Deescalating distrust: a deliberative approach to communicating with right-wing populists and supporters

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The paper explores the relationship between deliberative democracy and right-wing populism by focusing on the issue of (dis)trust in political communication. Should we trust right-wing populists enough to include them in political deliberation and, if so, how? The first part outlines a deliberative approach to political communication under conditions of political distrust. In a second step, I argue that theorists such as Habermas and Rummens contradict their own commitment to deliberative democracy by taking a militantly (or semi militantly, in the case of Habermas) democratic approach according to which right-wing populists should be excluded from democratic politics - or even banned. This approach, I argue, is more likely to escalate than de-escalate the spiral of distrust between populist and non-populist parties and citizens. It also runs counter to the deliberative ideal of political justification understood as a discursive process in which all arguments are heard and all affected persons (or their representatives) included. The rest of the article discusses the more delicate question of how to communicate with right-wing populists and supporters, and, especially, how to maintain a balance between justified and unjustified distrust. Given the communicative conditions and pathologies of the mediatized public sphere, I argue, opponents of right-wing populism are forced to use *deliberative rhetoric* and *deliberative contestation* as alternatives to deliberation proper (that is, face-to-face discussion, listening and argumentation). In addition, I argue in favor of *deliberative outreach* towards right-wing populist and even extreme groups, aiming to find a common ground when possible.

KEYWORDS

right wing populism, distrust, militant democracy, deliberative rhetoric, deliberative contestation, deliberative outreach

Introduction

Regardless of one's preferred definition of "populism," it is uncontroversial to point out the close relationship between populism, trust and mistrust. On the one hand, populist leaders are known for seeking and exercising power based on immediate trust and support from large numbers of more or less unorganized followers (Vitale and Girard, 2022; Weyland, 2017). Populist politics is therefore said to rely on "unquestioned trust" (Diehl, 2018, p. 112) or "an exaggerated amount of faith" (Pasquino, 2008, p. 28) in the populist leader and his or her personal skills and abilities. On the other hand, populist leaders and parties seek to boost their own trustworthiness as defenders of "the people" by promoting and capitalizing on citizens' *distrust* against economic, cultural and political elites, experts and expertise (Crease, 2023), political opponents and, in the case of right-wing populism, immigrants and other minorities allegedly not belonging to "the people" or "heartland" (Mudde, 2004).

While distrust is not always mentioned explicitly, it figures implicitly in most approaches to populism today. Jan-Werner Müller, for example, defines populism as "a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and unified—but ultimately fictional—people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior" (Müller, 2016, p. 19–20). But distrust is not just implicit in many standard *definitions* of populism, it is also seen as a negative *consequence* of populist rhetoric and politics: "the dismissive and disrespectful language of populism can undermine trust in political institutions, leading citizens to become more cynical about democracy" (Bächtiger and Dryzek, 2024, p. 92). In the empirical literature, populist rhetoric has been associated with political affects such as anger, resentment and hatred (Harteveld et al., 2022; Martínez et al., 2023) as well as with affective polarization, the "tendency for partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other side" (Druckman et al., 2021, p. 28).

While populism also exists on the left (Cohen, 2019; Mouffe, 2018, 2022), the most successful but also challenging form of populism today is right-wing populism, on which the present paper focuses. Given the tendency of right-wing populism to polarize and promote distrust, the question of how to respond to it seems urgent. Should politicians and citizens even communicate with populist actors and their supporters and, if so, how to do this without further escalating the spiral of mutual distrust? The article discusses whether and how to communicate with populist actors by drawing on deliberative democracy theory. I draw selectively on a Habermasian understanding of deliberative democracy, but that does not prevent me from criticising aspects of his approach, or from including a range of other deliberative scholars in the discussion.

The first part outlines a deliberative approach to political communication under conditions of public distrust and defends the deliberative ideal against some of its critics. In a second step, I argue that deliberative theorists such as Habermas (2016) and Rummens (2017) contradict their own commitment to deliberative democracy by taking a militantly democratic approach to right-wing populism according to which its proponents should be excluded or banned from formalized politics, and even treated with "contempt" (Habermas, 2016). This approach, I argue, is more likely to escalate than de-escalate the spiral of distrust between populist and non-populist parties and citizens. It also runs counter to the deliberative ideal of political justification understood as a discursive process in which all arguments are heard and all affected persons (or their representatives) are included.

Deliberative democracy and (mis)trust

Deliberative democrats emphasize the normative obligations and positive outcomes of public communication about matters of common concern, including laws, policies, political decisions, shared values or interpretations of basic rights and liberties. Communication, however, is not understood as any kind of talk or political rhetoric but as a mutual weighing of reasons that induces "reflection on preferences, values and interests in a non-coercive fashion" (Dryzek, 2000, p. 76). While theorists conceive the goals, sites, duties and epistemic standards of good deliberation differently (see Steiner, 2012), it is generally recognized that, ideally, democratic deliberation should be *inclusive*, *respectful* and *oriented towards truth* (Bächtiger and

Dryzek, 2024; Chambers, 2012; Mansbridge et al., 2012). The exact meaning of this ideal and its three components is controversial, but it still allows us to characterize certain types of political speech as illegitimate, disrespectful or epistemically harmful. For example, the use of hate speech to demonize opponents violates the ideal of mutual respect. Manipulating political preferences through propaganda and "fake news" violates the epistemic commitment to track the truth (Habermas, 2006b; Chambers, 2021).

Some studies suggest that, under the right circumstances, deliberation increases citizens' trust in government, institutions, and public officials (Boulianne, 2019; Volodin, 2018). Other studies indicate that *uncivil* speech has a negative effect on levels of trust among citizens (Vant Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022). According to the research findings of Diane Mutz, "people are more likely to say they distrust politicians if the politicians who are most salient in their minds at the time have been uncivil in their interactions with one another" (Mutz, 2015, p. 77). Incivility can be defined as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone" (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660), and political incivility as "a lack of respect for political opponents" (Vant Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022, p. 204). Given that deliberation is defined as *respectful* communication, incivility is per definition anti-deliberative. We can therefore argue that deliberative (civil) communication is needed to maintain the minimum level of trust in pluralistic, constitutional democracies.

Distrust, however, is not necessarily irrational or unjustifiable. The distrust that needs to be deescalated is the kind that is based on falsehoods, misconceived beliefs, or otherwise unjustifiable premises, say, demonization of whole groups based on wrongs committed by some of their members, conspiracy theories based on myth and speculation (Christner, 2022) or pure misinformation. For example, it is perfectly rational to distrust political leaders or elites with a history of promoting false claims or making wild promises without keeping them. The deliberative approach I defend does not encourage naive or misplaced trust; on the contrary, it is committed to maintaining a critical public sphere where political claims are scrutinized and confronted with evidence, politicians are held accountable, and demagogues are treated with appropriate scepticism. Deliberative democracy, in other words, is aligned with skeptical thinking as defined by Pippa Norris:

> Skeptical processes of decision-making weigh and sift information to assess the reputation of the agent of agencies [say, political candidates or parties]. Several questions guide critical thinking. Is the agent competent, with the skills, resources, and capacity to deliver on their responsibilities? Do they have integrity, behaving in ways which are honest, ethically upright, and truthful? Are they impartial in their role, with actions serving the interests of the principal [say, voters] rather than their own? (Norris, 2022, p. 5).

If the answer to these and related questions is positive, we can speak of "skeptical trust": the relevant agents or agencies are deemed *trustworthy*, based on a process of critical reflection and scrutiny (Norris, 2022, p. 7). Skeptical trust, then, is positively related to "skeptical mistrust" which makes a critical, balanced assessment about *untrustworthiness*, but distinguished from "credulous trust" which overestimates agents or agencies' trustworthiness (2022, p. 8) and "cynical mistrust" which underestimates it. In the latter case, what is at stake are "irrationally gloomy and overly cautious expectations (…), irrespective of the positive reputation of agents when fulfilling their

obligations" (2022, p. 8). As Norris states, both credulous trust and cynical mistrust are exploited by demagogues and "bad actors" to promote lies or make people believe in conspiracy theories such as Quanon (credulous trust) or undercut faith in others or government authorities, "weakening the willingness to obey the law voluntarily, to cooperate collectively in civic affairs, and to feel a sense of political legitimacy" (2022, p.8) (cynical mistrust).

So, from a deliberative democracy perspective, skeptical trust and mistrust should be promoted, while cynical mistrust and credulous trust should be decreased. Sometimes, of course, the difference between justified and unjustified (mis)trust is controversial and subject to reasonable disagreement, say, disagreement about the extent to which some voters' trust in a political leader is based on skeptical thinking or credulousness. But that is precisely why we need a well-functioning deliberative democracy: to have informed, inclusive and ongoing debate about the extent to which different expressions of trust and mistrust are justified or not. In cases of disagreement, political philosophers and theorists can weigh in with opinions and perspectives (as I do in this article), but, for deliberative democrats, the more important thing is that the disagreeing parties themselves maintain a civilized, truth-sensitive dialogue to find out what and whom to trust or not. To the extent that this dialogue gets distorted by mutual suspicions and unchecked prejudices, we may not be able to maintain a peaceful democracy in the long run: "The spiral of violence begins with a spiral of disrupted communication that leads to a spiral of unchecked mutual distrust to the breakdown of communication" (Habermas, 2006a, p. 15).

The potential of deliberation to defuse unchecked distrust in divided political contexts hinges not only on the arguments themselves, i.e., on their rational persuasiveness, but also on the form of deliberation. Thus, responding to a question about the lack of trust among political adversaries, Habermas says that, sometimes, "the style is the message" (2023, p. 77). In other words, when trust is low and there is little hope of agreeing on substantial issues, what matters is not so much the content or sophistication of the arguments we use, but the way in which we communicate. By responding to political opponents not with insults and distrust but with arguments, listening and attempts at mutual understanding, we include these opponents in a democratic "we" of disagreeing but still reasonably communicating citizens (or representatives).

This may sound fine in theory, but the hard question is nevertheless whether right-wing populist actors should be included in the "we" of democratic deliberation. Even deliberative democrats, as we shall see, believe that there are limits to inclusion and communication. For those who see populism as an anti-democratic or even fascist form of politics, deliberating with populist parties and political elites is not an option. The following section argues that (right-wing) populism is a more ambiguous phenomenon that its hardest critics assume and therefore that deliberative democrats like Abts, Rummens and Habermas are wrong when taking a militantly democratic approach that excludes populist parties completely from deliberative interaction.

Militant democracy: a critique

Some deliberative democrats adopt a "militantly democratic approach" to populism (Malkopoulou and Moffitt, 2023), arguing that the only way to deal with populist parties and their spokespersons is to isolate or even ban them. Thus, according to Abts and Rummens,

populists should not be treated as legitimate political opponents but as enemies: "populists are no longer ordinary adversaries, but political enemies who hold an incompatible view of the symbolic structure of the locus of power itself" (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p. 422). Also, "populist parties, to the extent that they are inimical to democracy, should be revealed as such, treated accordingly and, if necessary, isolated from power" (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p. 422). The justification for this is the claim that populism is antithetical to liberal democracy at the ideological level: as a matter of principle, populists deny legitimate pluralism among "the people" and claim to be the only true representatives of a homogeneously defined people. Referring to Habermas' deliberative theory and his notion of "co-originality" between liberalism and democracy, that is, their interdependence and equal importance (Rummens, 2017, p. 555), Rummens writes that populism fails to "recognize the intersubjective nature of democracy as a constructive process in which the will of the people reflects a discursive interpretation of the liberties all participants grant each other as free and equal citizens" (2017, p. 561).

The militantly democratic approach expresses a strong and non-negotiable form of distrust against populist elites (i.e., parties and their spokespersons). Rummens, however, says that the exclusionary attitude towards populist parties should be combined with an "inclusionary openness towards populist voters" (2017, p. 564) who should be listened to, and for which democratic solution should be sought. The distinction Rummens makes between populist elites and citizens is important (also Bächtiger and Dryzek, 2024, p. 96). Populist citizens (for lack of a better term) often have legitimate grievances and concerns (also Mouffe, 2022; Habermas, 2023) and vote according to genuine ideological convictions. Many are willing to argue in good faith about political disagreements. The case is different with populist elites who are mainly interested in winning the day and increasing their power.[1] These elites are often manipulative and use what Bächtiger and Dryzek (2024, p. 4) characterize as "diabolic strategies": "clever communicators can spread misinformation, extreme spin, and alternative facts or just try to impose their own reality by repetition, without any evidence that makes sense." Non-populist political actors can and should therefore attempt to deliberate with citizens (say, by responding to their needs and concerns), even when elites are unwilling to communicate on fair terms.

But why would voters who are attracted to right-wing populism regard somebody who tries to ban their preferred political party as a trustworthy communication partner? Many of these voters have firm beliefs about why their preferred candidate is genuinely democratic and good for the nation (perhaps for the world), or why he or she is the *only* truly democratic candidate. These beliefs are confirmed on social media platforms filled with (selective, biased) evidence and argumentation, provided by fellow partisans and clever ideological content providers. Banning these voters' political heroes from running and then trying to "listen to their concerns" afterwards seems like a recipe for distrust and polarization.

I recognize that populist parties sometimes violate liberal democratic norms, practices and institutions. Sometimes, they defend

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1   To be sure, this goes not only for populist elites, but for (some) other political elites as well.

extreme views or conspiracy theories. A well-known example is US-president Donald Trump and his refusal to accept electoral defeat and engage in a peaceful transfer of power in the 2020 US election. The *Sweden Democrats* (SD) and *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) have had members with ties to fascist and neo-nazi groups. In 2022, a former AfD member of the Bundestag and judge, was arrested for her alleged involvement in a far-right group's plan to overthrow the German government. More recently, AfD has been classified as "extreme-right" by German intelligence.[2] Whether this classification is based on sufficient evidence, and whether it should eventually lead to a ban, are controversial topics in Germany.[3] My approach is fully compatible with legally investigating and punishing, say, election interference, illegal hate speech, extremist propaganda or plans to overthrow democratically elected governments, but I remain skeptical of banning political parties. The first type of measures target *individuals* who have demonstrably done something illegal, while the latter goes after the whole organisation, a tactic also used by fascist regimes and dictatorships. In any case, given the likely drawbacks of bans, prohibitions and legal punishment, including the escalation of distrust in the democratic system among populist voters, such measures should be reserved only for the most extreme cases.

Violating the deliberative conception of democratic legitimacy

My worry about militant democracy is not just pragmatic, pertaining to its consequences, but also normative, pertaining to its legitimacy. In a deliberative understanding of democracy, we must have very strong and convincing reasons to ban political representatives, precisely because the deliberative understanding of democratic legitimacy is tied so closely to the discursive procedure of argumentation and counter-argumentation. On Habermasian terms, what makes democratic decisions (say, an election) legitimate is the inclusivity and rationality of the deliberative process that precedes them, i.e., the extent to which all affected citizens (or their representatives) have had the opportunity to be heard and make their case (inclusion), and the extent to which the "better argument" has been able to replace the more misguided, flawed or incoherent ones (rationality) (Habermas, 2008, 2023). Banning political parties that operate within the legal framework of constitutional democracy clearly violates the requirement of inclusion, but it also potentially violates the requirement of rationality. Like it or not, right-wing populists sometimes have valid points and legitimate concerns, i.e., they may raise important questions and contribute with relevant perspectives to political controversies. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to distrust the legitimacy (i.e., inclusivity or rationality) of a democratic process that maintains a formal ban on right-wing populist parties.

The conclusion so far is that when populist parties have not broken any laws or expressed openly anti-democratic or otherwise extreme political views, they should be trusted as legitimate (though problematic) political opponents. By "trusting the populists," obviously, I do not mean agreeing with them or sparing them from confrontation. On the contrary, in this context, trusting the populists means including them in the process of public argumentation *pro et contra*, meeting them with counter-arguments rather than bans and legal prohibitions.

Semi-militant democracy: Habermas' solution

Banning populist parties, I have argued, comes with a cost in terms of a likely increase of citizen distrust in the political establishment and the democratic process, but also in terms of a real loss of democratic legitimacy. However, trusting populist actors as legitimate opponents and including them in formalized politics also comes with a cost, given that these actors tend to use an anti-deliberative style of communication: simplistic, polarizing, disrespectful and sometimes misleading or propagandistic. By this, they promote different kinds of unjustified and cynical mistrust - in perceived elites, political opponents, experts, academic institutions, the legal system and the politico-economic "system" as a whole. We are therefore faced with a dilemma in the sense that excluding but also including right-wing populists comes with different kinds of costs and drawbacks.

One solution sometimes proposed is to disengage communication without bans and prohibitions, that is, to refuse to deliberate while still tolerating the populists: letting them speak and run for office. This "semi-militant" position seems to be taken by Habermas in an interview from 2016. While not suggesting a ban, Habermas argues that right-wing populist parties such as the AfD should be ignored by the established (non-poplist) parties, kept out of formalized debates and even treated with "contempt" (Habermas, 2016). According to him, politicians who take populists seriously by meeting them in debates only make the opponent stronger and tacitly acknowledge the battlefront that right-wing populism is defining: "We, up against "the system" (Habermas, 2016).

I agree with Habermas that sometimes, when choosing whether to deliberate or not, silence is the best option (or lesser evil). In the US, for example, democrats running for office may reasonably decide not to engage in debates about the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election since this could give anti-democratic forces a platform and legitimize their views (say, the lie that election machines produced in Venezuela were used to prevent Trump from winning). For similar reasons, some may refuse to debate climate deniers or proponents of irrational conspiracy theories. How, after all, respond rationally to claims that are not even intended to be part of an open discussion among sincere participants, but to disturb, shock and manipulate public opinion? Others may argue that it is important to openly challenge the relevant claims rather than allowing them to spread without contradiction.

Even when refusing to communicate directly with populist elites, opponents of right-wing populism can still address topics that concern populist *citizens*, such as unemployment, inflation or the consequences of mass immigration on national security, the economy and cultural identity. They can recognize the rational and therefore fallible claims that are

presupposed in these concerns and challenge them with empirical evidence and normative argumentation, proposing alternative solutions to the problems they address, without stigmatizing those who hold them as somehow unworthy of deliberation. By this, they can seek to deescalate distrust indirectly by communicating with voters instead of communicating directly with elites.

That being said, I still think Habermas' approach is too "militant" in the sense that he refuses deliberation with right-wing populism under *any* circumstances. In the mentioned interview, at least, he defends a firewall between the respectable and the non-respectable parties, encouraging the former to show" contempt" for the latter through demonstrative silence and refusal to cooperate. His approach is therefore liable to the same criticisms I directed against militant democracy proper, though in a milder form. First, there is the pragmatic concern that excluding populists from deliberation *a priori*, as a matter of principle, will fuel existing tensions and suspicions against the political establishment. As Mouffe (2005, p. 57) argues, the political implementation of a sharp distinction between "the good democrats" who defend universal values and the dangerous "extreme right" can reinforce the impression among those who are inclined to vote for right-wing populists that they are looked down upon and not taken seriously by the establishment (also Bächtiger and Dryzek, 2024, p. 125). This impression makes them even more distrustful of mainstream politics, and more likely to vote for populist parties.

To take an example from the Nordic countries, the intense moral condemnation of (and refusal to communicate with) the *Sweden Democrats* by the Swedish political establishment since 2014 has in no way decreased the party's popularity: in the 2022 general election, the party gained 20.6 percent of the votes. In Germany, the AfD came second in federal elections in February 2025, winning a record 152 seats despite the "firewall against the far right" upheld by the other parties. Given Germany's historical experience with fascism, the urge to establish a firewall is understandable. However, if the goal is to curb the influence of the far right, the result so far is not a success. I see little reason to think that a ban will change any of this.

Second, as in the case of militant democracy proper, my skepticism about semi-militant democracy is not just based on a strategic worry about its consequences (i.e., an increase of distrust), but also on a normative worry about legitimacy. If right-wing populists are never listened to and taken seriously in political debates, how can we know that all relevant arguments have been heard before policies and laws are enacted? How can we say that the process of democratic will-formation is rational and inclusive if one party is systematically ignored by all the others? How, under such circumstances, can populist citizens see themselves as "co-authors" of the laws they are forced to obey (Habermas, 1998, p. 446).

Based on these concerns, my position is more flexible than Habermas': sometimes, it makes sense to argue with (and against) populist elites, sometimes not. To the extent that these elites make reasonable claims and demonstrate a willingness to deliberate in good faith on mutually shared terms, deliberative attempts should be made. Ultimately, I submit, the decision should be based on the individual politician's goals and strategies for engaging with their constituents and the broader public. The decision cannot be made in the abstract, as a matter of principle, because the right decision depends on contingent factors that vary with political context, say: who is the opponent, what are they claiming, what is the medium for the debate and how is it set up, who is the audience, and so on.

Defining populism: beyond the ideological approach

In the end, the validity of my normative position defended so far comes down to the adequacy of my understanding of right-wing populism as a political phenomenon. If authors such as Mudde (2004), Müller (2016) and Rummens (2017) are right that all populism is a threat to liberal democracy because it denies political pluralism and legitimate opposition at the ideological level, then my position may seem misguided or naive. The problem with their ideological definition, however, is that it is clearly unjustified when applied to a number of right-wing parties that are typically defined as populist, say, Denmark's Peoples Party or Norway's Progress Party. Both of these parties combine anti-immigration and nativist rhetoric with appeals to "ordinary people" and criticism of cultural and political elites, but they also accept democratic principles, institutions and procedures. While these parties are especially (and often unfairly) critical of Islam, they do not deny pluralism as such or defend a culturally homogeneous "people" that has no room for ethnic, cultural or political pluralism. Labeling them as anti-democratic and excluding them from deliberation may therefore provoke a lot of justified anger and resentment and lead to an escalation of distrust.

To conclude this section, populism is a complex and ambiguous political phenomenon, regardless of whether we understand it as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), a political strategy (Weyland, 2017) or a discursive style (Moffitt, 2017) or "repertoire" (Brubaker, 2017). This complexity should be taken into account when considering whether and how to communicate with populists and their supporters. As Arditi puts it, "Populism can remain within the bounds of democracy, but also reach the point where they enter into conflict and go their own separate ways (Arditi, 2007, p. 87). In a similar vein, Urbinati says that "populism can stretch constitutional democracy toward its extreme borders and open the door to authoritarian solutions and even dictatorship; the paradox is that, should this regime change take place, populism would be unseated" (2019, p. 112). In other words, given that populism is a product of postwar constitutional democracy and justifies itself in democratic terms, if populism turns into fascism, it would no longer be populism (Malkopoulou and Moffit, 2023, p. 854). Thus, while critics of right-wing populism are often right in recognizing its illiberal and anti-democratic potentials, there is also a tendency to respond with inadequate or exaggerated condemnation and unjustified distrust. This is unfortunate because it allows right-wing populists and their supporters to refute criticism in general as biased, misunderstood or, more strongly, as "wokeism" or "cancel culture" (Bart Cammaerts 2022). The final section therefore addresses how to balance justified and unjustified distrust when deliberating with populists and supporters.

How (not) to deliberate with right-wing populists: the mediatized public sphere and the need for deliberative rhetoric, contestation and deliberative outreach

I have argued that there are pragmatic but also normative reasons not to exclude right-wing populist parties *a priori* from democratic

deliberation. The present section moves beyond the question of whether to deliberate and discusses *how* to do it (or not do it). Given the communicative conditions and pathologies of the mediatized public sphere, I argue, opponents of right-wing populism are forced to use so-called *deliberative rhetoric* and *deliberative contestation* as alternatives to deliberation proper (that is, face-to-face discussion, listening and argumentation). In addition, I argue in favor of *deliberative outreach* towards right-wing populist and even extreme groups, aiming to find a common ground when possible.

Communicative pathologies and populism in the mediatized public sphere

In the Habermasian, deliberative approach that informs this article, the mediatized public sphere (or system of spheres) is the primary area for political opinion formation and mobilization (Habermas, 2006b, 2023). For Habermas, the media have two functions. First, they should provide a link between (a) political communication in the public sphere, (b) formalized politics (legislation, policy making, etc.) and (c) citizens' everyday problems and experiences (their 'lifeworld'). Second, the media play a key role in protecting the "epistemic dimension" of the democratic process (Habermas, 2006b, p. 411), namely by facilitating qualified public discussion and the critical exchange of perspectives, thus generating a "plurality of considered public opinions" (Habermas, 2006b, p. 416), as opposed to mere gut reactions and unexamined prejudices. In an ideal deliberative democracy, these two functions would be fully realized.

But real world democracies are not ideal, and Habermas is clear that contemporary mass media and social media are far from fulfilling their deliberative functions (2006; 2023). Social media platforms, for example, are increasingly characterized by confrontations between hostile identity groups situated in "fragmented and self-centered echo chambers" (Habermas, 2023, p. 38) with little or no filtering according to standards of truth, relevance or morality. Also, instead of being a forum for discussion about the common good, these platforms are often marked by personal attacks and idiosyncratic expressions of opinion (Habermas, 2023, pp. 50–52). Together, these development have lead to different "pathologies of political communication" (Habermas, 2006b, p. 420), such as "personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts" all of which promote "a mood of antipolitics" (Habermas, 2006b, p. 422). In his study of mediatized populism, Benjamin Moffit points to similar tendencies. For him, "sports-based dramatization and polarization," "prioritization of conflict," "personalization," "us versus them" rhetoric and "simplification" of complex issues are among the structural features of the modern media landscape to which populism is particularly well suited, given its dichotomization of "the people" versus "the elite," its suspicion of expert knowledge, its revolt against political correctness and "distaste for complexity" (Moffit, 2017, p. 76; also Brubaker, 2017, p. 370).

Deliberative rhetoric (and other responses)

Deliberative democrats may respond in multiple ways to this situation, for example by calling for legal regulations of social media platforms (Habermas, 2023), suggesting ways to improve these platforms in a more deliberation-friendly direction (Sunstein, 2017), or arguing in favor of citizen education and the cultivation of deliberative virtues such as accuracy and truthfulness (Chambers, 2021). Alternatively, deliberative democrats may attempt to isolate proper deliberation from the messy rhetoric of the mediatized public sphere, i.e., by turning to the study and design of so-called mini-publics: small-scale, controllable and managed settings in which citizens come together to discuss and decide on policy, guided by norms of reciprocity, fairness and truth-tracking. Making up for structural deficits in the mediatized public sphere, mini-publics are supposed to be "more perfect public spheres" (Fung, 2003, p. 339). Deliberative opinion polls, citizen juries, consensus conferences, and citizens' assemblies are all examples of such forums (Chambers, 2009, s. 330). There is no reason why proponents and opponents of right-wing populism could not reduce some of the unjustified distrust they feel towards each other, and enhance mutual understanding, in such forums.

While not the denying the value of any of these proposals, the argument I want to make is different: in spite of the somewhat depressing features of the mediatized public sphere, progressives, liberals and other opponents of the populist right cannot withdraw into self-righteous complacency and abandon the battle for the hearts and minds of voters that takes place in these forums. The stakes are too high and the alternative to dire: to abandon the mediatized public sphere is to surrender it to manipulative forces with economic or political incentives, including forces on the populist and extreme right. Can opponents of the populist right navigate this sphere without abandoning the deliberative ideal? I argue that they can and should.

The first thing to notice is that a well-functioning *deliberative democracy* contains much more than *democratic deliberation*, that is, it includes a range of non-deliberative or only vaguely deliberative strategies and tools, including rhetoric: the use of narratives, trope and emotions to persuade an audience (Habermas, 2023, p. 73). We can define rhetoric as the modus or *way* in which something is said, as distinct from its content or message. While rhetoric can be persuasive in virtue in its "logos" (say, in terms of logic and consistency), what is often considered problematic is its appeal to "pathos" (emotions) and "ethos" (the character or personal virtues of the speaker). Also, rhetoric tends to be monological and top-down in the sense of being articulated *by* political elites *to* specific audiences, *for* specific purposes. What Chambers calls "plebiscitary rhetoric" (Chambers, 2009, p. 328) is purely strategic and values power over truth, thus fitting neatly with much populist rhetoric: "[plebiscitary] rhetoric, while able to cleverly defend itself, is not interested in engaging in debate or dialogue" (Chambers, 2009, p. 327).

However, as Chambers also notes, not all rhetoric is bad or anti-deliberative. She therefore distinguishes plebiscitary rhetoric from "deliberative rhetoric," which also appeals to ethos and pathos, but in a way that sparks qualified reflection rather than merely appealing to gut reactions: "passion, trope, metaphor and evocation can enhance dialogue and further the ends of mutual understanding" (Chambers, 2009, p. 326). Thus, while rhetoric *can* be a form of pandering or a substitute for critical reflection, it can also be deliberative in the sense

of inducing "*considered* reflection about a future [political] action" (Chambers, 2009, p. 335).

What is important for my purpose here is that a "deliberative" response to right-wing populism need not take the high road of sophisticated argumentation free from ethos and pathos. Articulating simple slogans, creating enthusiasm around a political leader and her persona, speaking to citizens' everyday experiences and grievances, or criticizing the flaws of one's opponents, *can* be done in ways that increases the deliberativeness (i.e., inclusiveness, respectfulness or epistemic quality) of public debates. It can be done without lying, manipulating, demonizing opponents, or appealing to unchecked (cynical) mistrust. Also, it can be done with the help of social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, Youtube and Instagram, using sound bites, visual images and short videos. The point is not to replace authentic face-to-face deliberation with these rhetorical strategies, but to use them as *supplements*, thus maintaining a communicative division of labor between (deliberative) rhetoric and deliberation proper.

Contestation and the pitfalls of exaggerated (dis)trust

Deliberative democrats can and should welcome any attempt to build democratic movements and political projects that have the potential to become "popular" alternatives to right-wing populism. Such movements must use deliberative rhetoric in order to manage the contemporary media landscape, but they must also be *contestatory* in the sense of using advocacy and partisanship as part of their communicative strategies. To provide a clear alternative to right-wing populism, they must argue for something (and someone) and against something (and someone). Thus, in defense of "contestatory deliberation" in a context of right-wing populism and extremism, Bächtiger and Dryzek note that "[t]here is no inherent tension between advocacy, partisanship and deliberation. Partisanship can at best be based on competing conceptions of the public interest; it is not the same as sectarianism […] where all that matters is the well-being of one's own side or group" (2024, p. 19).

One question that arises in connection with deliberative contestation, however, is how justified the distrust that gets expressed towards the other side is. When opposing the populist right, experiences of strong moral emotions such as disgust or anger are natural and often justified, for example when faced with racial stereotypes, hate speech or authoritarian impulses. But there is also a risk of exaggerated distrust involved in such contestation, as when populist voters are condemned *in toto* as, say, extremists or fascists. As I have already argued, right-wing populism is a complex phenomenon that contains democratic as well as more extreme elements, attracting diverse citizens with different kinds of backgrounds, goals and perspectives. Given this complexity, I submit, deliberative contestation should target specific viewpoints, claims, policies and behaviors rather than engaging in generalized group demonization aimed at populist voters. This is also Mouffe's position when reminding us that many of these voters have been manipulated by clever demagogues who only pretend to care about their lives: "I do not deny that there are people who feel perfectly at home with these reactionary [i.e. racist] values, but I am convinced that there are others who are attracted to those

parties because they feel they are the only ones that care about their problems" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 22). Some of these voters can and must be persuaded to vote differently next time, and the best way to do that is not to label them as fascists, sexists or racists without sufficient evidence.

Deliberative contestation, I believe, is better able to avoid the pitfalls of cynical distrust than other types of contestation, such as purely agonistic contestation where all that matters is the construction of political groups ("us) that strategically oppose other groups ("them") in order to establish a political hegemony (Mouffe, 2022). Cultivating deliberative virtues such as listening (Scudder, 2020), accuracy (Chambers, 2021), and mutual perspective taking (Habermas, 2023) makes us better able to articulate a justified and precise criticism of, say, racist, misogynist, islamophobic or transphobic ideas in contemporary right-wing populist discourse, and less likely to engage in the kind of generalizing moral condemnation that sees any concern with illegal immigration and border control as an expression of racism; any pro-life stance on abortion as an expression of misogyny; any concern with radical Islam as an expression of islamophobia; and any concern with trans women in womens' sports or gender affirming surgery on teenagers as an expression of transphobia. If we are too strongly identified and emotionally invested in agonistic battles between "us" and "them," we become less able to have difficult conversations about these and other controversial topics, and more likely to promote cynical (unjustified) mistrust against our opponents.

Deliberative outreach to right-wing populists and extremists

The final argument I want to make is in favor of deliberative outreach to populists and even extreme groups. That is, there is a need not just for *contestatory* deliberation, but also for *bridging* deliberation that attempts to find a common ground between different groups of citizens, even those who are attracted to authoritarian and extreme discourses. Understandably, attempts at deliberative outreach towards such groups are under suspicion of being naive or based on credulous trust. However, drawing on the deliberative democracy literature on deeply divided societies and on the discursive psychology of Bächtiger and Dryzek (2024), I argue that such outreach is difficult and risky, but not impossible or necessarily naive.

Empirical research on deeply divided societies suggests that smaller, regulated forums of debate can bring people from different sides of a conflict together and enhance trust, recognition and mutual understanding on both sides (Bächtiger and Dryzek, 2024, p. 127; Fishkin et al., 2021; O'Flynn and Caluwaerts, 2018). What Steiner et al. (2017) refer to as "deliberative transformative moments" are shifts in the quality of deliberation from high to low (or vice versa), where "high quality" means communication characterized by listening and respect (2027, p. 3), potentially leading to agreements or enhanced trust (2017, p. 128). Examples of such shifts from low to high can be found among deliberative encounters between former leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia, Bosniaks and Serbs in Bosnia, or poor people and police in Brazilian favelas, and they often involve the sharing of personal narratives and stories

(Jaramillo and Steiner, 2014, p. 11). Bächtiger and Dryzek (2024) use these and other examples to show that deliberative outreach towards extreme groups is at least possible and can have positive effects. To back up this claim, they present a "discursive psychology" according to which an individuals' "self" (or self-understanding) is constructed by participation in different discourses (cultural, political, national, local, etc.), but rarely by *one* discourse only. Typically, the discourse of right-wing populism, even in its more extreme variants, is only one of several discourses in which a person participates, meaning that fluid positions and critical reflection across discourses is (sometimes, at least) possible (2024, p. 121). This opens the door for deliberative outreach and attempts to find a common ground, perhaps even to collaborate on issues of common concern. My claim is obviously not that such outreach is easy or even possible in all cases, but that it is *sometimes* possible, and that attempts should be made.

Consider for example the recent controversy regarding the hugely popular progressive media channel, *The Young Turks* (TYT) and its founder Cenk Uygur who, in the wake of Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025 made several attempts to engage with right-wing, MAGA-affiliated outlets in what he framed as a strategy of "breaking the media silo."[4] Uygyr argued that progressives must find ways to reach audiences beyond the liberal bubble, especially those disillusioned with the political establishment but still aligned with Trump. This rationale was rooted in TYT's self-described "populist" narrative according to which there exists a shared anger among working-class voters across the political spectrum - anger directed at corporate elites, Wall Street, and corrupt institutions. Progressive media should therefore attempt to flip segments of the MAGA base by appealing to their economic grievances, and by building coalitions against rising authoritarianism, even if that meant temporary alliances or dialogue with ideologically distant actors.

In other US-based progressive media, the critique of Uygur is that he normalizes extreme actors on the American right and gives them a platform by interviewing them or appearing on their shows.[5] To his defence, Uygyr remains a principled and vociferous critic of Trump's policies and authoritarian tendencies. He tries to find a common ground between the left and right on certain issues, such corruption or anti-war sentiments, but he also engages in intense deliberative contestation against the populist right on a number of other areas, such as immigration or health care. [6] To be sure, deliberating with MAGA-world in this way is not without dangers and pitfalls, as critics have pointed out. My point is not that Uygurs' specific way of reaching out is always wise or justified, but that attempts like these are legitimate and potentially productive. Some people can do it without falling into the trap of credulous trust. To argue against deliberative outreach as a

matter of principle would surely amount to giving up the ideal of deliberative democracy altogether.

Conclusion: toward a deliberative democratic ethos of engagement

This article has argued that the escalating spiral of distrust between right-wing populists and their opponents cannot be countered by exclusion, moralized condemnation, or principled silence. Rather, what is needed is a more flexible and context-sensitive application of deliberative democratic principles—one that takes seriously the communicative complexities of a mediatized public sphere and the moral ambiguity of right-wing populism itself. While militant and semi-militant democratic approaches may be motivated by legitimate concerns about democratic backsliding and illiberalism, they risk reproducing the very pathologies they aim to prevent: polarization, alienation, and mistrust in the democratic process. On this background, I have defended a more inclusive but still critical form of deliberative engagement that seeks to distinguish between justified and unjustified forms of distrust. This approach affirms the value of skeptical scrutiny without lapsing into either credulous trust or cynical rejection. It accepts the risks of engagement, but insists that engagement— especially through deliberative rhetoric, contestatory communication, and deliberative outreach—is a necessary risk if democratic legitimacy and social cohesion are to be preserved.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

JJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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4 "Cenk & Brian Tyler Cohen SPAR over Cenk's MAGA outreach." *YouTube*, uploaded by TheDC, 27 Dec. 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOF49rezh9w.

5 "Is Cenk Throwing The Left Under The Bus? "YouTube, uploaded by *The Bitchuation Room*, 2. Jan. 2025. "? *YouTube*, uploaded by https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JYIlq6AzQQ.

6 "TYT Debates MAGA: Cenk Uygur vs. Scott Adams". YouTube, uploaded by *The Young Turks*, Oct. 29. 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z15wl2Tglpc.

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