process. The relative success of a similar strategy with bribery suggests some potential for more complex types of corruption.

As a final note, the comparison is not perfect. Notably, the scope of intervention was rather limited with other forms of corruption remaining in place. In-fact, the US may have been motivated in rooting out bribery specifically due to their increased level of influence in terms of more subtle corporate corruption[58]. Yet, the example still highlights relevant mechanisms for the topic of this paper.

Notable Criticisms of Mouffe

Elaborating on some criticisms of Mouffe's agonistics may allow for a more robust understanding of its benefits. For example, Davis[59] suggests that agonistics does not actually resolve any issues. Instead, it just results in a constant flux of conflict that will lead to the same undecided outcomes each time. Yet, this may be neglecting the creative implications of agonistics as articulation helps the populous at large embrace new solutions. This means that

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[56] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 98.
[57] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 127.
[58] Nyberg, *Corporate Political Activities*, 14.
[59] Diane D. Davis, "Agonizing [With] Chantal Mouffe," *JAC* 19, no. 3 (1999).

the flux would change over time, where issues such as corruption and their solutions become better understood by the masses. Furthermore, the criticism could be seen as more of a question of execution. However, Mouffe herself acknowledges that some experimentation would still be required in this area.

Similarly, Aytac[60] questions whether Mouffe does not politicize too many issues and in the process enable conspiracies. This is a criticism shared with conventional populism, but Mouffe also enables further discourse on different topics as opposed to the more rigid conspiracies of conventional populism. Still, this is a more passable criticism as it focuses on parts of agonistics, where Mouffe leaves critical room for interpretation. Aytac suggests solving the issue by implementing hypothetical thresholds and avoiding discussion on opinions surpassing these thresholds. Although one can see the reasoning due to the harm of conspiracies, it would be pertinent to avoid the influence of power relations in establishing any threshold. Otherwise, this change would challenge the entire point of agonistics.

In contrast, Hilmer[61] criticizes Mouffe as too conservative due to her analysis of the Occupy movement. At the end of Agonistics (2013)[62], Mouffe uses Occupy as an example of an exclusively extra-parliamentary movement: a model that should generally be avoided. As a rebuttal, Hilmer suggests that Mouffe fails to recognize "the complementary aspects of horizontal protest movements and agonistic democratic theory"[63]. Specifically, they are able to illustrate alternative societal arrangements through this protest. Yet, this criticism may be exaggerating Mouffe's dismissal of Occupy. Instead, Mouffe's comments could be viewed as an attempt to maximize movement impact. Some value could still be attributed to movements like Occupy. However, they are not the ideal means to achieve long-term progress.

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[60] Ugur Aytac, "On the limits of the political: The problem of overly permissive pluralism in Mouffe's agonism," *Constellations* 28, no. 3 (2021).
[61] Jeffrey D. Hilmer, "Chantal Mouffe. Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 61, no. 138 (2014).
[62] Mouffe, *Agonistics,* 112.
[63] Hilmer, *Agonistics*, 83.

In summary, Mouffe's agonistic democracy promotes addressing power relations through decentralized open discourse. Ideally, this will lead to a more accurate articulation of public opinion and its reflection onto political action. In this form, populism could enable progress on corruption legislation by connecting different interest groups in the wider population and empowering them to unify in countering corruption. Nevertheless, some questions remain on the feasibility of adopting such a political system.

Chapter IV: Strong Leadership and the Essential Shortcomings of Populism

In the final thematic Chapter, the focus will initially shift to strong leadership as one characteristic of conventional populism to be discussed in more detail. This will be done to emphasize the practical advantages of conventional populism in terms of its electoral potential, while also pointing out its difficulty to enable legislative progress. Meanwhile, the exact opposite is true for agonistic democracy. Based on the drawbacks of both agonistics and conventional populism, a discussion will follow on finding the ideal form of populism as a practical tool against corruption.

<u>The Leaderless Movement</u>

To begin, the intuitive flaws of strong leadership will be emphasized through its incompatibility with formal theories of populism. After all, it is doubtful whether the hypothetical ideal populist movement would tolerate the presence strong leadership. Although conceptions of populism differ in many ways, the central idea of representing "the people" remains largely consistent[64]. Therefore, if "strong leadership" is conceived of as including higher influence of politicians on guiding the agenda, it may in-fact not be entirely compatible with the populist ideal. This can also be rationalized by imagining strong leadership as establishing new power relations within the movement. Yet, it is precisely power relations that previously posed an issue in using

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[64] Jan-Werner Mueller, "Populism and constitutionalism," in *The Oxford handbook of populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

populism against corruption. As we will see, Rousseau and Mouffe will help us address and deconstruct the specific mechanisms involved.

First, Rousseau's Social Contract is arguably one of the first examples of populism as he generally agrees with leaderless politics, while simultaneously giving a curious role to leaders. Political leaders are referred to as "legislators" and are featured as an essential part of the envisioned system[65]. However, this is due the fact that leaders are meant to lose themselves in their work in order to represent the people. Specifically, "the wise legislator doesn't start by laying down his good laws"[66] and instead investigates the views of the public. As such, despite their importance in the context of Rousseau, leaders exhibit the exact opposite of what would be considered "strong" leadership. They are meant to only serve as a device to channel the opinions of the public into legislation that follows these as close as possible[67]. The legislator is also supported by the public in doing so through a form of direct democracy. However, at the same time Rousseau does not see direct democracy as necessarily making the legislator redundant. Still, weaker leadership is beneficial as it allows for legislation to most accurately reflect public opinion in legislation.

Rousseau's views could also be reflected in the contemporary setting within Mouffe's agonistics. She suggests the presence of excess power relations as a key flaw in political design and that "a sustainable politics will have to challenge the existing structure of power relations"[68]. More importantly, she also insists that "leadership must be constantly subordinated to the multitude"[69], which is similar to Rousseau's support for the public as active participants in politics. However, unlike Rousseau, Mouffe does not facilitate this with direct democracy. Instead, she stresses the need to have a more politically aware public as a part of the solution. This is to allow for deeper representation to take place through the establishment of new delegate bodies that directly engage with the public[70]. Simultaneously, agonistics

[65] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* eds., Jonathan Bennett, (Early Modern Texts: 2017), 20, https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/rousseau1762.pdf.
[66] Ibid., 22.
[67] Ibid., 32
[68] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 63.
[69] Mouffe, *Left Populism*, 31
[70] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 70.

acknowledges the fact that the ideal political system may differ between cultures[71]. As such, while Mouffe does appear to favor increased public involvement through empowered citizen councils, this is only one option. Perhaps it is possible that this subjectivity would even reinforce the idea of strong leadership in non-Western cultures that favor paternalism in politics.

Leadership as Enabling Electoral Success?

A failure of some populist movements can come down to their rigid portrayal of "the people". This is a key concept of populism. Not only that, but the typical twist describes "the people" as being oppressed by whoever the populists identify as the enemy. Such a combative attitude and a claim to represent the true "silent majority" can give rise to a feeling of inflated self-justification within the movement[72]. This is also a somewhat paradoxical feature as it is ultimately a small group of populist leaders trying to claim representation of the population at large[73]. The problem is that this may not always be warranted and ultimately to the detriment of the movement if the party's central issues do not reflect the true feelings of the public. Consequently, populist movements may find it more difficult to achieve wider success due to their unaddressed limited appeal.

Within such a context, the leader can take a central role and formulate a message that achieves electoral success. A movement chooses to highlight parts of their ideology during campaigning, as well as conceal their less popular proposals. The presence of strong leadership is valuable in order to coordinate this agenda in a way to appeal to the wide public. Otherwise, the movement can fail in avoiding dogmatic traps, in the form of controversial policy proposals that lead to their campaign being outright dismissed by the public. The two-time Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and the reactions to his candidacy can be seen exemplifying the crucial function of the leader. During the campaign, he was met with criticism from the left as socialist groups felt that the US progressive mistakenly referred to himself as a democratic

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[71] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 20.
[72] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 84.
[73] Mouffe, *Left Populism*, 31

socialist[74]. For example, his isolationism came under fire as ignoring the struggles of other countries and his general approach was seen as too liberal in nature. However, further analysis can see Sanders as only doing what was necessary to succeed in the notoriously right-leaning US setting[75]. More importantly, his rise to prominence has allowed the US to move to the left on a number of issues, while also further promoting a more decentralized political structure. The question remains whether such progress would be possible without this strategic leadership on the side of Sanders.

Leaders as Keepers of Stability

Another issue of populist movements is that they may fracture internally due to their dogmatic nature. As populists tend to have fairly strong opinions, the presence of small disagreements can cause notable friction. Ultimately, this can lead to serious conflict and even the eventual split of the movement, unless it is properly addressed[76]. Not only that but this instability will also harm the movement's likelihood of success. First, it may draw suspicion from potential members and divert them towards more stable alternatives. Second, as movements split up, their chances of electoral success also decrease. This may for example relate to the attention each movement receives in the media as well as the electoral system consequences of being a smaller party.

Once more, strong leadership is seemingly beneficial in this case in its unifying ability. In contrast to other members, the leader draws authority, for example, from their experience or current political appointments. This authority is based on such rational reasons as well as ones relating to an abstract aura within the movement[77]. Leaders are able to prevent any potentially movement-shattering disagreements using this authority. Over time, this unifying power of the leaders increases with their importance[78]. In doing so, they are able to further become

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[74] Judson C. Abraham, "The 2016 Bernie Sanders Campaign: American Socialist Populism." *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 29, (July 2020): 75.
[75] Ibid., 77.
[76] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 53.
[77] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 110.
[78] Francisco Panizza, *Populism and the mirror of democracy* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2005), 19.

associated with the party and eventually become a central part of its image. In return, the respect that they gain in the party will be able to boost their ability to further counter inter-party opposition.

The Misuse of Leadership

Yet still, these characteristics also introduce new drawbacks as they can distort larger movements and ultimately reduce their ability to effectively fight corruption. As suggested, the elevation of an individual, or group of individuals, to the point where they effectively represent the movement means that they gain a special sense of authority within the movement. Weber[79] identifies a relevant mechanism for this. Individual leaders thrive on charisma, and over time party members begin to get further invested in them. Over time, attacks on the leader become interpreted as attacks on the movement at large and followers are increasingly reluctant to criticize the leader and their choices. This can become problematic depending on the leader's true intentions towards the movement. In some cases, leaders may abuse this attitude and nurture a cult of personality, which is another reviled feature of conventional populism[80]. Such developments can have grave consequences as movements gradually lose their focus on policy as the leader and their image become more intertwined with the party. Consequently, key issues such as corruption are left behind in favor of showmanship politics.

Donald Trump may serve as a prime example of this transformation. Despite his immense wealth, Trump managed to portray himself as the most populist of the candidates in the 2016 Republican primary. The traits of the "wealthy insider-outsider" populist as proposed by Mudde & Kaltwasser[81] could apply. Questioning Trump became more unimaginable with the populist right movement becoming more invested in him. Once in office, failures were blamed on the "deep state" as is typical with populists[82]. More importantly, this imagined battle of Trump

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[79] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78.
[80] Mendilow, *Populism and Corruption*, 20.
[81] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 71.
[82] Yascha Mounk, "Pitchfork politics: The populist threat to liberal democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 31.

against the "deep state" become a critical focal point of his presidency as the party centered all attention on Trump. This had severe consequences as different inter-party movements that preceded Trump such as the Tea party lost their influence. Although the Tea party was also known for theater politics, they at least had a set of policy principles at their core. While it is true that GOP leadership did apply astroturfing tactics to use the Tea party wave against Obama's tax hikes, the grassroots part of the movement still remained in place[83]. Yet, as Trump coopted the Tea Party, these principles were forgotten. Instead, the respective wing of the GOP became keenly focused on defending Trump and his culture war[84]. The example illustrates the ability of the leader and their cult of personality to potentially change a given movement at its core. In doing so, they may also dampen its policy impact. On one hand, this dampening relies on the populist leader, which may place into question its long-term effect, as they will inevitably retire one day. Yet, even a short-term effect can be critical[85].

Interestingly enough, the emergence of authoritarianism may not necessarily be intentional on the part of leaders. Arguably, Bernie Sanders has promoted the decentralization of the political process throughout his career with his 2016 presidential campaign bringing this effort to the national level[86]. However, as Mather and Jefferson[87] suggest, his emergence into the public eye was also accompanied with the rise of left authoritarianism. Although authoritarianism had already been present in some form on the right before 2016, its left variant was rather new. Here, Sanders' political history and democratic consistency could perhaps indicate that this was an inadvertent side effect of his rhetoric. As such, this serves to emphasize the psychologically complex nature of authoritarianism. More importantly, it also highlights the need to constantly nurture active discourse and that political leaders must be willing to play a central role in making sure this takes place.

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[83] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 53.

[84] Fei WU and Xuan LI, "The Ideology of Trumpism and White Supremacy in the Post-globalization Geo-political Struggling," *International Relations* 8, no. 12 (2020): 510

[85] Ibid.

[86] Inger-Marie Schjønberg, "My heart is in Burlington: the US socialist senator: a biographical analysis on Bernard "Bernie" Sanders and his road to the US Senate 2006." (Master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2010), 69.

[87] Robert D. Mather and Kurt W. Jefferson. "The authoritarian voter? The psychology and values of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders support," *Journal of Scientific Psychology* (2016): 1.

Identity Issues

This process of party authoritarianism may be interpreted using the mishandling of "identity" as recognized by Mouffe. She suggests that individuals should cultivate an issue based political identity to be used in engaging with others in a political setting[88]. It is not about creating political identities as much as acknowledging those already there that are being ignored to the detriment of discourse. This is significant as Trump precisely misused identity in order to initially gain support. In particular, he appealed to the lack of identity that voters felt in an ever-changing world[89]. Then he transformed this into the above described self-centered and xenophobic brand, which engulfed a substantial part of the GOP. This is another variation of the beforementioned cult of personality where association with the movement and other followers becomes key to members as it satisfies a lost sense of belonging. Such a turn of events could perhaps be avoided in the presence of agonistic democracy. As individuals nurture political identities and practice them in a decentralized political setting, there would be less need to center issue-based movements on figures like Trump. Mouffe even identifies these personality-based populist movements as the consequence of a flawed political structure: "when institutional channels do not exist for antagonisms to be expressed in an agonistic way, they are likely to explode into violence"[90]. As such, allowing for proper agonistic confrontation may be necessary before in order to prevent further escalation.

The consequences of politicians misusing identity can be considerable. For example, coming back to corruption, the evolution of Trump and his supporters highlights the need to reduce the impact of identity within politics. Initially, Trump was very much critical of corrupt politicians and used their corruption to his advantage. However, Trump himself became even more corrupt once in office to little criticism from his base[91]. Among other things, this could be linked

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[88] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 5.
[89]. "Trump and the Revolt of the Rust Belt," Michael McQuarrie, posted November 11, 2016, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/69123.
[90] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 122.
[91] Philip Zelikow, Eric Edelman, Kristofer Harrison, and Celeste Ward Gventer. "The rise of strategic corruption." *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2020): 110.

to people's innate bias against admitting that they were wrong. However, Beinart[92] suggests a more subtle interpretation. In stressing social issues, Trump was able to subliminally move the classification of corruption from the political to the moral in the minds of his supporters. As such, his political corruption was ignored by the base, as he is seen as preventing wider moral corruption of society. In contrast, the hypothetical agonistic setting would bring the benefit of discussing corruption in a more concentrated systematic manner, disconnected from particular politicians. In doing so, such instances of manipulation could be avoided.

The above outcomes can be linked to the differing application of partisanship between Mouffe's agonistics and conventional populism. Afterall, both support it in some form. First, Mouffe recognizes that partisanship is an inevitable part of politics through identity as there is always the "we" as well as the "they"[93]. Yet, partisan confrontation in agonistics is more logical following a systematic set of rules in arguing policy. In doing so, it attempts to bring order to this unavoidable disorder. Conversely, conventional populism fuels a very much different partisanship. It could be seen as fitting Mouffe's definition of "antagonism" in its uncompromising way[94]. Therefore, the stated downsides of antagonism apply. Effectively, it does not allow the reaching of conclusions and the impasse that it creates can even lead to the breakdown of the political system.

From Flaws to Success?

Finally, it could be said that it is the flaws of populism that typically enable its success in a real-world setting[95]. Populists tap into an overlooked ideological vein in order to gain power. They do so by defining a very specific "the people" and everyone else as an enemy[96], propping up the ensuing rhetorical battle of these two imagined groups. As such, this process is also rather emotional in nature, and this emotion can be used as a gaslighting tool by the populist. It allows

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[92] "Why Trump Supporters Believe He Is Not Corrupt," Peter Beinart, published Aug 22, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/what-trumps-supporters-think-of-corruption/568147/.

[93] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 45.

[94] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 130.

[95] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 99.

[96] Mueller, *Populism and constitutionalism*.

them to center the party away from policy and in favor of antagonistic partisanship[97]. It may even be said that this antagonism creates a new identity of sorts as recognized by Mouffe[98]. This identity is facilitated by the strong populist leader and in doing so they play a key role in the electoral success of the movement. Yet, their increased influence also tends to reduce the representation of "the people", while curtailing the efforts of other more issue-based movements. Among other, this is done by increasing the importance of the leader in the movement over time. Such traits make it difficult for conventional populism to effectively address corruption[99] and most pressing political issues.

Consequently, one may wonder about the potential electoral success of a populist movement based around agonistic democracy. Yet, as Mouffe's ideas vary substantially from conventional populism, it lacks the same type of triggers that have enabled recent decisive victories of populists around the world. Instead, an agonistic movement would focus predominantly on a democratizing process, which may not appear as appealing to the typical reactionary populist voter. Still, it could be said that some precedent exists. For example, the populist movements in late 1980s Eastern Europe were rather successful in maintaining a version of populism that avoided many of its typical pitfalls while promoting democracy[100]. Although they mostly served as a short-term transition from totalitarianism, perhaps this is exactly what would be necessary to implement agonistics. Of course, although there may be a democratic deficit in the modern Western world, this is far from the scale of Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Therefore, the same sense of urgency to empower a comparable widescale democratizing movement may not exist among the general public.

Considering the theoretical and practical tensions between these two types of populism, it's inevitable difficulty to address corruption becomes apparent. In-fact, the two are effectively the opposite of one another. On one hand, conventional populist movements can be abused by authoritarians and easily lose focus on core issues such as corruption. On the other hand, a

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[97] Mendilow, *Populism and Corruption*. 22.
[98] Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 141.
[99] Yahong Zhang, "Corruption: Challenges of Anti-Corruption in the US," *Public Integrity* 22, no. 3 (2020): 302.
[100] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 36.

movement that places democratic reform at the center could be better able to address corruption, but the electoral success of such a movement may be difficult as the benefits would remain too abstract for the typical populist voter. This may be why politicians such as Bernie Sanders focus their political campaigns on popular policy, while indirectly promoting decentralization of democracy. Perhaps, carefully guided incrementalism is the way for the eventual success of agonistic democracy in some form, which will then allow for more appropriate articulation of anti-corruption policy.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Throughout the paper, the redeeming characteristics of populism were explored. The analysis focused on corruption as a key issue and an indicator of potential success. After an overview of the hypothetical political incentive structure enabling corruption, including the inadequacy of conventional populism as a response, this paper argued that Mouffe's agonistic democracy was a more fitting alternative because of its representational capabilities. Nevertheless, the presence of strong leadership as a feature typical of populism in a practical context complicates the story due to its irreplaceable central role and simultaneous drawbacks.

In conclusion, the potential success of populism as a tool against corruption depends on the form it takes. Based on the analysis, populism functions best when it is focused on facilitating the accurate articulation of public views. The issue is that its conventional ideologically charged variant can easily miss this goal. This distinction is especially notable with corruption, where the ideal version of populism succeeds in constraining it, while its conventional version may actually enable it by allowing for antagonism. This would point towards populism focused on democratic representation as the only one worth pursuing, but there is reason to suspect that this would gain the least electoral support. Therefore, in order to effectively promote progress, populist movements may need to balance gradual systemic democratization, and simultaneously strategically lean into some characteristics of conventional populism. In the long

run, such an approach can help introduce new ways to constantly counter systemic corruption in all of its current and future forms.

As part of this process, several key characteristics should be eventually introduced as this hypothetical movement continues to inch towards its goal of improved representation. At its core, agonistic democracy is about addressing power relations, which are seen as exacerbating many current issues. The influence of power relations could be reduced by a general empowerment of discourse and further democratization of the political process. In practical terms, political movements should adopt a structure that incorporates both parliamentary elements and the broader movement. By including artists and the wider public in the discussions, it becomes possible for new solutions to emerge. In addition to this engagement, it is key for respective movements to concentrate on the issues, while simultaneously maintaining connection and mutual respect with rival ideologies. Doing so will help avoid antagonism and facilitate concrete legislative solutions to contentious problems. The ability to do so sets agonistics apart not only from conventional populism but also traditional liberal democracy in its ability to articulate a response to today's most pressing issues.

Finally, the findings of this paper could be expanded to other topics beyond corruption. Of course, all issues have a different perception in the public sphere, and this can lead to a vastly different relationship with populism. For example, climate change is another area where systemic forces exist to limit legislative progress on a critical topic. Large corporations encourage this inaction as large profits are made in the current system, while moving to a green economy would be accompanied with notable uncertainty. Although the topic is somewhat linked to corruption, climate change significantly differs in its public perception. In this case, there is more behavioral inertia on the side of the public due to perceived necessary sacrifices to reach a green economy. As such, it would make a perfect extension to investigate the effectiveness of agonistic democracy in situations, where public opinion does not coincide with the public's best interest.

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