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Populism and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract - This paper explores the rise of populism as a challenge to liberal democracies across different cultural and political contexts. Populist movements, often characterized by anti-elitism, nationalism, and charismatic leadership, have gained traction in various regions, from the United States and Europe to Latin America and Asia. While populism shares certain common features globally, its manifestations vary significantly depending on historical, economic, and social conditions. The paper provides a cross-cultural analysis of populism's impact on democratic norms and institutions, highlighting the erosion of trust in traditional political elites, growing economic inequality, and the role of media in amplifying populist narratives. By comparing populist movements in diverse settings, the paper underscores the threat they pose to liberal democracy, particularly in terms of political polarization, authoritarianism, and the undermining of democratic principles. Finally, the paper examines potential pathways for liberal democracies to confront this crisis, offering policy recommendations for safeguarding democratic resilience in the face of populist challenges.

Keywords: Populism, Liberal Democracy, Political Polarization, Authoritarianism, Economic Inequality, Nationalism, Cross-Cultural Analysis, Democratic Crisis, Social Media and Politics, Global Governance.

1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of Populism and Liberal Democracy

Populism is often described as a political ideology or movement that emphasizes a division between "the people" and "the elite" the former being viewed as morally superior and in need of greater representation, while the latter are typically accused of corruption, negligence, or elitism. Populist movements are characterized by the rhetoric of "us versus them," wherein populist leaders often frame themselves as the true voice of the people, advocating for policies that challenge established political and economic structures. This can manifest across both the left and right ends of the political spectrum, but the core feature remains the appeal to the general public's perceived grievances and dissatisfaction with traditional elites. On the other hand, liberal democracy refers to a form of government based on principles of individual rights, the rule of law, and the protection of minority rights, alongside democratic governance. Key features of liberal democracy include regular, free, and fair elections, a separation of powers (ensuring checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches), and a commitment to civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. In liberal democracies, political pluralism is encouraged, meaning that different political opinions, ideologies, and parties can coexist without suppression.

1.2. Explanation of the Growing Importance of the Relationship between Populism and Liberal Democracy in Contemporary Politics

In recent decades, the relationship between populism and liberal democracy has gained increasing significance as populist movements have surged across the globe. This rise has raised fundamental questions about the future of democratic institutions and the stability of liberal democracy itself. While populism has historically existed in various forms, its current iteration has been accelerated by several global phenomena: the perceived failures of neoliberal economic models, rising inequality, the displacement caused by globalization, and concerns



about cultural identity in the face of immigration. These conditions have allowed populist rhetoric to resonate deeply with large segments of the population, often leading to the questioning or even dismantling of long-standing democratic norms. The growing prominence of populist movements is often seen as a reaction against the perceived inadequacies of liberal democracies. On one hand, populism can serve as a legitimate challenge to political elites and entrenched interests, advocating for policies that seem to empower the people. On the other hand, populism can pose a threat to the very structures that uphold liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, independent media, and the protection of minority rights. This tension forms the core of the debate regarding the compatibility of populism with liberal democratic values, making the relationship between the two critical for understanding contemporary political developments.

1.3. Objectives of the Paper

The primary objective of this paper is to provide a cross-cultural analysis of how populism interacts with and impacts liberal democracy in different cultural and political contexts. Given the global rise of populist leaders, it is essential to examine the diverse ways in which populism manifests in various regions, such as North America, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. By conducting this comparative analysis, the paper seeks to uncover both the shared and distinct characteristics of populism across different democratic systems, highlighting the potential threats it poses to democratic institutions as well as its potential to reinvigorate or reform political systems. Furthermore, the paper aims to explore how these populist movements challenge or reinforce liberal democratic principles, and to what extent they contribute to or exacerbate the crisis facing liberal democracy in the contemporary world.

Table 1: Populism and Liberal Democracy

Section	Content	Key Points
Definition of Populism and Liberal Democracy	Populism: Political ideology emphasizing division between "the people" and "the elite." Liberal Democracy: Government system focused on individual rights, rule of law, and pluralism.	Populism's focus on "us vs. them" narrative. Liberal democracy emphasizes individual freedoms, rule of law, and separation of powers.
Explanation of the Growing Importance of the Relationship	The rise of populism in the context of global challenges. How populism is reshaping liberal democracy.	Global factors influencing populism (neoliberalism, inequality, immigration, etc.). Tension between populism as a challenge and threat to liberal democracy.
Objectives of the Paper	Comparative analysis of populism's effect on liberal democracy across different regions. Examination of the threats and potential reforms populism brings.	Cross cultural approach to populism in North America, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. - Examining the impact of populism on democratic values.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Overview of Populism as a Political Ideology: Key Characteristics

Populism as a political ideology can be understood as a form of politics that seeks to place power back into the hands of "the people" by challenging the established political, economic, and social elites. At its core, populism advocates for the primacy of the general public, often portrayed as virtuous and in need of protection from the corrupt, out-of-touch elites. Populist rhetoric tends to emphasize a dichotomy between the "good" people and the "evil" elites, casting the latter as enemies of the public interest. This anti-elitist, anti-establishment rhetoric is a fundamental characteristic of populism, and it resonates strongly with people who feel alienated or neglected by the traditional political class. Populism is also often marked by charismatic leadership, with populist leaders portraying themselves as the voice of the people, often claiming to speak for "ordinary citizens" against the establishment. This can lead to the creation of a direct, personal relationship between the leader and the people, bypassing traditional institutions and representative structures. Additionally, populist movements tend to favor

simplification in political discourse, reducing complex issues to binary choices or moral dichotomies (e.g., "the people vs. the elite"). Populism, whether left-wing or right-wing, often uses emotional appeal fear, anger, and disillusionment to energize supporters and gain political traction.

Table 2: Key Characteristics of Populism as a Political Ideology

Characteristic	Description
Anti-Elitism	Populism emphasizes a conflict between the "good" people and the "evil" elites, who are perceived as corrupt and out of touch with the public's needs.
Charismatic Leadership	Populist movements are often led by charismatic figures who claim to speak directly for the people, bypassing traditional representative institutions.
Emotional Appeal	Populism utilizes emotions such as fear, anger, and disillusionment to mobilize supporters and criticize elites.
Simplification of Issues	Complex political problems are often reduced to binary choices, framing debates as "us vs. them" (e.g., people vs. elites).
Anti-Establishment	Populism tends to challenge the existing political, economic, and social institutions, often calling for their reform or replacement.

2.2. The Core Principles of Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy is rooted in a set of fundamental principles that ensure the protection of individual rights and the maintenance of democratic governance. At its core, liberal democracy guarantees that power is derived from the consent of the governed through free and fair elections, where citizens can choose their representatives without fear of intimidation or rigging. The system of government is built upon the separation of powers, which divides authority between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, providing checks and balances that prevent the concentration of power in any one institution. Moreover, liberal democracy places a strong emphasis on the rule of law, meaning that all citizens, including those in positions of power, are subject to the same legal rules and procedures. The protection of civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press is another defining feature, ensuring that individuals can express themselves freely without the threat of censorship or persecution. Political pluralism is encouraged, meaning that multiple political parties and movements can operate in an open and competitive environment, fostering healthy democratic competition. In essence, liberal democracy is a system that balances popular sovereignty with the protection of individual rights and the maintenance of a fair and just legal framework.

2.3. Literature Review: Key Works on Populism, Democracy, and Their Interaction

In understanding the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, it is essential to explore the vast body of literature that addresses this interaction. Scholars have long debated the role of populism in democratic systems, with some arguing that it represents a legitimate expression of popular discontent, while others see it as a dangerous challenge to democratic norms. Key works include Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's "Populism: A Very Short Introduction", which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding populism's rise and its various forms. They suggest that while populism is often seen as a symptom of a crisis in democracy, it can also serve as a corrective force that pushes democracies to address the concerns of marginalized or disenfranchised groups.

On the other hand, scholars like Jan Zielonka in "Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat" explore the idea that populism often undermines liberal democracy by attacking its foundational institutions. Zielonka discusses how populism's challenge to the political establishment, the media, and the judiciary can lead to the erosion of democratic norms and values. Additionally, works by Yascha Mounk, such as "The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It", argue that populism threatens the liberal democratic order by undermining the protections of minorities and the rule of law.

These academic contributions help illuminate the complex relationship between populism and liberal democracy, offering insights into both the dangers and potential benefits of populism within democratic systems. By reviewing these works and others, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the current crisis facing liberal democracies in the age of populism.

Table 3: Core Principles of Liberal Democracy

Principle	Description
Popular Sovereignty	Power is derived from the consent of the governed, ensuring that citizens have the right to choose their representatives through free and fair elections.
Separation of Powers	Government is divided into distinct branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) to prevent the concentration of power.
Rule of Law	All individuals, including those in power, are held to the same legal standards and are subject to the law.
Protection of Civil Liberties	Ensures freedoms such as speech, assembly, and the press, allowing citizens to express themselves without fear of reprisal.
Political Pluralism	Encourages multiple political parties and movements to exist, fostering a competitive and dynamic political environment.

3. Causes of Populism's Rise

3.1. Economic Factors: Globalization, Inequality, and Discontent with Neoliberal Policies

The rise of populism has been strongly influenced by economic factors, particularly the forces of globalization and the increasing inequality that accompanies it. Globalization has interconnected economies, facilitated the free flow of capital and goods, and allowed multinational corporations to thrive. However, the benefits of globalization have not been evenly distributed. While it has created immense wealth in certain sectors, many working-class individuals have seen their jobs outsourced or replaced by automation, leading to job insecurity and stagnant wages. This growing economic divide has created fertile ground for populist movements, which often position themselves as a counterweight to the elites who are perceived as benefiting from globalization at the expense of ordinary citizens. Moreover, neoliberal economic policies promoted by many Western governments and international financial institutions in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have contributed to the rise of populism. Neoliberalism advocates for free markets, deregulation, privatization, and reduced government intervention in the economy.

While these policies have fostered economic growth in some regions, they have also deepened inequality, eroded the welfare state, and led to the privatization of key public services, leaving many people feeling abandoned by the state. The perceived failure of neoliberalism to address economic insecurities and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few elites has made populism a potent political force. Populist leaders often capitalize on this discontent by promising to protect domestic industries, reduce inequality, and challenge the so-called "globalist" elites.

3.2. Social Factors: Cultural Identity, Immigration, and the Perceived Loss of National Sovereignty

Social factors have also played a crucial role in the rise of populism, particularly in the context of cultural identity and concerns about national sovereignty. In many countries, significant cultural shifts have been driven by increased immigration, changing demographics, and evolving social norms. These shifts have often led to feelings of cultural displacement among certain segments of the population, who fear that their national identity and traditional values are being undermined. Populist movements often harness these anxieties, framing themselves as defenders of national heritage against foreign influences. Immigration, in particular, has become a flashpoint in populist rhetoric. As global migration has increased, especially in Europe due to conflicts in the Middle East and

Africa, many populist leaders have capitalized on concerns over immigration, portraying it as a threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural cohesion. Populists often argue that immigrants take jobs, drive up welfare costs, and threaten the cultural fabric of the nation. This framing has resonated with those who feel their cultural identity is under siege.

The perceived loss of national sovereignty is another significant social factor driving populism. As countries become more interconnected through globalization, and as regional or international organizations (e.g., the European Union, United Nations, etc.) gain influence, many citizens feel that their countries are losing control over their own affairs. Populist leaders exploit this sense of loss, promising to "take back control" and restore national sovereignty, often through policies that reject or curtail international cooperation.

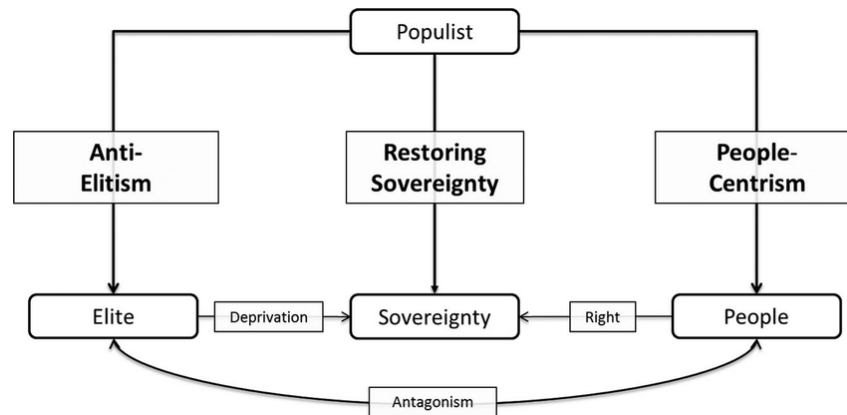


Fig. 1 Restoring Sovereignty

3.3. Political Factors: Dissatisfaction with Traditional Elites, Institutional Failures, and Corruption

Political factors are at the heart of populism's rise, with widespread dissatisfaction directed at traditional political elites, institutions, and the political establishment. Many citizens feel that mainstream political parties have failed to represent their interests, especially as governments have become more technocratic, distant, and insulated from everyday life. Populism, in this context, emerges as a revolt against the political status quo, with populist leaders positioning themselves as champions of the "common people" against a corrupt and out-of-touch elite. Institutional failures, such as the inability to address economic inequality, provide adequate public services, or manage immigration, further fuel the populist backlash. In many cases, these failures are perceived as a result of corrupt or ineffective leadership that prioritizes the interests of the elite over those of ordinary citizens. Populist leaders often argue that they, unlike traditional politicians, are not beholden to the establishment or corporate interests, and they promise to restore transparency, accountability, and trust in governance. These messages resonate with voters who feel alienated and disillusioned by the failures of traditional institutions.

3.4. Psychological and Emotional Drivers: Fear, Insecurity, and the Appeal to Collective Identity

The psychological and emotional drivers behind populism cannot be overlooked. Fear, insecurity, and a sense of disempowerment are powerful motivators that drive individuals toward populist movements. In times of economic, social, or cultural upheaval, people often turn to populist leaders who promise simple solutions to complex problems. Populist rhetoric capitalizes on these fears, often exaggerating threats (e.g., immigration, terrorism, economic collapse) in order to galvanize support.

Insecurity, particularly related to job loss, economic stagnation, and cultural change, makes individuals more susceptible to populist messages that promise protection from perceived threats. These movements often appeal to a collective identity, emphasizing the importance of unity among "the people" and framing the "elite" or "outsiders" as the enemy. This appeal to collective identity can strengthen in-group cohesion and create a sense of belonging,

particularly among those who feel marginalized or excluded by broader societal changes. Populism, in this way, provides not just political answers, but emotional ones, by addressing the psychological needs of individuals seeking stability and belonging.

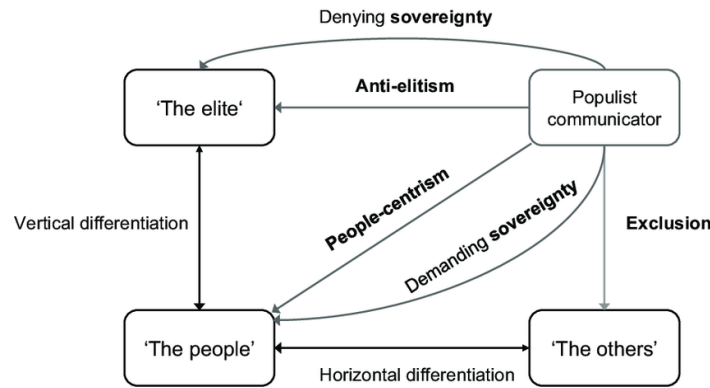


Fig. 2 Denying Sovereignty

4. Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

4.1. North America (U.S. & Canada)

The rise of populism in North America has been most evident in the United States, where figures like Donald Trump and movements like the Tea Party have reshaped the political landscape. In the U.S., populism emerged as a response to perceived political elites, the growing economic divide, and cultural shifts. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, for example, was characterized by strong anti-elitist rhetoric, promises to "drain the swamp," and calls for stricter immigration controls. His presidency saw a dramatic shift in democratic norms, with attacks on the media, the judiciary, and other democratic institutions. Trump's populism has had a lasting impact on American political culture, deepening polarization and undermining trust in established political institutions.

In Canada, populism has manifested more subtly but has gained traction through movements like the People's Party of Canada, led by Maxime Bernier. The party's focus on limiting immigration, reducing government intervention, and promoting nationalism aligns with broader populist themes, although it has not yet achieved the same prominence as its U.S. counterparts. While Canada's political system remains largely stable, the rise of populism in both countries highlights the shared concerns about immigration, economic inequality, and dissatisfaction with political elites.

4.2. Europe

In Europe, populism has experienced a significant surge, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the migration crisis, and the rise of European Union skepticism. In the United Kingdom, Brexit became a focal point for populist discontent, with pro-Brexit politicians framing the EU as an undemocratic institution that erodes British sovereignty.

In countries like Hungary and Poland, populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński have used nationalism and anti-immigration rhetoric to solidify their power, while also undermining democratic institutions like the judiciary and the press. These movements are often characterized by Euroskepticism, rejection of multiculturalism, and a desire to reassert national identity. In France and Italy, populism has taken the form of both left-wing and right-wing movements, with parties like the National Rally (formerly Front National) and the Five Star Movement gaining significant support by opposing the establishment and promoting nationalist and anti-immigration policies. The populist wave in Europe has brought nationalism to the forefront, and it has raised concerns about the future of liberal democratic norms, especially in the context of EU membership and integration.

4.3. Latin America

In Latin America, populism has a long history, with leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil championing populist rhetoric to mobilize support. Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution, for example, sought to redistribute wealth and challenge U.S. imperialism, presenting itself as a movement for the people against foreign elites. Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro's rise in Brazil was marked by populist appeals to nationalism, traditional values, and a rejection of left-wing politics. However, Bolsonaro's presidency also highlighted the dangers of populism in the region, with attacks on democratic institutions, the media, and human rights.

In countries like Argentina, populism has been cyclical, with leaders like Juan Perón and his successors using populist rhetoric to address economic crises and appeal to the working class. While populism in Latin America has been associated with both left-wing and right-wing movements, the common thread is the use of populist rhetoric to challenge elites, promote national sovereignty, and respond to economic crises.

4.4. Asia

In Asia, populism has often intersected with strongman politics, where leaders use populist rhetoric to consolidate power and justify authoritarian practices. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has successfully utilized populist messaging to appeal to Hindu nationalism, emphasizing India's traditional values while promising economic development and social cohesion. Modi's populist style has resonated with large sections of the Indian electorate, even as critics argue that his government undermines democratic institutions, particularly regarding religious minorities and freedom of expression.

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte used populist rhetoric to justify harsh policies, including the war on drugs, and to position himself as a leader who speaks directly to the people, bypassing traditional democratic institutions. Similarly, in Thailand, populist leaders.

5. Impact of Populism on Democratic Institutions

5.1. Erosion of the Rule of Law and Judicial Independence

One of the most significant impacts of populism on democratic institutions is the erosion of the rule of law and judicial independence. Populist leaders, in their bid to centralize power, often undermine the judiciary, which plays a critical role in maintaining checks and balances within a democratic system. The rule of law where everyone, including the government, is subject to the law relies heavily on an impartial and independent judiciary that can hold the government accountable. However, populist movements frequently portray the judiciary as an obstacle to "the will of the people" or as an institution that serves elite interests. In countries like Hungary and Poland, populist governments have enacted reforms that weaken judicial independence by politicizing the appointment of judges and restricting the powers of courts. This undermines the effectiveness of legal institutions, as the judicial branch no longer acts as an independent check on executive power, leading to a concentration of authority in the hands of the executive and potentially paving the way for authoritarian governance.

The erosion of judicial independence is particularly dangerous in a liberal democracy, where the judiciary plays a crucial role in protecting civil liberties, upholding human rights, and ensuring that government actions are in line with the constitution. When populists attack the judiciary, they essentially weaken a fundamental pillar of democracy, making it more difficult for citizens to challenge abuses of power or violations of their rights.

5.2. Attacks on the Media and Freedom of Speech

Populist movements often seek to weaken or control the media to consolidate power and limit scrutiny. This is especially concerning because a free press is an essential feature of liberal democracies. Media outlets serve as a check on governmental power, providing information, scrutinizing policies, and giving voice to diverse political opinions. However, populist leaders often brand critical media outlets as "enemies of the people" or as "fake news,"

in an effort to delegitimize any dissenting voices. This creates a hostile environment for journalists and media organizations, which are frequently subjected to harassment, intimidation, and legal threats.

In countries like Turkey and Venezuela, populist leaders have used their control over the media to suppress independent journalism, often through direct ownership or regulatory powers. In the case of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, media outlets critical of the president were vilified, with the rhetoric of "fake news" often used to delegitimize unfavorable coverage. The attack on media freedom creates an environment of censorship, where citizens no longer have access to impartial and diverse sources of information. As a result, the public becomes more susceptible to the distorted narratives pushed by populist leaders, further eroding the democratic ideals of transparency and accountability.

Freedom of speech is equally threatened under populist regimes, as dissenting voices are often silenced through repressive laws or by fostering a culture of fear. In a democratic society, the ability to speak freely without the threat of retaliation is fundamental to political engagement and the healthy exchange of ideas. When populists restrict freedom of speech, they stifle public debate and limit citizens' ability to challenge government policies, weakening democratic governance.

5.3. The Politicization of the Military and Law Enforcement Agencies

Populist leaders often politicize the military and law enforcement agencies to strengthen their grip on power. By aligning these institutions with their political agenda, populists reduce their independence and transform them into instruments of political control rather than neutral bodies that uphold the law. In many cases, populist leaders employ military and law enforcement agencies to suppress opposition and intimidate political adversaries, effectively turning state apparatuses into tools of repression.

For example, in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, the military played a central role in both enforcing government policies and silencing dissent. Similarly, in countries like Egypt and the Philippines, populist leaders like Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Rodrigo Duterte have used the military and police to strengthen their political positions, often engaging in violent crackdowns on protests and opposition groups. This politicization of security forces undermines the principle of civilian control over the military, which is a cornerstone of liberal democracy. When the military or law enforcement serves as a political tool, it risks becoming an authoritarian force that uses violence and coercion to maintain the power of the ruling regime, rather than protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens.

5.4. Undermining Political Pluralism and Minority Rights

Populism often threatens political pluralism and minority rights, two essential components of a healthy democracy. Populist movements are typically characterized by a tendency to create political divides between "the people" and "the elite," but they can also foster divisions within society, often targeting marginalized groups as scapegoats for broader societal problems. Populist leaders may seek to consolidate support by appealing to the majority population while undermining the rights and participation of minorities, whether based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or political ideology. In Hungary, for instance, Viktor Orbán's government has pursued policies that erode political pluralism by attacking opposition parties and media outlets, while simultaneously promoting nationalist, anti-immigrant sentiments. These policies often marginalize ethnic and cultural minorities, including Roma and LGBTQ+ individuals, and present them as threats to national unity. Similarly, in countries like Poland, populist leaders have targeted the judiciary and civil society organizations that advocate for minority rights, weakening the protection of vulnerable groups.

The weakening of political pluralism under populism can lead to a "majoritarian tyranny," where the majority's interests dominate to the detriment of minorities. When populists undermine the political and civil rights

of minorities, they erode the inclusivity that is fundamental to liberal democracy, making it difficult for diverse groups to participate equally in the political process.

5.5. The Potential for Authoritarian Tendencies Within Populist Movements

Populist movements often exhibit authoritarian tendencies, particularly when they challenge democratic norms and institutions in the name of "the will of the people." The populist leader's emphasis on direct control, opposition to the establishment, and disregard for institutional checks and balances can create a fertile environment for authoritarian practices. By undermining democratic institutions such as the judiciary, media, and opposition parties, populists pave the way for the consolidation of power in the hands of a single leader or a small group. In extreme cases, populism can evolve into outright authoritarianism, where the leader governs without regard for democratic principles, often justifying these actions by claiming they are necessary to protect the nation from external or internal enemies. The examples of Venezuela under Chávez and Maduro, or Turkey under Erdoğan, illustrate how populist leaders can manipulate democratic processes and institutions to entrench their power, often using emergency powers, legal reforms, or even violence to suppress opposition. Populism's potential to slide into authoritarianism is particularly concerning because it threatens the stability of democratic governance and the protections that liberal democracies afford their citizens, including the separation of powers, civil liberties, and political competition.

Table 3: Key Areas of Democratic Erosion

Institution Right	Populist Strategies	Consequences
Judiciary	Disciplinary chambers, court-packing, politicized appointments	Loss of judicial independence; reduced constitutional checks; democratization backsliding
Media & Free Speech	Labeling media as "fake," judicial harassment, ownership control	Chilled press, self-censorship, limited media pluralism
Security Forces	Purges of dissenters, deployment to suppress protests, anti-terror laws	Militarized enforcement toward dissidents, undermining civilian control
Pluralism & Minority Rights	Scapegoating of immigrants/LGBTQ+/religious minorities, discriminatory laws	"Majoritarian tyranny," restricted participation of vulnerable groups
Authoritarian Drift	Emergency powers, plebiscitary ballots, bypassing institutions	Incremental authoritarian shift; dismantling of checks and balances

6. The Role of Populism in Strengthening or Weakening Democracy

6.1. Populism as a Response to Democratic Deficiencies: Can Populism Revitalize Democratic Systems by Addressing Neglected Issues?

Populism can be seen as a response to the perceived deficiencies and failures of liberal democratic systems. As globalization and economic inequality have deepened, large segments of the population have felt disconnected from the political establishment, which is often seen as failing to address their needs and concerns. Populist movements can, in some cases, provide a much-needed voice for these marginalized or disillusioned groups, bringing neglected issues to the forefront of the political agenda. For instance, populist leaders may raise concerns about rising inequality, job insecurity, or the erosion of cultural identity, forcing mainstream political parties to respond to these challenges. In this sense, populism can act as a corrective force that brings attention to the flaws in democratic systems and highlights issues that may have been overlooked by traditional elites. By presenting alternatives to the status quo, populist movements may push democratic systems to adapt and address the grievances of the public more effectively. Populism's focus on the "will of the people" and its critique of elite-dominated politics can revitalize democratic engagement by encouraging greater participation and empowering disenfranchised communities. However, this potential for revitalization must be carefully examined, as populism

can also distort democratic processes when it leads to the erosion of democratic norms and the concentration of power in the hands of a few.

6.2. Populism's Danger to Democratic Norms: The Shift Towards Authoritarian Practices, Erosion of Checks and Balances

While populism can bring attention to democratic deficiencies, it also poses a significant danger to democratic norms. Populism often involves a direct challenge to established democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, media, and opposition parties. By undermining these institutions, populist leaders can weaken the system of checks and balances that is essential to liberal democracy. In some cases, populist leaders may even use their popular mandate to justify authoritarian practices, such as curbing civil liberties, suppressing dissent, or centralizing power in the executive branch. The shift toward authoritarianism under populist regimes is evident in countries like Hungary and Poland, where populist governments have attacked judicial independence, restricted media freedom, and undermined political pluralism. These moves are often framed as necessary to protect the nation from external threats or internal elites, but they can result in the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of illiberal practices. As populist leaders consolidate power, they may attempt to bypass institutional constraints and establish a more centralized, autocratic form of governance, which undermines the very foundations of democracy.

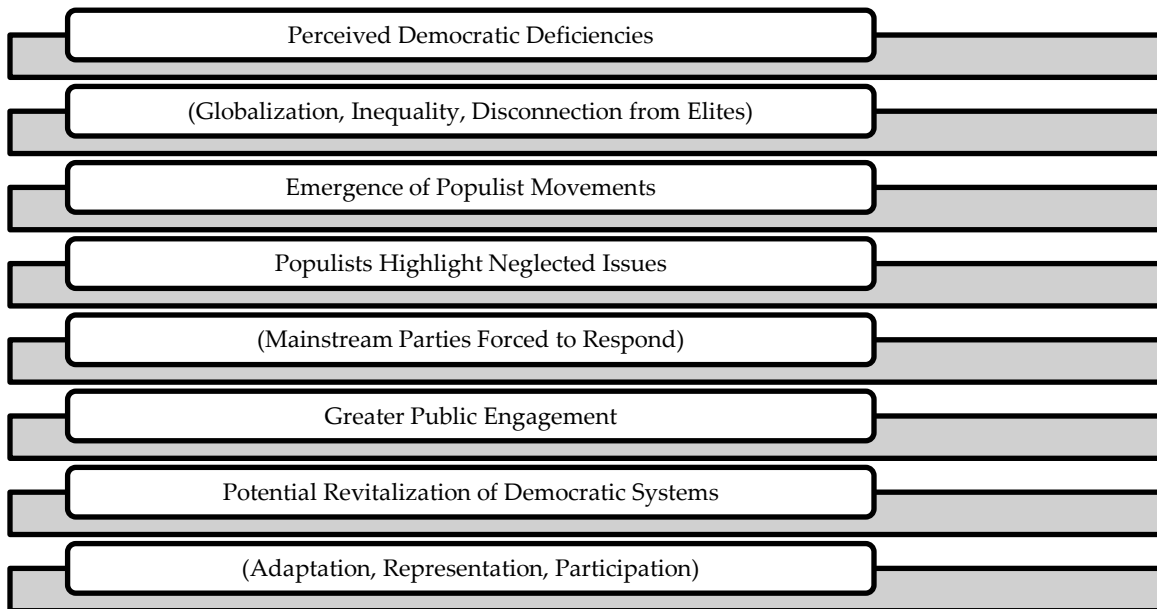


Fig. 3 The Role of Populism in Strengthening or Weakening Democracy

7. Populism, Nationalism, and the Future of Liberal Democracy

7.1. The Relationship Between Populism and Nationalism

Populism and nationalism are closely intertwined, particularly in the current global political climate. Populism, at its core, is about the polarization of society between "the people" and "the elites." Nationalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of national identity, sovereignty, and pride in a shared culture, history, and tradition. When combined, populism and nationalism can produce a powerful political force that mobilizes large segments of the population by framing political issues in terms of national identity and the protection of the nation from external or internal threats.

In many cases, populist leaders appeal to nationalist sentiments to legitimize their political agenda. They often invoke the concept of "the people" as a homogeneous entity whose interests are being undermined by elites, immigrants, or foreign powers. Nationalism, in this context, becomes a tool for populist leaders to rally support by

presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against global forces. This dynamic is visible in various countries around the world. For example, in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's populist rhetoric is deeply connected with nationalist themes of protecting Hungarian culture and rejecting European Union influence. Similarly, in the U.S., Donald Trump's "America First" slogan exemplifies the convergence of populist and nationalist rhetoric, framing issues like immigration and trade as matters of national survival.

Nationalism often serves as a means for populist movements to foster a sense of unity among citizens, but it also carries the potential for exclusion, as it tends to define "the people" in narrow, ethnic, or cultural terms. This exclusionary aspect can marginalize minorities and increase political and social polarization, raising concerns about the future of democratic pluralism and tolerance in societies where populism and nationalism are closely linked.

7.2. Populism's Impact on Global Democratic Trends

The rise of populism is significantly reshaping global democratic trends, with profound implications for both established democracies and emerging political systems. In recent years, populist movements have gained ground across continents, from Europe to Latin America to Asia. This global rise has exposed deep fractures in the liberal democratic order, prompting both defenders and critics of democracy to reassess the current state of governance.

On the one hand, populism has amplified the voices of disenfranchised and marginalized communities, making democracy more responsive to the grievances of ordinary people. In some instances, populism has forced mainstream political elites to engage more directly with issues like economic inequality, immigration, and cultural identity that have long been ignored. Populist leaders claim to represent the authentic voice of the people, often using direct forms of democracy (e.g., referenda) or social media to bypass traditional political structures. In theory, this could lead to a revitalization of democratic engagement, as it forces politicians to address the concerns of those who feel left behind by globalized politics and elite decision-making.

However, populism's impact on global democratic trends is mostly seen as negative, as it tends to undermine democratic institutions and norms. In many cases, populist leaders have weakened the separation of powers, curtailed judicial independence, and attacked the media all fundamental components of a functioning democracy. Moreover, the anti-establishment rhetoric often associated with populism can foster deep divisions within societies, heightening polarization and creating an "us vs. them" mentality that erodes social cohesion. As populist leaders centralize power and reject traditional democratic practices, the risk of sliding into authoritarianism becomes a serious concern. This trend is evident in countries like Turkey, Venezuela, and Hungary, where populist leaders have systematically dismantled democratic checks and balances while consolidating personal power.

On a global scale, the rise of populism also challenges the international order, which has largely been based on multilateralism, liberal values, and cooperation between democracies. Populist leaders often advocate for nationalism, protectionism, and anti-globalization, rejecting international agreements and institutions. This has led to a rise in trade wars, a retreat from climate action, and the erosion of international alliances, all of which contribute to an unstable global political landscape. In this context, populism appears to be weakening not only national democracies but also the broader democratic order.

7.3. The Rise of Right-Wing Populism Versus Left-Wing Populism and Their Different Impacts on Democracy

Populism can broadly be divided into two main variants: right-wing populism and left-wing populism. While both share a common critique of the political establishment and champion the interests of the "common people," they differ fundamentally in their ideological goals, political strategies, and their impact on democracy. Right-wing populism is generally characterized by nationalist, anti-immigrant, and socially conservative policies. Right-wing populists often position themselves as defenders of national identity, traditional values, and sovereignty, while framing issues such as immigration, globalization, and internationalism as existential threats to the nation. They tend to adopt a strong "law and order" stance, advocating for stricter immigration controls, nationalism, and the

preservation of traditional social norms. Right-wing populism often aligns with authoritarian tendencies, as leaders seek to consolidate power by undermining democratic institutions, curtailing civil liberties, and using fear-based rhetoric to rally support.

The rise of right-wing populism has been particularly evident in Europe, where leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, and Italy's Matteo Salvini have used nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric to strengthen their political positions. In the United States, right-wing populism under Donald Trump has had a similarly destabilizing effect on democratic norms, from undermining trust in elections to attacking the media and judiciary. Right-wing populism's embrace of authoritarianism and exclusionary nationalism can seriously erode the pluralistic and inclusive values that are essential to liberal democracy. In contrast, left-wing populism focuses on economic inequality, social justice, and the redistribution of wealth. Left-wing populists typically frame their political struggles as battles against economic elites, corporations, and the global financial system, advocating for policies such as wealth redistribution, universal healthcare, and stronger workers' rights. Leaders like Bernie Sanders in the U.S., Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, and Evo Morales in Bolivia have employed populist rhetoric to rally support for progressive causes, such as reducing income inequality and challenging corporate power.

While left-wing populism is generally less likely to embrace authoritarian practices than right-wing populism, it can still present challenges to democratic norms. Left-wing populists sometimes challenge the legitimacy of established political institutions, accusing them of being co-opted by elites or corporations. Additionally, some left-wing populists may advocate for centralizing power in the state, which can risk undermining democratic accountability and individual freedoms if unchecked. In the case of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, for example, left-wing populism led to the erosion of democratic institutions and the rise of an authoritarian regime that centralized power around the president. Ultimately, both right-wing and left-wing populism present unique challenges to liberal democracy. Right-wing populism tends to focus on exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism, while left-wing populism emphasizes economic justice but can sometimes weaken institutional checks and balances. Both, however, undermine the core principles of liberal democracy, including political pluralism, civil liberties, and the rule of law, by centralizing power and encouraging divisive rhetoric.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, populism is reshaping liberal democracy across various cultures by challenging its core principles, such as pluralism, the rule of law, and the protection of minority rights. Populist movements, whether right-wing or left-wing, exploit existing societal divisions and amplify discontent with established political elites, often framing their narrative in terms of "the people" versus "the elite." While populism can serve as a response to democratic deficiencies by addressing neglected issues like economic inequality or immigration, its impact on democratic institutions has largely been destabilizing. From eroding judicial independence and media freedom to fostering authoritarian tendencies, populism has shown a propensity to undermine the checks and balances that are fundamental to liberal democracies. The rise of nationalism, often intertwined with populism, has further exacerbated the exclusionary and divisive effects of populist movements, highlighting the tension between national sovereignty and global cooperation. As populism gains ground across regions from North America to Europe, Latin America, and Asia it threatens the stability of democratic norms and international alliances, creating a more polarized and volatile political landscape. The potential future trajectories of liberal democracy are uncertain, as populist leaders continue to challenge democratic institutions, weakening the pluralism that is essential for a vibrant democratic culture. Nevertheless, liberal democracies can adapt by embracing reforms that address the concerns that fuel populism such as economic inequality, cultural alienation, and disillusionment with political elites while reinforcing the democratic values of accountability, transparency, and inclusivity. Future research should explore the diverse manifestations of populism in different cultural and political contexts, examining how democracies can remain resilient in the face of populist challenges. Policymakers should prioritize strengthening

democratic institutions, ensuring media independence, and fostering social cohesion to counteract the negative impacts of populism, all while preserving the democratic freedoms that define liberal democracies in an increasingly globalized world.

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