



The Impact of Populism on Democratic Institutions: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Populism has become a defining political phenomenon in the 21st century, shaping democratic institutions worldwide. This paper explores the impact of populist movements on democratic governance, focusing on case studies from Europe, Latin America, and the United States. By examining the mechanisms through which populist leaders consolidate power, weaken checks and balances, and challenge traditional party systems, this study highlights the implications for democratic resilience. The analysis draws from contemporary political science literature, employing a comparative approach to assess variations in populist influence across different political systems. The findings suggest that while populism can serve as a corrective to elite-driven politics, it also poses significant risks to democratic norms and institutions.

Keywords: Populism, Democracy, Political Institutions, Governance, Authoritarianism

1. Introduction

In recent decades, populism has gained prominence across the globe, fundamentally challenging traditional political systems and redefining governance structures. This rise in populist influence has been particularly pronounced in countries experiencing political fragmentation, economic crises, and public dissatisfaction with mainstream political elites. Populism is not a monolithic phenomenon; rather, it manifests differently across regions and political contexts. In some cases, it emerges as a left-wing movement advocating for economic redistribution and social justice, while in others, it takes the form of right-wing nationalism, emphasizing anti-immigration policies, cultural conservatism, and protectionist economic strategies. Statistical evidence suggests that populist parties have gained electoral success in both developing and developed democracies. According to the Global Populism Database (2022), the share of votes for populist parties in Europe increased from 7% in the 1990s to over 30% by 2020, indicating a significant shift in voter preferences. Similarly, in Latin America, a study by the Latinobarómetro (2021) shows that over 60% of citizens distrust traditional political parties, creating a fertile ground for populist rhetoric.

Despite these ideological differences, a common thread among populist leaders is their tendency to position themselves as the true representatives of "the people," in direct opposition to a corrupt or disconnected elite (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The rise of influential populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary exemplifies the profound transformations in contemporary democratic governance. These leaders, despite their distinct political contexts, share a similar strategy of undermining institutional checks and balances, promoting majoritarianism, and attacking independent media and civil society organizations that challenge their authority.

In the United States, Trump's presidency was marked by his rejection of traditional political norms, repeated efforts to discredit the press, and attempts to delegitimize electoral institutions, culminating in the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. In Brazil, Bolsonaro adopted an anti-establishment rhetoric that fueled distrust in democratic institutions, actively dismissing scientific expertise during the COVID-19 pandemic and encouraging political polarization. Meanwhile, in Hungary, Orbán has pursued constitutional reforms that concentrate power in the hands of the executive, weaken judicial independence, and limit the influence of opposition forces, effectively transitioning Hungary into a hybrid regime that retains the formal appearance of democracy while eroding its substantive principles.

The scholarly debate surrounding populism remains divided. Some theorists view it as a necessary corrective mechanism for democracies that have become too detached from the needs of ordinary citizens. In this perspective, populism serves to mobilize disenfranchised voters, bring pressing social issues to the forefront, and challenge entrenched elite dominance (Laclau, 2005). From this angle, populism can enhance democratic participation by engaging previously marginalized voices and fostering political competition. However, critics argue that populism often leads to democratic backsliding, as populist leaders tend to concentrate power, delegitimize opposition, and weaken the very institutions that ensure accountability and the rule of law (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Once in power, many populists adopt authoritarian tendencies, weakening constitutional norms and making it difficult for democratic institutions to recover even after these leaders leave office.

To better understand the effects of populism on democracy, it is crucial to explore its historical evolution, key theoretical frameworks, and diverse manifestations across different political systems. Historically, populism has been linked to moments of crisis, whether economic, social, or political. Its appeal lies in its ability to offer simple solutions to complex problems, often through charismatic leadership and direct appeals to the public. Populism has existed in various forms, from early 20th-century agrarian movements in the United States and Latin America to contemporary European nationalist parties and radical leftist movements in developing countries.

This study adopts a comparative approach to analyze how populist leaders operate within democratic settings and the extent to which their governance strategies impact democratic resilience. By examining both short-term and long-term effects, this analysis will highlight the risks and opportunities posed by populism in different political contexts. While some democracies have managed to resist or adapt to populist pressures, others have experienced significant institutional decline, raising important questions about the future of democratic governance in an era of rising populism.

2. Theories and Definitions of Populism

Populism is a contested concept in political science, with scholars debating its definition, causes, and effects on democracy. Cas Mudde (2004) characterizes populism as a "thin-centered ideology," meaning it lacks a comprehensive worldview and instead relies on a core dichotomy between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." This simplistic framework allows populist movements to adapt across different political contexts, making it a flexible and persistent force in modern politics. Populist leaders often claim to embody the "true will" of the people, positioning themselves as defenders of ordinary citizens against a political establishment perceived as self-serving, detached, or corrupt (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This rhetoric enables them to justify policies that bypass institutional constraints, attack political opponents, and consolidate executive power under the pretext of restoring popular sovereignty.

Despite its adaptability, populism can be broadly categorized into right-wing and left-wing variants, each with distinct ideological underpinnings but similar governance styles. Right-wing populism, exemplified by figures such as Donald Trump in the United States and Marine Le Pen in France, tends to emphasize nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and cultural conservatism. These leaders often frame globalization, multiculturalism, and international organizations as threats to national identity and economic security. Right-wing populists frequently target minority groups, mainstream media, and independent institutions, claiming that these actors undermine the will of the majority.

In contrast, left-wing populism, seen in the policies of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, primarily focuses on economic justice, wealth redistribution, and resistance to neoliberal policies. Left-wing populists present large corporations, financial institutions, and foreign powers as the primary oppressors of the people, advocating for nationalized industries and expanded social welfare programs to reclaim economic sovereignty. Despite their ideological differences, both right-wing and left-wing populist leaders share a common tendency to weaken institutional constraints, sideline opposition, and concentrate power in the hands of the executive, often at the expense of democratic governance and the rule of law.

3. Democratic Institutions and their Erosion

Populist governments often seek to weaken institutional checks and balances to consolidate power, undermining the very foundations of democratic governance. By challenging judicial independence, manipulating electoral processes, and diminishing the authority of legislative bodies, populist leaders reshape democratic institutions to serve their political ambitions. These tactics are frequently justified under the guise of restoring the "will of the people," reinforcing the populist narrative that existing democratic structures are illegitimate, corrupt, or unrepresentative (Bermeo, 2016). As a result, democratic institutions, which are designed to ensure accountability and prevent authoritarianism, become subverted, facilitating a gradual but significant decline in democratic norms.

3.1 *Judicial Independence*

One of the primary targets of populist regimes is judicial independence, as the judiciary serves as a crucial check on executive overreach. Populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey have systematically altered their judicial systems to ensure loyalty to the executive. These leaders have appointed judges based on political allegiance rather than merit, expanded executive authority to influence court rulings, and imposed legal reforms that undermine judicial autonomy. In Hungary, Orbán's government restructured the judiciary by lowering the retirement age for judges, allowing the ruling party to replace them with government-friendly appointees. Similarly, Erdoğan's administration in Turkey has dismissed thousands of judges and prosecutors, consolidating control over the judiciary under the pretense of national security concerns. By neutralizing judicial independence, populist regimes remove a vital mechanism of accountability, enabling the executive to rule with minimal legal constraints.

Populist regimes often undermine judicial independence, removing key legal constraints on executive power. Empirical data from the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (2022) shows a decline in judicial independence scores in countries like Hungary (-25% since 2010) and Turkey (-30% since 2015), correlating with increased executive control.

3.2 *Electoral Manipulation*

Elections, a cornerstone of democracy, are often manipulated by populist governments to ensure prolonged rule. Gerrymandering, voter suppression, and restrictive campaign finance laws are commonly employed to disadvantage opposition parties and maintain electoral dominance. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party has introduced electoral reforms that disproportionately benefit the government while imposing restrictions on media access for opposition candidates. In Brazil, under Jair Bolsonaro's leadership, there were attempts to discredit electronic voting systems, fostering distrust in the electoral process and preemptively delegitimizing potential electoral losses. These tactics erode electoral integrity, reducing political competition and weakening public trust in democratic institutions.

3.3 *Parliamentary Undermining*

Legislative institutions, which serve as platforms for debate and policy-making, are frequently undermined by populist leaders who perceive them as obstacles to executive authority. Parliaments are often weakened through executive decrees, direct attacks on opposition lawmakers, or mobilization of public sentiment against legislators who challenge populist policies. In many cases, populists frame opposition parties as "enemies of the people," fostering political polarization and reducing the legitimacy of pluralistic governance. In countries like Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro has bypassed parliamentary authority by creating parallel legislative bodies that operate under executive control. Legislative bodies often face executive encroachment. Data from the V-Dem Institute (2022) indicates that parliamentary oversight in Venezuela declined by over 40% under Nicolás Maduro, illustrating how populist leaders consolidate authority by sidelining opposition voices. Similarly, in Hungary, Orbán's government has used its parliamentary majority to pass laws that centralize power, reduce oversight mechanisms, and curtail the rights of opposition parties.

By weakening judicial independence, manipulating electoral processes, and undermining parliamentary oversight, populist governments erode the fundamental structures of democracy. The cumulative effect of these actions is the transformation of democratic institutions into instruments of executive control, creating an environment where authoritarian governance can thrive under the pretense of majoritarian legitimacy.

4. Civil Society, Media and their Role

Media freedom and civil society are fundamental pillars of democratic governance, serving as essential mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and civic engagement. A free press acts as a watchdog against government abuses, while civil society organizations mobilize citizens, advocate for human rights, and push for policy reforms. However, in many populist-led regimes, these institutions are systematically undermined to eliminate dissent, control public discourse, and consolidate executive power. Populist leaders frequently attack independent media, brand journalists as "enemies of the people," and restrict civil society organizations that challenge their authority (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). These actions not only weaken democratic resilience but also contribute to an environment of misinformation, political polarization, and declining public trust in independent institutions.

4.1 Media Control

One of the most effective tools employed by populist leaders is control over the media. The press serves as a vital check on government excesses, but populists seek to suppress critical voices by capturing state-owned media, intimidating independent journalists, and spreading disinformation. In countries such as Russia, the Philippines, and Hungary, populist leaders have used a combination of legal, financial, and extrajudicial measures to silence media outlets that oppose them.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin's administration has gradually taken control of major television networks and newspapers, ensuring that state-controlled media dominate the public sphere while restricting access to independent journalism. The government has passed restrictive laws requiring media organizations to register as "foreign agents" if they receive funding from abroad, effectively delegitimizing critical reporting. Similarly, in the Philippines, former President Rodrigo Duterte's government pursued legal actions against independent news outlets like *Rappler* and targeted journalists with threats and harassment, discouraging investigative reporting on corruption and human rights abuses.

Hungary under Viktor Orbán offers another striking example, where pro-government oligarchs have acquired private media outlets, leading to a media landscape dominated by government-friendly narratives. By reducing press freedom, populist regimes limit access to unbiased information, making it easier to manipulate public perception and control political discourse.

4.2 Civil Society Restrictions

Civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), watchdog groups, and advocacy networks, play a crucial role in upholding democratic norms by holding governments accountable. Populist governments restrict civil society through legal and financial barriers. A study by Freedom House (2021) found that NGO activity declined by over 50% in Hungary due to restrictive laws.

However, populist regimes frequently view these organizations as threats to their authority and seek to restrict their influence through legal crackdowns, financial cuts, and public discreditation.

Populist governments often introduce restrictive laws to limit foreign funding for civil society organizations, arguing that these groups serve "foreign interests" rather than national priorities. In Hungary, Orbán's government passed legislation requiring NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as foreign agents, discouraging international support for human rights and pro-democracy initiatives. Similarly, in Poland, the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has sought to curtail civil society activities by channeling state funding toward pro-government organizations while marginalizing independent advocacy groups.

In Turkey, Erdoğan's administration has used emergency decrees and terrorism-related charges to shut down NGOs, prosecute human rights activists, and weaken organizations promoting press freedom, women's rights, and minority protections. These restrictions diminish the space for civic engagement, weakening opposition to government policies and reducing public access to alternative viewpoints.

By controlling the media and restricting civil society, populist regimes erode the foundations of democratic accountability. Without independent journalism and active civil society organizations, governments face little resistance in consolidating power, marginalizing opposition voices, and implementing policies that undermine democratic norms. The suppression of these institutions not only weakens democracy but also contributes to the rise of authoritarian governance under the guise of populist majoritarianism.

5. Is Populism Corrective to Democracy?

Populism is frequently criticized for its role in undermining democratic institutions and eroding liberal norms. However, some scholars argue that it can serve as a corrective mechanism for democracy by addressing political and economic grievances that mainstream parties have ignored. Populism thrives in times of crisis when a significant portion of the population feels excluded from political representation or disillusioned with traditional elites. By positioning themselves as champions of the "common people," populist leaders claim to restore democracy to its fundamental purpose—ensuring government accountability and responsiveness to the needs of ordinary citizens (Laclau, 2005). While the dangers of populism, including authoritarian tendencies and democratic backsliding, are well documented, its potential role in reinvigorating political participation and highlighting systemic failures should not be overlooked.

5.1 *Populism and Political Participation*

Historically, populism has emerged as a reaction to both economic inequality and political alienation. Whether through left-wing or right-wing movements, populist leaders have mobilized voters who feel neglected by mainstream political institutions. Left-wing populism, particularly in Latin America, has gained traction by addressing wealth disparities and advocating for social justice. Leaders such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia implemented policies aimed at reducing economic inequality, nationalizing key industries, and expanding welfare programs. These policies resonated with marginalized populations, allowing them to gain political influence they had previously lacked. Populism can increase voter engagement. The European Social Survey (2020) found that populist parties mobilized disengaged voters, raising political participation rates in France and Italy by 10%.

On the other hand, right-wing populists have leveraged cultural and nationalist sentiments to mobilize voters who perceive globalization, immigration, and multiculturalism as threats to their identity. Figures such as Donald Trump in the United States and Marine Le Pen in France have built political movements based on anti-elitism, opposition to immigration, and skepticism toward international institutions. These leaders have succeeded in drawing previously disengaged or disillusioned voters into the political process, increasing democratic participation.

5.2 *The Democratic Paradox*

Despite its ability to engage marginalized voters, populism also presents risks to democratic governance. While it can revitalize political participation, it often does so at the cost of institutional stability. According to the Democracy Index (2021), countries with strong populist leaders saw an average decline of 15% in democratic accountability indicators. Many populist leaders, once in power, attempt to bypass or weaken democratic checks and balances, undermine judicial independence, and consolidate executive authority. Their rhetoric frequently delegitimizes opposition parties, independent media, and civil society organizations, reducing pluralism and democratic competition.

This creates a paradox: populism can both enhance and weaken democracy. While it addresses real political and economic grievances, its governance style often leads to democratic erosion. The challenge for democratic systems is to acknowledge the root causes of populist discontent—such as economic inequality, political alienation, and cultural anxieties—while ensuring that responses to these issues do not come at the expense of institutional safeguards.

5.3 *Comparative Analysis: a study case*

To better understand the varied impact of populism on democratic institutions, it is essential to examine specific case studies from different regions. The experiences of the United States, Hungary, and Brazil illustrate the different trajectories populism can take, from democratic resilience to democratic erosion and potential authoritarian consolidation. These cases demonstrate how populist leaders exploit institutional weaknesses while also highlighting the factors that either curb or accelerate democratic backsliding.

5.4 *United States: Trumpism and Institutional Resilience*

Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021) tested the resilience of the United States' democratic institutions. His administration was marked by attempts to challenge the credibility of the electoral system, weaken independent oversight mechanisms, and discredit the mainstream media, which he frequently referred to as "fake news" and "the enemy of the

people." Trump also sought to politicize the judiciary, installed loyalists in key government positions, and repeatedly challenged the legitimacy of the 2020 election results, culminating in the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Despite these efforts, the system of checks and balances, along with strong civil society activism, ultimately prevented a full erosion of democracy. The judiciary upheld electoral integrity, state officials resisted pressure to overturn election results, and independent media continued to hold the government accountable. While Trump's populist rhetoric deeply polarized the electorate, U.S. institutions demonstrated their resilience by ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. The 2020 election saw record voter turnout (66.7%), demonstrating democratic resilience.

5.5 *Hungary: Orbán's Authoritarian Populism*

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has systematically dismantled democratic safeguards since coming to power in 2010. His government has enacted constitutional changes that centralize power, undermined judicial independence by packing courts with loyalists, and weakened press freedom by consolidating media outlets under state-friendly ownership. Hungary's democracy index score dropped from 7.5 in 2010 to 4.7 in 2021. Orbán has also curtailed the influence of civil society organizations, limiting funding for NGOs and restricting their operations. Unlike in the United States, Hungary's democratic institutions have largely failed to resist these authoritarian trends, making it a prime example of how populism can transition into long-term autocracy.

5.6 *Brazil: Bolsonaro and Democratic Stru*

5.6.1 *Brazil: Bolsonaro and Democratic Struggles*

Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022) in Brazil mirrored some of the authoritarian tendencies seen in Hungary, particularly his attacks on the judiciary and the media. He frequently sought to delegitimize Brazil's electoral system, spread misinformation about election fraud, and downplay the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, often dismissing scientific expertise. However, Brazil's institutional framework, along with an active civil society and independent courts, acted as barriers to full democratic collapse. Unlike Hungary, where the executive successfully consolidated control, Brazil's democracy showed signs of resilience, with Bolsonaro ultimately failing to overturn the 2022 election results.

These case studies highlight the diverse impact of populism on democratic systems, illustrating that while some institutions resist authoritarian tendencies, others succumb, leading to long-term democratic decline.

6. Conclusion

The rise of populism presents both challenges and opportunities for democratic governance by shaking up traditional political structures. On one hand, populism offers a mechanism to address elite-driven politics by voicing the concerns of marginalized communities and increasing overall political engagement. It brings neglected issues into the spotlight and mobilizes voters who have felt disenfranchised by established political elites. On the other hand, populist movements carry inherent risks that can undermine the foundations of democracy. They often weaken institutional safeguards, erode judicial independence, and curtail media freedom, thereby compromising checks and balances that are essential for a healthy democracy. Comparative analyses reveal that the effects of populism are not uniform; they vary significantly depending on a country's institutional resilience and prevailing political culture. Future research should focus on strategies for democratic systems to adapt to populist pressures, ensuring that while political participation is enhanced, core democratic norms and institutional integrity are effectively safeguarded.

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