

Democracy and Community: Exploring a Contested Link in Light of the Populist Resurgence

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INTRODUCTION

The appeal to a community unified by a strong collective identity and a menacing notion of the outside “other” has become a driving force in the resurgence of right-wing populism. While populism lacks a coherent ideological core, the reference to a community of a virtuous people pitted against the elite is a defining feature of its mobilizing efforts.¹ The mass rallies of right-wing populists provide a tangible sense of how the image of a homogenous community frames political grievances and fuels anger. The affective and immediate appeal to the community of ordinary people has been instrumental in challenging the procedural practice of liberal democracy.

The populist appropriation of community as a foundational element of this actor’s political identity raises questions about the conceptual link between community and democracy. Is populism’s reliance on mobilizing a communal identity simply a reiteration of the regressive nationalist ideology, or does it bring to the fore legitimate questions about the current state of democracy? Does the plea for renewing democratic practices in the public sphere need to develop a more robust understanding of how the infrastructure and resources of the community facilitate civic engagement? In other words, does the effective evocation of community by populists provide lessons when considering the future of democracy in an emancipatory key?

Against the background of the populist surge in Western democracies, this chapter has two objectives. First, it will explore the link between democracy and community from a theoretical perspective, arguing that a vibrant democratic

I would like to acknowledge that this chapter draws on research supported by the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada*. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to the *Hamburg Institute for Advanced Study* where I had the privilege of being a fellow while completing this text.

¹ Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style,” *Political Studies* 62, no. 2 (2014): 381–97.

practice that is appropriate for the challenges of the twenty-first century is indeed reliant on a substantial, functionally and procedurally pertinent sense of communal existence and shared collective identity. In this respect, the chapter alludes to how the growing emphasis on individual rights and cosmopolitan values has overshadowed the constitutive role of the community in which citizens interact as a *zoon politikon* (political animal). Second, the chapter describes how the center-left has gradually abandoned its underlying sense of a collective identity rooted in community-based political ideas and social practices. In this regard, I interpret the resurgence of right-wing populism also as a reaction to the advancing disintegration of those community practices and resources that have provided an important dimension of the social infrastructure on which a thriving democracy rests.

First, I explore the strategic use that right-wing populists make of community as a vehicle for promising democratic empowerment understood in terms of a revitalized notion of popular sovereignty. In this context, I discuss how the center-left has largely neglected the pivotal role of community in promoting democratic processes, not least with a view to a common good beyond the neoliberal market model. Second, this chapter provides an inquiry into the link between democracy and community, drawing on the empirical example of a study on Neighbourhood Houses (NHs) in Metro Vancouver. The central hypothesis that I intend to advance based on these theoretically grounded and empirically illustrated arguments is that community-based practices and values could play an essential role in fostering (radical) democracy beyond its current anemic stage.

THE POWERFUL POPULIST REFERENCE TO COMMUNITY: THE PROMISE OF EMPOWERMENT

The invocation of a resilient and continuously reaffirmed sense of the “people” is constitutive for populism. At its core is the claim to represent the vox populi, the “voice of the people” defined by a dramatized contrast to the political elite or establishment.² Populism’s ideological ambiguity³ and popular appeal make this an intellectually fascinating – albeit theoretically challenging – subject of study. The conceptual uncertainty is rooted in the versatility of the claim to represent the interests of ordinary people in a direct and authentic manner. Cas Mudde and Ben Stanley call populism a “thin-centred ideology”⁴ that is qualitatively different from other core political ideas.⁵ Populism is a mode of

² Robert R. Barr, “Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics,” *Party Politics* 15 (2009): 29–48.

³ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, “Conclusion: Populism and Twenty-First Century Western European Democracy,” in *Twenty-First Century Populism*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 217–23.

⁴ See, for example, Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33; and Ben Stanley, “The Thin Ideology of Populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95–110.

⁵ Similarly, see Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

engaging in politics that is not exclusive to a particular ideological position or type of political actor. The form of political engagement – its reliance on direct political action, a strong mobilizing collective identity, and charismatic leadership – is the constitutive mark of populism.⁶

If indeed populism can best be conceptualized as a mode of political mobilization, it is critical to shift the analytical focus on the claims constituting its popular appeal in the current political climate: At the core of right-wing populist political strategy is the reference to the “people” as a collective that is depicted as deprived by the elite with a view to its shared identity and socioeconomic interests.⁷ The charismatic leader regularly claims to articulate the direct “voice of the people,” untamed by procedural rules associated with liberal, rules-based democracy. Given the centrality of the “people” in justifying the populist cause and the mode of conducting politics, populism needs a tangible and emotionally charged sense of the community on which it claims to rely as its *raison d'être*. The rallies and manifestations of populist actors are no coincidental manifestation; they speak directly to the significance attributed to the dramatized depiction of the community of regular people. Populists draw on the sense of unity and cohesion staged at mass gatherings. It is here where the “imagined community” gains a fleeting manifestation; the demos takes on a theatrical existence sanctioning the people and, by virtue of the latter, its populist leader.

It is in this respect that the affinity between right-wing populism and nationalism becomes apparent. The discourses of both revolve around the notion of the sovereignty of “the people.” In the scholarly discussion on comparing the discourses of both, populists are depicted as operating based on a vertical axis pitching ordinary citizens against unresponsive elites, while nationalists are portrayed as promoting a horizontal sense of the people as a politically or culturally bounded community.⁸ Yet, as Brubaker has argued convincingly, these dimensions of invoking the “people” normally intersect in the practice of both political movements.⁹ In populist political narratives, the

⁶ See Moffitt and Tormey, “Rethinking Populism,” 381–97; and Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Populism: Corrective and Threat to Democracy,” in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 205–22.

⁷ Margaret Canovan, “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, eds. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25–44.

⁸ See, for example, Bart Bonikowski et al., “Populism and Nationalism in a Comparative Perspective: A Scholarly Exchange,” *Nations and Nationalism* 25, no. 1 (2019): 58–81; Benjamin De Cleen, “Populism and Nationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 342–62; and Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,” *Javnost: The Public* 24, no. 4 (2017): 301–19.

⁹ Rogers Brubaker, “Populism and Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020): 44–66.

politically potent reference to the “people” points to people as those who have been deprived of their legitimate rights and people as a bounded community whose identity and interests need to be protected and nurtured.¹⁰

For instance, the strong anti-immigrant rhetoric and insistence on (national) borders as the ultimate defense of the sovereign rights of the people regularly shapes the political discourse of nationalists and populists. In this regard, I consider Brubaker’s claim persuasive that “this strict conceptual separation cannot capture the productive ambiguity of populist appeals to ‘the people’, evoking at once plebs, sovereign demos and bounded community.”¹¹ Populists employ the nationalist allure of portraying people united as equals by cultural traits and a shared collective decision-making process. Yet, in the discourse of right-wing populism, the issues of inequality and deprivation are regularly fused with an (often belligerent) notion of the community’s identity and borders.¹²

This collective identity is instrumental in turning the perceived social and cultural marginalization into a vehicle of political protest. Borrowing from nationalist ideologies, yet being far more versatile in staging the defining characteristics of the “people,” populists articulate a yearning for belonging and a romanticized past when this identity was supposed to be pure and untainted. In populist rhetoric, the invoked notion of the people as community is – far from being a territorially, linguistically, or ethnically defined nation – a *chiffre* to direct political anger and frustration. The “Make America Great Again” slogan allows ambiguity in defining a nation’s interests and identity.¹³ Its primary purpose is to fuel a form of agonistic politics whose driving force is the contestation of the status quo.¹⁴

It is worth noting that the versatility and multiplicity with which populists reify the community is instrumental for their political mobilization. What constitutes the community is deliberately left ambiguous, thus allowing the building of broad political coalitions. Using this extensive communal appeal, Donald Trump was able to unite evangelicals, farmers, union representatives, and white voters from the American suburbs. He created a support base wherein the extremely wealthy claim to guard the interests of those who feel disempowered by politics and threatened by socioeconomic change (the latter

¹⁰ See, for example, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Penguin, 2018).

¹¹ Brubaker, “Populism and Nationalism,” 44.

¹² Christian Lamour and Renáta Varga, “The Border as a Resource in Right-Wing Populist Discourse: Viktor Orbán and the Diasporas in a Multi-Scalar Europe,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35, no. 3 (2020): 335–50.

¹³ The Italian Lega provides a similar illustration for this argument. For further discussion see Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, “‘No Regionalism Please, We are Leghisti!’ The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini,” *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (2018): 645–71.

¹⁴ Ilan Kapoor, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? The Relevance of the Habermas-Mouffe Debate for Third World Politics,” *Alternatives* 27, no. 4 (2002): 459–87.

process significantly driven by the very billionaires who assert to be the champions of the ordinary people's cause). To build this coalition, the staged community is deliberately left void of a clear notion of shared interests or political objectives. A general and unifying sense of deprivation and loss of control provides the rationale for claiming to transcend the traditional left–right divide. The notion of community staged by right-wing populists is at the same time horizontally defined by nationality or ethnicity and vertically defined by anti-elitist sentiments. The glue between these two dimensions is regularly provided by the representation of the threatening “other.” This role can be assigned to the external “other” (the immigrant, the refugee) or the domestic “enemy,” the socioeconomic or political elite (the “deep state,” etc.). Both images of the “other” often merge in the anti-Semitic trope of the global Jewish elite as the menacing risk to the well-being of the people.

The German context and the rise of the so-called Alternative for Germany (AfD) party provides a vivid illustration of how nativist rhetorical elements are fused with the anti-elitist political trait: The collective identity based on a clear sense of “Us” (the locals, the Germans) and “Them” (the foreigners, the EU) is critical for the mobilizing efforts of the AfD. This strong collective identity promises to provide a remedy against the experience of social decline or marginalization: pride in the national community and the promise of solidarity based on a nativist identity. Salmela and von Scheve describe how, from a social-psychological perspective, right-wing populists offer a politically effectual strategy to address the fear of social decline and status inconsistency.¹⁵ Their underlying collective identity provides an ideational avenue to transform uncertainty and fear into resentment and hatred toward the perceived enemy of the people.¹⁶ Using the ethnic or cultural “other” as a scapegoat for social ills is as emotionally exhilarating as it is politically shrewd. This reliance on a strong, predominantly ethnocentric Us-versus-Them binary is at the core of many right-wing populist parties. With respect to the German AfD, Rensmann's diagnosis that the political radicalization of the party is not detrimental to its popular appeal points to how central discourses of othering and exclusionary nationalism are to the recent electoral successes of this party.¹⁷

The agonistic politics displayed in this latter sense promises a democratic empowerment of those depicted as deprived and disenfranchised. The

¹⁵ Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve, “Emotional Roots of Right-Wing Political Populism,” *Social Science Information* 56, no. 4 (2017): 567–95.

¹⁶ Bart Bonikowski, “Ethno-Nationalist Populism and the Mobilization of Collective Resentment,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): 181–213.

¹⁷ Lars Rensmann, “Radical Right-Wing Populists in Parliament: Examining the Alternative for Germany in European Context,” *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 3 (2018): 41–73. For further discussion, see Manuela Caiani and Patricia Kroll, “Nationalism and Populism in Radical Right Discourses in Italy and Germany,” *Javnost: The Public* 24 (2017): 336–54; and Oliver Schmidtke, “Politicizing Social Inequality: Competing Narratives from the Alternative for Germany and Left-Wing Movement Stand Up,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (2020): 1–11.

rhetoric of winning back the sovereign rights of the people (in the Germany, the right-wing AfD has appropriated the slogan of the opposition against the GDR regime: “We are the people”) links the plea for radical political change, an agonistic critique of consensus-focused liberalism, with the notion of a cohesive, homogenous community. This chapter does not intend to engage in a discussion about if and in what form this democratic promise of strengthening the sovereign rights of the people is actually kept or betrayed in practice. There have been compelling accounts of how right-wing populism mobilizes and strengthens authoritarian, antipluralistic impulses.¹⁸ In the next section, I will examine why the evocation of a community has played such an important role also in the political mobilization of right-wing populism and how leftist, progressive forces have tended to underestimate this instrumental role of communal ties in promoting radical-democratic reforms.

THE CENTER-LEFT’S LOST SENSE OF COMMUNITY: ABANDONING A NOTION OF THE COMMON GOOD?

The left has a historically well-founded aversion to affective notions of community and its intrinsic reactionary, authoritarian political tendencies. As is evident in the current global resurgence of right-wing populism, the emphasis on the qualities and boundedness of the community tends to promote a form of identity politics wherein rules-based democracy and standards of universal rights are easily compromised or even systematically undermined by nativist ideas. With good reason, commentators have alluded to the “democratic pathology” of populist movements and how it challenges critical elements of liberal democracy.¹⁹

However, it is important to acknowledge how – under the auspices of the New Labour transformation of social democracy – the center-left has undervalued the power the reference to a community can have in terms of nurturing a sense of both the common good and a lived solidarity. Over recent decades the established left has shifted toward a form of politics that is firmly rooted in individual rights and entitlements. In his recent book *The Tyranny of Merit*,²⁰ Michael Sandel presents a scathing critique of what he frames as the meritocratic ideal. Further, it is this ideal that has become the dominant framework on which also the center-left has formulated its responses

¹⁸ Tarik Kochi, “The End of Global Constitutionalism and Rise of Antidemocratic Politics,” *Global Society* 34, no. 4 (2020): 487–506, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1749037>.

¹⁹ Most notably, the independence of political institutions such as the parliamentary or the judiciary system. For further examples, see Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, “Populism versus Democracy,” *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 405–24; and Cas Mudde, “Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Today,” in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Trends*, ed. John Abromeit et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 295–307.

²⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* (New York: MacMillan, 2020).

to the challenges of globalization and rising levels of social inequality.²¹ Sandel focuses on what he describes as a corrosive left-wing individualism:

The solution to problems of globalisation and inequality – and we heard this on both sides of the Atlantic – was that those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to rise as far as their effort and talents will take them. This is what I call in the book the “rhetoric of rising.” It became an article of faith, a seemingly uncontroversial trope. We will make a truly level playing field, it was said by the centre-left, so that everyone has an equal chance. And if we do, and so far as we do, then those who rise by dint of effort, talent, hard work will deserve their place, will have earned it.²²

At the core of Sandel’s book is the claim that meritocracy is corrosive of the common good. Assigning the responsibility and blame for growing social inequality to individuals’ virtues and resources deepens, in his interpretation, the political divide between “winners and losers.” Those who lose out economically or culturally are subjected to a socially sanctioned humiliation as “not trying hard enough.” These animosities in turn fuel the populist anger with established elites. Sandel underlines the significance of the dignity of work and our social understanding of success as ways to reanimate civic life.

One can also interpret his insights with a view to the role of community under consideration here. Under neoliberal guises, the reliance on individual merit has eroded a substantial notion of how citizens are social beings whose well-being is fundamentally shaped by the community of which they are a part. Our political approaches to address deepening forms of social inequality – arguably one of the pivotal drivers of the populist resurgence – are based on ideologies justifying or questioning the legitimacy of these inequalities and injustices. Yet, at the same time, it is a strong notion of community that provides the ideational and social basis for considering the common good and the way individuals should participate in it. The demand for social inclusion presupposes a form of social contract or a notion of the common good that would be difficult to achieve based on individual merit alone.

Patriotism has become tainted by the demand of the populist-nationalist right; its ideological affinity to nativist ideas has made the left shun any of the conceptions and emotions attached to them. Yet, without a substantiated form of fellowship and community, without the experience of practiced solidarity in communal settings, individuals are largely left with the logic of a competitive, market-based meritocracy. Under these circumstances, the value of social equality becomes reduced to a market competition in which individuals ultimately become responsible for their own social status. In contrast, the working-class movement had a strong mobilizing notion of community-based identity and solidarity. The values and practices attached to the common good

²¹ Similarly, see Sheri Berman, “Populism is a Symptom Rather Than a Cause: Democratic Disconnect, the Decline of the Center-Left, and the Rise of Populism in Western Europe,” *Polity* 51 (2019): 654–67; and Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, “Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 5–19.

²² Berman and Snegovaya, “Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy,” 23.

represented in this community were instrumental in spurring its political fight and challenging the logic of capitalist socialization. Without this narrative and communal network, the social-democratic left has gradually lost the ability to provide a voice to those who feel threatened by the global economy and the social changes it has triggered.²³

In a similar vein, Wendy Brown, in her book *Undoing the Demos*, has pointed to the political implications of the neoliberal age.²⁴ Brown demonstrates how the neoliberal logic of economic metrics has subjected all domains of social life to market-based standards, thereby eroding the basis for democratic citizenship. In her interpretation, organizing social life exclusively in a market-based logic corrodes the political imaginary and social-institutional framework that makes democracy work. She establishes the direct link between the dominance of neoliberalism, the erosion of democratic citizenship, and the strengthening of the toxic political debate on which right-wing populism thrives:

As neoliberalism wages war on public goods and the very idea of a public, including citizenship beyond membership, it dramatically thins public life without killing politics. Struggles remain over power, hegemonic values, resources, and future trajectories. This persistence of politics amid the destruction of public life and especially educated public life, combined with the marketization of the political sphere, is part of what makes contemporary politics peculiarly unappealing and toxic – full of ranting and posturing, emptied of intellectual seriousness, pandering to an uneducated and manipulable electorate and a celebrity-and-scandal-hungry corporate media.²⁵

Without community-based standards of justice and entitlements, all that is left is the deepening animosity between social groups. Depriving people of the dignity of work and the recognition that they contribute to the common good paves, in Brown's and Sandel's interpretation, the road toward a society that is deeply divided, both socially and politically. It is worth considering how the impact of COVID-19 has drawn public awareness to the way in which individuals are integrated into and dependent on a net of social relations in the public sphere. For instance, frontline workers in the service industry and the healthcare system have recently been recognized as indispensable for the functioning of our social fabric (including a growing awareness of the vulnerability of this workforce that is constituted in large part by women, migrants, and racialized people²⁶). Around the world, the effectiveness of the response to the global pandemic has been

²³ See Luke March and Cas Mudde, "What's Left of the Radical Left? The European Radical Left After 1989: Decline and Mutation," *Comparative European Politics* 3, no. 1 (2006): 23–49; and Michael McQuarrie, "The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger," *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): 120–52.

²⁴ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

²⁵ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*: 39.

²⁶ See Michael Simpson, "For a Prefigurative Pandemic Politics: Disrupting the Racial Colonial Quarantine," *Political Geography* 84 (2021): 1–3.

critically shaped by how robust the communal response to the crisis was and how much trust there has been in the sense of mutual commitment in this community. In essence, the global pandemic underlines how strongly the vitality of a community and forms of civic engagement are coconstitutive.

THE ENABLING SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

One of the central deficits of liberal democracy is the detachment between the collective decision-making process in the parliamentary system and the democratic engagement of individual citizens. Populists thrive on frustration with the established functioning of democratic institutions and challenge the status quo with the notion of a popular sovereignty that could be restored to the “people.” Yet, at the same time, populists regularly fall short in providing avenues toward a meaningful and substantiated form of civic engagement.²⁷ One significant element in populists’ attempt to promote what it means to reinstall genuine popular sovereignty is the reliance on mass rallies and the turn away from the practices of place-based communities. The appeal for a populist response to the crisis of democracy reflects the loss of trust that many citizens feel toward their ability to govern their communities in a democratic fashion.²⁸

In this section, I focus on the features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. The sociology of (urban) public space and community organizations offers us multifaceted findings on the vital resources that such spaces provide for creating communities rooted in shared civic practices.²⁹ In his recent book *Palaces for the People*, Klinenberg underlines the centrality of a “social infrastructure” as a physical environment that enables the interactions of people in a community.³⁰ As Klinenberg suggests, a robust social infrastructure “fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours.”³¹ The encounters in public spaces and webs of social interactions

²⁷ Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Gregor Fitz, Juergen Mackert, and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, vol. 3, *Migration, Gender and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁹ For further examples, see Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011); Adrian Little, “Community and Radical Democracy,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 7, no. 3 (2002): 369–82; Warren Magnusson, “The Symbiosis of the Urban and the Political,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 5 (2014): 1561–75; and Nicole P. Marwell and Michael McQuarrie, “People, Place, and System: Organizations and the Renewal of Urban Social Theory,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 647, no. 1 (2013): 126–43.

³⁰ Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

that these create in the community are foundational resources also for cultivating civic engagement and democratic practices on the ground. These recurrent, institutionally sanctioned forms of social interaction play a formative role in creating trust, solidarity, and mutual commitment in the community. The community-rooted social infrastructure facilitates shared experiences and activities (from public squares to community gardens and child care facilities) based on which citizens develop common interests and the collective capacity in governing the commons.

A recent multi-year study that colleagues and I conducted on NHs³² in Metro Vancouver provides a brief illustration of the central role this community-based social infrastructure is able to provide for democratic practice.³³ The services and programs that NHs offer often open the door to meaningful interaction and engagement. In the fundamental way that Putnam described social capital as providing the infrastructure for making democracy work, NHs are a key player in nurturing a sense of trust and reciprocity in community life. They are also advocates for their communities as they have a profound effect on the network of interactions and encounters that make up a community. They sustain the capacity to find a voice in the community, both individually and collectively.

Thus, the seemingly mundane practice of interacting at NHs and participating in community-based activities can enable the learning and practice of important civic and political skills. The effect on the skills and confidence of the respondents is particularly pronounced for those born outside Canada. The local community at a NH validates and recognizes a person's contributions. These civic skills learned through involvement and relating to others are a pivotal resource that contributes to overcoming social isolation and encouraging engagement in the wider community. Sean Lauer reports that more than 60 percent of respondents stated that they made at least one close friend through the NHs, and he finds a significant increase in civic and community engagement directly related to being involved in NHs. Similarly, qualitative interviews with this group underlined the fact that social isolation is a major concern, and one that can be addressed effectively by NHs.

One critical reason why immigrants and minorities in particular find themselves isolated and unable to contribute to public debates is the absence of low-threshold opportunities for engagement. NHs offer precisely this entry into communal engagement in a nonthreatening, service-based environment. The project conducted oral histories with participants about their personal

³² Neighbourhood Houses are nonprofit, community-organized places that offer multiple services in particular for less privileged groups. In 2014, NHs in Metro Vancouver provided a total of 444 programs/activities (overall 208,664 participants).

³³ For the results of the project, see Your Neighbourhood House, www.yournh.ca; and Miu Chung Yan and Sean Lauer, eds., *Neighbourhood Houses: Building Community in Vancouver* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021).

experiences of NHs. One recurrent theme in these interviews is how the use of services gradually built trust and turned NHs into “safe places.” Instrumental in this respect is the reliance of NHs on volunteers: in 2012–13, more than 3,670 people registered as volunteers in NHs in Metro Vancouver. In the same vein, NHs have become socializing agencies that regularly allow immigrants to become leaders in their community and take on prominent roles in public life. In 2013, more than 60 percent of staff members at NHs were either current or former resident service users. As an active part of the NGO community at the urban level, NHs pave the path of immigrants toward professional careers with third-sector organizations, community engagement, and leadership.

At the collective level, NHs facilitate residents working together to achieve collective goals. They provide a physical and social framework for social networks, dialogue, and collective-communal empowerment. The skills that community members acquire in taking part in or organizing events can easily be transferred to other forms of active engagement. Through low-cost, family-friendly services and social events, NHs offer tangible incentives to overcome alienation from communal life, particularly for those who have a more precarious social status (low-income people, seniors, immigrants, and minorities). These self-governing community associations can be interpreted as entry points and networks that facilitate democratic participation in a basic yet essential way. As Yan puts it, “motives of democratic participation, sharing, and reciprocity are actualized through services”³⁴ offered at NHs.³⁵

Social capital researchers have suggested that bridging ties is important for political participation. Our research suggests that NHs play such a bridging role in connecting citizens to communal affairs and opening the door for modes of participation.³⁶ Building on the insight from social capital frameworks, one can argue that NHs bring people together, contribute to overcoming social isolation, convey information about issues in the community, and provide low-threshold forms of participation in grassroots initiatives (see the findings of the survey documented in Table 4.1).

Considering the nature of program activities at NHs in Metro Vancouver, it is evident that the most important type of program consists of direct services to

³⁴ Miu Chung Yan, “Bridging the Fragmented Community: Revitalizing Settlement Houses in the Global Era,” *Journal of Community Practice* 12, nos. 1–2 (2004): 58.

³⁵ Based on their case study of neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, Juliet Musso and Christopher Weare similarly point to the significance of networked-based social capital in supporting the democratic functions of neighbourhood governance networks. For further discussion, see Juliet Musso and Christopher Weare, “Social Capital and Community Representation: How Multiform Networks Promote Local Democracy in Los Angeles,” *Urban Studies* 54, no. 11 (2017): 2521–39.

³⁶ Caroline Patsias, Anne Latendresse, and Laurence Bherer, “Participatory Democracy, Decentralization and Local Governance: The Montreal Participatory Budget in the Light of ‘Empowered Participatory Governance,’” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 6 (2013): 2214–30.

TABLE 4.1 *Perceived changes in social skills through involvement at neighbourhood houses*

Change in social skills	Place of birth					
	Total (%)		Inside Canada		Outside Canada	
	Increased a little	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Increased a lot
Has your ability to work with people from different backgrounds changed?	42	34	34	29	46	38
Have your decision-making abilities changed?	42	26	30	19	48	29
Have your skills in organizing or managing events and programs changed?	36	21	24	17	42	23
Have your skills in speaking in front of other people changed?	35	27	22	19	42	32

the community (e.g. daycare, services for families and seniors), which also cover a main part of the NHs' funding scheme. Yet, it is striking to see that a considerable number of those activities are also directly related to community- and advocacy-oriented initiatives. Some of these activities are explicitly designed to serve this purpose; others might start with a local issue and morph into a broader concern for the well-being of the community. Food-related activities are an example. As evidence from multiple NHs suggests, work on a local communal garden project can be a rewarding socializing experience, sensitizing NHs participants to and involving them in issues related to food security, urban planning, and healthy living.

The results of the survey provide us with an interpretative lens through which to view the broader sociopolitical functions that such civil society associations can take on in giving a voice to newcomers and minorities. By investigating the

role that NHs play in municipal and provincial policy-making, our research found consistent evidence of how these self-governing associations in Metro Vancouver establish an institutional infrastructure for building and strengthening urban communities and nurturing their collective capacity. The case study of NHs emphasizes the importance of *bridging* social capital – establishing vertical social networks between socially diverse groups or organizations. The experience of these organizations in the urban context is that, when previously unrelated or dissimilar community organizations and groups connect with one another, the created ties strengthen the overall social fabric.³⁷

The case of NHs sheds light on how the social infrastructure of the local-urban context can facilitate democratic processes in a fundamental sense: First, nongovernment actors such as NHs provide an institutional infrastructure for building and strengthening urban communities and nurturing their collective capacity. Second, they build social capital as a key component of democratic and socially sustainable civic communities, thus delivering a response to the growing social inequality and alienation in urban communities. Third, place-based organizations are a critical part of addressing the increasingly complex challenges of urban communities (joint government–civil society problem-solving) through horizontal and vertical coordination as key to effective policy-making.

MULTI-SCALAR COMMUNITIES: REIMAGINING POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The example of the NHs in Metro Vancouver speaks to our established understanding of communities as local associations. And indeed, my argument is that these place-based communities where people interact, debate, and become politically engaged will be a cornerstone of a revitalized democratic public sphere.³⁸ Contrasting the local context, with its rich opportunities of generating a sense of community shaped by a dense network of face-to-face social interactions on the one hand and the imagined, more abstract national community on the other, has been a long-standing issue in democratic theorizing.³⁹ However, it is doubtful whether a strengthening of governance practices in local communities by itself will be able to provide a sufficiently robust response to the declining trust in democratic institutions and practices more broadly. Indeed, cynics would argue that democratic

³⁷ See, for example, Yan and Lauer, *Neighbourhood Houses*.

³⁸ Along those same lines, for the case for local democracy in a global era see Thad Williamson, David Imbroscio, and Gar Alperovitz, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³⁹ Janet Newman and John Clarke, *Publics, Politics and Power: Remaking the Public in Public Services* (London: Sage, 2009).

engagement and participation in local communities could also be instrumental in sheltering power structures from democratic oversight.

The widespread frustration with democracy and the associated populist response are vitally rooted in the growing incongruity between sites of economic and political power, on the one hand, and the institutional reach of principles of democratic accountability and citizens' involvement in the political decision-making process, on the other. While causally attributing the rise of right-wing populism simply to the frustration of the "losers of globalization" is misleading, it points to an important enabling factor of this political actor: Politics in the age of globalization is characterized by a heightened sense of losing control – sentiments populists capitalize on ardently. In this respect, the populist challenge to liberal democracy is at its core also indicative of how our traditional sense of the democratic community is being transformed and challenged. Historically, democracy has been tied to the nation-state as the sole (territorially defined) mode of political community in which citizens are bestowed with rights and the democratic decision-making process unfolds. Yet, given the internationalizing realities of the twenty-first century, community-driven processes of democratic reform would need to be recalibrated in response to multiple, overlapping sites of power and governance structures.⁴⁰ In this regard, populism raises legitimate questions about fundamental challenges of contemporary liberal democracy: What defines a people as a bounded political community (*demos*), and how do we establish effective forms of self-government by providing citizens with the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives?⁴¹

Europe provides a straightforward example of reconsidering the politics of scale when it comes to revitalizing community and citizenship practices: The internationalization of European societies in particular, both with respect to the integration of national economies into bigger supranational regional blocks and the transferral of political authority from the national to the European level, has caused a level of anxiety and uncertainty that has demonstrated to be exploitable by simplistic and populist forms of protest.⁴² In relinquishing

⁴⁰ For further discussion, see Daniele Archibugi, David Held, and Martin Köhler, *Re-Imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); David Held, "The Changing Contours of Political Community: Rethinking Democracy in the Context of Globalisation," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 94 (1999): 30–47; Sandra Lavenex, "Globalization and the Vertical Challenge to Democracy," in *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization*, ed. Hanspeter Kriesi et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 105–34; and Jan Aart Scholte, "Reinventing Global Democracy," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2014): 3–28.

⁴¹ Kaltwasser frames these issues in terms of a response to Dahl's democratic dilemmas: Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Responses of Populism to Dahl's Democratic Dilemmas," *Political Studies* 62, no. 3 (2014): 470–87. For further discussion, see also Brendan McCaffrie and Sadiya Akram, "Crisis of Democracy?: Recognizing the Democratic Potential of Alternative Forms of Political Participation," *Democratic Theory* 1, no. 2 (2014): 47–55.

⁴² For further examples, see Ben Crum and John Erik Fossum, "The Multilevel Parliamentary Field: A Framework for Theorizing Representative Democracy in the EU," *European Political Science*

considerable power to supranational institutions, vital questions are raised about the range and meaning of democratic rule.⁴³ At the core of these questions lies the conundrum of how we should define the demos as a bounded political community that provides the social framework for democratic deliberation and decision-making.

Considering multiple and overlapping levels of scale when it comes to the forces shaping our lives, the institutional arrangement of democratic intervention is of central importance. With a view to effective democratic practices, how can we match the nature of the sociopolitical, economic, and environmental challenges – also sites of power – to modes of engaged citizenship and democratic decision-making? Could a notion of the community and the common good still exclusively rely on the nation-state as the sole territorial marker of the political community? How can we adjust democratic practices to a changing social and economic reality in terms of cogenerating spaces and mechanisms for citizen engagement that allow us to address these challenges effectively?

Addressing these questions clearly is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth pointing to how the potential of place-based, local communities for democratic reform could be a fruitful starting point in addressing the transformation of the political ordering of space.⁴⁴ Political practices of social movements have already adapted to the spatial reach of democratic actions. For instance, Della Porta has empirically and conceptually demonstrated how transnational social movements have developed effective modes of civic engagement that are commensurable with the nature and scope of their political claims (the environmental crisis, social inequality, racial exclusion, etc.).⁴⁵ Della Porta calls this practice a form of “local contention, global framing” articulated in transnational global activism.⁴⁶ New communication

Review 1, no. 2 (2009): 249–71; Thomas Risse, *A Community of Europeans?: Transnational Identities and Public Spheres* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Fritz W. Scharpf, “After the Crash: A Perspective on Multilevel European Democracy,” *European Law Journal* 21, no. 3 (2015): 384–405; Vivien Schmidt, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union Revisited: Input, Output and Throughput,” *Political Studies* 61, no. 1 (2013): 2–22.

⁴³ Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione, “Three Models of Democracy, Political Community and Representation in the EU,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 2 (2013): 206–23.

⁴⁴ See Quintin Bradley, “Bringing Democracy Back Home: Community Localism and the Domestication of Political Space,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, no. 4 (2014): 642–57.

⁴⁵ Donatella della Porta, *Can Democracy Be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013); Donatella della Porta and Gianni Piazza, “Local Contention, Global Framing: The Protest Campaigns Against the TAV in Val di Susa and the Bridge on the Messina Straits,” *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 5 (2007): 864–82.

⁴⁶ Similarly, see Patrick Hayden, *Cosmopolitan Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017); and Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam, “Scale Shift in Transnational Contention,” in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, eds. Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 121–50.

technologies combined with the political imagination of activists on the ground have opened up new avenues for redefining and expanding political communities.⁴⁷

CONCLUSIONS

The relative strength of populist parties across Western democracy is centrally based on the claim of empowering the “people”; Koppetsch speaks in this context of the populist promise of being “collectively re-sovereignized.”⁴⁸ The plea to represent ordinary people in their relationship to an unresponsive elite is discursively couched in strong images of community, a people joined by a shared collective identity. The emotionally charged sense of a community nourished and staged by nationalist populists has become one of the central political weapons to challenge what they perceive to be the technocratic modus operandi of liberal democracies. With their focus on national identity, populists have been able to offer a captivating and politically instrumental sense of community. In the case of right-wing populism, this invocation of a unified people in whose name their charismatic leaders claim to speak has had substantial undemocratic implications, both with respect to the contempt for procedural rules in the parliamentary system, if not openly authoritarian aspirations, and with a view to the exclusionary impetus with which the community is mobilized against alleged outsiders and “enemies of the people.”

This chapter makes the argument that progressive forces considering the future of democracy should not simply dismiss the idea of community as integral to attempts to deepen democratic practices. Taking into account place-based communities and their modes of democratic empowerment is more than a nostalgic imagination of small-scale practices of self-governance. Exploring the conceptual link between community and democracy, I argue that the center-left has erroneously abandoned the reliance on a community defined by shared values and practices. Having bought into the neoliberal creed, the social-democratic left has not been able to find an effective counternarrative to the populist right’s exclusionary nationalism.

While the promise of democratic empowerment of the “sovereign people” is regularly betrayed in the practice of right-wing populists, the affective reference to the community is powerful in its ability to challenge the political status quo in liberal democracy. Without such a mobilizing sense of community it will be difficult for those forces on the left, determined to deepen democratic practices and civic engagement, to respond to the populist resurgence from the right.

⁴⁷ On the idea of communicatively integrated communities, see Lewis A. Friedland, “Communication, Community, and Democracy: Toward a Theory of the Communicatively-Integrated Community,” *Communication Research* 28, no. 4 (2001): 358–91.

⁴⁸ Cornelia Koppetsch, *Die Gesellschaft des Zorns: Rechtspopulismus im Globalen Zeitalter* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 217.

Historically, the working-class left could rely on a strong notion of community. Its strong collective identity, continuously reproduced through a network of civil society organizations, formed the cultural resources needed for the political fight. Without such a vibrant idea of what brings individuals together in a joined political cause, of what generates recognition, solidarity, and mutual commitment, the political identity of the left would remain pale and anemic compared to the dramatized narrative of the people and its elitist enemies on the right.

Similarly important for the future of democracy is the recognition that communities can produce a social infrastructure whose practices are essential for a revitalized engaged citizenship. Local communities can be powerful vectors of sustaining a social infrastructure that ties citizens into a collective decision-making process and provides them with the tools to become *citoyens* in the radical, Republican tradition. For the future of democracy it will be essential that citizens perceive modes of democratic engagement as meaningful and commensurable to the fundamental challenges that the current political and socio-environmental crisis poses. Transnational social movements are a promising approach to reimagining political communities and modes of civic engagement in multiple spatial contexts. Community and civic engagement sustain and nurture each other. If citizens are deprived of these avenues of exercising their democratic, participatory rights in a meaningful fashion, populism's simplistic political answers informed by narratives of exclusionary nationalism will continue to gain in appeal.