



Populism's Influence On Democratic Institutions

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Abstract

The rise of populist movements across established democracies has sparked intense debate about their impact on democratic institutions. This paper examines how populist rhetoric, governance strategies, and institutional reforms affect the quality and resilience of democratic systems. Drawing on comparative analysis of populist governments in Europe, Latin America, and beyond, this study identifies three primary mechanisms through which populism influences democratic institutions: discourse shifts that reframe political legitimacy, institutional pressure that weakens checks and balances, and norm erosion that undermines democratic conventions. The analysis reveals that while not all populist movements pose equivalent threats, authoritarian populism demonstrates particularly severe impacts on judicial independence, media freedom, and electoral integrity. Moderating factors including strong civil society, robust rule of law, and institutional resilience can attenuate these negative effects. This research contributes to understanding the conditions under which populism facilitates democratic backsliding versus democratic renewal.

Keywords: Populism, Democratic Institutions, Democratic Backsliding, Institutional Erosion, Checks And Balances.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary democracies face mounting challenges from populist movements that fundamentally question the legitimacy of established political institutions. From the rise of right-wing populism in Europe to left-wing movements in Latin America, populist actors have secured electoral victories by positioning themselves as authentic representatives of 'the people' against corrupt elites.¹¹ This political phenomenon raises critical questions about the compatibility between populist governance and liberal democratic norms.

The relationship between populism and democracy is inherently paradoxical. Populist movements often emerge through democratic channels, claiming to defend popular sovereignty against oligarchic interests. Yet once in power, populist leaders frequently challenge the institutional constraints that safeguard democratic pluralism.⁸ This tension manifests in attacks on judicial independence, restrictions on media freedom, and efforts to concentrate executive power.

This paper investigates how populist movements influence the quality and functioning of democratic institutions across different contexts. Specifically, it examines:

- The mechanisms through which populism affects institutional integrity

- Variations in impact across different types of populism
- The moderating factors that either amplify or attenuate these effects.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing democratic resilience in an era of rising populist sentiment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining Populism

Populism is best understood as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.⁹ This ideational definition distinguishes populism from full ideologies by its limited conceptual core, which must be attached to other ideological elements to form a comprehensive worldview.

Three core elements characterize populist discourse:

- Anti-Elitism, Portraying Established Institutions And Political Actors As Corrupt;
- People-Centrism, Claiming To Represent The Authentic Voice Of Ordinary Citizens; And
- A Manichean Worldview That Frames Politics As A Moral Struggle Between Good And Evil.⁵

These elements combine to create a political logic that questions the legitimacy of institutional mediation between popular will and policy outcomes.

Democratic Institutions and Their Functions

Democratic institutions serve multiple critical functions: constraining executive power through checks and balances, protecting minority rights, ensuring free and fair elections, guaranteeing civil liberties, and providing accountability mechanisms.⁴ These institutions operate through both formal rules (constitutions, laws, electoral systems) and informal norms (conventions, practices, expectations).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that democratic resilience depends not only on formal institutional design but also on normative commitments to democratic principles among political elites and citizens.⁸ When these norms erode particularly norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance democracies become vulnerable to authoritarian backsliding even when formal institutions remain intact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Populism and Democratic Backsliding

The relationship between populism and democratic erosion has generated substantial scholarly attention. Comparative research demonstrates that populist governments, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies, frequently undermine democratic institutions through 'legal' means rather than outright coups.⁶ This process, termed 'constitutional retrogression,' involves incremental changes that cumulatively weaken democratic checks while maintaining a veneer of legality.

Empirical studies using V-Dem data reveal concerning patterns. Populist executives demonstrate significantly higher rates of attacks on media freedom, judicial independence, and civil liberties compared to non-populist counterparts.⁷ However, this relationship is moderated by regime type, with populist authoritarians showing the most severe impacts while populist democrats exhibit more ambiguous effects.

Case studies from Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Venezuela illustrate diverse pathways of institutional deterioration under populist leadership. Common strategies include judicial reform to reduce independence, media capture through regulatory changes and economic pressure, electoral manipulation through gerrymandering and voter suppression, and constitutional changes that concentrate executive power.²

Variations in Populist Impact

Not all populism produces equivalent institutional effects. Research distinguishes between

inclusionary and exclusionary populism, with the latter demonstrating stronger anti-pluralist tendencies.¹⁰ Left-wing populist movements in Latin America have shown mixed records, with some advancing democratic participation while others concentrating power.¹²

Table 1 below synthesizes key differences across populist types and their typical institutional impacts.

Table 1. Typology of Populism and Institutional Impact Patterns

Type	Core Features	Primary Targets	Impact Level
Left-wing Economic	Redistribution focus, class-based appeals	Economic elites, business interests	Medium
Right-wing Nativist	Immigration restriction, cultural identity	Minorities, media, international institutions	High
Centrist Anti- corruption	Technocratic governance, anti-establishment	Traditional parties, bureaucracy	Low-Medium
Authoritarian Populism	Strong leadership, anti- pluralism	Judiciary, media, civil society, opposition	Very High

Note. Impact levels derived from comparative analysis of institutional quality indicators across 40+ populist governments (2000-2023).

MECHANISMS OF INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

Populist influence on democratic institutions operates through three interconnected mechanisms that collectively undermine institutional integrity and autonomy. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for identifying early warning signs of democratic backsliding and developing appropriate countermeasures.

Discursive Delegitimization

Populist leaders systematically challenge the legitimacy of institutions that constrain executive power. By framing courts, media, and opposition parties as enemies of the people, populists create narrative frameworks that justify institutional attacks.¹³ This discursive strategy reshapes public perceptions of institutional roles, making citizens more tolerant of institutional violations.

Evidence from Hungary demonstrates how sustained attacks on judicial independence through populist rhetoric precede and enable formal institutional changes. Orbán's government consistently portrayed constitutional court rulings as obstacles to popular will before implementing judicial reforms that reduced court autonomy.¹ Similar patterns appear in Poland, where the government's characterization of judges as 'post-communist holdovers' legitimized judicial purges.

Institutional Capture and Reform

Once discursive groundwork is laid, populist governments pursue institutional reforms that concentrate power and reduce checks. These reforms often exploit constitutional ambiguities or use constitutional amendment procedures to restructure institutions in ways that favor the executive. Key strategies include court-packing through expanded judiciaries with loyalist appointments, electoral system modifications that advantage the ruling party, and regulatory changes that enable media capture.

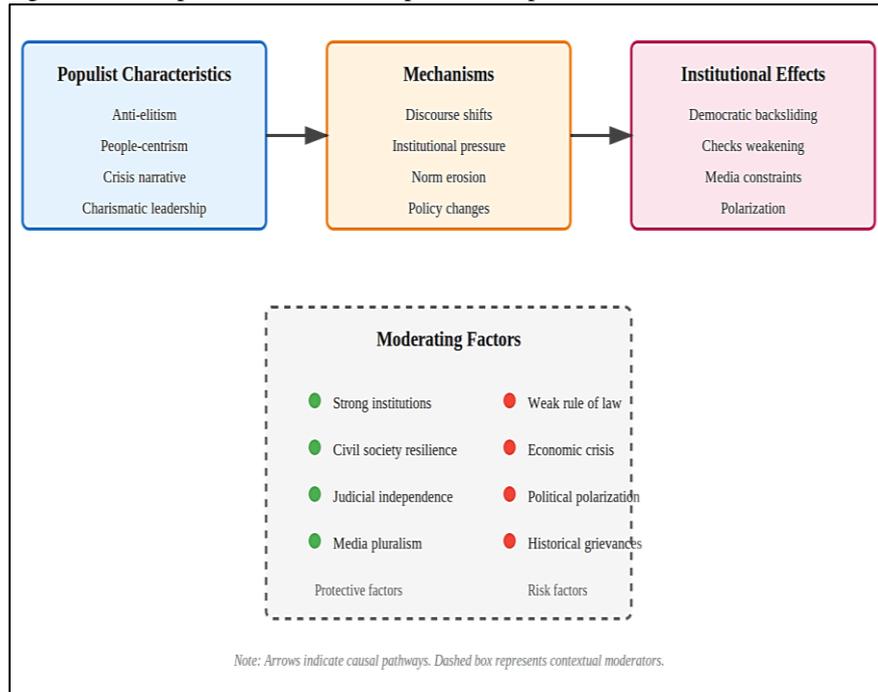
Venezuela under Chávez exemplifies comprehensive institutional capture. Between 1999 and 2009, the government expanded the Supreme Court, created parallel power structures, modified electoral rules, and restricted civil society operations all while maintaining constitutional procedures.³ These 'legal' transformations cumulatively hollowed democratic institutions while preserving their formal shells.

Norm Erosion

Perhaps most insidious is the erosion of informal democratic norms that regulate elite behavior. Populist leaders frequently violate norms of mutual toleration (accepting opponents as legitimate) and institutional forbearance (exercising restraint in using institutional powers). These violations create precedents that weaken democratic guardrails even when formal institutions remain intact.⁸ Once norms erode, democracies become vulnerable to further deterioration as successors inherit weakened

constraints. Figure 1 illustrates these interconnected mechanisms and the factors that moderate their impacts.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Populism's Impact on Democratic Institutions

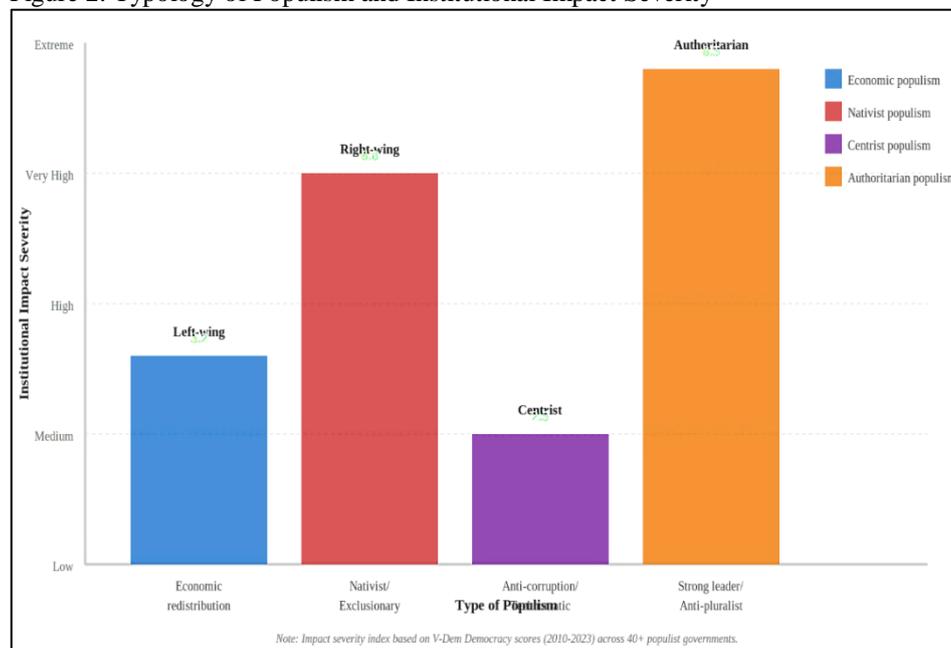


Note. Framework synthesizes mechanisms through which populism affects democratic institutions, showing protective and risk factors that moderate these relationships.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS

Cross-national analysis reveals significant variation in how populist governments affect democratic institutions. This variation reflects differences in populist type, institutional context, and pre-existing democratic quality. Figure 2 presents comparative data on institutional impact severity across different populist types, based on aggregated democracy indicators.

Figure 2: Typology of Populism and Institutional Impact Severity



Note. Impact severity index compiled from V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index scores comparing populist government periods with pre-populist baselines across 40+ countries (2010-2023).

The data reveal that authoritarian populism demonstrates the most severe institutional impacts, with an average severity index of 8.5 on a 10-point scale. Right-wing nativist populism shows substantial impacts (6.8), while left-wing economic populism exhibits moderate effects (3.2). Centrist anti-corruption populism demonstrates the mildest institutional impacts (2.5), though this category shows the widest variation across cases.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Democratic Resilience

The findings underscore that institutional resilience depends heavily on pre-existing democratic quality and civil society strength. Countries with robust rule of law traditions, independent judiciaries, and vibrant civil societies demonstrate greater capacity to resist populist institutional attacks. This suggests that democratic consolidation efforts should prioritize strengthening these protective factors rather than focusing exclusively on electoral procedures.

Moreover, the analysis reveals that early responses to populist institutional threats matter significantly. Once institutional changes are implemented and norms eroded, reversing damage becomes substantially more difficult. This emphasizes the importance of vigilant monitoring and rapid mobilization of institutional defenders, including civil society, opposition parties, and international organizations.

Limitations and Future Research

This analysis faces several limitations. First, measuring institutional quality remains methodologically challenging, with different indices sometimes producing divergent assessments. Second, causal attribution proves difficult given that populist emergence often follows institutional weakening, creating potential endogeneity concerns. Third, the relatively short time horizons in some cases limit assessment of long-term institutional effects.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs that track institutional changes before, during, and after populist governance periods. Investigating mechanisms of institutional recovery following populist rule would provide valuable insights for democratic restoration efforts. Additionally, exploring how different institutional designs affect vulnerability to populist attacks could inform constitutional engineering discussions.

CONCLUSION

Populism's influence on democratic institutions represents one of the most pressing challenges to contemporary democracy. This analysis demonstrates that populist movements employ systematic strategies to weaken institutional constraints through discursive delegitimization, formal institutional reform, and informal norm erosion. However, the severity of these impacts varies substantially across populist types and institutional contexts.

Authoritarian populism poses the gravest threat to democratic institutions, systematically attacking checks and balances across judicial, media, and electoral domains. Right-wing nativist populism also demonstrates substantial negative impacts, particularly through attacks on minority rights and media freedom. In contrast, left-wing economic populism shows more variable effects, with some cases strengthening participatory mechanisms while others concentrating executive power.

The analysis identifies critical moderating factors that determine whether democracies withstand populist pressures. Strong civil society, robust rule of law, judicial independence, and committed institutional defenders serve as essential bulwarks against democratic erosion. These findings suggest that democratic resilience strategies should focus on strengthening these protective factors while maintaining vigilance against early signs of institutional attack.

Ultimately, the relationship between populism and democracy remains contested and context-dependent. While populist movements can legitimate democratic participation and challenge oligarchic power, they simultaneously threaten the institutional foundations that sustain democratic pluralism. Navigating this tension requires both acknowledging legitimate grievances that fuel populist support and defending the institutional architecture that prevents majority tyranny. Only through such balanced approaches can democracies address populist challenges while maintaining their essential character.

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