

Abstract

Human beings today play more than at any other point in history, yet political discourse rarely accounts for this radical cultural shift and its deep roots. Economic theories have long provided the dominant frame for politics, exemplified in the twentieth century by the struggle between capitalism and socialism, but they fail to grasp cultural forces. Leaders and societies thrive not merely by redistributing resources but by promising participation in a common culture. Whereas *Homo Oeconomicus* models the rational maximizer, *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1938) foregrounds play as the root of culture and civilization. Drawing from Huizinga, Caillois, and cultural history, this paper introduces Playerism as a conceptual lens to understand political culture: increasingly, citizens frame political life as play, motivated not by economic rationality but by ludic drives such as competition, chance, mimicry, and chaos — dynamics that modern populists have mastered. When disruptions strike, societies often retreat to cultural reservoirs for stability—religion being the most common. Yet there exists an even deeper cultural reservoir: play. The aim of this paper is to uncover the anatomy of these ludic logics within political culture as well as cultural roots and differences.

1. Framework

1.1 Huizinga and the Sacred Earnest

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga (1938) argued that play—though separate from “ordinary life”—is the foundation of culture and generates institutions such as law, religion, and art. It emerges not out of economic interest but out of intrinsic motivation. At the core lies what Huizinga called **sacred earnest**: a negotiated reality that must be upheld, and its outcome honored — be it a duel, a coin toss, or a vote (Huizinga, 1938, p. 49).

A historical example appears in Herodotus’ *Histories*: when Persia required a new king after a pretender was deposed and no bloodline could be followed, clan leaders considered various playful methods—lottery or vote—and finally settled on whoever’s horse neighed first at sunrise. Darius secured the throne through trickery by arranging a mare’s presence for his stallion. Yet crucially, the tribes accepted the ludic procedure.

Voting, one of many cultural techniques, rests on this principle. It is not the rationality of the ballot that legitimizes authority, but the cultural honoring of the ritual that makes the outcome binding. Huizinga emphasized that the spoilsport is more destructive than the cheat. The cheat bends rules for advantage, but the spoilsport “shatters the play-world itself” (Huizinga, 1938, p. 11). When this covenant is undermined—such as losers refusing to accept results—the sacred earnest of democracy can collapse.

This paper argues that this collapse does not necessarily lead to barbarism or religious fundamentalism; instead, other ludic procedures may take its place. As Huizinga observed, “play is a contest for something, or a representation of something” (Huizinga, 1938, p. 13), but Roger Caillois (1958) was the first to provide a more nuanced framework to organize different forms of play.

1.2 Caillois’ Framework for Play

Roger Caillois (1958) called spontaneous and free play *paidia* and structured play *ludus*, the latter being bound by a stage, rules, or defined winning conditions. Furthermore, he identified four primary categories of play:

- Agon (competition)
- Alea (chance)
- Mimicry (role-play, simulation)
- Ilinx (vertigo, rushes of adrenaline, disruption)

These four modalities provide a framework for analyzing how politics mobilizes ludic energies. Each corresponds to a reservoir of cultural techniques—competitions, lotteries, performances, and disruptions—through which legitimacy is constructed.

Caillois compared these categories to highlight contingencies and differences. He noted that both Agon and Mimicry require skill and agency, while Alea and Ilinx diminish it. Societies that privilege the first two tend to value merit, while those privileging the latter emphasize spirituality or superstition. Furthermore, Agon and Alea allow for more structured *ludus* with clear outcomes, whereas Mimicry and Ilinx require interpretation.

2. Cultural Reservoirs of Play

Plato's remark remains pertinent: "*You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation*" (Republic, cited in Huizinga, 1938). I argue that the same holds for cultural realms: analyzing their repertoire of play reveals much about their motivations and value systems.

Cultural techniques and societal norms are not deliberately engineered but grow organically over time, giving each cultural sphere an instinctive and distinctive toolkit. They would anarchically emerge through *paidia* and seek formalization in *ludus*, which then offers new playful possibilities or may even serve as cultural institutions. The seemingly trivial act of "drawing the short stick" exemplifies how playful improvisation crystallizes into formalized lottery systems, which served as legal means to resolve disputes across societies—as mentioned in the Old Testament (e.g., Joshua 18:10).

Historians have long observed that, confronted with disruption, societies tend to fall back on cultural repertoires that provide legitimacy, orientation, and affective force. Turning to sacred texts, rituals, or divine sanction, such repertoires are often seen as religious. Yet we can recognize play as an equally profound, if not deeper, cultural reservoir.

European history offers testimony to these shifts. Based on the Hellenic cultural sphere, the Roman Empire epitomized *panem et circenses*—bread and games—as a means of governance. With the rise of Christianity, this ludic orientation gave way to *ora et labora*—prayer and labor. Playful techniques such as casting lots were stigmatized as pagan, and entire fields of architecture (theatres, stadiums) ceased to exist in Europe for over a thousand years. Yet ludic forms resurfaced. Stadiums re-emerged in England with cricket and spread throughout the British Empire. Despite its colonial legacy, cricket is still embraced passionately in India. Hiroshima, devastated by nuclear war, built a baseball stadium within years, underscoring play's role in reconstruction and cultural renewal—and also bridging divides, helping transform bitter enemies into allies. The Olympic Games exemplify how play functions as a cultural institution: bringing cultures together in civilized competition, while allowing host nations to project power.

In 2025, the first Olympic Esports Games will be held in Saudi Arabia. To harness the cultural energy of its youth, the Crown Prince has invested heavily in transforming the

Kingdom into an esports hub—even though chess was declared haram in Saudi Arabia as recently as 2016 causing resistance in society. (Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, 2016) This marks a significant shift in the Islamic world, where play is often suppressed as a waste of time, reminiscent of the Christian *ora et labora* mentality. At the extreme, the Taliban’s prohibition of even music exemplifies this suppression.

By contrast, East Asian societies have a long history of embracing ludic practices. South Korea and Japan cultivated gaming cultures that became both economic drivers and cultural exports. It is telling that Nvidia—originally a graphics card manufacturer for video games—has become the most valuable technology company in the world. Technological innovation often stems from military needs but flourishes in gaming culture. Tapping into the cultural energy of play can unleash enormous political and economic power.

3.1 Agon – Competition as Legitimation

Agon, the structured contest, is perhaps the most recognizable political form of play. It channels the human impulse toward rivalry into regulated formats where victory confers legitimacy. Historically, aristocrats legitimated honor through duels—ritualized combat for the symbolic recognition of honor. Instead of violence, societies institutionalize symbolic combat: debates, elections, sporting competitions. In classical Greece, Olympic victories were taken as signs of divine favor and thus political entitlement.

One famous case is **Diagoras of Rhodes**, whose Olympic boxing victories elevated him and his family to near-mythical status. His sons and grandsons also became Olympic victors, and the prestige secured the family lasting political influence in Rhodes. Similarly, in 5th century BCE Athens, the statesman **Cimon** gained immense popularity by winning the four-horse chariot race at Olympia, which bolstered his election to public office. As Pindar put it, “*To be victorious at Olympia crowns a man with radiant glory, and his fame will not perish in the memory of men*” (*Olympian Odes* 7.91–94). Athletic triumph was thus a recognized pathway to political power.

Today, athletic triumphs still provide symbolic capital: leaders pose with sports teams, and nations invest in mega-events like the Olympics to gain prestige. Political debates function in similar ways, dramatizing competition through metaphors of combat like “destroying” one’s opponent.

The political potency of agon depends on fairness. Authority is legitimated when the contest is perceived as just; when fairness is doubted, legitimacy collapses. Contemporary populism thrives on precisely this suspicion. Accusations of “rigged elections” undermine the sacred earnest that sustains democratic agon.

Games as cultural products reflect divergent understandings of agonistic conflict. Chess, originating in India and diffused through the Islamic and Christian worlds (which both sought to ban it), is directly confrontational while dramatizing hierarchy: pieces differ in power but must coordinate strategically. Go, by contrast, emphasizes encirclement and connection rather than hierarchy. Its rules are minimal, yet its complexity emerges from emergent strategy and mutual agreement. Players are not even forced to make a move; it ends when both **cease** to play. Hnefatafl, or Viking chess, celebrates asymmetry: a smaller defending force seeks to escape encirclement by a larger attacker.

Each of these games encodes cultural attitudes toward conflict, power, and legitimacy. And each culture has a different repertoire to approach conflict.

3.2 Alea – The Legitimacy of Chance

Where agon rewards skill, alea legitimizes outcomes by completely denying human agency. Caillois defined alea as “*a resignation to destiny, a game in which the player is entirely passive*” (Caillois, 1958, p. 17). Precisely this passivity makes it powerful: when decisions are attributed to chance, they cannot be accused of bias.

The casting of lots has ancient roots. In the Mesopotamian *Atrahasis* epic, the gods drew lots to divide the universe, a myth later echoed in the *Iliad*, where Poseidon, Zeus, and Hades cast lots for the realms of sea, sky, and underworld. The *Iliad* states: “*Three brothers we are, and sons of Cronus ... we cast lots, and each received his due*” (Homer, *Iliad* 15.187–193). What appears as divine allocation was also a practical cultural technique. It was standard legal practice in the ancient Middle East to divide inheritance shares or appoint officials by lot. The Hebrew Bible similarly describes land distribution by lot: “*Joshua then cast lots for them in Shiloh in the presence of the Lord, and there he distributed the land*” (Joshua 18:10).

In Athens, many civic offices were assigned by sortition to prevent corruption, embodying the democratic principle of equality. Aristotle described sortition as the most democratic method: “*It is thought to be democratic when public offices are assigned by lot, and oligarchic when*

they are filled by election” (*Politics* 4.9, 1294b). Modern jury selection and visa lotteries continue this tradition.

Yet chance has often been stigmatized as irrational. Christianity in particular waged what some historians call “a war on randomness,” branding the casting of lots as pagan divination that usurped divine providence. Islam, too, restricts games of chance, though with more nuance, tolerating some forms while prohibiting gambling.

While the ancient West cast lots, the Hindu world knew cubical dice for millennia before their spread through the Roman Empire. Hindu traditions like the *Rig Veda* both praise and condemn dice. The *Mahābhārata* centers on a decisive dice game in which the rightful heirs to the empire lose everything and are exiled—a story that simultaneously warns of gambling’s dangers and reflects early theories of probability and fate.

Caillois noted that while animals engage in agon, mimicry, andilinx, only humans play with chance. I argue that the cultivation of chance is one of the most profound civilizational roots: it generates legitimacy that transcends human manipulation. The probabilistic models and randomized trials of the scientific revolution carried this legacy forward, and today, this same logic is embedded in algorithms and the DNA of artificial intelligence.

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While the ancient West cast lots, the Hindu world knew cubical dice for millennia before spreading throughout the Roman Empire. Hindu traditions like the Vedas both write of the dangers of gambling as well as praising dice in different times. The most important Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*, has the rightful heirs to the empire losing it all in a game of dice, and in exile they learn of a story about the knowledge of dice, often attributed to ancient theories of probability.

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3.3 Mimicry – Representation and Performance

Mimicry legitimizes authority through role-play and performance by capturing the hearts and minds of the audience. Caillois defined it as “*an acceptance, if only momentary, of an illusory universe*” (1958: 19). Politics abounds with such illusions: representatives speak on behalf of constituencies, leaders embody “the people,” rituals dramatize continuity.

Theatricality has long been central to political legitimacy. Roman satire exposed the absurdities of power. With the rise of Christianity, theatre largely disappeared from Europe for a millennium, surviving mainly in didactic religious forms. Medieval passion plays sought to render the sacred intelligible to the illiterate. Its revival during the Renaissance—exemplified by Shakespeare’s Globe—reignited public imagination, offering a bourgeois counter-power to aristocracy. As Shakespeare famously put it: “*All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players*” (*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII).

Modern parliaments retain theatrical dimensions: ceremonial dress, ritualized procedure, and the performative rhetoric of debate. Satirical protest to counter power likewise deploy mimicry through parody, costumes, spectacle. These techniques expose the artificiality of political roles, delegitimizing authority by exaggerating its theatricality.

As Huizinga observed, “*the impersonator plays at being another person, another character, another personality, or another reality*” (*Homo Ludens*, 1938, p. 24). Democratic politics depends on this capacity, and it correlates with cultures with rich traditions in mimicry — India’s theatre tradition, Japan’s kabuki, South Korea’s comedy culture — democracy finds.

A strong culture of mimicry provides fertile ground for pluralism, as it habituates societies to the recognition that roles are constructed, contested, and reversible.

3.4 Ilinx – Chaos and Disruption

Ilinx, the play of vertigo, dramatizes rupture. Caillois described it as “*an attempt to destroy stability, to create a kind of voluptuous panic*” (1958: 23). Like seeking a rush of adrenaline by jumping off a cliff or intoxicating festivities, it is a very powerful and irrational source of excitement. In politics, ilinx legitimizes authority by embodying disruption, or calling for a revolution.

Religious traditions often institutionalized ilinx. The Pythia at Delphi, intoxicated and incoherent, provided oracles precisely because her words defied rational control but evoked strong emotional rapture. As Plutarch wrote in *Moralia*: “*The Pythia, when she sits on the tripod, becomes filled with divine frenzy*” (Plutarch, *Moralia* 414e). Priesthood would often provide answers that allowed multiple interpretations, onto which oracle seekers could project their desires. Even though being illiterate, Muhammad’s reception of the Qur’an in trance-like states was taken by his followers as proof of divine authenticity and charisma. “*And you did not recite before it any scripture, nor did you inscribe one with your right hand. Otherwise, the falsifiers would have had cause for doubt.*” (29:48) In modern times, Donald Trump resonates with followers through his unpredictable style, rule-breaking, and chaotic performances, which are perceived as signs of unbiased authenticity. All represent individual embodiments of the seeming chaos of the universe following a divine plan.

Revolutionary upheavals exemplify collective ilinx. With almost playful roots, the *Jeu de Paume* — or Tennis Court Oath — of 1789 was the vow for the French Revolution, followed

by the storming of the Bastille and years of terror that marked the road to civil rights with a sea of blood. But as the revolutions of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, or the Ayatollahs show, the intoxicating chaos of ilinx is no guarantee of a liberating society, but only serves to free oneself from current inhibition to lay bare what cultural reservoir the revolution taps into.

The emotional force of ilinx cannot be dismissed. People desire ecstasy, risk, and rupture. As Huizinga noted: “*Play is a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own*” (1938: 8). Political ilinx dramatizes precisely this stepping out, offering temporary transcendence even at the cost of long-term stability—or one’s life. It is entirely irrational.

4. Populism, Nihilism, Playerism

Populism mobilizes the full ludic spectrum. *Agon* as a battle of “the people” against “the elites” even against the game “the system” itself, which is claimed to be rigged; a victory over *alea*, as a stroke of destiny whereby improbable outsiders emerge as leaders against all odds; in *mimicry*, as a performance of authenticity that invites people to “play along”; and as *ilinx*, the intoxicating thrill of disruption. This ludic mix renders populism emotionally engaging, intense, dramatic, and high stakes.

Politics of emotions are nothing new, but especially the American alt-right movement under political strategist and former White House adviser Steve Bannon tapped into a network of highly engaged gamer communities. Surrounding Gamergate (2014–15)—a sexist harassment campaign within gamer culture—this network morphed into political trolling on social media and even a recruitment funnel. As Joan Donovan noted, meme wars became “*a way to weaponize internet culture to gain political power*” (Axios, 2022). No candidate could seem more fitting than a casino owner, known for affairs with Playmates, whose political promise for every possible challenge was simply: “winning.”

On the contrary, contemporary progressives had long cultivated a suppression of their playfulness under the guise of professionalism. On the level of *agon*, many have shied away from confrontation and debate, preferring an image of being nice, correct, and inclusive at the cost of appearing weak or indecisive. In *alea*, they have grown entirely risk-averse, highlighting safety, and clinging to technocratic management. In *mimicry*, exaggerated roles of representation for every possible group failed to resonate with those they claimed to

represent. Rather than embodying credible advocacy, the perceived suffering of others became like a worn costume, only sacrificing one's own authenticity in the process. Finally, in *ilinx* they frequently fall into nihilistic boycotts, blockades, and intentional chaos. It is the last resort to unleash one's playful energy—and to be consumed by it. In total, this is not perceived as engaging or fun.

By contrast, civilized politics seeks to channel these ludic forces without collapsing into spectacle or nihilism while respecting the rules of the game. It cherishes *agon* by embracing the public arena and ensuring losers accept defeat to get the best out of people. It may celebrate *alea* as a democratic technique that distributes power impartially—citizen assemblies, jury selection, sortition. It cultivates *mimicry* through strong representative performance, while maintaining credibility and integrity, allowing itself to be challenged by other forms of mimicry like satire. And it harnesses *ilinx* in the form of festivities that bind and refresh political communities without dismantling institutional frameworks. Such a politics neither denies play nor succumbs to it but celebrates politics as civilizational play.

5. Conclusion: No Solutions

In our world and age of Playerism, it is good to be aware that solutions are for puzzles. As Caillois noted, “*Games imply decision, situations which can be won or lost, whereas the riddle implies solution*” (Caillois, 1958, p. 170). One is well advised not to offer solutions unless there is something clearly missing and one knows how to fix it, like a flat tire requiring a new tire and someone able to change it. Other than that, solutions are for riddles or what are called games of progression. These are intentionally designed challenges, like having to find a key to progress to the next level and are often used for narratological games. A player can solve them through brainpower or if someone simply hands them the key or the solution. It is also the easiest to be a spoilsport, because after the puzzle is solved, it is useless for further engagement. It is as if one is told the ending to a story. Mostly the missing part is a personal desire, and that is where play comes in as a source of engagement.

Most games, as well as challenges and desires in real life, are always subject to dynamics: luck, decisions of other actors, or the resonance of the observer. There are no solutions to those. One can only formulate better strategies to win what one aims for, to discern what dynamics are at play, what one possesses agency over, and what resonates with other actors.

According to the three basic psychological needs from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), people long for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which we can translate to a desire for agency, being valued for one’s skill, and feeling connected to others in a way that provides belonging. It helps to be aware that people and cultures have vastly different value systems and cultural repertoires to draw energy from. Especially at times when societal norms and frameworks are challenged, it is good to know which toolkit of play to fall back on—apart from religious rules, economic theory, or political ideology. And these can even be more civilizing and engaging.

If politics is unavoidably playful, the decisive question is not whether to play but how.

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