

Research Article**DOI:** 10.30520/tjososci.1837602

Consensus and Agonism in Democratic Theory: Comparing the Approaches of Habermas and Mouffe

Muhammed Ramazan Demirci¹¹ Asst. Prof., Giresun Üniversitesi, Giresun, Türkiye / muhammed.demirci@giresun.edu.tr.

Abstract: This article offers a comparative analysis of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and Chantal Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy. It explores how these two theoretical frameworks interpret key democratic concepts such as legitimacy, participation, the public sphere, and representation. While Habermas emphasizes rational deliberation and consensus as the foundation of democratic legitimacy, Mouffe argues that conflict and dissent are essential to democratic vitality. The study, based on literature review and conceptual comparison, illustrates these perspectives through examples from social media, civil society movements, and local democracy. The analysis highlights that both approaches provide valuable insights into contemporary democratic theory. It concludes that pluralist democracies require a balanced consideration of both consensus-oriented and conflictual democratic practices to address the complexities of legitimacy and representation in today's political contexts.

Keywords: Habermas, Mouffe, Communicative Action Theory, Agonistic Democracy, Participatory Democracy

ORCID¹: 0000-0002-6726-7370

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary democratic regimes are facing increasingly complex challenges, including deepening crises of representation, declining citizen participation, and rising political polarization. The erosion of public trust in traditional political institutions has led to a significant weakening in the perceived legitimacy of decision-making processes, thereby necessitating a critical rethinking of the normative foundations of democracy. In response, political theory has sought to develop theoretical solutions to these democratic dilemmas. In this context, the works of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe stand out as two influential and contrasting approaches to reimagining democratic practice.

Habermas, drawing on his theory of communicative action, conceptualizes democracy as a process of rational deliberation aimed at achieving consensus (Habermas, 2004). For him, democratic legitimacy is established through the participation of individuals in rational public discourse under conditions of freedom and equality (Habermas, 2009). Mouffe, in contrast, critiques this consensus-oriented model for obscuring power relations and suppressing the inherently conflictual nature of politics (Mouffe, 2000). Her theory of agonistic democracy regards pluralism and conflict as constitutive elements of the political, and seeks to reconstruct democracy on the basis of these tensions (Mouffe, 2013).

The central research question guiding this study is as follows: How do Habermas's consensus-based model of democracy and Mouffe's agonistic approach conceptualize democratic legitimacy, citizen participation, the public sphere, and political representation; and what normative and practical contributions do these conceptualizations offer to contemporary democratic practice? To answer this question, the study first outlines the theoretical backgrounds of both approaches through a review of relevant literature. This is followed by an analytical exposition of Habermas's and Mouffe's respective understandings of democracy. In the subsequent comparative section, the two theories are evaluated systematically in relation to key democratic concepts, identifying points of convergence and divergence. Finally, the applicability of both approaches is assessed through examples from contemporary political practice, and a

conceptual evaluation is presented in light of the study's overall findings.

This article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the theoretical tension between consensus and conflict in contemporary democratic thought, and to contribute to the intellectual renewal concerning crises of democratic legitimacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary evolution of democratic theory has largely revolved around two principal orientations since the final quarter of the 20th century: deliberative democracy and agonistic democracy. These two approaches have generated deep theoretical debates regarding the normative foundations of liberal democracy, the nature of political participation, and the processes of legitimacy construction (Mouffe, 2000; Dryzek, 2000). The paradigm of deliberative democracy, which gained prominence in the 1990s, was shaped by thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. This paradigm argues that liberal democracy should be legitimated not merely through majority rule or interest balancing, but through rational public deliberation that guides collective decision-making (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

Habermas's theory of communicative action (2004) forms the theoretical backbone of deliberative democracy. According to Habermas, democratic legitimacy is achieved when individuals participate in public communication processes freely and under conditions of equality, aiming for rational consensus (Habermas, 2009). In this context, the "public sphere" represents a political space where individuals engage in shared reasoning and where conditions for open and inclusive debate are established (Habermas, 1991). From a Habermasian perspective, political participation grounded in communicative rationality enables transparent and accountable relationships not only among citizens but also between institutions and societal actors (Habermas, 2009).

However, since the 2000s, one of the strongest critiques of this normative framework has emerged through agonistic democratic theories. Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical democracy (1985) asserts that the political realm should be defined not through consensus but through structural antagonisms. In *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), Mouffe argues that liberalism and democracy harbor irreconcilable internal tensions. The ideal of universal rational consensus, she contends, suppresses political differences and sustains hegemonic orders. Mouffe thus proposes the notion of the "agonistic" space—a political terrain where adversarial but non-violent conflicts are recognized and legitimized (Mouffe, 2005a).

Agonistic theorists reject limiting the political to the "decidable." They emphasize the constitutive role of identity, affect, belonging, and exclusion in political struggle. Thinkers such as William E. Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and Jacques Rancière similarly argue that agonistic politics must not only acknowledge conflict but also create spaces where marginalized differences can become visible (Connolly, 1995; Honig, 1993; Rancière, 1999).

In recent years, attempts have been made in the literature to reconcile these two opposing orientations. For example, Dryzek (2005) recognizes the practical challenges of achieving the ideal conditions of deliberative democracy and proposes pluralistic deliberation models that accommodate diverse identities and discourses. Similarly, Erman (2009) argues that agonistic elements should be considered legitimate within deliberative processes, thereby proposing a theoretical synthesis. Even Mouffe herself acknowledges that agonism requires certain minimal

normative frameworks in order to sustain a stable political space (Mouffe, 2013).

In this context, contemporary democratic theory increasingly seeks to address the theoretical tension between consensus and conflict in both normative and practical terms (Horváth, 2018; Alves & Lima, 2016). These rich debates in the literature suggest the need to rethink the normative grounds of democratic legitimacy and the nature of political participation. Building on these two theoretical approaches, this study aims to offer conceptual insights into current democratic practices and contribute to addressing gaps in the literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative theoretical analysis to examine two contrasting approaches within the field of political theory: Habermas's deliberative democracy and Mouffe's agonistic democracy. Rather than engaging with empirical phenomena, the research focuses on the internal logical structures, conceptual foundations, and understandings of political legitimacy within these normative democratic theories. Accordingly, the study adopts theoretical analysis and conceptual comparison techniques, which are foundational to qualitative research methods (Yanow, 2000; Gerring, 2012).

Theoretical analysis, as applied here, goes beyond mere description of normative political ideas. It seeks to evaluate their internal coherence, underlying assumptions, and the political implications they generate (Freeden, 2003). In this respect, the primary works of Habermas and Mouffe are treated as principal sources, and their conceptual frameworks are systematically analyzed through key terms such as legitimacy, public sphere, participation, representation, and conflict. This approach enables an interpretation of each theory within its own conceptual integrity before engaging them in a comparative dialogue.

Conceptual comparison, on the other hand, aims to uncover the political functions and normative orientations of different theories by comparing the meanings attributed to similar concepts (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). This involves evaluating not only definitional aspects of concepts but also their assumed roles within political systems and their implied models of citizenship. Such a methodology, consistent with the plural nature of democratic theory, avoids asserting a singular "correct" model of democracy and instead facilitates a comparative understanding of alternative legitimacy regimes.

Additionally, the study draws on insights from critical discourse analysis. This perspective helps reveal the ideological assumptions, exclusionary tendencies, and hegemonic structures embedded within the theorists' discourses (Fairclough, 1995). In doing so, the analysis moves beyond theoretical exposition to engage with the political effects, limitations, and transformative potentials of the models under consideration.

Rather than testing hypotheses in the conventional sense, the study traces analytical shifts and tensions across theoretical typologies. To this end, it also incorporates ideal-type analysis (Weber, 2011), treating the theories of Habermas and Mouffe as ideal types and evaluating their explanatory capacity in the context of contemporary democratic crises.

This methodological framework aims not merely to replicate abstract theoretical debates, but to reveal how normative theories engage with current political realities. In doing so, the study underscores that political theory is not only a textual or conceptual exercise, but also a critical and constructive intellectual practice capable of

contributing to solutions for present-day democratic challenges.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In normative debates on the construction of democratic legitimacy, the theoretical models developed by Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe represent two major orientations in contemporary political theory. These approaches diverge significantly in their assumptions about the nature of political participation, the function of the public sphere, and the sources of legitimacy. While Habermas's model of deliberative democracy seeks to construct a consensus-based order grounded in communicative rationality, Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy foregrounds conflict and hegemonic struggle as constitutive of the political.

Habermas, in response to the legitimacy crisis in modern societies, developed his theory of communicative action to argue that democratic processes cannot be reduced to interest-based bargaining, but must instead be founded on rational public agreement (Habermas, 2004). In this context, "communicative rationality" refers to the capacity of individuals to arrive at shared norms through symmetrical, non-coercive discursive practices. His concept of the public sphere (*öffentliche Sphäre*) describes a political space shaped by civil society and media, where critical public reason is cultivated (Habermas, 1991).

According to Habermas, democratic will-formation occurs on two levels: first, public opinion is generated through informal rational deliberation among citizens; second, this opinion is transmitted into formal political decision-making processes through parliamentary institutions and the legal system (Habermas, 2009). Legitimacy rests on rational consensus achieved in an open, inclusive, and reason-based communication environment. The concept of the "ideal speech situation" represents a communicative order in which participants are persuaded solely by the force of better arguments under conditions of equality (Habermas, 2001).

Habermas's vision of democracy is deeply rooted in Enlightenment ideals of universal reason and progressive rationality (Habermas, 2009). He posits that social consensus is possible through communicative processes that enable rational determination of the common good. However, this model has faced several criticisms. It has been argued that it underestimates power relations, structural inequalities, and cultural differences, and that its assumption of equal discursive conditions for all individuals is unrealistic (Young, 2001; Mouffe, 2000).

In contrast, Chantal Mouffe constructs democratic politics around the notion of antagonism rather than consensus. She critiques the idealist claim of liberal pluralist democracy that all differences can be reconciled through rational deliberation, considering it an untenable illusion (*illusio*) (Mouffe, 2000; 2005a). According to Mouffe, deep conflicts between social groups and political identities are structural and irreconcilable; hence, the political inherently entails a friend–enemy distinction. Although her position resonates thematically with Carl Schmitt's theory of the political, Mouffe departs from Schmitt by arguing that such conflict can be expressed legitimately within a liberal democratic framework (Schmitt, 1996).

Mouffe's model of agonistic democracy proposes the transformation of antagonism into legitimate political contestation rather than its suppression. In this framework, political opponents are not enemies to be eliminated, but adversaries who recognize each other's legitimacy (Mouffe, 2005a). Democracy is thus conceptualized as an ongoing hegemonic struggle in which every political order rests on the temporary dominance of particular values, always

subject to contestation by alternative projects (Mouffe, 2000).

For Mouffe, democratic legitimacy stems not from final consensus but from the legitimate and open expression of conflict between competing political projects. Political participation, in this view, should not aim at consensus but at making diverse identities and demands visibly represented in the public sphere. Participation entails not convergence, but the expression of disagreement and the continuation of political rivalry within democratic boundaries.

Rather than depoliticizing democracy, the agonistic model prioritizes institutional and cultural arrangements that allow for the legitimate and creative articulation of conflict. This perspective acknowledges that political attitudes are based not only on reason but also on affective foundations. Mouffe (2013) argues that the technocratic and depoliticized consensus orientation of centrist politics undermines citizens' sense of political agency, thereby creating fertile ground for the rise of populist movements (Mouffe, 2018).

In conclusion, Habermas's deliberative model—centered on rational consensus—and Mouffe's agonistic model—emphasizing conflict as constitutive of the democratic process—embody distinct and at times conflicting theoretical approaches to the sources of democratic legitimacy. This study aims to compare these frameworks systematically and offer normative insights for contemporary democratic practices.

5. FINDINGS

The findings of this study demonstrate how Habermas's consensus-oriented theory of communicative action and Mouffe's conflict- and hegemony-centered agonistic democracy diverge at both the theoretical level and within contemporary political practices, while also revealing points at which they complement one another. First, the conceptual tension between the two models is systematically examined through key democratic dimensions such as legitimacy, participation, the public sphere, and representation. Subsequently, the study analyzes how these theoretical differences manifest in practice by drawing on concrete examples from social media dynamics, civil society movements, and local democratic processes. This analysis shows that the distinction between consensus and contestation in democratic theory is not merely an abstract conceptual debate but one that produces empirical implications across a wide spectrum—from digital publics to urban political arenas. Accordingly, the Findings section proceeds by first presenting a comparative analysis of the two approaches and then examining their applied reflections in contemporary political contexts, thereby completing the study's overall analytical framework.

5.1. Comparative Analysis

The democratic theories of Habermas and Mouffe exhibit significant contrasts across core political concepts due to their divergent theoretical foundations. The following section presents a comparative examination of the two frameworks, focusing on the key concepts of legitimacy, participation, public sphere, and political representation.

Legitimacy: The question of the source of democratic legitimacy marks a profound theoretical divergence between the approaches of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe. For Habermas, democratic legitimacy is grounded in collective consent formed through processes of public reasoning. Legitimacy, in this framework, can only be established through rational agreement that emerges from communicative processes in which individuals participate freely and under conditions of equality (Habermas, 2009). According to his theory of communicative action, a key

distinction must be made between persuasion and coercion in public deliberation: a decision is considered legitimate only if participants are convinced by reasons that appeal to their own rational judgment (Habermas, 2004). Hence, legitimacy is normatively constituted through the dialogical and rational acceptance of what is deemed valid. Habermas's approach assumes that political power can only be justified through a consensus based on communicative rationality (Habermas, 2009).

In contrast, Chantal Mouffe conceptualizes legitimacy not as the outcome of rational consensus, but as the product of political struggle and hegemonic relations. According to Mouffe, every form of legitimacy depends on the ability of a particular social group to render its values, interests, and worldview hegemonic (Mouffe, 2000). From this perspective, legitimacy is not derived from absolute truth or universal reason, but rather represents the temporary acceptance of a socio-political order that has been normalized through hegemonic articulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Mouffe argues that conflict is inherent to democratic politics, and thus no political order can ever be fully accepted by all segments of society (Mouffe, 2000). Legitimacy, therefore, arises from the process of hegemonic formation and is always open to challenge by counter-hegemonic alternatives (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Mouffe criticizes Habermas's model for overlooking the inevitable entanglement of legitimacy and power. She contends that the power-free deliberative space envisioned in Habermas's "ideal speech situation" underestimates the inherently conflictual and exclusionary nature of the political (Mouffe, 2000; 2005). In contrast, Mouffe's agonistic approach views legitimacy as embedded within particular power configurations and as constantly contested through political struggle (Mouffe, 2005a).

This theoretical cleavage reveals a fundamental epistemological divergence between the consensus-based and agonistic models of democracy: while Habermas locates legitimacy in consensus achieved under ideal discursive conditions guided by universal reason, Mouffe sees it as the contingent product of conflict and hegemonic contestation inherent in the political. Thus, one centers rational communication as the foundation of legitimacy, while the other emphasizes the inescapability of political struggle.

Participation: In political theory, the nature of democratic participation is not limited to citizens' involvement in formal procedures (e.g., elections); it also encompasses active and critical engagement in processes of public reasoning. The approaches of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe diverge significantly in their interpretations of the meaning, form, and normative function of participation.

Habermas conceptualizes participation primarily as involvement in deliberative processes based on communicative rationality. Within the Habermasian framework, democratic participation entails citizens' ability to engage in public discourse freely, equally, and consciously, offering well-reasoned arguments and evaluating others' claims through rational deliberation (Habermas, 2004). Participation, in this model, extends far beyond voting behavior; it involves continuous communication through civil society organizations, public forums, consultative platforms, and the media, with the expectation that citizens influence political decision-making via these channels (Habermas, 2009). For Habermas, democratic legitimacy can only be achieved through the sustained exercise of public reasoning, where discourse is stripped of emotional, personal, or irrational motives. The ultimate aim of participation is to generate a rational consensus grounded in a universally acceptable conception of the common good.

In contrast, Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy defines participation as active involvement in political struggle. For participation to be authentic, Mouffe argues, citizens must become political subjects not only through rational argumentation but also through collective identities, passions, and forms of belonging (Mouffe, 2005a). In the agonistic framework, participation is expressed through politically intense practices such as partisan engagement, ideological contestation, and protest. Mouffe rejects the liberal theoretical notion that citizens should "bracket" their strong moral or identity-based convictions in public deliberation, deeming this both unrealistic and undesirable (Mouffe, 2000). On the contrary, she asserts that citizens must enter the political domain with their values, affective attachments, and differences, which are essential to the vitality of the agonistic democratic process (Mouffe, 2005a).

Within this view, political participation materializes not only in discursive arenas but also through social movements, protests, radical political campaigns, and ideological mobilizations. A fiercely contested election campaign, in which opposing political blocs assert their visions with intensity, is seen by the agonistic model as a healthy manifestation of democratic pluralism. Mouffe (2018) argues that for citizens to make genuine political choices, the alternatives must be clear, contentious, and mobilizing. Thus, expanding democratic participation is less about reaching technocratic consensus and more about institutionalizing contentious, passionate, and pluralistic political competition.

Accordingly, the divergence between these two models extends beyond participatory mechanisms to include differing conceptions of political subjectivity and the normative principles governing democratic practice. Habermas envisions participation as a process of rational dialogue and deliberation, while Mouffe sees it as a space of visible antagonism, competitive engagement, and affective political mobilization. In practice, this contrast results in the emphasis on citizen panels, deliberative forums, and consensus conferences within the Habermasian model, whereas the Mouffian perspective prioritizes protest cultures, social movements, and hegemonic confrontations as primary arenas of democratic participation.

Public Sphere: The concept of the public sphere occupies a central position in the normative debates of contemporary democratic theory. However, Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe attribute distinctly different meanings to this concept, diverging both epistemologically and theoretically. While both theorists view the public sphere as the space where citizens engage in political life, they hold opposing views regarding its structure, operation, and capacity to generate legitimacy.

For Habermas, the public sphere (*öffentliche Sphäre*) is a discursive arena situated between the private domain and the state apparatus, where citizens engage freely in public deliberation guided by the force of reason (Habermas, 1991). He idealizes this space as one in which individuals participate in public reasoning, debate on the basis of argumentative rationality, and generate collective opinions oriented toward the common good. In his historical analysis, Habermas identifies the "bourgeois public sphere" of eighteenth-century Western Europe as a model where rational criticism and public thought were institutionalized. However, he argues that this model has deteriorated in modern mass societies due to the commercialization of media, pressure from interest groups, and the dominance of manipulative communication practices (Habermas, 1991).

Despite these transformations, Habermas maintains that a vibrant, inclusive, and accessible public sphere

remains normatively essential to the constitution of democratic legitimacy. In his view, diverse perspectives must be freely expressed, all participants should enjoy equal rights of inclusion, and the communicative culture should operate within a framework of discursive ethics grounded in reason (Habermas, 1991; 2009). In this perspective, the public sphere functions as the foundation of social consensus and is fundamental to conferring democratic legitimacy upon political decision-making.

By contrast, Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy offers a critical perspective on this normative idealization. Mouffe conceives of society as a heterogeneous terrain characterized by enduring tensions among irreconcilable interests, identities, and regimes of meaning. From this standpoint, the idea of a single, homogeneous, and inclusive public sphere is misleading. According to Mouffe, the public sphere is fundamentally a site of hegemonic struggle, where different social actors compete to establish the dominance of their own discourses (Mouffe, 2013). Thus, it is not a space of silent consensus but a dynamic arena in which legitimate political conflict is rendered visible.

This view resonates with Nancy Fraser's (1990) notion of counter-publics, which argues that the hegemonic public sphere always privileges particular discourses, compelling marginalized groups—whether defined by ethnicity, sexuality, or ideology—to construct their own alternative publics. Mouffe contends that Habermas's model obscures these asymmetric power relations and risks suppressing difference in the name of universal reason (Mouffe, 2000). In her view, the antagonism inherent to the political demands a model of the public sphere structured not by consensus, but by agonistic contestation (Mouffe, 2013).

These divergent conceptions also lead to contrasting interpretations of digital-age transformations in the public sphere. The Habermasian approach tends to interpret the internet and social media as promising new platforms for deliberation, whereas the Mouffian approach emphasizes their pluralistic, overlapping, and often conflictual nature. Indeed, phenomena such as hashtag movements, viral campaigns, and counter-hegemonic discourses in digital spaces signal the emergence not of a singular, universalist public sphere, but of multiple, fragmented, and contested publics.

In summary, Habermas envisions the public sphere as a space for consensus-building through normative discursive ethics and the production of common reason, while Mouffe situates it as a dynamic field of hegemonic contestation in which political differences are actively and competitively expressed. This fundamental contrast has direct implications for broader theoretical debates surrounding democratic pluralism, representation, and participation.

Political Representation: Political representation remains a foundational element of contemporary democratic theory. However, divergent theoretical approaches persist concerning the legitimacy, function, and limitations of representation. Both Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe focus on the normative foundations of representative democracy, yet their interpretations of the concept diverge significantly. While each theorist acknowledges the crisis of representation within contemporary democracies, they adopt contrasting theoretical orientations regarding the function and transformative potential of representation.

Habermas does not advocate the rejection of representative democracy but instead argues for its

transformation through communicative rationality. He asserts that the democratic legitimacy of representative institutions must derive not solely from electoral authorization, but also from their responsiveness to discursive processes within the public sphere (Habermas, 2009). In this context, the notion of “communicative sovereignty” reflects a model of popular sovereignty rooted not only in formal representation but in communicative consent generated within civil society and public discourse. Elected representatives, according to Habermas, must maintain legitimacy not merely through legal authority but also by responding to critical public opinion formed through deliberative reasoning (Habermas, 2009).

In line with this view, Habermas advocates for reinforcing representative institutions through deliberative practices: citizen panels, public assemblies, consultative councils, and referenda are seen as participatory mechanisms that enhance the pluralistic legitimacy of representative democracy. Political representation, from this perspective, should function as a communicative interface between the public and political decision-making mechanisms. Representatives must remain engaged with the guidance of public reason; otherwise, the democratic nature of representation is compromised.

In contrast, Chantal Mouffe interprets the current crisis of representative democracy as a result of post-political tendencies driven by liberal centrism. According to Mouffe, the homogenization of the political through “technocratic consensus” deprives citizens of genuine political alternatives, weakening authentic political competition (Mouffe, 2005a). She contends that when diverse social demands, identities, and worldviews are not sufficiently expressed within the representative system, this exclusion fosters the rise of anti-systemic radical movements. Mouffe explains the ascendance of far-right populist parties in this light—as a consequence of the failure to accommodate legitimate political differences within the system (Mouffe, 2018).

Mouffe’s theory of representation is grounded not in communicative agreement, but in competition among hegemonic projects. In her view, democratic representation necessarily entails the prioritization of particular value systems; representative institutions should serve as arenas for the contestation of competing hegemonic visions (Mouffe, 2005a). For Mouffe, pluralism in representation is not only about the protection of individual rights but also about the visibility of collective identities (Mouffe, 2000). She argues that political representation gains democratic vitality when distinct ideological actors confront each other openly. Accordingly, a certain degree of polarization is not only inevitable but desirable, as it enables real political choice and citizen mobilization (Mouffe, 2005a).

Another notable divergence between the two approaches lies in their conceptions of leadership and political rhetoric. Habermas, basing democratic legitimacy on argumentative rationality, remains skeptical of charismatic leadership and emotional rhetoric (Habermas, 2009). Mouffe, by contrast, emphasizes the affective dimension of the political and recognizes the role of leadership in constructing collective identities through “us versus them” distinctions (Mouffe, 2013). However, she insists that such rhetoric must remain within democratic boundaries, requiring the recognition of the opponent as a legitimate adversary.

In conclusion, for Habermas, political representation functions as a mechanism legitimized through communicative reasoning, whereas for Mouffe, it is the institutionalized expression of democratic pluralism and hegemonic struggle. The former emphasizes deliberative harmony and discursive ethics; the latter foregrounds the visibility of differences and the democratic management of political antagonism. This theoretical distinction offers

competing normative perspectives on how to address the crisis of representation in contemporary democracies.

The contrast between deliberative and agonistic democratic theories can be more clearly understood when examined across specific normative and institutional dimensions. While Habermas's model emphasizes rational consensus, communicative action, and structured forums for participation, Mouffe's approach centers on hegemonic struggle, political conflict, and ideological contestation as intrinsic to democracy. These key distinctions are outlined in Table 1, which compares the two models in terms of core principles, conceptualizations of the public sphere, modes of participation, and sources of legitimacy, accompanied by illustrative examples from real-world democratic practices.

Table 1: Key Dimensions of Deliberative and Agonistic Democracy

Dimension / Criterion	Habermas (Deliberative Democracy)	Mouffe (Agonistic Democracy)
Core Principle	Rational consensus and communicative action	Hegemonic struggle and legitimate political conflict
Public Sphere	A discursive space grounded in shared reasoning	A site for the legitimate expression of political antagonism
Mode of Participation	Citizen forums, consultative councils, referenda	Protests, local campaigns, ideological contestation
Source of Legitimacy	Agreement based on shared and reasoned justifications	Ideological conflict legitimized by public support
Illustrative Example	Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre	Zoning disputes turning into political competition over environmental/economic priorities

Note: Table created by the author based on theoretical interpretations. No external source was used.

5.2. Applied Illustrations Through Contemporary Examples

To concretize the theoretical approaches of Habermas and Mouffe, it is useful to examine contemporary domains such as social media, civil society movements, and practices of local democracy. Developments in these areas help to illustrate what the perspectives of deliberative and agonistic democracy signify in practice.

Social Media: In the digital age, social media platforms serve both as experimental grounds for assessing the applicability of normative democratic theories and as arenas where the public sphere is being reconfigured. In this context, the political theories of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe offer divergent frameworks for evaluating the nature of the digital public sphere. At first glance, the participatory and decentralized structure of social media appears to hold the potential for a new Habermasian public sphere. As a medium where millions of citizens can express political opinions and exchange information and ideas, social media seemingly promises an expansion of public reason.

From the perspective of Habermas's theory of communicative action, social media—under conditions of limited censorship and access to diverse information sources—can facilitate collective opinion formation through

rational-critical deliberation. This perspective positively evaluated social media's role in events such as the Arab Spring, where platforms were used as tools for democratic mobilization against authoritarian regimes. However, the actual functioning of digital platforms often falls short of these normative expectations. Recent empirical research shows that social media frequently fosters "echo chambers" and "algorithmic filter bubbles," thereby intensifying political polarization and transforming engagement between opposing views into hostile confrontation rather than constructive dialogue (Sunstein, 2017; Maisaroh et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2024; Bail et al., 2018).

This dynamic represents a significant departure from Habermas's ideal of the public sphere. Instead of rational discourse, emotional reactions dominate; rather than the dissemination of information, disinformation spreads; and insult and trolling replace dialogue. Thus, the functioning of digital publics often fails to uphold a Habermasian ethic of discourse, instead producing a communicative regime marked by rhetorical violence and digital antagonism.

Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy offers a more interpretively consistent framework for understanding the conflictual nature of online political communication. According to Mouffe, the political is inherently structured by antagonisms, and it is not surprising that these tensions become visible in digital contexts (Mouffe, 2005a). The central question for Mouffe is whether these conflicts can be transformed into legitimate agonistic confrontations within democratic limits. However, the tendency of algorithms to prioritize content that triggers anger, fear, and polarization—combined with the proliferation of fake news and hate speech—suggests that social media often drifts beyond legitimate agonism toward destructive antagonism.

In this sense, social media simultaneously facilitates the mobilization of democratic demands and offers fertile ground for the degradation of political discourse. From Mouffe's perspective, the democratic potential of digital agonism can only be realized if marginalized identities and suppressed demands are incorporated into the system of political representation. Hashtag movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FridaysForFuture exemplify spaces where previously silenced voices gain visibility and normative relevance by raising public awareness and fostering collective consciousness. Such movements may also activate critical reflection in the broader public, aligning with Habermas's ideal of stimulating rational public deliberation.

Nevertheless, these same digital platforms simultaneously act as conduits for discourses that erode democratic processes. This duality underscores the ambivalent nature of the digital public sphere from both Habermasian and Mouffian perspectives: on the one hand, the promise of pluralistic participation and visibility; on the other, the risks of epistemic erosion and increased political intolerance. Habermas responds to these challenges by advocating for regulatory interventions such as content moderation, algorithmic transparency, digital media ethics, and media literacy focused on civic engagement. Mouffe, in contrast, calls for mechanisms that channel political passions into legitimate democratic spaces rather than suppressing them.

In conclusion, social media constitutes an intensified field of experience that brings theoretical debates over the nature of public communication in contemporary democracies into sharp focus. The spectrum extending from Habermas's ideal of communicative rationality to Mouffe's model of hegemonic contestation necessitates an integrated and critical assessment of the normative potential and structural risks of the digital public sphere. The sustainability of democratic political culture in the digital age appears to depend on the ability to forge a reflective

synthesis between these two theoretical approaches.

The theoretical divergence between deliberative and agonistic democracy also manifests in how each framework interprets the role of social media in contemporary politics. While deliberative theory sees digital platforms as potential spaces for rational discourse and civic engagement, agonistic theory highlights their capacity to expose hegemonic conflicts and amplify marginalized voices. Table 2 presents a comparative reflection on the theoretical expectations, democratic opportunities, and inherent risks associated with social media, as viewed through Habermasian and Mouffeian lenses. Real-world examples such as #FridaysForFuture and #OccupyWallStreet illustrate how these divergent democratic logics unfold in digital spaces.

Table 2: Social Media: Comparative Theoretical Reflections

Dimension / Criterion	Habermas (Deliberative Democracy)	Mouffe (Agonistic Democracy)
Theoretical Expectation	Rational deliberation, public reason via digital forums	Online visibility of conflict, contestation of hegemonic norms
Opportunities	Civic engagement, rational discourse, global solidarity	Expression of excluded voices, affective mobilization
Risks	Echo chambers, disinformation, decline in discursive quality	Escalation of antagonism into polarization and populism
Example	#FridaysForFuture, rational climate discourse	#OccupyWallStreet, affect-driven protest against financial elites

Note: Table created by the author based on theoretical interpretations. No external source was used.

Civil Society Movements: Social movements, acts of civil disobedience, and mass protests occupy a central theoretical position in understanding the transformation of democratic politics. In this regard, the democratic theories of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe offer both overlapping and diverging normative orientations concerning the functions attributed to civil society movements. While both theorists regard civil society as an indispensable component of democracy, they develop different epistemological assumptions regarding the ways in which these movements interact with the political system.

Habermas interprets civil society movements as communicative responses emerging from the lifeworld against the structural colonization of the system. In his analysis of the “new social movements” of the late twentieth century—such as environmentalism, feminism, and peace activism—he argues that these movements reintroduce normative concerns into the public sphere by challenging the dominance of technocratic and bureaucratic rationalities, thereby contributing to the reconstruction of democratic legitimacy (Habermas, 1987). According to Habermas, such movements expand the scope of public discourse by incorporating issues marginalized by the political system—such as environmental sustainability, gender equality, or personal freedoms—into rational deliberative channels, thereby stimulating normative renewal within institutional structures. As such, peaceful, non-violent actions that activate public reason are interpreted within Habermas’s framework as manifestations of communicative power (Habermas, 2009).

For Habermas, the legitimacy of these movements depends on their capacity to engage in dialogue with the system. Civil society actors contribute to democratic transformation to the extent that their demands are transmitted

to the decision-making mechanisms through public reasoning. The civil rights movements of the 1960s, the shaping of environmental policies, or the influence of feminist activism in political representation exemplify, for Habermas, how communicative action can affect institutional arrangements.

Chantal Mouffe, by contrast, conceptualizes social movements within the framework of agonistic democracy as collective political interventions that challenge hegemonic orders (Mouffe, 2005a). For Mouffe, civil society is not merely a space for participatory consensus but a battleground for ongoing political struggle and counter-hegemonic articulation (Mouffe, 2000). In her theory, street protests, strikes, occupations, and radical forms of civil disobedience are considered legitimate tools for confronting the exclusionary nature of the existing political system (Mouffe, 2013). Particularly under conditions where ideological differences between political parties are blurred and alternatives are narrowed, such movements restore democratic pluralism by granting visibility to suppressed claims (Mouffe, 2005b).

Mouffe evaluates movements like Occupy Wall Street and Spain's 15-M Indignados as alternative modes of political expression emerging in response to the crisis of representation (Mouffe, 2013; 2018). From a Habermasian standpoint, the lack of structured policy proposals or organizational leadership in these movements may be interpreted as a limitation, as it impedes systemic dialogue and institutional engagement. However, for Mouffe, this is a defining feature of agonistic politics: civil movements challenge the dominant hegemony precisely from their position outside the system, and this externality grants them transformative political potential.

In this context, the global climate strikes led by Greta Thunberg may be interpreted within a Habermasian framework as rational warnings articulated in defense of public reason and scientific discourse. Simultaneously, from a Mouffian perspective, they may be viewed as legitimate hegemonic confrontations that articulate intergenerational claims for justice. Likewise, women's marches, anti-authoritarian civil resistance, or ethnic rights movements generate political energies aligned with the pluralistic ethos of agonistic democracy.

While Mouffe does not legitimize violence or actions that directly aim to dismantle constitutional order, she critically opposes the criminalization of incompatible demands and the shrinking of political space. She insists that radical critique and protest are necessary to sustain democratic vibrancy and dynamism. Civil society activism, in this sense, is not simply a consensual arena compatible with the system but also a site of struggle where hegemonic norms can be challenged.

In conclusion, while Habermas and Mouffe share a sensitivity to the significance of civil society movements, they conceptualize their role in democratization differently. Habermas views civil society as a space of deliberative potential that stimulates systemic transformation through communicative rationality. In contrast, Mouffe conceives of it as a site for institutionalizing political antagonism and sustaining hegemonic contestation. This theoretical divergence reflects fundamentally different visions of protest politics, conditions of legitimacy, and the contribution of civil society to democratic renewal. Table 3 provides a comparative overview of these perspectives, highlighting their distinct engagement models, normative orientations, and illustrative historical examples such as the civil rights movement and the Occupy/15-M mobilizations.

Table 3: Civil Society Movements: Comparative Theoretical Reflections

Dimension / Criterion	Habermas (Deliberative Democracy)	Mouffe (Agonistic Democracy)
View on Social Movements	Communicative responses from the lifeworld	Legitimate acts of hegemonic resistance
Engagement Model	Integration into deliberative processes	Disruption of hegemonic order through visible dissent
Normative Focus	Rational reconstruction of legitimacy	Pluralization of political space
Example	Civil rights movement engaging political institutions	Occupy and 15-M as expressions of anti-representational critique

Note: Table created by the author based on theoretical interpretations. No external source was used.

Local Democracy Practices: Local governments constitute one of the most immediate levels at which democratic participation can be observed and citizen–state interaction is most intensively experienced. The local level offers not only a setting for governance mechanisms but also a political space where both consensus and conflict dynamics emerge in tangible ways. In this regard, the democratic theories of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe provide distinct yet potentially complementary normative frameworks for interpreting the design and operation of local democracy.

Habermas's theory of democracy advocates for the institutionalization of participatory mechanisms grounded in communicative action at the local level (Habermas, 2009). Especially in small-scale political communities where deliberative processes can be more easily organized, it is possible for citizens to engage directly in shaping public policy. In this context, the participatory budgeting model implemented in Porto Alegre, Brazil, has been widely viewed as a practice closely aligned with Habermasian normative principles (Abers, 2000). In this model, neighborhood residents gather to deliberate on budgetary priorities, collectively formulate proposals for resource allocation, and make decisions either by consensus or majority vote. Such processes not only enhance the legitimacy of decisions but also promote the political subjectification of citizens (Fung & Wright, 2003). From a Habermasian perspective, these practices demonstrate how communicative rationality can find institutional expression at the local level, fulfilling the democratic function of the public sphere (Habermas, 2009). Citizen assemblies, neighborhood forums, and consultative councils similarly represent participatory forms grounded in deliberative democratic ideals (Fung, 2004).

In contrast, Chantal Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy frames local democracy not as a space of consensus, but as a battleground where legitimate political conflicts can be institutionalized (Mouffe, 2013). According to Mouffe, local politics is among the most intense arenas in which social antagonisms unfold. Ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, or ideological differences often lead to direct encounters and tensions in urban life. Mouffe argues that the success of local democracy depends on the capacity to bring these conflicts into the political arena rather than suppressing them, and to manage them through pluralistic representation (Mouffe, 2005a). For example, in a municipal zoning debate, one group may oppose a development project on environmental grounds, while another may support it in the name of economic growth. A Habermasian approach would prioritize bringing stakeholders together to deliberate and seek rational consensus (Habermas, 2009). A Mouffian view, however, would see such competing claims as legitimate political positions that should compete through local elections, referenda, or public

campaigns, with democratic legitimacy arising from public support (Mouffe, 2013).

Nonetheless, Mouffe emphasizes that political competition must remain within democratic bounds. The rule of the political majority must not suppress minority demands entirely. Even where consensus is not possible, it is normatively essential—according to agonistic democracy—that channels for expressing dissenting voices remain open. In practice, this principle may be reflected in mediation processes employed in some cities. Public conflicts over issues such as transportation planning or environmental regulation can be addressed through facilitated negotiations. From a Habermasian perspective, such processes represent forums for rational argumentation and consensus-seeking; from a Mouffian view, these are temporary, contingent outcomes of hegemonic contestation.

The institutional design of local governance can also reflect this theoretical distinction. In municipalities governed by coalitions, a deliberative culture of consensus may prevail. In politically polarized contexts, however, the relationship between council majorities and oppositions may resemble Mouffe's model of agonistic politics. For example, the highly contentious electoral processes in major cities like Istanbul illustrate how political polarization manifests at the local level. Yet, as long as such conflict is conducted within democratic norms, it can enable citizens to evaluate political alternatives and foster greater democratic awareness.

In sum, local democratic practices offer empirical arenas in which both deliberative consensus and agonistic contestation can be observed concurrently. Habermas views local democracy as a space where communicative action can be intensified, while Mouffe sees it as a site where political antagonisms can be expressed through democratic rivalry. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these two approaches provide complementary theoretical lenses that together illuminate the dual requirements of consensus and contestation in democratic local governance. Table 4 illustrates these divergent logics by comparing key dimensions of local democratic practice, exemplified by initiatives such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and contentious zoning debates that reflect ideological struggles over environmental and economic priorities.

Table 4: Deliberative vs. Agonistic Democracy in Local Practice

Dimension / Criterion	Habermas (Deliberative Democracy)	Mouffe (Agonistic Democracy)
Core Principle	Rational consensus through communicative action	Legitimate political conflict and hegemonic struggle
Public Sphere	Discursive arena for reasoned debate	Arena of visible political contestation
Form of Participation	Forums, consultative councils, referenda	Protests, local campaigns, electoral rivalry
Source of Legitimacy	Shared reasons and rational deliberation	Democratic competition and popular support
Illustrative Example	Porto Alegre Participatory Budgeting	Zoning disputes turning into political competition over environmental/economic priorities

Note: Table created by the author based on theoretical interpretations. No external source was used.

CONCLUSION

This study has comparatively examined the democratic theories of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe through the key conceptual dimensions of legitimacy, participation, the public sphere, and representation. Both thinkers offer influential theoretical frameworks that respond to the legitimacy and representation crises faced by contemporary democracies. While Habermas develops a normative ideal of democracy grounded in the theory of communicative action, Mouffe proposes an agonistic model of democracy centered on the constitutive role of conflict in politics.

Habermas's approach is driven by the belief that democratic legitimacy can be reconstructed through public deliberations grounded in universal reason. In this framework, legitimacy rests on rational consensus emerging from discursive processes in which all citizens can participate under conditions of equality. Participation is defined as the involvement of individuals in public reasoning, free from prejudice; the public sphere is conceived as a singular, inclusive space where the common good is deliberated. Political representation functions as the institutional expression of the collective will generated through communicative processes. While acknowledging the practical limitations of this ideal—such as structural inequalities and media monopolies—Habermas proposes reforms to strengthen democratic institutions through deliberative processes, enhance civil society, and diversify communicative channels.

Mouffe, by contrast, conceptualizes democracy as a pluralistic and inherently conflictual arena in which full consensus is neither possible nor desirable. For her, legitimacy arises from the contestation between competing hegemonic projects; politics inherently involves a distinction between “us” and “them.” Participation entails citizens intervening in the public sphere with their collective identities and political passions. Rather than a singular arena for consensus, Mouffe envisions the public sphere as a multiplicity of spaces where antagonistic narratives compete. Democratic representation, in her view, depends not only on the presence of differences but also on their political visibility and expressibility. Mouffe's model challenges the technocratic and depoliticizing tendencies of liberal democracy and places political struggle at the heart of the democratic process. At the same time, she acknowledges that agonistic democracy carries risks of polarization and political deadlock, underscoring the need to preserve a democratic ethos—respecting opponents as legitimate adversaries and adhering to constitutional norms.

This study demonstrates that the approaches of Habermas and Mouffe are not mutually exclusive but represent two normatively complementary orientations. Habermas's model, grounded in dialogue, rationality, and institutional inclusiveness, offers a structured pathway for constructing democratic legitimacy; Mouffe's emphasis on difference, passion, and hegemonic struggle serves to safeguard the vibrancy and pluralism of democracy. The contemporary phenomena of polarization, representational crisis, and declining participation can be re-examined through the combined insights of both theorists.

For instance, to address political polarization, Habermasian communicative mechanisms—such as deliberative platforms, mediation forums, and citizen panels—can be normatively effective; however, to ensure the authentic representation of political differences, Mouffe's agonistic pluralism must also be considered. Overemphasizing consensus may reduce politics to a technocratic governance practice, whereas excessive conflict may erode democratic norms. Therefore, the sustainability of democratic political culture depends on constructing a critical and balanced synthesis between consensus and contestation.

The findings of this study, guided by the central research question—How do Habermas's consensus-based

model of deliberative democracy and Mouffe's agonistic approach conceptualize legitimacy, participation, the public sphere, and representation, and what contributions do they offer to contemporary democratic practices?—highlight the original insights that each perspective provides in responding to current democratic crises. Habermas advocates for a more inclusive, pluralistic, and rational communicative order to restore legitimacy, while Mouffe underscores the vital importance of reinforcing political alternatives and oppositional forces as a source of democratic resilience. In conclusion, the theoretical frameworks of Habermas and Mouffe not only open fertile ground for political theory debates but also offer normatively complementary foundations for making democratic practices more pluralistic, inclusive, and resilient. In envisioning the future of democracy, the dynamic synthesis of these two approaches could transform the tension between consensus and contestation into a driving force for democratization.

STATEMENT OF SUPPORT AND THANKS

This study received no external funding, and there are no individuals or institutions to acknowledge.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest associated with any institution or individual in relation to this study.

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