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Populism and Western Democracies

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Abstract

This master's thesis, titled "Populism and Western Democracies," meticulously analyzes the profound impact of populism on the foundational elements and beliefs of Western democracies. It also explores the economic and political situations that promote the rise of populism, how the populist leaders exploit the malfunctions of the system and the resulting consequences on the social fabric and democratic culture of a country.

The study is based on a comparative case study methodology, taking its cues on historical precedents (Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, etc.) and current ones (Kais Saied in Tunisia, Donald Trump in the United States, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, leaders in Latin America, such as AMLO in Mexico and Fernandez in Argentina, etc.). The thesis examines the structural features of populist movements with an emphasis on the importance of charismatic leadership, the role of digital populism in avoiding the traditional media and regional differences.

It exposes how populism, which is driven by economic inequality and cultural fears, oversimplifies complicated political phenomena into an us versus them discourse, which weakens institutional protections, creates political polarization, and distrust among the populations. The research finds that although populist movements can be based on actual grievances, their policies can cause greater social polarization, political antagonism, and a slow deterioration of democratic stability, and the difficulty of sustaining democratic norms in the face of shifting populist movements.

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1. Introduction

The changes in populism seen within the 21st century have greatly impacted the political landscape of Western democracies. Populism targets elites claiming power by "the people" to whom the populism is directed, thus it serves as an attack on democracy and poses as a danger to social order (Mudde, 2004). It arises because of the perceived social, political, and economic discontent especially among populations who feel alienated or sense a systemic malfunctioning (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), Yet these proposed solutions often lead too undermining democracy itself and erode concerns regarding trust, stability, and governance.

Democracy as a system has had its difficulties fulfilling its pledges, especially in providing economic and political equality. Economic inequality, though not novel, has become more pronounced with the surge of neoliberal market policies after the 1980s. Such policies have deepened intra-country inequalities while exacerbating disparities across different countries. This structural shift produced an erosion of the post–World War II period and its illusion of years of national unity accompanied by faith in upward socioeconomic mobility that bolstered

public trust in democratic institutions. The intensifying absence of economic opportunities undermines democratic representation triggering legitimacy crisis among elected rulers and resulting in discontentment focused on the professional working class and civil society (Piketty, 2014). This explains that populism is an offspring of economic inequality rising during times of recession coupled with high unemployment which fuels social unrest and sharpen political divisions (Rodrik, 2018).

This creates a hybrid type of politics, which comes about as a blend of liberal democracy which heavily relies on the votes of the masses while guaranteeing the voice of the minorities, aka the population that poses a threat to the stability of the democracy.

Often, populists reject institutional safeguards that defend majoritarian interests and instead prefer direct claim-making representation (Diamond, 2017). Populist leaders position themselves as 'the people's leaders' by casting political institutions as venal and self-interested (Galston, 2018). This narrative deepens their reach, especially when economic discontent fuels social fragmentation.

Donald Trump in the US and Giorgia Meloni in Italy exemplify how social media provides populist leaders an avenue to bypass established political monopolies and address the electorate directly (Norris & Inglehart, 20919). Through Twitter, Trump was able to monopolize public attention and direct outrage towards his opponents. Meloni's ascent was accompanied by well-crafted online advertisements. Marine Le Pen leveraged digital media to engage with the working class in France, while Javier Milei in Argentina became an internet sensation through social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Yilmaz et al. (2024) argue that the growing omnipotence of the media in populist countries, such as Hungary and Brazil, demonstrates how digital technologies can be used for authoritarian purposes.

This Master's Thesis analyzes the impact of populism on Western democracies through this investigative question: In what ways does populism undermine the foundational elements and beliefs of Western democracies? The thesis analyzes the economic and political context of the specific region, the effort to capture systems in an advanced state of dysfunction by the populist leaders, and the resultant impact on the social fabric and democratic culture of the nation.

Populism does not stem solely from economic grievances; there are cultural concerns that support its emergence. There is a significant backlash against globalization and immigration

from the financially strained middle class after the 2008 recession (Taggart, 2018). In some countries with changing demographic patterns, populist messages tend to exploit fears regarding cultural and national identity preservation. The combination of economic suffering with cultural self-doubt certainly proves helpful to populist politics as exemplified in the Brexit vote in England and the rise of nationalist parties in various countries in Europe (Rodrik, 2018).

The populist movements reduce intricate political phenomena to an oversimplified struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite', thus leading to a form of political pessimism (Canovan, 1999). This way of thinking results in increased political division and dismisses opposing perspectives by branding them as part of an evil and corrupt system.

Levitsky & Ziblatt (2019) argue that policies placed under the category of populist governance often take the form of limiting the judiciary's autonomy, repressing the freedom of the press, and centralizing authority within the office of the President. Although these actions can be beneficial for supporting populist leaders in the immediate sense, they dissipate the balance of power that checks authority which may prove harmful to the democracy in the long run.

The effects of social populism are just as pronounced. Popular narratives worsen divisions, deepening the social fractures beyond the political sphere, which is almost always more of an us versus them contest (Sunstein, 2018). As trust in democratic institutions wanes, populist leaders continue to delegitimize courts, media, and election systems. Added to this destruction of credibility is the deeper suspicion of institutional trust which gives life to stronger populist feelings. The end result is more instability of the institutions (Dalton, 2004). Reestablishing the trust in these institutions is vital for the sustenance of democracy, which requires active policies that both address economic grievances and seek to preserve democratic values.

This dissertation takes a case study approach in the comparative study of populism in different countries. The cases of Donald Trump in America, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France, and Javier Milei in Argentina demonstrate similar features of anti-establishment populist economic nationalism and cultural conservatism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The impact of populism on the democratic principles in question differs according to the strength of the institutions and the political culture of the countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

This thesis is dependent on political science and sociological theories and their data evidence. The split that Cas Mudde drew between thin-centered and thick-centered populist ideologies

helps explain the flexibility of populism's ideology (Mudde, 2004). Empirical analyses consist of putative policies with particular outcomes as well as public opinion data on institutional trust (Dalton, 2004). This technique of blending qualitative and quantitative research guarantees the widest possible coverage of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

The methodology is based on qualitative content analysis of the academic literature, media sources, and political speeches and policy documents. Comparative case studies portray the enabling conditions for populism together with some of the disabling conditions (Taggart, 2018). Using the blend of theoretical and empirical approaches, this research attempts to formulate actionable guidance for policymakers, scholars, and citizens interested in and worried about the state of democracy.

In conducting this analysis, a central assumption is that populist movements address real grievances, but their enforcement produces social violence and political hostility. The stress on a 'winner takes all' logic from populist movements is hostile to freedom and democracy, just like the attacks on democratic processes and values tend to erode institutional protection (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). But, these outcomes are not necessary. The pro-democracy response relates to dealing with economic inequality and rebuilding a trustful relationship with institutions.

This research is valuable outside of the academic world because it tries to inform governing policies that seek to satisfy popular demands while ensuring democratic stability. Understanding populism is increasingly important in the current context where liberal democracies are under threat from various factors such as economic disparity and general apathy towards politics (Canovan 1999). This thesis attempts to address the relationships between economic inequality and political violence, and is one of many contributions trying to answer the question of democracy's durability in the 21st century.

2. Historical Context: Democratic Structures and Populism

2.1 Brief Overview of Western Democratic Development

Western democracy has experienced evolution through centuries owing to paradigm shifts in philosophy, politics, and society. The Enlightenment (17th-18th centuries) was an epoch that

opposed absolute monarchy and endorsed several ideas like individual freedom, the law, and representation. Important philosophers like John Locke, Montesquieu, and Jean Jacques Rousseau provided the basis of modern democracy, guiding its institutions even today.

Both the French and American Revolutions were significant movements for the spread of democracy. The American War of Independence resulted in a constitutional republic with checks and balances, federalism, and individual rights (Wood, 1993), whereas the French Revolution (1789-1799) introduced democratic ideas of civil rights and popular sovereignty (Tocqueville, 2019). The Napoleonic Code impacted Europe by legally consolidating power and transitioning political rule from autocracy to a system based on legislation (Todd, 2023).

During the 19th century, the expansion of democracy was evident in the increase of voting rights, the formation of parliament, and the civil rights movements' achievements (Knutsen et al., 2018). In the early part of the 20 th century, however, democracy was dealt some heavy blows with the emergence of totalitarian regimes like fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany as well as the authoritarian and repressive regime of Franco in Spain. Defeat of these ideologies during World War II strengthened the hold of liberal democracy as the dominant political system in the West, which led to the building of robust democratic institutions in Europe alongside North America (Patomäki, 2006).

2.2 Key Philosophical Underpinnings

The development of democracy is linked with particular political philosophies. John Locke (1632-1704) claimed the existence of natural rights and the existence of Government by Consent alongside the Social Contract, where the government is formed to serve the people and safeguard their lives, liberty, and possessions (Locke, 1988). These principles had a profound impact on American constitutions, especially on the democratic ones.

Montesquieu (1689-1755) put forward the separation of powers theory and advocated for the creation of the legislature, executive, and judicial branches of government which would operate independently in order to prevent tyranny (Montesquieu et al., 2022). His concepts became a prerequisite for constitutionally established democracy in all countries.

Rousseau and Cole (1950) argue that the legitimacy of governance arises from the will of the collective people. In his lifetime, Rousseau advocated on the importance of a direct democracy

system and also on the importance of "general will." His ideas had heavy impacts on the development of republican systems of governance and on the revolutionary movements throughout the countries.

Tocqueville, 2019, pointed out that as did de Tocqueville in Democracy in America (1835), where he disscused the power and weaknesses of a democratic system, one of the finds was how the power of the majority can silence the minortities. These ideas are relevant today when populists use these problems as a mean to capture power at the detriment of pluralism.

However, the aforementioned ideas has helped with the development of democracy, the conflict where the equilibrium that needs to be struck between the power of the majority and the power of the minorties still does exist. While these challenges remain, even populist movements emerge and claim to represent "the people" as opposed to the elite.

2.3 Global Spread of Democratic Norms Post-WWII

After the second world war, democracy was one of the most important focuses of game paradigms with the helped of economic reconstruction projects, ideological change and international organizations. One of the most important milestones was the founding of the UN that started promoting democracy through the passing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Lauren, 2011) as it was the first to provide political freedom and human rights.

Reconstruction of war-blasted Europe was possible due to the economic linkage primacy of democracy during The Marshall Plan (1948-1952) (Judt, 2005). The foundation of NATO and the subsequent creation of the European Economic Community, which later became the EU, politicized economic advantages and solidified democracies at the same time (Moravcsik, 1998).

Democratic capitalism and authoritarian socialism were contested heavily during The Cold War (1947-1991). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 came the expansion of democracy's merits and an increase in the rapid democratization of previously ruled communist nations. However, that came at a cost, as economic bull markets drove public distrust toward democratic regimes, giving rise to populist movements (Diamond, 2015).

Lack of powerful leading institutions capable of tackling corruption in the post-cold war era democracy-led many countries towards authoritarian rule. The Arab Spring (2010-2012) was

a precise illustration of these boiling democratic hopes encountered with sheer governing force and chaos (Lynch, 2013).

2.4 The Rise of Populism and Its Democratic Implications

Liberal democracies emerged as the primary governing systems around the world after World War II. However, in the 21st century, populist movements emerged that defy accepted democratic practices. Populism, by its broadest definition, is a political framework that aggressively portrays "the people" as being at grotesque conflict with a corrupt elite and, as a result, severely erodes institutional checks and balances (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The impact of economic crises, globalization, and social inequality have amplified. Populists who claim to speak for "the people" have emerged as leaders after every major economic catastrophe. The distrust in traditional political parties after the 2008 financial crisis, for example, led to the rampant growth of populist movements in Europe and the US (Piketty, 2014). As has been observed with many populist leaders, power consolidation is often achieved with a massive crusade against judicial independence, media freedom, and legislative protocols.

The relationship between democracy and populism is rather intricate. The language of mobilization under populism quicker results in political engagement, in a greater risk of obliterating pluralism and institutional tolerances. The essence of conflict between liberal and populist democracy is, broadly speaking, representation: while liberal democracy focuses on constitutionalism and minority protection, populism focuses on governing through emergency edicts and direct public appeals (Dahl, 1989).

Populism has become a central phenomenon in the political arena that has spread from Europe's right-wing nationalist parties to Latin America's leftist movements. For instance, Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary have directly contested democratic institutions using populist techniques (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Such styles of governance are a new form in the context of democratic backsliding, where the concentration of power in the executive branch combined with aggressive actions towards the media reduces democratic robustness.

Consequently, understanding modern populism also requires understanding the historical evolution of democracy. The commitment to democratic norms will be tested through the willingness of democratic societies to fulfill the popular expectations while achieving institutional stability and constitutional order.

3. The Structure and Dynamics of Populism

3.1 Conceptual Foundations of Populism

As we saw in Section 1, populism is typically described as a "thin-centered" ideology which can latch itself onto different political systems (Mudde, 2004). While this is perhaps the most accepted interpretation of Cas Mudde's work, there are other scholars like Ernesto Laclau who offer a different take by viewing populism as a discursive strategy that mobilizes "the people" versus "the elite." This is the claim that Santos et al. (2024) comes from, arguing that this framework shows how populism operates outside of ideational boundaries, allowing it to be more fluid in nature.

Along these lines, some scholars argue that it is the form of populism that matters most, rather than what populism actually encompasses. This is evident in how populist rhetoric, for example, employs an us versus them approach (dichotomy) to reduce multifaceted socio-political issues into simple narratives of conflicts between honorable, everyday citizens and a powerful, malignant elite. Such a rhetorical style makes it easier for populist leaders to cast themselves as the true representatives of the people while bypassing the traditional political framework and interacting directly with their supporters (Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024).

3.2 Populism and Its Relationship with Other Political Forces

3.2.1 Populism and Authoritarianism

Although populism and authoritarianism are two distinct concepts, their intersection has raised mounting   concern.

As noted by Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier (2025), populism does not seek to reclaim power in an authoritarian way, it instead attempts to return power to the people by confronting elites. This duality is explored further, emphasizing that once in office, many populist leaders become

authoritarian. That shift — from mobilizing democratically to exercising authoritarian rule — is the crux of the phenomenon of democratic erosion (Ruth-Lovell & Wiesehomeier, 2025).

Larry Diamond explores this shift in his work When Does Populism Become a Threat to Democracy? (Diamond, 2017). While he notes that populism is beneficial in stimulating participation within a democracy, it often leads to an imbalance with other spheres of government, particularly with the executive. Populist leaders often attack the foundations of democracy, including the judiciary and the media. We can observe these dynamics in the cases of Hugo Chávez, Viktor Orbán, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who started from strong populist positions and later wielded unprecedented power in ways that dismantled democratic structures (Hawkins & Mitchell, 2025).

The transition from populism to authoritarianism is often marked with a narrative of "saving" the nation from invented dangers, giving reason for such deviations from democracy and accumulation of power (Latif Al Waroi et al., 2024). Once in office, populist leaders tend to exploit their mandates to eliminate the institution of democracy.

3.2.2 Populism and Nationalism

Populism is typically associated with nationalism. It often features as part of the right-wing populist movements.

Samuel Huntington explains in his book "The Clash of Civilizations" how nationalist populism emerges in reaction to cultural threats, viewing globalization and immigration as life-and-death challenges to national identity (Huntington, 1998).

Populist figures like Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen ethnically or culturally define 'the people' and use nationalist populism to appeal to them. The phrase "America First" from Trump and Le Pen's obsession with French identity touting French identity and foreigner exclusion demonstrates this (Froio, 2022). Likewise, left populists like Evo Morales and Rafael Correa use nationalism to promote economic self-sufficiency and anti-foreign dependence.

Nationalism serves as an unifying force in both right-wing and left-wing populist movements, conjuring up a sense of outrage over so-called external threats and strengthening the populist

narrative of elite abandonment. The existence of opposing ideological sides illustrates the extent to which flexible nationalism can be used by populists for whatever objectives they have.

3.2.3 Populism in the Context of Globalization

The emergence of contemporary populism is firmly rooted in the phenomenom of globalization. Samuel Huntington's work Political Order in Changing Societies argues that liberal socio-economic development can undermine existing modes of socio-psychological governance and political order, and therefore, create opportunities for the growth of populism (Huntington, 1993). In the case of the West, globalization has intensified inequality, resulting in economic dislocation and the fostering of resentment.

Elaborate changes in the economy has led to a return of populism, as demonstrated by Sanders and Matteo Salvini who criticize globalization from differing ideological positions. Sanders is for 'the economy' to 'function' for the people and redistribution of wealth, while for Salvini, concern centres on immigration, foreign trade, and protectionist policies to defend the domestic economy.

Populist sentiment is also a product of cultural globalization. The adoption of liberal Western principles like gender equality and rights for LGBTQ+ people is viewed as an assault on traditional values by a number of societies. In Eastern Europe and even the Middle East, Orbán and Erdoğan have taken upon themselves the role of populist leaders who act as defenders of Western nationalism against cultural imperialism of the West (Ferreira Dias, 2024).

3.3 The Structural Characteristics of Populist Movements

3.3.1 The Role of Leadership

An important element in the development of populism is the often present and very alluring force of a singular figure: personalistic leadership. In the ideologies of populism, it is imperative for a leader to be both captivating and supremely authoritative. Populist leaders create a persona that transcends the boundaries of a political office. He becomes the embodiment of a rebellion against an entrenched system that is rotten and out of touch. These leaders market themselves as casualties of the system; true representatives. They do not work through conventional political parties. Rather, they offer direct, unfiltered, and personal interaction to the "people." These leaders flourish in contexts where they are able to address the broader society, where they can reach the audience without going through established

organizations, but rather via personal interaction, leadership, and appeals to unit identity.

What drives these leaders to the top is their proficiency in crisis narratives. Take for instance Jair Bolsonaro, who depicted Brazil as a nation under siege with crime, corruption, and moral decay as existential threats to its existence (Hällgren & Buchanan, 2024). The same can be said for Narendra Modi, whose depiction of an elite class that has "forgotten" the common people became a rallying cry for millions, positioning him as the leader who could restore India's lost pride and power (Hällgren & Buchanan, 2024). These narratives are not mere conjectures for political gain; they evoke strong feelings, especially of anger and fear, and encourage individuals to adopt a mindset where they feel besieged.

This emotional exploitation on which populist leadership thrives. Populist leaders use the panic mode to create a feeling of national urgency (Kinnvall, 2024). Whispers, now emotionally drawn to the narrative of disaster, are frequently prepared to accept extreme propositions, including restricting civil liberties and democratic norms - all in the name of "saving" the nation (Kinnvall, 2024). In this manner, the populist leader is no longer a mere politician, but rather a living symbol of national hardship.

3.3.2 Digital Populism and the Bypassing of Traditional Media Gatekeepers

Disruptive technology has changed the landscape of popular politics as leaders and movements are no longer obliged to work within the confinements of traditional intermediaries. Unlike traditional media, which channels political communication through editors, social media platforms offer direct access. This absence of intercessors enhances populist discourse more through its immediacy, visceral connection, and anti-establishment sentiment.

Populist leaders use social media as a megaphone to advance their own political agenda. An example is Donald Trump, who has single-handedly altered news cycles to his benefit by using incendiary tweets and disregard for journalists, who he considers part of the insider establishment (Gomes & Reis, 2024). Just like that, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil turned WhatsApp into a tool to post misleading content that went viral and, in turn, fostered loyalty while demonizing the mainstream media (Gomes & Reis, 2024). These platforms radically transform the division between political communication and entertainment while enabling an unprecedented level of personalization between the leaders and the audience.

Apart from the individual figures, digital media increased grassroots populism and shattered the traditional political party hierarchy system. An example is Italy's Five Star Movement, which emerged from online activism. The movement shows how digital disintermediation allows political outsiders to garner influence without prior systems or frameworks (Vakhrushev, 2024). The same can be said for Spain's Podemos and France's Yellow Vests, who used social networks for rapid mobilization, showing the force of digital populism (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Still, the transformation brings destabilizing effects. The social media systems' algorithmic approach favors sensationalism rather than nuance, deepening the divide between opposing political factions. These divides are exacerbated by populists who sow distrust in the opponent and institutional authority using misinformation. The 2016 U.S. elections and the Brexit campaign were prominent examples where severely inaccurate information, often boosted and circulated by bots, drastically changed public perception, making sensible discussion nearly impossible (Stoica, 2024).

Unlike traditional media, digital propaganda alters public perception unlike any other form of media. Digital propaganda shatters public deference so widely accorded to media gatekeepers enabling greater involvement in politics, thus redefining the fabric of democratic societies. This gap of connection, however, comes at the cost of democracy stability, revealing why disintermediation in modern populist movements is both a frightening weapon and a useful resource.

The ways in which populist leaders engage with the public evolves due to the effects of digital disintermediation, which is part of a larger trend. In the majority of cases, these leaders also bypass institutional limitations, targeting the judicial, legislative, or bureaucratic arms of the political system as they attempt to centralize authority. This shift in disintermediation from communication toward governance is analyzed through the example of Donald Trump.

3.3.3 Regional Variations in Populism
Despite the common features present in different forms of populism, each region has distinctive traces of it depending on the local context. There is a need to describe the socio-economic and

historical context in order to appreciate the differences in the populist politics of various regions.

In comparison to other regions, Latin America is more familiar with the concept of populism because it has traditionally been associated with leftist economic policies and strong, charismatic leaders. Juan Perón and Hugo Chávez, and more recently Andrés Manuel López Obrador, have garnered support by promising interventionist policies which include redistribution of wealth and state control over the economy. These movements tend to arise after a certain economic crisis, when traditional parties are seen to be voiceless in addressing the   pervasive   inequalities.

Right-wing populism, which focuses on immigration and cultural identity, is more common in Europe. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) and National Rally in France gain from fears of globalization and demographic change. They construct narratives that highlight the need to protect   one's   home   and   culture   (Ozcan   &   Kaya,   2024).

Populism in America is a unique blend. On the left, with Bernie Sanders, it's about leveling the socio-economic playing field and holding corporations accountable, while the right, under Donald Trump, merges economic protectionism with anti-establishment sentiment and nativist views (Staufer, 2020). This is a more nuanced take on American populism's multifaceted syndrome: both its economic and cultural dimensions are significant in American political life.

In both Africa and Asia, the emergence of populist movements is often linked to weak institutional frameworks and political turbulence (Salasiah et al., 2024). In the Philippines and South Africa, populist leaders have emerged, such as Rodrigo Duterte and Jacob Zuma, who have exploited executive power while eroding judicial and press independence, (Salasiah et al., 2024). These examples showcase the tendency of populism to thrive in contexts where there is a lack of democratic safeguards, raising concerns about the possibility of such phenomenon escalating authoritarianism.

3.3.4 The Role of Crisis in Populist Mobilization

Whether real or imagined, crises play an essential role in the development and mobilization of populist initiatives. Social, economic, and political instability offer an opportunity for populists

to seize power, as they can easily position themselves as the only solution to systemic failures. Mainstream political actors attempt to alleviate crisis situations with institutional remedies, as opposed to opportunistic antagonists who actively exploit such crises as proof of elite incompetence and moral decay, populiists are unapologetic in their strategies. The calculated use of crisis narratives aids mobilization as it cultivates urgency which appeals to mass support.

Economic downturns have always give rise to a new wave of populism. The financial crisis of 2008, for example, significantly changed the political climate in Europe and the U.S. (Lynch and Hopkin, 2018). In Southern Europe, left-wing populist parties like Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos surfaced, blaming financial elites, international institutions, and austerity measures for the recession while lobbying for increased spending on social welfare programs (Menegatti et al., 2023). Right-wing populist movements in the U.S. and Northern Europe also started to gain ground, from Trump's "America First" campaign to the revival of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) party. All these movements viewed the economic crisis as an outcome of globalization and immigration. They claimed that foreign workers and trade partnerships had severely crippled national prosperity (Kim, 2023).

Cultural and security crises are equally effective mobilization tools. In parallel, the European 2015-2016 refugee crisis catalyzed the swift rise of right-wing populist parties across Europe. Figures like France's Marine Le Pen and Hungary's Viktor Orbán labelled immigration as an aggressive attack on national identity, associating it with rampant crime, high unemployment, and cultural diminishment (Akbari & Najeebullah Mujadidi, 2024). These leaders crafted a crisis narrative of immigrants as hostile invaders, enhancing social cohesion with strong justifications for border control and nationalist policy. Trump's 2016 campaign, for instance, touted the idea of immigration as a national emergency, which led to his travel ban on Muslim nations and plans for a border wall (Waldinger, 2018).

Public health crises have further intensified the reliance on populist narratives. Take, for example, The COVID-19 Pandemic, which enabled populist rulers to attack expert governance as well as democratic governance (Baydag & Villanueva Ulfgard, 2025). In both Brazil and the United States, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump used the pandemic as an opportunity to ignore scientific counsel, attack the press, and undermine any political challengers (Zimmermann et al., 2024). As self-styled defenders of individual liberties against reckless technocracy, they deepened public distrust in institutions (Zimmermann et al., 2024).

So, in reality, crises do not solely function as exogenous shocks for populists, but rather as fundamental parts of their political machinery. The ability to control public perception of an issue allows for actions outside democratic norms which further erodes public trust.

4. Comparative Case Studies: Populism in Action

4.1 The 1930s: Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain

4.1.1 Historical and Political Context

The emergence of Benito Mussolini in Italy and Francisco Franco in Spain serves as an example of how populist movements become authoritarian regimes during a crisis. Both leaders exploited the politically volatile climate, the economic downturn, and widespread discontent with the democratic capitalist framework and sought to implement radical change (Chen, 2024). As to the reason for Mussolini's appeal, it rested on the nationalistic and the promise of a revitalized Italy, while Franco's movement was a counter-revolutionary response to the leftist forces, framed as an attempt to restore order, tradition, and Catholicism (Chen, 2024).

4.1.1.1 Mussolini: Post-War Crisis and the Nationalist Populist Surge

Italy Post-World War I period is characterized by economic difficulties, political disunity, and social unrest. Italy did not emerge victoriously; rather, it came out with its territorial ambitions which gave rise to the narrative of "mutilated victory" (Vittoria Mutilata) (Pavan Dalla Torre, 2024). This is narratively known alongside further fueling nationalist movements and public disillusionment with the democratic government. The failure of the government to contain economic and inflationary pressures together with a steep rise in unemployment gave rise to radical   alternatives.

Mussolini, an ex-socialist who turned into a die-hard nationalist, emerged in this atmosphere of frustration.He established the "Fasci Italiani di Combattimento" in 1919, which later transformed into the "Partito Nazionale Fascista" (Curea, 2023). He promised economic recovery, national strength, and the end of political turmoil. His hoses rhetoric appealed to the middle class, angry veterans, and disillusioned workers by portraying his movement as one capable of addressing the challenges posed by an ineffective liberal democracy and the rising specter   of   socialism   (Curea,   2023).

Through street violence by the Blackshirts (Squadristi), mass mobilization, and alliance forming with conservative elites, Mussolini perceived himself as a politically unaffiliated man of action who could burst through traditional party politics. He staged the March on Rome in October 1922, which was the culmination of the previously organized violent mobilization (Whittam, 2024). This event highlighted his appeal to the citizens as he presented himself as the solitary figure who could restore order enabling King Victor Emmanuel III to appoint him as Prime Minister (Whittam, 2024). After assuming office, he promptly sought to revoke the democratic structures of governance while deceptively outwardly claiming to enjoy popular support.

4.1.1.2 Franco: The Spanish Civil War and the Anti-Communist Populist Narrative

Franco's path to authoritarianism differed from Italy's in that it was defined by a military struggle rather than a political mobilization as was the case in Italy (Ivanytska, 2024). Nonetheless, he exhibited striking traits of other populist leaders in his rhetoric and approaches. The Second Spanish Republic began in 1931 and introduced reforms aimed at limiting the traditional power of the Catholic Church, the military, and the landowning elite (Llamazares, 2024). While these reforms were meant to modernize Spanish society, they instead exacerbated ideological tensions between the right and the left, further polarizing the country. The left fragmented into various factions—including communists, socialists, and anarchists—while conservative sectors, including landowners, the bourgeoisie, and aristocracy, aligned with parts of the military in open opposition to the Republic (Llamazares, 2024).

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) started when a group of conservatives, military officers, and nationalists conspired to overthrow the leftist Republican government coalition (Leira-Castiñeira & Fernández Prieto, 2023). Franco was the head of the Nationalist forces and, as such, portrayed himself as a savior who would lead Spain out of the chaos brought by communism. Franco's legitimacy was won through battle, contrary to Mussolini whose rise was defined by political engineering and intimidation. Franco claimed the support of the masses with promises of restoring Spain's lost glory, defending Catholicism, and annihilating leftist forces that he claimed had plunged Spain into despair (Ivanytska, 2024).

During the wartime period, Franco's propaganda claimed that he defended the integrity of Spain, Christendom, and morals. Upon Franco's victory, he instituted an authoritarian regime

characterized by the brutal suppression of dissent, vigorous nationalism, and an embrace of populism.

4.1.2 Strategies of Legitimization and Mobilization

Both Franco and Mussolini used strategic communication and mass mobilization to consolidate their power. The propaganda, symbols, and myths of national renewal that were central features of their public policies contributed to their legitimacy.

4.1.2.1 Constructing the Myth of a Strong, Unified Nation

Both regimes dealt with national rejuvenation as a focal point and portrayed the leader as a national saviour. No other rhetoric, in his case, was more important than the idea of reverberating the glory of the Roman Empire; it was central to everything Mussolini did as it connected his rule to the imperial past of Italy (Roche, 2019). Italians, shattered by the post-World War 2 era, hoped for an unprecedented resurgence to don the "New Rome" vision that was envisioned by Mussolini (Roche, 2019).

For Franco the rule was a Spain's traditional a counter-revolutionary Spanish restoration. The Spanish Civil War was, in his account, a holy battle fighting the devilishly brutal left. Franco's leadership and authority were presented as divinely ordained and, embodying that, his slogan "España Una, Grande y Libre" ("One, Great, and Free Spain") fuses the values of nationalism, authoritarianism, and divinely legitimized rule, characterizing Francoism the best (Pérez-Crespo, 2023).

4.1.2.2 Manipulating Mass Communication and Identity Symbols

Any public communications were expertly designed to fit the perception the leaders sought to cultivate among the population. Mussolini, for instance, did not just control Italy's media, but improved it by employing radio, cinema, and the press to amplify fascist propaganda. His regime also founded Istituto Luce, which produced propaganda films glorifying fascist achievements and Mussolini's leadership (Mancosu, 2024).

Like Franco's regime, Mussolini's also utilized media at their disposal, but with a different approach. Mussolini was, perhaps, the most visible of modernist leaders, giving ostentatious speeches and exhibiting over-the-top gestures. Franco was much less animated. Franco

disseminated messages through the Catholic Church, schools, and the radio, which allowed him to project himself as a fatherly figure while maintaining an authoritative gaze, but not feeling paternalistic like a charismatic leader.

4.1.2.3 Cult of Personality and the Leader as a Savior Figure

Mussolini and Franco cultivated personal cults that transcended them as dictators. Mussolini the Duc lead Italy as emblematized by Italy himself. His self-aggrandizing speeches, exhibitions of military prowess, and overtly public actions projected the belief that it was only him who was capable of leading Italy to its expected greatness (Belousov, 2024).

Franco, not so colourful, also had that concept about him as, El Caudillo (Belousov, 2024). Bolstered his authority with a quasi-historical narrative attempting to Catholic and nationalistically save the genuinely necessary but his reign was justified through a Catholic doctrine as chosen by God himself. Unlike Mussolini, Franco was not after public recognition. He kept a carefully crafted distance while letting the military and Church propagate his rule.

4.1.3 Bypassing Traditional Institutions

Mussolini and Franco, facing no opposition, legally, politically, and repressively undermined all democratic means to competitively strengthen facilities their power.

4.1.3.1 Eroding Democratic Structures

Beginning with the adoption of the 1923 Acerbo election law, Italy's parliament was turned into a mere administrative unit under the direct rule of the dictator who started with boasting of himself as a King in his sovereign state by 1925. While aftermarket requirements of winning all elections as fast as possible ended any enhancing activities even basic democratic choices and multi party systems were installed the governing and guidance models were officially adopted by a version of corporatism solely imagined fascists.

After winning the Civil War, Franco imposed a military dictatorship instead of restoring the Spanish Republic. Unlike Mussolini, who took over institutionally at breakneck speed, Franco consolidated power more gradually, focusing on long-term dominance through repression and institutional reconfiguration.

4.1.3.2 Using Repression and Institutional Reforms to Consolidate Power

Both leaders repressed the population as a means of control. Mussolini had his secret police OVRA (Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e Repressione dell'Antifascismo) which persecuted the regime's political challengers (Fonio & Agnoletto, 2013). Franco's regime similarly purged and executed right-wing Republicans and leftists, imprisoning everyone who could potentially mount any form of opposition to his despotic rule (Fonio & Agnoletto, 2013).

4.1.4 Lessons for Contemporary Populism

Mussolini and Franco's rule shed light on the extent to which populism can morph into deep-seated authoritarianism. Their justification of exceptional actions in the name of saving the nation rings true today. Both demonstrate the ways in which governability based on populism can swiftly shift to repressive rule, using the pretext of crises to dismantle democratic frameworks and strengthen their authority.

The legacies left by Mussolini and Franco epitomize that the use of shallow pretexts for authoritative rule could stem from extreme populist sentiments fused with mythologized nationalism and circumvention of systems. They employed policies based on catastrophic violence and state-sponsored violence which still serves as a blueprint to contemporary autocratic leaders which underscores the threat posed by authoritarian populist nationalism.

4.2 Tunisia: Kais Saied and the Presidential Drift

4.2.1 The Roots of Populism and Democratic Erosion in Tunisia

The course of Tunisian democratic populism and its deterioration into democratic erosion commenced long before the tenure of President Kais Saied. It stems from the political turmoil that ensued after the Jasmine Revolution in 2011. The Jasmine Revolution, which resulted in the removal of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ended decades of autocratic governance and created an avenue for new political forces claiming to 'true democracy' transform the remnants of the old regime (Maijar & Andri, 2024). This shift included prominent actors like Ennahda party, a moderate Islamic movement that masqueraded as a supporter of liberal democracy. Its narratives were rife with elements of populist discourse by framing itself as advocates for faithful and historically oppressed portions of the society against a secular, pro-Western elite characterized by moral decay, exclusionary practices and greed (Maijar & Andri, 2024).

The success of Ennahda was facilitated by the disillusionment of the people with the ancien regime whose rule was perceived as corrupt, elitist, and too dependent on Western aid. Ennahda took advantage of this mood and positioned itself as a political alternative that could renew morally and institutionally (Blanc, 2024). Although the party officially supported democratic reforms, it was also interested in redefining the identity politics in Tunisia through the discourse of cultural and moral revival. This was a tactic that further divided the society, polarizing the secular and religious constituencies. When Ennahda was unable to effectively govern as the economy continued to suffer and security threats persisted, people started to lose their faith in the democratic process that followed the revolution. The inability to bring real change left a fertile soil to be used in the future by populist appeals and anti-system rhetoric.

During the period when Ennahda was struggling to justify its existence, opposition political parties alongside civil groups accused the party of attacking secularism. Leftist political figure assassinations that occurred in 2013 opened up opportunities for newer, regressive economic policies that were far detached from traditional progressive frameworks (Blanc, 2024). As a result of the immense distrust that was created; later on, populistic intervention was done by Kais Saied. He made use of the anger directed towards the Islamist-aligned and secular sides of Tunisian politics (Gana et al., 2023).

4.2.2 Kais Saied's Rise and Populist Legitimation

The 2019 Presidential elections witnessed the emergence of a political outsider and a populist candidate, electorally strange phenomenon in Tunisia: Kais Saied, a Constitutional law professor, devoid of any previous governance experience (Tamburini, 2022). His appeal rested in being regarded as an honest, anti-establishment figure who purportedly opposed the corruption and incompetence of the political class. Moreover, he eschewed the local vernacular' and opted to address Tunisians in modern standard Arabic which positioned him, at least self-branded, as an ascetic intellectual, Tunisia's future leader unto ruled, and protector of national dignity and Tunisia's moral integrity (King, 2023).

Saied's campaign rhetoric was dominated by, and centre around, direct democracy and the absence of a political intermediary. He was critical of political parties for they, in his view, had betrayed the social contract and, thus, an entire system of Tunisia needed complete replacement

(Boughanmi 2023). His proposal struck a chord with citizens sick and tired of elite power struggles paired with economic stagnation. It was also noted that, during the campaign, an attempt to mobilize nationalist and sovereigntist sentiments portraying Tunisia as weakened not only by foreign intrusions but also a non-representative political elite was made (Boughanmi, 2023).

Following a landslide victory in the presidential election, Saied attempted to consolidate power further during the political deadlock and the COVID-19 pandemic. His decision to implement emergency measures, which he claimed were vital for the preservation of national stability, signified the

4.2.3 Bypassing Institutional Mediation: Saied's Power Consolidation

The peak of Saied's presidential power arguably occurred in July 25th 2021 after he unilaterally removed the Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, paused the parliament, and latter on dissolved it completely. (Blanc, 2024). Saied justified his actions arguing it was in line with Article 80 of The Tunisian Constitution which maintains the President can take extraordinary actions in times of national distress. He Also claimed his efforts 'saied' restoring order to the country (Blanc, 2024). This position was virtually uncontested until his critics rather quickly decided it was a coup attempt as it practically removed all legislative or judicial scrutiny and control.

After the parliamentary suspension, Syahba claims that Saied further advanced his consolidation of power by ruling by decree and removing the "check-and-balance" system, which had defined Tunisia after the revolution (Syahba & Fahadayna, 2024). This was exemplified by the dismissal and substitution of crucial judicial personnel which masked the executive encroachment into the control of the judiciary. The arrest of critical politicians and journalists marked an incontestable scope for civil freedom and Saied's rule. He further attempted to pass a contentious referendum in 2022, which radically expanded presidential powers diminishing the parliament and other state mechanisms (Syahba & Fahadayna, 2024).

These steps displayed a populist undertone when Saied portrayed himself as a self-sufficient representative of the people, claiming that the current political system is both corrupt and illegitimate. He intensified the political divide and rationalized the removal of democratic systems by depicting his political rivals as traitors and foreign infiltrators.

4.2.4 Populism and Democratic Erosion Under Saied

Saied's leadership marks an emerging brand of populism that style attempts to reclaim sovereignty to the people while removing all democratic safeguards. The abandoning of political norms, along with a cascade of executive orders, orders is a clear attack against the basic precepts of representative democracy (Annovi, 2024). This is analogous to the overarching patterns of populist governance, where leaders claiming to champion the nation undertake radical action stripped of any reasoning other than 'for the salvation of the nation' takes place. In doing so, they dismantle institutional checks and balances on power.

Moreover, the rhetoric and behavior of Saied demonstrate a political logic that does not allow considering dissent as a valid element of democratic pluralism. Rather, dissenting voices are interpreted as a threat to national unity and state enemies. This discrediting of political opponents has been accompanied by the weakening of judicial independence and the criminalization of criticism, which has left the democratic arena of contestation considerably reduced (Annovi, 2024). The media, which was relatively lively and active in keeping the power in check, has also been put under more restrictions. Such trends have reduced the size of the public sphere, restricting the freedom of discussion and undermining the constraints on the   executive.

Tunisia is a good example of how even the transition to democracy may inadvertently set the stage for populism, which then starts to eat away at the very democratic institutions out of which it first arose. The post-revolutionary era did not bring the economic and institutional changes that many citizens anticipated and this led to a feeling of betrayal and a lack of progress. The high unemployment rate of about 16 percent in general and more than 33 percent among the youth has made a big part of the population, especially the younger generations, more disillusioned with the democratic experiment. This socioeconomic disappointment has produced a rich soil of populist appeals. The nationalist and anti-elite rhetoric, which President Saied employed to legitimize his power consolidation, is an example of how populist leaders transform the structure of governance in the name of crisis management. The ability of Tunisia to revert to a pluralistic and participatory democratic process is highly questionable, particularly since civil society and opposition groups are finding it hard to check the growing power of the executive.

4.3 Trump in the United States: Polarization and the Assault on Institutions

4.3.1 A Unique Adaptation of Populism to Presidential Democracy

The populism advanced by Donald Trump is a distinctive example of the Americanized framework of democracy and sociopolitical movements. Unlike 'outsider' parliamentary populists, Trump capitalized on the relative powers of the U.S. presidency to execute control as an insider. Trump claimed anti-establishment credentials despite being a billionaire celebrity, which garnered sympathy from voters who felt disconnected from those in power (Kinderman, 2023). Today, no single medium allows for direct interaction between a citizen and a politician like social media, which, in Trump's case, was Twitter—and later converted to X by Musk. This gave him the opportunity to directly reach out to his supporters without relying on the editorial intermediaries of traditional media.

It is not an exaggeration to assert that Twitter (now X) was the accelerator and Trump's deceitful strategies for his supporters the steering wheel. Social media enabled politicians to frame relations with their supporters like never before, and Trump's populism served this quite literally. More than mere rhetoric, this served as a systematic effort toward dismantling intermediary institutions. From 'deep states' to congressional battles, court attendances and portraying himself as the victim of political witch hunts, Trump mounted a systematic erosion of institutionalized American democracy. Sculpting American democracy his way led to unrestrained leadership, or what Conley describes as "This unbalance," freedom to direct contact with the people without any form of checks and balances (Moynihan, 2020; Conley, 2022).

His appeal thrived on simplifying policy into stark choices with heavy emotional appeal: globalism vs American jobs, securing borders vs crime, and crushing China vs decline of the nation (Marietta et al., 2017). This black and white narrative bolstered his image as the defender of American values against vicious foreign interference and a domestically perceived elite that was more rotten and complacent.

4.3.2 Executive Power and Institutional Bypass in the Trump Presidency

The emergence of digital platforms has allowed populist leaders to circumvent traditional media and rally voters, but this disintermediation extends into the political and institutional

domain as well. This section analyzes how Donald Trump restructured the boundaries of executive power by weakening the controls that civil servants, political entities, and federal institutions traditionally exercised — accumulating power through legal and extralegal channels.

One of the hallmarks of disintermediation, the form of populism exercised by Trump, is the erosion of institutional and political actors that traditionally curb the use of executive power (Moynihan, 2020). He is known to have issued multiple executive orders which bypassed Congress, put loyalists in place to break down bureaucratic opposition, and undermined any federal agency that did not embrace his policies. He dismissed career civil servants under the pejorative "the swamp," and in doing so, encouraged the population to distrust institutions that are fundamental to a liberal democracy (Wejnert, 2023).

In addition, without considering a policy framework, he reframed the Republican Party to be solely instrumental in projecting his image, branding it his personal trademark (Wilson, 2023). Loyalty to the Party now means loyalty to Trump - marking a diversion from conservatism, democratic tradition, and the Rule of Law.

His reach affected even conservative media, as groups like Newsmax and One America News emerged as competitors to Fox News through their adoption of his rhetoric (Archer et al., 2024). Grassroots initiatives like Turning Point USA further served to mainstream his efforts, forming a counter political and media sphere where Trump's narrative was perpetuated and became the reality.

4.3.4 Delegitimization of the Democratic Process

Prompted by rising discontent among voters, perhaps no other strategy has been consequential to a democracy than his unrelenting approach to undermining the democratic system. Referring to the media as 'the enemy of the people,' he fuelled the growing cynicism towards journalism, branding critical coverage as 'fake news' and building a political culture where truth was at the whims of one's partisan stance (Freedman, 2022).

His onslaught towards the judiciary was just as pronounced. Trump routinely blasted judges who ruled against him for lacking objectivity, and set out to alter the composition of the courts by nominating politically compatible judges, deepening divisions and destroying judicial impartiality.

The 2020 election marked the last of Trump's demolition of democratic freedoms.

His promotion of the "Big Lie" — the unfounded assertion that an election was stolen— led to the events of January 6 at the Capitol (Arceneaux & Truex, 2022). His refusal to concede and the subsequent attempts to overturn the results not only disrupted the peaceful transfer of power, but also created a worrying precedent for future attempts to challenge the legitimacy of elections. Even with impeachment, court cases, and public outrage, Trump still maintaining a strong base supporting his ideas. This clearly shows the profound weakening in American democracy.

4.3.5 The Role of Elon Musk and the 2024 Presidential Campaign

The influence of Elon Musk had an automaton affect during the era of 2024, further exacerbating Trump's intention and efforts towards presidency (Alonso-Muñoz, 2024). After purchasing Twitter Inc and relabelling it to X, Musk reinstated Trump's account, furthering the right-wing populism rhetoric with "free speech absolutism" (Alonso-Muñoz, 2024). This meant that Trump received an even bigger tool to fire up the bay that was cruising without any form of censorship.

Musk's role was not limited to social media. Cutting down X's moderation policies and propping up content supportive of anti-establishment voices and pro Trump content turned the site into a bulldozer for trumpfied content, essentially making it a trumpet for his 2024 campaign (Tallent, 2023). While Musk did not fund Trump in any direct way, his digital empire served as a clear advantage for trump, ensuring that the message being communicated by him took the front stage at every given opportunity on the internet.

This marked the beginning of a new epoch in populist politics for the world, where military power in tangential relations to technology merged together to attack democratic principles (Pabst, 2022). The endorsement by Musk helped trump win the trust of younger conservative voters who were into technology. In the other hand, trump provided musk with the populist backing he needed so as not to be monitored and controlled by government regulators.

4.3.6 The Enduring Impact of Trump's Populism

In 2024, the remaining effects of populism were clear with Trump's attempt to regain power. His ability to remobilize voters post 2020 elections demonstrated the polarization within the U.S and the resilience of the movement (Rensmann, 2021). While the second term was marked by renewed fighting with democratic institutions and norms, there was also solidification of his changes to the Republican Party, and the broad politics of the country.

The collaboration between Musk and Trump marked a new evolution of populism in the digital age. It transformed political insurgency in democracy by combining populism with the digital oligarchs system, setting the movement in place for future leaders who wish to change technology-led governance (Akande et al., 2023). This transformation, along with the blend of political power and media, will change the narrative of American democracy for years to come in this new era of digital-initiated governance where institutional resilience is questioned (Akande et al., 2023).

4.4 Giorgia Meloni in Italy: Populism Between Moderation and Radicalism
4.4.1 A Populism Seeking Institutional Legitimacy

Giorgia Meloni represents a distinct example of elite right-wing populism in Western Europe. Unlike most other populist leaders that tend to dislocate frameworks of governance, Meloni attempts to balance two strategies. She continues with her nationalist, identity-driven narrative but seeks to legitimize her rule with institutional firm-ness and international coalitions (Baldini, 2024). As the first female Prime Minister of Italy and the leader of Fratelli d'Italia, she has consolidate power alongside the constitution, unlike more radical populists like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro who create chaos to gain traction (Baldini, 2024). As Reinhard Heinisch observes, Meloni exemplifies an advanced stage of populism which he regards as "functionalist" in that it adjusts to fit democratic frameworks instead of eliminating them (Appendix A). Her form of populism is evolutionary, not revolutionary, seeking endurance rather than rupture.

Her ascendance to power was both an eruption and a continuity of the previous populist tides in Italy (Oxford Analytica, 2023). Wielder of the emulous base of Silvio Berlusconi who blended populism into a technocratic neoliberalism inclusive mix and Matteo Salivini's Lega aground anti-EU immigration Eurosceptic policies, Meloni's strain comprises of a more rigid

form of populism. She brands herself as a conservative ianithor left the discount servationship yet relentless pursued the sovereignist rhetoric (Oxford Analytica, 2023). Unlike the Five Star Movement which was designed omnomore party scorb bans structureof denial, Meloni set out to weaken these traditional bonds, illustrating a more strategic form of populism (Gavrilova, 2023). Heinisch points out that this approach is characteristic of a wider phenomenon concerning European right-wing populists who seek to adapt their policies to institutionalized frameworks by creating cohesive political parties, utilizing the EU, not to integrate and serve its purpose but to transform it from the inside out (Appendix A).

4.4.2 Nationalist and Identity-Based Rhetoric in a More Moderate Form

A unique characteristic of her leadership is the capacity to retain a radical nationalist vision while moderating extreme nationalism. Her motto "Dio, Patria, Famiglia" (God, Country, Family) combines the traditional nationalist rhetoric with careful, strategic avoidance of the far-right undertones of the Italian history (Vassallo & Vignati, 2024). Unlike Salvini who bluntly insulted EU institutions, Meloni perfected her sovereignty-centered focus by calling for a "Europe of Nations" which is more agreeable and has less room for confrontation. This has allowed her to attract traditional conservatives and more firebrand right-wing voters (Vassallo & Vignati, 2024). In the interview, Heinisch points out that such reconfiguration of the nationalist narrative is important for modern populists in order to maintain relevance—they express sovereignty not by withdrawing, but by asking for a reconfigured multilateralism that favors the framework of national identity (Appenix A).

On immigration policy, she has adopted a strict approach, tightening control and reducing the scope of action of NGOs in the Mediterranean region (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2024). Unlike Salvini who had aggressive confrontational clashes with other European leaders over migration policies, Meloni has attempted to achieve some level of cooperation with Brussels for funding agreements about border control which help her accrue funds while still maintaining her harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric to placate voters from her support base wanting "tougher" policies (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2024). As Heinisch explains, this is how contemporary populists use a dual strategy— "speak radically and govern pragmatically" – which serves to insulate them from external scrutiny and internal dissent.

Selvaggina's Italian economic nationalism has developed scarcely more than practically. To degli Escudero, it is important to note the balance Giorgia Meloni advocates for when it comes to protecting Italian industry and opposing EU overreach. Advocating for both at the same time poses a danger and risk to Italy's sovereignty. Her attempts at implementing greater market control in Italy coupled with the use of non-constructive fiscal populist policies at pre-election periods proposed by Italian coalitions are no longer utilized (Bruno, 2024). Because of this mixed populist approach which could be considered self-serving ideology, she was able to stave off potential moderates in European markets and partners (Bruno, 2024).

4.4.3 Maintaining a Direct Relationship with the People: A Hybrid Communication Strategy

The combination of modern technology and traditional political striking is what seemed to work for Meloni. As heard, Trump used the platform Twitter to attack many institutions and rally supporters. On the other hand, Meloni has adopted a more disciplined approach to media engagement (Cilento, 2023). She uses TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram to reach tend to a younger demographic and also has a firm grasp on traditional media outlets (Cilento, 2023). Heinisch attributes this phenomenon to "strategic populist personalization," where authority figures establish direct emotional connections with citizens while reducing media interactions that might jeopardize their grip on power (Appendix A).

What stands out most is her ability to sway an audience by giving torch bearing speeches which are deeply emotional. Meloni places herself as, the 'globalist elite' alongside the 'Bureaucrats in Brussels.' Her in comparison to those on the chaotic side of the political spectrum makes her stand out. She doesn't, lines, liberal democratic institutions makes her unique in the advancing side of confrontational populists (Cilento, 2023). Unlike prima donna Berlusconi, who fancied the idea of owning personal media networks to promote himself, Meloni has mastered the art of digitally engaging with the public without being at the mercy of mainstream media (Cilento, 2023).

4.4.5 Selective Attacks on Intermediary Bodies Without Undermining Institutions

Actions from one leader or one nation do not solely preclude the erosion of liberal democratic institutions. This section builds upon preliminary discussions on digital disintermediation and institutional bypass, offering a comparative synthesis of how disparate populist actors, such as

Trump, Bolsonaro, and Meloni, have waged warfare on the judiciary, legal, and media impositions, including the semi-autonomous public sphere. Either way, these actions, whether covert or overt, are indicative of deeper, cross-national, and more complex patterns of democratic backsliding and institutional de-legitimization.

To date Meloni has not launched full-scale assaults on democratic institutions, however she has hit intermediate targets like non-governmental organizations, trade unions and certain segments of the press (Schiuma, 2024). Her administration has limited the activities of non-governmental organizations pertaining to the rescue of migrants, claiming that these NGOs foster illegal immigration. She has also lambasted some television and radio stations for being too partial, although, unlike in Hungary under Viktor Orbán, constitutive authoritarian forms of press control have not been instituted in Italy (Schiuma, 2024). This pattern, as pointed out by Heinisch, illustrates the difference between authoritarian populism and what he calls "semi-loyal populism" that critiques and weakens intermediaries but spares essential democratic institutions to prevent a backlash and retain legitimacy (Appenidx A).

His engagement with the judiciary is careful but remains tactical (Lecis Cocco Ortu, 2024). Unlike more radical populist leaders, Meloni has not gone for the judicial bomb approach against courts that deiced unfavorably on the country's popularity—she instead goes to court in more civilized ways by hoping to implement her policies, or has restricted the functioning of courts to her preferred frame of reference (Lecis Cocco Ortu, 2024). This way of doing things enables her to sustain some institutional mileage credibility whilst patting the back of her partisans who regard the courts as bones on the neck of a conservative government.

The first case is the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, where evidence suggests that even populism can 'mature' from its damaging roots. It serves as a reminder that it is possible for populist actors to shift from being anti-system protagonists to system-inclined leaders without losing touch with primal ideologies. Different from the likes of Trump or Bolsonaro, whose brand of populism created extreme clashes with institutions, Meloni has managed to navigate fiercely nationalistic populism within the parameters of a functioning governance system. There are still, however, risks to be managed. Balancing internal party hardliners and international obligations, especially credibility with nationalistic voters and European bodies, will require remarkable poise (Oxford Analytics, 2024). Also, her capacity to cope with Italy's economic dynamics, migration influx, and EU relationships will dictate whether her model of populism is enduring or merely adapative.

4.5 Latin America: AMLO in Mexico and Fernández in Argentina

4.5.1 The Roots of Latin American Populism

Populism is a deep-rooted phenomenon in Latin America that has existed side-by-side with caudillismo, or strongman rule, and economic populism. From Juan Perón in Argentina to Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the region has seen countless leaders who rally people against elites while simultaneously consolidating power within themselves (Conniff, 2012). Unlike Western democracies, where somewhat constrained populism exists, Latin American populism tends to take more extreme forms, such as the dismantling of the system of checks and balances, nationalistic and self-serving policies directed towards the economy, and a cult of personality that flirts with authoritarianism (Conniff, 2012).

Rampant inequality, especially paired with deep economic instability, is one of the greatest propeller for Latin American populism (Lins, 2020). For years, the region has faced severe discontent attributed to recurrent financial crises, hyperinflation, and foreign debt defaults (Lins, 2020). Populist leaders are often perceived to rather mercilessly pamper the economically underprivileged by implementing some immediate relief policies, such as nationalizing certain sectors, subsidizing others, or expanding fiscal space, that may, in the long-run, deepen the instability (Lins, 2020). This is often the case with Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and Alberto Fernández in Argentina, both realizing that economic discontent and anti-elite sentiments could be used to constructively maintain political support for themselves (Lins, 2020).

4.5.2 AMLO in Mexico: Popular Support and Institutional Challenges

Posing as leftist populist since he took office in 2018, AMLO balances fervent economic nationalism with deep hostility toward anything he views as an obstacle to his plans (Silva, 2023). His political branding draws from the "fourth transformation" narrative - a mark in history where he claims Mexico underwent drastic shifts - and positions him as a reformer undoing years of neoliberal rot (Silva, 2023).

4.5.2.1 Delegitimization of Institutions and Media Control

The peculiar aspect of AMLO's populism is his conduct toward Mexico's democratic institutions. He routinely lashes out at independent bodies, the courts, and even the regulators as unclean ons servants of corrupt elites. Controversy arose when he sought to fundamentally

change the National Electoral Office (INE), with many accusing him of endangering the electoral system in Mexico (Villanueva Ulfgard, 2023). In the same way, his relentless onslaught on journalists and the media has raised concerns about freedom of expression, with his administration being blamed for creating a 'chilling' atmosphere for independent journalism.

4.5.2.2 Economic Populism and the Battle with Business Elites

AMLO's has executed a policy strategy focused on the state, reversing decades of privatization of the energy industry (Flores Paredes, 2024). Under his administration, the government has heightened oil production and nationalized lithium reserves in an attempt to reduce foreign investment in the country (Flores Paredes, 2024). While these actions are popular for nationalism, they have antagonized business elites and global investors. His centerpiece construction projects, like the Maya Train and Dos Bocas refinery, have drawn widespread criticism for causing environmental destruction and being economically unviable. Despite this, they endure as tokens of his dedication to national development (Oehmichen Bazán, 2024)(Tornel, 2021).

Simultaneously, AMLO's social policies , including cash payments to vulnerable groups, have consolidated his political support (Velasco, 2022). While these policies have alleviated poverty temporarily, critics claim they are unable to provide a sustainable solution in the long run as they rely on funding obtained from austerity in other areas—such as science, education, and healthcare (Velasco, 2022).

4.5.2.3 Foreign Policy and Relations with the U.S.

AMLO has been pragmatic and at times confrontational with the United States and has maintained cooperation on trade and migration during both Trump and Biden's presidencies. Confrontations, however, have been frequent regarding energy, human rights, and democratic governance of other countries (Oxford Analytica, 2023). His unwillingness to denounce the authoritarian regimes of Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua highlights his ideological alignment with Latin America's leftist movements, distinguishing him from regional pro-Western centrists (Oxford Analytica, 2023).

4.5.3 Fernández in Argentina: The Weight of Peronism and Economic Crisis

Alberto Fernández's presidency (2019-2023) illustrated yet another chapter in Argentina's enduring history of Peronist populism (Tzeiman, 2024). While he was initially viewed as a moderate relative to his vice president and political patron, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, his administration rapidly descended into familiar cycles of economic mismanagement and persistent confrontational politics (Tzeiman, 2024).

4.5.3.1 Peronism's Populist Legacy

Peronism, arguably the pillar of Argentine politics since the 1940s, combines leftist ideology with nationalist agendas and militant social welfare policies (Culver, 2014). This legacy was furthered by Fernández, who framed himself as a protector of the working class from neoliberalist elites. His expenditures included price controls, restricted exports, and increased welfare spending, all which are characteristic of previous Peronist governments (Culver, 2014).

Argentine businesses and international actors distinctly remember his presidency for the open hostilities he waged against them. His government undertook a sovereign default on IMF debt obligations, instituted currency controls, and increased government spending in the economy (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2025). Though some of these measures provided short term relief, they created stronger inflationary forces in the medium term, which would trigger one of modern Argentina's most severe economic crises.

4.5.3.2 Economic Collapse and Populist Solutions

As of 2023, Argentina faced a dramatic crisis with surging inflation rates that were triple-digit, increasing poverty levels, and a nose-diving currency (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2025). Instead of pursuing structural reforms, the Fernández government continued implementing "populist" policies, which included inflationary wage increases, direct cash transfers (stimulus checks), and expanded subsidy programs (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2025). While these policies offered some respite to social upheavals in the short run, they deepened the alternative economic disequilibrium and increased imbalances.

4.5.3.3 Political Turbulence and Electoral Defeat

Fernández's waning approval ratings and internal fractures of the Peronist coalition led to a significant loss in the 2023 elections (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2024). A loss under a more market-friendly government was viewed as a temporary retreat from leftist populism, but it

was clear that the underlying problems fueling Peronism's dominance remained unaddressed (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2024).

4.5.4 Comparative Reflections: AMLO vs. Fernández and the Future of Populism in Latin America

Fernández's waning popularity and intensifying factionalism within the Peronist coalition culminated in a devastating electoral loss in 2023. (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2024). The election of a pro-market government marked a momentary retreat from leftist populism in Argentina, but the fundamental conditions that enabled the rise of Peronism remain unaddressed (Retamozo & Trujillo Salazar, 2024).

Even AMLO and Fernández's ideology was populist in nature; they experienced rather different political outcomes. AMLO enjoyed a stable economy and high approval ratings, which enabled him to retain power and shape Mexico's politics long after his presidency (Cachanosky & Padilla, 2018). Fernández, on the other hand, was unable to control Argentina's deteriorating economy, which resulted in a credibility crisis for Peronism.

These two leaders exemplify the phenomenon most recently acknowledged in the region: the combination of economic distress, weak institutions, and the rise of self-styled populist saviors willing to dominate the political scene (Cachanosky & Padilla, 2018). These cases, however, also paint a picture of the shortcomings of populism: the failure to deliver enduring economic stability.

Looking ahead, it is inevitably the case that the tradition of populism will continue shifting and reshaping together with new or reinvented figures. With or without new leaders, the challenge is as always defining the intersection of popular appeal, economic viability, and democratic health.

4.6 Comparative Analysis: Populist Patterns Across Time and Space

As a result of its evolution with respect to time, geography, and politics, populism proves to be quite difficult to classify. However, looking at its historical and current versions—from interwar Europe to Tunisia, the US, Italy, and Latin America after 2010—provides insight on the ways in which the strategies of populism adapt and endure. This comparison focuses on two important features: the populist time and crisis logic, and the changing dynamics of leadership in relation to organizational structure.

4.6.1 Populism and Crisis: Temporal Shocks vs. Chronic Disillusionment

Mussolini's and Franco's historical populisms were deeply shaped by existential shocks like defeats in war, revolutionary turmoil, or the decline of empires. In other words, those were striking breaks in time, marked by the irretrievable collapse of liberal pluralist frameworks (Huntington, 1993). In this setting, populist regimes were established in an attempt to "resolve" the perceived political disarray—restoring authoritarian order under the guise of national emergency.

By contrast, contemporary populisms are more frequently the byproducts of long-term chronic systemic dysfunction instead of a catastrophic event. Kais Saied's Tunisia evokes discontent in regard to the slow and vague returns in the context of a democratic transition (Diamond, 2015). Deep-seated political disenfranchisement, cultural anxiety, and a sense of identity fueled Trump's rise, while Meloni's campaign leveraged the disassociated perception of EU institutions towards national identity. From AMLO to Bukele, populism in Latin America is often a response to the decline of trust in democratic leaders, though not necessarily to the absence of democracy.

This difference highlights a critical change: modern populism takes advantage of fatigue while historical populism was a reaction to collapse. Convulsions create a backdrop for the former; a credibility deficit for the latter. As Reinhard Heinisch (2025) observes, "Populism now is not a reaction to acute crises, but to a chronic one—a democracy in disrepair below the surface" (Appendix A). While the form maintains its existence, the responsiveness, trust, and pluralism in content is rapidly declining which provides fertile soil for a populist intervention.

4.6.2 Power and Performance: From State Mythology to Personalist Spectacle

Mobilizing support for any cause relies primarily on leadership. Mussolini and Franco derived their legitimacy from sacrificial myths, military valor, and national rejuvenation (Pice, 2014). They ruled in what can be described as Classical Theatrical regimes: marked and dominated by harsh discipline and mass psychotic rituals, brutal ceremonies, and rigid systems of idolatry arranged along an unbending hierarchy (Pice, 2014). The power was absolute and hierarchically vertical.

Contemporary populists, in stark contrast, showcase power as wielded laterally. Trump's order-destroying charm flourished under a fragmented media system; Saied's rule is dry and formalist; Meloni mashes up conservative cultural signifiers with moderation as strategy. In Latin America, populists swing like a pendulum between paternalistic approach and participatory rhetoric, all while consolidating power. Most importantly, these leaders project proximity to their citizens as opposed to distance—deeming them "ordinary" even when employing exceptional means to govern. Heinisch (2025) aptly summarized this shift observing, "Today's populist leaders don't need to seize institutions like in the 1930s—they colonize them from within. Their legitimacy comes not from overthrowing the system but claiming to be its true voice" (Appendix A).

Institutionally, the divergence is stark. The historical populists forged new authoritarian states from the wreckage of democracy (Möller 2023). The latter mostly operate within the bounds of pre-existing democracies, gradually modifying or circumventing them (Möller 2023). This distinction does not mean that the threat is diminished in any way. Rather, today's populism is more difficult to pinpoint: it does not disrupt the system; it subverts it. His constitutional acrobatics, Trump's election denial, and AMLO's rearrangement of structures all demonstrate a populist logic that erodes, rather than explodes.

All these figures, current and historical, share a common trait: the refusal of mediation. Intermediaries, be it political parties, courts, civil society, are dismissed as obstacles standing in the way between "the people" and the ultimate goal. And the escape routes from intermediaries—military coups in the past, algorithmic outrage today—underscore the change: modern populism is algorithmic, not militaristic; symbolic, not uniformed (Fieschi 2019).

This comparative perspective aids in understanding the metamorphosis of populism throughout time and space, while simultaneously demonstrating its cunning, adaptive intelligence. Embedded within a crisis, personalism, and de-legitimization of complexity, populism persistently undermines democratic principles—be it marching down the streets of Rome or metaphorically marching across digital platforms. The insight lies not just in dissecting the phenomenon of populism, but in unpacking what it transforms into when democracy washes its hands.

5. Populism's Tensions with Western Democratic Structures

5.1 The Institutional Playbook of Populist Power

The most dangerous consequence of populism in a democratic culture is its capacity to undermine institutions from within, frequently disguised as reform or anti-elitist renewal. Unlike authoritarian regimes, which deeply dismantle the institutional framework, contemporary populists use avenues available to them: legal ones. They change rules, procedures, and appointments to widen the sphere of power while retaining the facade of democracy, all in the name of populism (Hawkins & Mitchell, 2025).

Judiciaries have, for the most part, been insulated from political control: these are the prime targets. In the United States, Donald Trump's systematic onslaught against the judiciary branch focused particularly on judges who had the temerity to rule against him, fostering a new public perception of the judiciary that damaged trust in its neutrality (Peabody, 2018). Bound to a legally constrained frame, Trump's federal judicial system was aggressively reshaped by ideologically-driven purges of office holders and appointing loyalists to entrenched positions. Courts have also been democratically captured in Poland and Hungary where populist governments expelled the courts' autonomy through unrestrained political control and turned them into instruments to be wielded. (Peabody, 2018).

In Tunisia, the executive power consolidator Kais Saied has expanded his public sector clean-up campaign to judges and chopped the Supreme Judicial Council, effectively restoring judicial subservience in the name of corruption control (Oxford Analytica, 2022). These excerpts give rise to a tendency: Populist rationality wishes to recast independent institutions as the empire of the old elites.

Legislatures are not immune to being sidelined either.

It is very common for populist executives to skip governmental parliamentary debate with the use of emergency decrees, referenda, and executive orders. These tools are allowed in most democracies; however, their overuse can be harmful as well (Bauer & Becker, 2020). In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's government uses decree laws in order to facilitate legislation and circumvent parliament discussions which is reminiscent of what we saw in Hungary under Orbán (Bauer & Becker, 2020).

The role of the media as a whole is equally important. A free press is one of the major democratic institutions that allow for accountability, however, in the hand of a populist the press is always rendered as part of the corrupt elite. Disinformation is not just a term used to counter individual stories. It is a tactic to challenge the existence of journalism as an institution (Kumar & Kariwal, 2023). Over the years, we have seen the likes of Trump in the U.S., Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Meloni in Italy use their democratic power to cultivate antagonistic relations with democratic industry, leaving the real press to only publish favorable stories. This does not erase dissenting views, but instead, floods the market with alternate reality ideology, stripping the populace of the logic-based fact value needed for intelligent discourse (Kumar & Kariwal, 2023).

Thus, we can see that populism erodes institutions not by violent overt actions, but using more sophisticated means such as delegitimatization, personalization, and legal a manipulation.Its brilliance is in using the instruments of democracy – the courts, the laws, and the media – to dismantle the spirit of democratic governance.

As noted by Hon. Furore, "The rise of populism is a by-product of citizens' perception of underrepresentation in democratic frameworks," which is foundational to the argument above (Appendix B). This observation proves that the erosion of democracy on an even surface is not a vertical attempt, but one motivated by democratic disenchantment. Populate systems do well when the people become dissatisfied with formal systems and prefer direct, subjective, rather self-meaning representation.

5.2 Political Polarization and Social Fragmentation

While polarization may be emotional and cultural in nature, institutional erosion frames populism's more structural impact. Moral dualism is simply a dividing line that is used as an attack by populists to justify their rule. They will simplify society as "pure, virtuous people" or as a "corrupt, traitorous elite". In doing so, such framing deepens political polarization as a struggle over differing morals, as opposed to simply differing viewpoints.

The consequences are outright dangerous. Political opponents are escalated from mere rivals to full-blown enemies. Warfare of this sort festers broader societal divisions wherein culture, identity, and social interactions turn hostile towards politics, not just the other way around. Following Trump's presidency, the U.S. has witnessed a public sphere in which bipartisan discourse is a rarity and vehement alarming hostility has instead taken its place(Dagnes, 2019).

Social units such as families and workplaces increasingly reflect the nation's deep ideological divides.

Evidence of such fractures can be seen across the rest of Europe. In France, Marine Le Pen's infamous prominence has publicly shifted discourse towards cultural nationalism and anti-immigration rhetoric, effectively shattering the nation's consensus around pluralism (Akbaba, 2018). Following suit, Meloni in Italy championed an exclusionary and perceptive focus on a Christian identity, tradition, and sovereignty, relegating discourse steeped in race, religion, and class. In every instance, compromise is deemed a betrayal for populist discourse which transforms disagreements over policy into conflict of existence.

As mentioned in other chapters, social media catalyzes populism by fragmenting social groups. Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook do not serve as neutral social venues. Rather, they act as multipliers to emotional outrage, confirmation bias and mobilization on a sociopolitical level. It has become a norm for populist leaders to triumph here as they, unlike conventional politicians, do not require middlemen for communication for these leaders speak directly to their supporters. Closed systems of ideology constrict users in echo chambers inundated with content of the same kind devoid of rational discourse and engage in infusive flaming dialogue while sacrificing dependable conversations.

Culturally, the emotional economy of populism relies specifically on "affect", a technical term in rhetoric which means emotion. To foster loyalty and dampen dissent, resentment, and vile injustice alongside a disproportionate amount of anger is enforced. Arias Maldonado notes that this fundamentally damages the democratic ethos (Cited 2018). These democracies are not only built on institutional frameworks; they are also constructed on social frameworks that comprise mutual acceptance, cooperative recognition, shared truths, and the readiness to suffer loss at polls, which, in turn, are contested by populists constructively rusting them. Populism replaces pluralism with stark binary fractures based on polarization (Arias Maldonado, 2018).

Hon. Furore cites, "When a divisive and extremist rhetoric is used, questioning the principles of the rule of law or undermining freedom of the press and pluralism, it risks setting in motion a very dangerous process of destabilization" (Appendix B) Furore suggests that there is a danger of invoking democracy that does not possess vision and social order and structure(s) fundamentally borders on chaos. This reinforces the argument put forth in the previous chapter

that covers the debilitating elements to democracy shaped by populist discourse—and communicative regressions brought on by populism is not solely anchored in stylistic devices.

5.3 The Global Implications: Disrupting Cooperation, Undermining Norms

Though domestic characteristics of populism has gained significant attention, its transnational consequences are becoming more pronounced. Leaderships with populist ideologies tend to incite sympathy and support for such governance systems in other nations. This creates a transnational feedback loop which undermines the liberal international order established post 1945 (Martill, 2020).

One direct consequence is the decline in cooperation on a multilateral level. As cited in (Posner, 2017), populist figures hold external relations with other countries with great suspicion, often leading to hostility. The framing of international norms as elite imposition is highly popular amongst high ranking politicians such as Trump, Brexit supporters, and Bolsonaro. Their perception of international norms as elite coercion implaced upon the masses leads to disregard for global environmental accords (Posner, 2017).

International cooperation for tackling climate change, pandemics, mass migration, and geopolitical tensions become impossible when these antagonistic approaches carry the most potential. These theories also serve to empower authoritarian rule.

The absence of democratic political leaders does not mean institutions such as the United Nations or the European Union goes unchecked; they can and tend to disrupt the order without facing any consequences due to the lack of supervision offered by authoritarian governments (von Soest, 2024).

Furore's arguments show that "it is essential to distinguish between constructive criticism of community policies… and a closed-off attitude used for propaganda purposes, which risks undermining European cohesion" (Appendix B). His comment illustrates how the international norm populism rejects as a liberal "thematic horizontalism" is not at all inevitable. More often than not, the norm is politically domesticized by elites for manipulative domestic purposes. A good-spirited critique of global governance in a populism could be democratic renewal; the wielding of sovereignty is often democratic retreat.

Finally, populism disrupts the global information order. Not only do populist leaders accept disinformation and conspiracy theories (Bergmann, 2020); they use them as political devices—

sometimes as peddlers, other times messengers. Through this lens, falsehoods have a peculiar way of diminishing trust within journalism, science, and expertise, leading primarily to what some researchers describe "epistemic fragmentation;" a disunited world where a consensus reality devolves into factionalized denial (Bergmann, 2020).

5.4 The Transformation of Democracy in the Age of Populism

Instead of only endangering democracy, populism more and more alters its form, producing hybrid political systems which preserve electoral frameworks but gnaw at liberal safeguards (Peruzzotti, 2017). In numerous western states, we observe the rise of 'illiberal democracies' in which elections continue to be contested, but balances of power, judicial autonomy, press freedom, and rights of minorities are increasingly eroded. This change demonstrates adaptation rather than rupture, for populism not eliminates democracy, but transforms it into its overwhelming, majoritarian, and plebiscitary logics (Peruzzotti, 2017).

This is further evidenced with the emergence of 'plebiscitarian democracy.' Directly appealing to the population through referenda, social media, and mass rallies, populist leaders assert that they personify the untainted will of the people (Nurdin et al., 2024). There is an increase in personalist, leader-focused movements which replace political parties, parliaments, and even civil society (Nurdin et al., 2024). Loyalty to the leader is now regarded as popular consent, while dissent is condemned as treachery against the nation (Nurdin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, technology advances this change (James White, 2024). We are entering the age of "algorithmic democracy" in which digital technology serves as the conduit for political participation, using secret algorithms that sideline rational discourse in favor of emotional, tribal, and outrage-laden politics (James White, 2024). Populist leaders excel at this exploitation, forging direct and unmediated ties to their constituents while generating echo chambers of ideologically stark polarization.

The problem now is not only to protect classical liberal democracy from populist attacks, but to understand that the entire structure and form of democracy is undergoing change. The danger is that democracy's processes may endure, while its essence—the devotion to pluralism, compromise, and a sincere commitment to law—declines. It is vital to grasp this shift: democracy's future may not be jeopardized by blatant authoritarianism, but a gradual, stealth

erosion of its liberal essence masquerading behind votes, public sentiments, and digital participation that once marked its strength.

6. Conclusion: Populism's Impact and the Future of Democracy

6.1 Volatility and Power Concentration

Crisis situations—be they economic, political, or cultural—tend to give birth to populist leaderships that promise a reconnection of governance with the will of the people (Nurdin et al., 2024). As they attempt to resolve the issues at hand, there is an increase in political volatility and centralization of power. Populist leaders feel justified to violate institutional barriers and non-majoritarian processes in deliberative democracy system due to what they perceive to be the direct voided rule of the people as the sanction to their leadership (Latif Al Waroi et al., 2024). This thesis illustrates that this pattern has been observed with remarkable consistency throughout Western democracies and other countries.

Kais Saied's Tunisia stands as a textbook example. Once seen as an outsider with a promise of moral rejuvenation, Saied swiftly dismantled institutional constraints—suspending parliament, exercising power through decrees, and remolding the judiciary to serve his interests (Tamburini, 2022). His reasoning was based on an acute perception of crisis. The outcome, however, was a more fervent variant of personalist governance, cloaked in constitutional pretenses (Tamburini, 2022). The absence of parliamentary mediation is more than a procedural simplification"—it is a complete abandonment of any pluralistic democratic framework.

The same underlying framework emerged under Donald Trump. In the United States, the order of populism centered on the use of executive orders, discounting "deep state" bureaucracies, and visceral anger mobilization through social media (Pierson, 2017). Trump's political behavior—rhetorically confrontational and institutionally undermining—was a form of populism that saw the checks and balances as elitist encumbrances to and renewal of the nation (Pierson, 2017). He has systemically delegitimized the press, the judiciary, and the electoral process which created dangerous volatility in the world's most stable democracy (Cisneros Tirado & Babbili, 2021).

Even Giorgia Meloni, more a moderate and calculated take on right-wing populism, engages in selective bypassing (Pietrucci, 2023). She attenuates intermediary institutions like NGOs and unions without directly engaging in frontal clashes with core institutions (Pietrucci, 2023). This selective erosion creates softer executive resurgence, undermining liberal democratic norms while preserving democratic face-politics (Pietrucci, 2023).

This action deepens the defined effects of populism as a source of volatility. It exceeds shifts in policy frameworks or ideological breaks; it destroys the basis of anticipatory governance essential to democracy. The illusion of quick "decisiveness" observed in the short term often renders systems brittle and erodes resilience in the long term.

6.2 Gradual Democratic Decline

The short-term consequences of populism tends to result in volatility and a centralization of power, but the most harmful effects unfold over time. The failure of trust in pluralism—and the legitimacy of opposition—marks a slow shift towards the death of the cultural underpinnings of liberal democracy. The decline is not necessarily a decisive shift toward authoritarianism; it is a relentless erosion of democratic standards over time.

As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt put it, democracies perish not only through coups, but through democratically elected regimes that systematically deconstruct the framework from within. (Pérez-Liñán, 2018) This thesis illustrates how populists, once in power, utilize the rhetoric of dissent as treason, opposition parties as non-existent, and institutions as mere puppets of a cabal of the elite. The self-defense mechanisms that social and political systems build to preserve order deteriorates public debate and intensifies the strife in politics beyond the point of compromise (Pérez-Liñán, 2018).

In Tunisia, Saïd's attacks on judicial autonomy alongside the usage of emergency powers positioned dissenters as enemies of the state (Tamburini. 2022). The conversion of constitutional logics into instruments of autocratic domination lays bare the subversion of substance behind the populist façade of democracy (Tamburini, 2022). Similar acts can be observed in the United States, where Trump's refusal to acknowledge the result of the 2020 election led to the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, an attack months in the making through

a steady diet of disinformation and delegitimization of electoral processes (Cisneros Tirado & Babbili, 2021).

The decline is even visible in consolidated democracies. In Italy, the sidelining of civil society actors along with Meloni's framing of NGOs as threats to sovereignty portrays the divisive populist reasoning of 'the virtuous people' versus 'the illegitimate intermediaries' (Pietrucci, 2023). Her sidelining of the opposition, as explained in my discussion with Prof. Heinisch, illustrates a "semi-loyal" populism: It conforms to some aspects of the democratic framework, but reflexively attacks its pluralistic framework (Appendix A).

Thus, populism as a phenomenon now distorts the very nature of democratic participation. Opposition is no longer viewed as a necessity of democracy; rather, it is seen as sabotage (Devenney, 2022). Show replaces substantive discussion. Nuance is reduced to dichotomies. In the long run, as the threshold for acceptable dialogue shrinks, the robustness of democratic culture diminishes (Devenney, 2022).

The harder it is to revert such changes. The unchecked amalgamation of norms results in packing courts, discrediting the media, and eroding civil society, leading to an uncertain recovery. Citizens become accustomed to authoritarianism disguised as democracy. Populism in this respect does not function as a fleeting jolt—it reshapes the democratic landscape, but rather subversively transforms what is considered the 'new normal.'

6.3 The Global Balance Shifts

The impact of populism poses serious challenges that extend far beyond one's own borders (Ignatieff, 2020). The global eminence of the democratic model while maintaining liberal democracies has grappled with internal divisions, executive overreach, decreasing inter-institutional trust, and plethora of unaddressed systemic issues, has sharply declined. This creates room for competing models of governance, especially the state capitalism model of China, to further expand its influence (Ignatieff, 2020).

The global south is paying attention to such developments as they deal with parallel circumstances but lack robust institutional cultures (Weyland, 2024). From the West's viewpoint, the chaotic image these actions give off conveys the idea that democracy is feeble and easily weaponized (Ignatieff, 2022). While symbolic democracy suffers in these moments,

like during the January 6 Capitol riots, or Orbán's gradual dismantlement of freedom press and judiciary, these regimes become ever more confident in ridiculing the liberal world order (Ignatieff, 2022).

Holslag describes the image that China projects suggesting that it portrays stunted control, developmental efficiency, and a perverse sense of freedom all while lacking democracy (Holslag, 2011). Western nations continue to lose economic and political standing alongside Beijing as a result of perpetual disillusionment nations face by their hollow promises. China enjoys increased acceptance as a source of economic alliances while emerging as an alternative in terms of governance (Holslag, 2011). Tunisia under Saied, along with various Sub-Saharan African nations, increasingly embrace embracing quasi authoritarian rule that prioritizes results over democratic balderdash (Holslag, 2011).

This thesis observes that a shift in geopolitical alignment cannot simply be viewed through the lens of economics or strategy; it has a deeper ideological foundation as well. While populism erodes democracy from within, it simultaneously undermines its normative exportability. We are no longer witnessing the liberal democracy as the perpetual 'end of history,' but as a vulnerable system heavily contested from the inside.

The decline in the credibility of democracy simultaneously marks the decline of Western soft power. If the democratic backslide continues unchecked, the 21st century could very well mark the retreat of liberalism domestically, followed by an erosion of influence internationally. In this framework, defending democracy transforms from merely a national challenge to a challenge with global ramifications.

6.4 Core Findings

This thesis has looked at how populism has evolved, starting with the theoretical roots of populism, to its manifestations in western democracies and other parts of the world. Examining either the historical or modern-day examples, it is possible to observe that populism is opportunistic, as it takes advantage of the weakness of institutions and intervenes during the period of crisis to change democracy inside out.

One of the most important conclusions is that populism is not simply a political style, but a persistent force that restructures the framework of democratic participation (Finchelstein &

Urbinati, 2018). From the disruptive personalism of Donald Trump to the legalistic authoritarianism of Kais Saied, and the tempered style of Giorgia Meloni, populist leaders seem intent on removing mediation, delegitimizing opposing voices, and redefining sovereignty (Finchelstein & Urbinati, 2018).

Nevertheless, this thesis also points out that populism is not a product of economic dissatisfaction only. Cultural anxieties, which are focused on identity, belonging, and the loss of traditional values, is equally effective in the mobilization of support. Indeed, these cultural aspects are usually the real emotional drive of populism. Populism flourishes in the environment where the communities do not only feel disconnected with the economy, but also with the mainstream cultural discourse. It is important to note that the same way that democracy can be hijacked by not addressing inequality, so can cultural grievances.

Populism morphs to fit different contexts, which is equally important. In well-established democracies, it may emerge as a form of semi-loyal opposition to the political intermediaries. It decays democratic practices in fragile systems with blinding speed (Grattan, 2014). Scholars stress that this is the very core of the threat posed by populism – it does not need to violently dismantle democracy to destroy it, but rather works subversively to erode it from within (Grattan, 2014).

6.5 Policy Responses

The endurance of democracy while battling against populist disruption has different vertically tied dimensions unto itself. Such a battle requires a singular will, civic training, and active governance. In reinforcing this thesis, numerous corresponding policies were spawned.

To begin with, democratic frameworks must be more effortless in accepting transparency and accountability. Populist counter narratives are rooted in perceptions of people being ignored. Governments need to enhance the engagement opportunities at the localized levels.

Secondly, frameworks of economic participation must be enhanced as urgent. Policies directed towards alleviating inequality are critical due to the stronghold that plutopism has on socioeconomic disparities. These policies also cover social mobility and combating entrenched privilege. Sustained employment and monopolistic control also fall under these concepts.

Thirdly, culturally enriching democracy should be pursued more intensely and pro-actively. The public must trust state institutions while public offices should reinforce the domain of civic education by countering disinformation. Indispensable forms of aided journalism along with advanced media education must no longer endorse inequality or the absence of freedom.

Lastly, all core structures must disregard the obsession of populist imitation. Once parties central to the ground adopt populist slogans and senseless political talk, that politically motivated strategy proves to be counterproductive in securing the vote. In doing so, they appear to endorse what is attempting to undermine democracy itself. The unfortunate halfway house that both Italy and United States have fallen into serves as a perfect example of stay of birth and sin.

6.6 Looking Ahead

Populism is not going to vanish. It is not a deviation that should be fixed, but a mirror of contradictions and unfulfilled promises of liberal democracy. It shows the institutional flaws in political representation, cultural inclusion, and economic justice. The main issue, then, is not whether populism is eliminable, but whether democracy can change.

It is only by reforming itself in a significant way that liberal democracy can avoid becoming a historical footnote: an ideology that suffocated itself in its own stagnation. As this thesis has maintained all along, populism does not just thrive on inequality and exclusion but on profound cultural insecurities. Although democracy traditionally focused on political equality, it has long allowed increasing economic inequality and has been unable to react to the cultural alienation of most of its citizens. Such failures, in their turn, contribute to the polarizations and social breaks that populists take advantage of.

To ensure that democracy remains a viable and valid system of governance, it is not enough to protect its institutions, but also to re-invent its social contract. Justice, dignity, and voice should be offered to everyone, not only in theory, but in reality. In this endeavor, the analysis of populism is not only an academic practice, but a civic duty.

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Appendix A: Interview with Professor Reinhard Heinisch

Date: 30 March 2025

Location: Remote interview (recorded)

Interviewer: Giuliano Squitieri

Interviewee: Prof. Reinhard Heinisch, University of Salzburg

Giuliano Squitieri: In your research on populism, you've analyzed how populist leaders undermine democratic institutions. What, in your opinion, are the most common mechanisms they use to weaken checks and balances? Are there significant differences between European and American cases?

Prof. Heinisch: Before diving in, let me explain how I became interested in populism. In the 1990s, while working with the U.S. State Department, I was asked to monitor Jörg Haider, then Governor of Carinthia, Austria. He was one of the first modern populists I encountered. Later, while in Bolivia, I met Evo Morales—then a union leader. Despite being on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, Morales and Haider shared strikingly similar populist traits. Both appealed to an imagined, idealized past, and constructed a narrative of 'the people' against external or internal elites.

Populists often don't initially set out to dismantle democracy. However, once in power, they claim to represent the "real people," and from that sense of moral mandate, they begin overriding institutional checks. They see liberal democratic rules as obstacles. This leads to the

gradual dismantling of constraints, pushing them into an illiberal direction. They attract allies, co-opt or weaken oversight bodies like courts, media, and opposition parties. Eventually, they reach a point where they feel compelled to stay in power to avoid retaliation—so the system deteriorates further.

An Austrian example is illustrative: Haider's state guaranteed a failing bank's debt to maintain his image, leading to a financial disaster. Oversight mechanisms—like media, auditors, and opposition—were too weak or silenced to prevent it. This model of incremental erosion is mirrored in other contexts, including the U.S., where mechanisms of control are increasingly bypassed.

Giuliano Squitieri: Populism often fuels deep social and political division through "us versus them" rhetoric. What factors make a society vulnerable to such political radicalization, and what strategies can mitigate polarization?

Prof. Heinisch: Populism today is not just a historical recurrence—it is a reaction to modernization and globalization. These transformations generate anxiety and a sense of lost status, both economically and culturally. People feel their futures are threatened. It's not just about economic loss, but cultural and emotional dislocation.

Populists tap into this by promising a return to a glorified past. Their narratives resonate emotionally, not just rationally. For instance, in a post-COVID survey in Austria, people most distrustful of institutions—non-voters and Freedom Party supporters—reported feeling disproportionately affected, despite relatively mild pandemic impact. This suggests that emotional vulnerability can override objective conditions.

To counter this, mainstream parties must improve communication—appealing to emotion without mimicking populist rhetoric. It's about reconnecting with voters through clarity, empathy, and consistency, rather than policy zigzags or technocratic detachment.

Giuliano Squitieri: Based on your work with institutions, what political tools are most effective in countering populism without alienating their electoral base?

Prof. Heinisch: Much depends on how mainstream conservative parties behave. They often hold the key. When conservatives co-opt radical right agendas, they may weaken themselves and empower the populists. We've seen this in Austria. In contrast, Merkel's CDU in Germany

maintained a clear line, avoiding full collaboration with the far-right AfD—though the jury is still out on long-term outcomes.

There's no universal solution. In some countries, isolation strategies have worked (e.g., Belgium's cordon sanitaire). In others, they backfired. Instead, parties should adapt by improving outreach, simplifying their message, addressing emotions, and maintaining policy coherence.

A major risk is that growing populist strength shrinks the political center, forcing centrist coalitions that are paralyzed and ineffective—further fueling populist arguments. New governance models, perhaps like Scandinavia's tolerance-based minority governments, could offer more effective alternatives.

Giuliano Squitieri: I'm comparing leaders like Trump (USA), Meloni (Italy), Saied (Tunisia), AMLO (Mexico), Fernández (Argentina). What commonalities and differences do you see in how they consolidate power? How do cultural, economic, or institutional factors shape these models?

Prof. Heinisch: Core populist features include:

1. **An imagined "heartland"**—a mythical "real people." For Haider, it was ethnic Austrians; for Morales, it was indigenous groups; for Trump, the white working class.
2. **An antagonist elite**—foreign, corrupt, urban, or liberal.
3. **A mission to restore stolen sovereignty**—populists see themselves as redeemers with no limits.

However, variations arise based on institutional contexts. In Poland, for instance, populists manipulated court procedures to paralyze the Constitutional Tribunal. In Hungary, media licenses and judicial appointments were weaponized. In the U.S., Trump ignores rulings he dislikes and relies on party control.

Control over **media and universities** is crucial. In Hungary and Slovakia, governments pressured private media or used licensing to marginalize dissent. In the U.S., pressure is applied through lawsuits or ownership changes. Universities are attacked for being "elitist," and certain academic fields are defunded.

The stronger populists grow, the more their enemies are externalized—Brussels, George Soros, "globalists." Domestic opposition is portrayed as aligned with these foreign elites. When resistance builds, it's framed as foreign interference. The pattern is eerily consistent, even if the local dynamics differ.

Appendix B: Interview with Hon. Mario Furore (MEP)

Date: 31 March 2025
Location: Interview via e-mail
Interviewer: Giuliano Squitieri
Interviewee: Hon. Mario Furore, Member of the European Parliament (MEP), Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), serving in his second parliamentary term (2019–2024, re-elected for 2024–2029).

Giuliano Squitieri: How do you assess the relationship between the growth of populism and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions, both in Europe and globally?

Hon. Furore: The growth of populism is often a consequence of citizens perceiving a lack of representation in democratic institutions. When institutions fail to effectively respond to the needs and concerns of the population, a space is created that can be occupied by political forces challenging the establishment. In Europe and globally, this dynamic has led to growing distrust in traditional institutions, especially when these new forces have not found a governmental outlet. However, I am convinced that this phenomenon should not be viewed solely in a negative light: if populism translates into greater attention to people's real problems and into a renewal of our democracy, it can also help strengthen trust in institutions, as happened with the *MoVimento 5 Stelle* in Italy.

Giuliano Squitieri: How are the populist policies adopted in some EU member states influencing European cohesion? Is there a tension between national sovereignty and community policies?

Hon. Furore: To be able to answer this question, one should first clarify what is meant by "populist" policies and specify which measures are being referred to. Broadly speaking, I feel that the principles of solidarity and cooperation among member states should never be called into question for mere electoral purposes. This has happened in the past and continues to

happen today, creating short-sighted tensions within the Union without a reform perspective. I want to make one point clear: it is essential to distinguish between constructive criticism of community policies—which can help improve their effectiveness and respond to citizens' demands—and a closed-off attitude used for propaganda purposes, which risks undermining European cohesion. With regard to the tension between national sovereignty and community policies, I believe it can be considered a constant theme in the European debate. The goal must be to find a balance between respecting national identities and interests, and the need for effective common policies to address global challenges such as climate change, security, and the digital transition.

Giuliano Squitieri: The M5S has proposed the concept of direct democracy through tools such as online platforms. How do you think these tools influence traditional democratic representation? Do you think technology can really strengthen democracy, or does it risk creating division and populism?

Hon. Furore: I believe that the use of technology to promote citizens' democratic participation is one of the most important innovations of our time. Tools of direct democracy, such as online platforms, can make politics more accessible and transparent, reducing the distance between voters and institutions. The *MoVimento 5 Stelle* was a pioneer in Italy and in the world, for example bringing legislative proposals submitted by citizens on its platform to parliamentary approval. It is essential that these tools be used responsibly, ensuring inclusiveness, security, and the quality of the debate. Technology is a means, not an end: if properly managed, it can strengthen democracy and popular participation; if misused, it fuels polarization and disinformation.

Giuliano Squitieri: Populist leaders often promote short-term policies, such as immediate economic measures. How do you assess the risk of political instability these policies can generate, especially in a European context?

Hon. Furore: In an increasingly media-driven public debate, every political force seeks to provide quick answers to citizens' problems. I think this is a phenomenon that affects everyone, not just so-called "populist" leaderships. Obviously, it is essential to have and maintain a long-term vision, one that is sustainable even for future generations. In Europe, where economies are interconnected and one country's decisions can have effects on others, it is fundamental that economic policies be well thought out. Let me give an example: the *Superbonus 110%,*

the Italian State's measure for sustainable home renovation, had extraordinary effects from an environmental point of view—drastically reducing CO2 emissions—and from an economic point of view—creating over 1 million jobs and turning Italy into the "locomotive of Europe." This measure was considered populist by some political forces, but in reality, it was part of a broader vision of sustainable development for the country.

Giuliano Squitieri: In a democratic context, can populism act as a corrective against the establishment, or can it lead to an authoritarian drift that threatens democratic values? What is the boundary between populism that renews democracy and populism that weakens it?

Hon. Furore: Yes, I believe that "populism" can serve to bring back to the center of public debate issues that traditional political forces have neglected over the years. However, today we are witnessing a real degeneration on the part of some political parties—not only in Italy. When a divisive and extremist rhetoric is used, questioning the principles of the rule of law or undermining freedom of the press and pluralism, it risks setting in motion a very dangerous process of destabilization. The boundary between populism that renews democracy and populism that weakens it lies in the ability to maintain respect for institutions, democratic debate, and the rules of the game.