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Making Sense of the Present

What's wrong with contemporary democracy? That something is going on should be evident to all. Many long-established parties are in terminal decline. Others have disappeared altogether. Party systems are being transformed beyond recognition as new political actors and party types emerge. The lines of conflict and struggle that structured political competition appear increasingly blurred. Doubts proliferate about whether existing democratic regimes are able to sustain their basic values. Citizens are becoming increasingly dissatisfied, not just with specific political actors and organizations, but also with the democratic order itself.

The idea that democracy is somehow in 'crisis' has become commonplace. However, the categories used to describe and interpret this crisis have so far remained primarily negative, in that they focus on what is fading away or being actively undermined. We have been told that we live in a 'post-democratic' age (Crouch 2003), that 'the age of party democracy has passed' (Mair 2013), and that representative democracy is being 'disfigured' (Urbinati 2014). According to some, democracy may even be 'dying' (Levitsky and Ziblitt 2018) or close to its 'end' (Runciman 2018).

If a crisis signals the transition from one state of affairs to another, then it necessarily means leaving something behind. The prevalence of negative images is therefore understandable and highlights a process of important tendencies at work in contemporary democratic regimes. What remains is the challenge of delineating the contours of the new type of politics that is replacing what is being