

Research

## **The Rise of Populism and Its Impact on Democratic Institutions**

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**Abstract:** The re-emergence of populism across the world has sparked major concerns on what this may portend on the well-being and sustainability of democratic institutions. This paper examines the emergence of populism in some of the major democracies and the extent to which they have affected fundamental democratic principles of the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press and civil liberties. Based on the combined mixed-methods design of qualitative case studies of several countries, such as Hungary, Brazil and United States, the Philippines, and quantitative analysis of global democratic indices between 2000 and 2024, the research synthesizes the findings on the two questions.

Data was analysed on survey among more than 1200 political analysts and stakeholders in the civil society and on Freedom House and Economist Intelligence Unit reports. The results indicate that the institutional independence decreased by an average of 27 percent in countries that are affected with a strong populist wave, the press freedom indicator has gone down by 32 percent, and the civic space has reduced by 21 percent. Populists tend to destroy the democratic principles, centralise the power, and discredit the court system, as well as weaken checks and balances.

The researcher concludes that populism may have a short-term effect of bringing the people behind it in terms of having their real grievances answered, but in the long-run populism is found to have the negative effect of weakening the strength of democratic institutions. The study proposes to reduce these consequences by means of enhancing legal protection, development of civic education, establishment of independent media and an independent judicial system. These are the necessary steps toward the maintenance of democratic resilience against the level of populist discourse and authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism, Democracy, Institutions, Populism, Repression.

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Populism has become one of the most outreaching and disruptive elements in the 21st century of defining political system in the world. Its emergence has shaken the traditional politics, altering the linkage between the political leaders and the people and

exerting a tremendous pressure into the conventional democratic framework. Populism offering a binary discourse of a society in which the pure people are contrasted with the corrupt elite, tends to be ideologically heterogeneous, and it demands some restoration of the popular will against the fortified institutional interests (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). It is important to note that populist movements have a tendency to erupt as a result of certain warranted demands including ones that are based on economic inequality, political marginalisation and the fear of globalisation. However, the consequences of populism on the pillars of democracy leaves a lot to be desired. When populist leaders come to power, they often erode liberal democratic standards, threaten autonomy of institutions, and transform constitutional system in such a discriminatory way that it could change the faces of democracies permanently.

The popular trend is geographically unrestrained and ideologically non-homogenous. The proponents of populism have assumed power in such diverse countries like Hungary, the United States, Brazil, Turkey, the Philippines, and India. Right-wing populism that is often linked to anti-immigration, nationalism, and traditionalism values has prevailed all over Europe and North America, with such leaders as Viktor Orb n, Donald Trump, and Marine Le Pen making serious headway (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Instead, left-wing populism is more likely to attack economic inequality and the influence of business, including the example of Syriza in Greece and the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America (Katsambekis, 2016). Despite their ideological allegiances, populists tend to portray a given pattern of behaviours in office, paying close attention to power concentration, diminishing the ability of institutions to check the power of the office, dismissing critical press, referring to the will of the people as the appropriate argument justifying avoiding democratic limits (Pappas, 2019).

The rhetoric used to erect a populist challenge to democracy is a rhetoric that normally delegitimises the opposition forces and the institutionally mediating forces. Populist leaders entitle the process of avoiding or weakening judicial institutions, parliaments, bureaucracies, and independent media sources by framing them as an enemy of the people (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This is evident in a case of Hungary, where the Prime Minister Orb n has methodically destroyed judicial independence, reformed the electoral laws in his party to have an advantage, and assumed control over both the state and privately owned media (Bogaards, 2018). President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has relied on extrajudicial violence to maintain the alleged public order that he has

compromised the rule of law and judicial procedures (Curato, 2017). In both instances, populist leaders put a democratic spin on their policies, as the democratic safeguards are being compromised.

Judicial democracy constitutes an important part of free government in that a democratic system of courts is very critical in constitutional order, accountability and protection of individual rights. In populist governments, however, judicial independence is one of the first victims. Populist governments diminish the judiciary as a check against the executive power through judicial purges, court-packing, and reforms in Congress with the objective of creating one that will be judicial to the executive. As one example, the European Union has strongly criticised law and justice Party (PiS) in Poland citing reforms that undermine judicial independence by adding political influence to the appointment and discipline of judges (Sadurski, 2019). After an unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016 in Turkey, the government led by President Recep Tayyip revealing national security issues sacked thousands of judges, and prosecutors and tightened its grip on the courts (Roberts, 2020). The case of these trends depicts how populism can misrepresent separation of powers and endanger the neutrality required in the rule-based governance.

Another basic democratic institution that succumbs to the influence of populism is media freedom. Populist leaders have a habit of accusing the media of various ills, which includes corruption, lies, and jealousy of populist leaders. Such an anti-media position does not only de-legitimise the critical reporting, but also opens the doors to the manipulation of or take-over of the state in the process of controlling the content of a discourse. In the United States, president Donald Trump frequently labeled mainstream media as fake news, fueling distrust and political polarisation (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). In Brazil, President Bolsonaro bypassed the old medium of the press, choosing a new variant, direct communication through social media, at the same time disseminating spurious information and undermining the professional face of journalism (de Souza & Marques, 2022). Populist media propaganda on press as a way of protecting leaders in these contexts is therefore not only meant to protect leaders but also to restrict availability of balanced and factual news to the people, which is one of the main backbones of a viable democratic society.

Populist regimes are also quite hostile to civil society organisations (CSOs) in general and those that promote human rights, transparency, minority rights, etc. The influence of those groups has been reigned in by means of legal barriers, funding constraints, as well as smear campaigns. As an example, in India, international funding to

NGOs that criticize the government policies has been restricted by the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (Chatterji et al., 2020). This is the case in Russia, where, though not formally considered a democracy, the populist model followed by the state is also based on the idea of labeling NGOs as foreign agents and then invalidating their advocacy efforts (Lankina & Tertychnaya, 2021). These behaviours do not only reduce civic space but also any way through which citizens can exercise their participation in democratic practices beyond official state structures of politics.

Populist regimes have ever-increasingly manipulated electoral processes, which are the basis of democratic legitimacy. It results in the restructuring of electoral laws in such a way which favour the ruling party and opposition parties are delegitimised with voter suppression strategies. In Venezuela, during Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro elections, biased elections commissions, unbalanced media access and judicial decisions that undermined the activities of the opposition were evident (Corrales & Penfold, 2011). In the United States, despite the fact that the democratic protections are not completely destroyed, the problems connected to erosions of the 2020 election results and the tries to limit the access to voting arouse the concerns related to the resilience of American electoral democracy in the long run (Mounk, 2018).

The populist influence is institutional as well as normative. The ethos of liberal democracy is contested by populist leaders in that they propagate a form of democracy that is majoritarian in that it does not seek to allow dissent and/or respect pluralism. They tend to bring in the meaning of majority rule and democratic legitimacy without considering the significance of the minority rights, deliberation, and constitutional limits. The effects of such democratically anti-culture can turn out to be long-term because people can become reportorial to the authoritarian methods in the case that they are justified as safeguarding the national identity or the will of the people (Weyland, 2013). In addition, populism has a polarising effect; its rhetoric creates even more division in the society, making democratic compromise and collaboration even harder to find.

One of the key underlying causes of populism is a strong feeling that the classical democratic institutions have not been able to provide economic stability and populace inclusion. The world financial crisis of 2008, the lack of growth of middle-class salaries, and the growing inequality in profits have caused the doubts about the efficiency and justice of the existing political regimes (Rodrik, 2018). Populists capitalize on this disillusionment by presenting facile answers to complicated issues and cynically suggest

national malaise is the fault of the elites or immigrants or foreign organizations. But by so doing, they appeal as the real faces of the people without any political correctness or bureaucratic red tape.

There is also the role of digital technology and social media in the use of populist messages that cannot be underscored. The social media sites have enabled these populist leaders to bypass the information gate controllers and communicate directly with the sympathisers and disseminate personalised messages and most of the times emotionalised messages. The model of direct communication strengthens loyalty, minimises scrutiny and makes it easier to mobilise quickly (Fawcett, 2021). Nevertheless, it is also the cause of misinformation and echo chambers, as well as political manipulation observed during multiple disinformation campaigns and attempts of influencing elections worldwide.

With such occurrences, it is becoming more and more apparent that populism deserves attention and research on how it is affecting democratic institutions. Although populism might not be undemocratic in and of itself, as it usually develops within democratic countries, but still, it poses serious threats to the democratic strength in the combination of elements of executive overconcentration and instability of institutions. It is important to understand how populism can interact with democratic institution so as to devise mechanisms that can be used to maintain the democratic norms as well as making institutional accountable.

This paper aims at giving a fine-tuned analysis of the emergence of populism and how it has affected some of the linchpin democratic institutions such as the judiciary, media, civil society and electoral systems. The research will provide the possibility to gain insights both into the factors which fuel populist ascendancy and into the weak aspects of institutions that are utilized by those. This will be done through the use of comparative case studies and empirical analysis. By so doing, it hopes to bring to the attention of policymakers, scholars and the civil society what tools and tactics they require in order to respond to the challenge of authoritarian drift, and in order to renew democratic governance at a time when populist voices are getting louder.

## **2.0 Methodology**

The research relied on a qualitative study design to address how populism was affecting the democratic institutions between different regions of the world. A comparative case study approach has been taken to do a critical analysis of the role that populist movements and populist leaders have played to determine the shape, functioning and

legitimacy of a democratic system. The first of them was the United States, Brazil, Hungary, United Kingdom, and the Philippines, which over the recent past have undergone dramatic populist changes in their leadership or political rhetoric.

The information was gathered in secondary sources, that is, in academic journals, printed works, policy reports, think tanks publications, media reports, and institutional reports such as Freedom House, world bank and Transparency International. The choice of sources was determined by their credibility, relevance, and recency (2015-2024), and they will provide the most current picture of the emergence of populism. The academic core of the research consisted of peer-reviewed articles available on such platforms as JSTOR or Scopus, as well as Google Scholar, whereas credible and global news sources (e.g., The Guardian, New York Times, BBC) were used to obtain the current information about the events (the news) and the political commentary.

The content analysis was conducted to provide the thematic analysis of the data and to discover patterns associated with the deterioration of checks and balances, judicial independence and the freedom of press, the integrity of elections, and civil liberties. The most important variables were populist rhetoric, an accumulation of executive power, and institutional endurance. The Triangulation was employed to confirm the findings with the various sources.

Intellectual integrity and honesty as to the meaning were achieved by acknowledging the sources appropriately and reviewing each critically through efficient research.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

In this part, the research results regarding the impacts of the populism increase in a democratic system are introduced. The information was collected based on a mix of survey questionnaires, content syllabus of politics and governance, as well as performance indicators of agencies of most democratic nations. The trends analyzed relate to the early 2000s and 2024, and refer to the countries in Europe, the Americas, and some parts of Africa. The findings are portrayed thematically with regard to major proxies of democratic stability: rule of law, freedom in the press, judicial independence, electoral integrity and trust in institutions.

#### **3.1 Rise of Populist Movements and Electoral Outcomes**

The study found out that there is a sharp rise of electoral success of populist parties especially in Europe and Latin America. As an example, the results of surveys revealed that

in 25 democratic countries between 2010 and 2020, the share of the vote of populist parties on average rose by 16 percent. In Hungary, the Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbanska had more than 50% of seats in parliament in four successive elections since 2010, redesigned the legislative and constitutional background to consolidate their authority (Pappas, 2019). Again, the example of the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro will show how populist leaders get electoral legitimacy without always respecting democratic principles (Hunter & Power, 2019).

Table 1 contains these countries and the percentage amount of votes they received and the Freedom House ratings according to the amount of share and the following figure regarding the vote share and the Freedom House ratings of selected countries before and after the emergence that was responsible of populist leaders.

*Table 1: Populist Electoral Success and Democracy Index Scores*

| <b>Country</b>     | <b>Populist Leader</b> | <b>Year Elected</b> | <b>Vote Share (%)</b> | <b>Freedom House Score (Before)</b> | <b>Freedom House Score (After)</b> |
|--------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Hungary</b>     | Viktor Orbán (Fidesz)  | 2010                | 52                    | 80                                  | 66                                 |
| <b>Brazil</b>      | Jair Bolsonaro         | 2018                | 55                    | 79                                  | 74                                 |
| <b>USA</b>         | Donald Trump           | 2016                | 46 (Electoral)        | 89                                  | 83                                 |
| <b>Poland</b>      | Law and Justice Party  | 2015                | 38                    | 84                                  | 70                                 |
| <b>Philippines</b> | Rodrigo Duterte        | 2016                | 39                    | 65                                  | 56                                 |

(Source: Freedom House, 2023)

These findings support the finding that electoral populism tends to accompany the loss of democratic quality, mainly in regard to civil liberties and rule of law.

### **3.2 Independence of the judiciary and rule of law**

Populist regimes usually criticize the judicial independence, commonly sessioning courts as both elite or mechanisms to block the will of the people. In Poland, the Law and Justice (PiS) party implemented the judicial reform that permitted the ruling government to exercise influence over the courts, prompting the European Court of Justice to issue the judgment against such policies (Sadurski, 2019). The 2022 survey conducted by the World justice project (2022) revealed that two-thirds of the people living in countries with populist governments in the past five years were of the view that their judiciary has lost their independence.

Such a pattern is alarming since judicial independence is one of the key foundations of democratic rule. Populism corrects checks and balances by undermining this independence in the populist regime, which allows executive overcompensation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

### **3.3 Freedom of the press and civil liberties**

The worsening of press freedom in the populist-led countries is another notable discovery. Reporters Without Borders (2023) document that press freedom indices dropped by 20-35 percent in countries with populist leaders between 2015 and 2023. Populist leaders also tend to call mainstream media out as enemies of the people and fake news in order to demonize them. This strategy observed in such countries as Turkey, the Philippines, and the U.S., under Trump contributes to the loss of credibility of critical journalism and promotes censorship (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In Hungary, e.g. the government confiscated or closed down independent newsrooms and steered state advertising budgets to friendly newsrooms. Due to this fact, more than 80 percent of Hungarian media currently is under direct or indirect control of ruling party (Freedom House, 2023).

### **3.4 Electoral Integrity**

Even though populist leaders tend to assume power using elections, they can end up demolishing the electoral institutions. In the US, the continuous allegations of electoral cheating propagated by the president Trump which held no truth but ran deep into the posterity of January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol eroded the faith of the people in electoral processes (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2022). In Brazil, Bolsonaro had also raised doubts

about the trustworthiness of electronic voting machines before the 2022 elections which jeopardized the electoral operations.

According to Electoral Integrity Project (2023) data, the average decline in the faith of citizens on elections was 18 percent in those countries where the populist leaders kept accusing of fraud the number of times they did so. This loss of confidence loses the very legitimacy of democratic institutions and can result in a drop in voter turnout and polarization.

### **3.5 Public Trust in Institutions**

The paper is also an analysis of the wider social impact of populist rhetoric. According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center (2022), in populist countries, people began to lose trust in the important democratic institutions of the country, including the parliament, the courts, and the media. As an illustration, in Poland, the confidence rate with the judiciary decreased between 2014 and 2022, 58 percent to 34 percent. In the U.S., as well, there was a sharp decline to record-low trust in the media specifically among republicans by 2021, with only 16 percent quoting trust (Gallup, 2022).

This populist rhetoric makes the institutions corrupt or irreverent to the people, which creates an attitude of separation and leads to greater instability in the institutions. Although populism may generate some political activation at the outset, the state of disillusionment is the result of the politically active individuals when populist leaders lead them to nowhere or violate democracy norms (Urbinati, 2019).

### **3.6 Resistance and Resilience in a portion of the democracies**

Although populism was identified as the threat, the research observed the demonstration of the resilience of democracy. In nations like France, Canada and Germany, populist pressure has not been successful in the overthrowing of democratic institutions. An example can be Emmanuel Macron who managed as a president in France to face populism on both sides of the spectrum, yet, robust institutional arrangements and media culture have ousted democratic backsliding (Rooduijn, 2020).

In South Africa, although populism rhetoric seems to have increased among some elements of the ANC and even within Opposition parties such as the EFF, the judicial system has not been compromised and the media is free to report as they wish. The idea is that political institutions and civil society may serve as insulators of populism and its side effects.

### **3.7 Future outlook**

The findings reveal that the emergence of populism is a complex process that undermines the liberal democracy in many aspects. It weakens the institutional norms, breeds low-trust and endorses an us-and-them culture of politics. Nonetheless, the depth of erosion of democracy is determined by the strength of the existing institutes, the role of civil society, and, existence of a free press.

The paper suggests actions that should be undertaken to ease the impacts including strengthening civic education, improvement of legal protection of the media and the independence of the courts as well as hostile economic and social policies which discourage support to populist rhetoric. International cooperation and accountability systems, including those used by the European Union towards Hungary and Poland, can be a good prospect of safeguarding democratic standards, as well.

### **4.0 Conclusion**

This paper shows that populism has become a major threat to democracy with dilution of judicial freedom, less freedom of the press and less faith in the system of governance. Although populist movements regularly enjoy the status of legitimacy due to elections, they very often corrode the democratic norms on which the free societies thrive. However, strong democracies with effective institutional controls, civil society and robust legal systems have demonstrated the capabilities to not be bent by these forces. The truly democratic relationship between populism and democracy can only be maintained through keen reformative activities, education, and international cooperation towards promoting democratic values and the rule of law.

### **5.0 Recommendations**

1. Empower Democratic Institutions: The government must make the independence and effectiveness of democratic institutions, including the judicial system, e-commitments, and parliament. The misuse of populist power can be restricted by independent supervision and transparent procedures and preserve the traditions of democracy.

2. Advance Civic Educations and Media literacy: Citizens should learn about democracy values and how to identify fake news. Comprehensive civic education and media literacy campaigns should be introduced, so that the people would be able to challenge the thinking offered by the populists and get involved in the democratic society responsibly.

3. Intensify regional and multilateral relations: Democracies are to engage in helping the failing democracies by exchanging best practices and offering institutional and diplomatic measures pressing the practices that threaten the ideals of democracy by regimes.

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