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## ***THE RISE OF POPULISM IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES***

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### ***Abstract:***

*The rise of populism in Western democracies has transformed political landscapes, challenging traditional party systems, and reshaping public discourse. This article examines the drivers behind this surge, including economic inequality, cultural backlash, and the erosion of trust in institutions. It explores how populist movements exploit social media and identity politics to mobilize support and examines their implications for democratic governance and social cohesion. By analyzing case studies from Europe and North America, the article highlights common patterns and divergent outcomes. The findings suggest that while populism responds to legitimate grievances, its growth poses significant risks to democratic norms and inclusive policymaking. The article concludes with recommendations for addressing the underlying causes and strengthening democratic resilience..*

***Keywords:*** *Populism, Western democracies, political movements, economic inequality, cultural backlash, social media, democracy, political trust, identity politics, governance*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, populism has surged across Western democracies, from the United States and the United Kingdom to countries in Europe such as France, Italy, and Hungary. Characterized by anti-elitist rhetoric, skepticism toward established institutions, and appeals to "the people" against perceived corrupt elites, populism challenges the foundations of liberal democracy (Mudde, 2004). This political phenomenon has gained momentum amid economic uncertainty, cultural anxieties, and rapid technological changes.

This article seeks to explore the complex factors contributing to the rise of populism, including economic and social drivers, media dynamics, and political strategies. It also assesses the consequences of populist ascendance for democratic institutions and social cohesion, drawing on cross-national case studies. By providing a comprehensive analysis, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate and inform policy responses to the populist challenge.

## Defining Populism in the Context of Western Democracies

### Conceptual Frameworks

Populism is a contested and multifaceted concept that has been interpreted differently across political science, sociology, and cultural studies. In Western democracies, populism generally revolves around the tension between "the people" and "the elite," but various frameworks emphasize different dimensions:

#### Ideational Approach:

Populism is viewed primarily as a thin-centered ideology that considers society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." The core is the moralistic claim that politics should express the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). This framework highlights the anti-elitism and majoritarianism at the heart of populism.

#### Strategic Approach:

Populism is understood as a political strategy whereby leaders or parties seek to gain and maintain power by directly appealing to "the people," often bypassing traditional institutions, parties, or intermediaries. Populist actors use this approach to mobilize mass support through charismatic leadership and direct communication.

#### Socio-Cultural Approach:

Populism is analyzed as a cultural or social phenomenon linked to identity politics and reaction against social change, globalization, and perceived threats to traditional values or national sovereignty. This framework often overlaps with discussions on nationalism and cultural backlash.

#### Discursive Approach:

Populism is defined through the style and rhetoric of political communication, focusing on how political actors construct the people/elite dichotomy in discourse, often simplifying complex social realities into us-versus-them narratives.

### Characteristics and Typologies

#### Key Characteristics of Populism:

##### People-Centrism:

The notion that the "true people" are sovereign and should have the ultimate authority. This group is often portrayed as virtuous, unified, and homogeneous.

##### Anti-Elitism:

A deep suspicion and condemnation of the "corrupt elite" — political, economic, cultural, or media elites — who are accused of betraying or ignoring the interests of the people.

## **Manichaeian Worldview:**

A moral dualism dividing society strictly into good (the people) and evil (the elite), reducing political complexities into binary conflicts.

## **Direct Appeal and Majoritarianism:**

Populists often claim to represent the "general will" directly, advocating for direct democracy or plebiscitary mechanisms to bypass established representative institutions.

## **Crisis and Anti-Establishment Sentiment:**

Populism often arises during perceived crises (economic, cultural, political) and feeds on dissatisfaction with the status quo.

## **Typologies of Populism:**

**Populism varies according to ideology and context. Common typologies in Western democracies include:**

### **Left-Wing Populism:**

Focuses on economic inequality and social justice, criticizing neoliberal elites, financial institutions, and advocating for redistribution and expanded welfare (e.g., Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece).

### **Right-Wing Populism:**

Emphasizes nationalism, anti-immigration policies, cultural traditionalism, and law-and-order themes. It often frames elites as cosmopolitan and out-of-touch with national identity (e.g., National Rally in France, Alternative for Germany).

### **Centrist or Technocratic Populism:**

Less common but can occur in cases where populists combine anti-elite rhetoric with calls for technocratic or pragmatic governance, positioning themselves as alternatives to polarized parties.

### **Personalistic Populism:**

Populism that revolves around a charismatic leader who personifies "the people," often bypassing institutions and centralizing power in their figure (e.g., Donald Trump in the U.S., Silvio Berlusconi in Italy).

## Economic Drivers of Populism

### Impact of Globalization and Deindustrialization

#### Globalization Effects:

Globalization—characterized by increased international trade, capital flows, and the outsourcing of production—has reshaped labor markets and economies in Western democracies. While it brought growth and consumer benefits overall, it also generated significant winners and losers:

**Job Losses in Traditional Sectors:** Many manufacturing and industrial jobs moved abroad to countries with cheaper labor, causing structural unemployment and economic decline in regions dependent on these industries (e.g., the Rust Belt in the U.S., industrial areas in the UK and Germany).

**Perceived Loss of Sovereignty:** Economic globalization is often linked with perceived loss of control over national economic policy, fueling resentment against international institutions (e.g., EU, WTO) and elites who promote free trade and deregulation.

**Cultural and Economic Backlash:** The economic displacement caused by globalization is often coupled with cultural anxieties about immigration and changing demographics, which populists exploit by blaming external forces and elites for citizens' hardships.

#### Deindustrialization:

**The decline of heavy industry and manufacturing due to automation, global competition, and shifting economic priorities has disproportionately affected working-class and middle-class communities:**

**Economic Decline and Social Dislocation:** Loss of stable, well-paying jobs has led to increased unemployment, poverty, and weakened social cohesion.

**Erosion of Social Capital:** Deindustrialization often correlates with declines in union membership and civic participation, weakening collective bargaining and social protections.

These economic hardships create fertile ground for populist leaders to mobilize disaffected voters by promising to restore lost jobs, protect “national industries,” and challenge the existing economic order.

### Economic Inequality and Insecurity

#### Rising Economic Inequality:

In many Western democracies, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened over recent decades due to factors such as wage stagnation, tax policies favoring the wealthy, and the erosion of social welfare programs.

**Wealth Concentration:** Increasing concentration of wealth among elites fosters perceptions of unfairness and exclusion from economic progress.

**Political Alienation:** Inequality contributes to political disenchantment as large segments of the population feel left behind by mainstream parties perceived as serving elite interests.

## **Economic Insecurity:**

**Beyond inequality, the experience of economic precarity—such as job insecurity, insecure housing, and lack of social safety nets—heightens fear and anxiety among citizens:**

**Precarious Labor Markets:** Growth of temporary, gig, and part-time work increases economic vulnerability.

**Social Mobility Decline:** Reduced opportunities for upward mobility reinforce perceptions that “the system” is rigged.

**Populist Appeal:** Populists often tap into these insecurities by blaming elites, immigrants, or global forces for the lack of economic security, and by promising protectionism, welfare chauvinism, or economic nationalism.

Economic drivers play a central role in fueling populist movements in Western democracies. The disruption caused by globalization and deindustrialization generates economic grievances, while growing inequality and insecurity undermine trust in traditional institutions and elites. Populist leaders exploit these conditions by framing themselves as defenders of “the people” against the economic status quo.

## **Cultural and Identity Factors**

### **Cultural Backlash Theory**

#### **Core Idea:**

Cultural backlash theory explains the rise of populism as a reaction to rapid social and cultural changes, especially those related to liberal values, multiculturalism, and progressive social norms.

#### **Context:**

In many Western democracies since the 1960s–70s, movements for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and expanded immigration have transformed societies. While widely supported among younger, urban, and educated populations, these changes have unsettled parts of the population who feel their traditional values, status, and cultural dominance are eroding.

#### **Populism as a Reaction:**

Populist movements mobilize this sense of cultural threat by framing the political conflict as between “the pure people” (usually culturally conservative, native-born groups) and “elites” who promote progressive cultural agendas seen as alien or imposed.

## **Identity and Status Anxiety:**

Individuals experiencing cultural backlash often feel a loss of social status or recognition. This sense of grievance fuels support for populists who promise to defend “traditional” national culture and identity against perceived marginalization.

## **Immigration and National Identity Concerns**

### **Immigration as a Flashpoint:**

**Immigration, especially large-scale or rapid influxes of migrants and refugees, has become a central issue for many populist parties in Western democracies:**

**Economic and Cultural Fears:** Populists argue immigration threatens jobs, social services, and public safety, but more often emphasize perceived threats to cultural cohesion and national identity.

**Framing Immigrants as “Others”:** Populists frequently portray immigrants as outsiders who do not share the dominant culture, values, or loyalty to the nation, fostering exclusionary narratives.

### **National Identity and Sovereignty:**

**Concerns about immigration often tie into broader anxieties over national sovereignty, especially within supranational frameworks like the European Union:**

**Loss of Control:** Citizens worry about the erosion of borders and self-determination.

**Defending “The People”:** Populists claim to protect the “true” people’s identity and way of life against dilution or transformation through immigration.

### **Cultural Homogeneity vs. Multiculturalism:**

The debate often centers on whether societies should emphasize cultural assimilation and unity or embrace pluralism and diversity. Populists typically advocate for the former, opposing multicultural policies and promoting nativist sentiments.

Cultural and identity factors significantly drive populist sentiments by triggering backlash among groups that feel culturally threatened by social change and immigration. Populism thrives on mobilizing fears about loss of status, national identity, and social cohesion, often framing political conflict as a defense of traditional cultural values against alien elites and outsiders.

## Role of Media and Social Networks

### Social Media as a Populist Tool

#### Direct Communication and Bypassing Gatekeepers:

**Social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) allow populist leaders and movements to communicate directly with their audience, circumventing traditional media filters and editorial control. This enables:**

**Rapid dissemination of messages and slogans.**

Unmediated emotional appeals that resonate with supporters.

**Mobilization of grassroots support through viral content and online activism.**

#### Amplification of Populist Narratives:

Social media algorithms often prioritize sensational, emotionally charged content, which benefits populist messages that emphasize conflict, outrage, and simplistic “us vs. them” framing.

#### Echo Chambers and Polarization:

Social media environments can create ideological echo chambers, where users engage primarily with like-minded content and communities. This reinforces populist worldviews and deepens societal divisions.

#### Misinformation and Disinformation:

Populists often exploit social media to spread misinformation or conspiracy theories that undermine trust in elites, experts, and institutions. This tactic sows doubt and fuels anti-establishment sentiments.

#### Examples:

Leaders like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Matteo Salvini have effectively used social media to build personal brands and maintain direct engagement with their base, shaping political discourse outside traditional channels.

## Mainstream Media’s Role and Challenges

### Gatekeeping and Framing:

**Traditional media outlets have historically acted as gatekeepers, selecting which issues to highlight and framing political debates. However, their role in covering populism is complex:**

**Amplification Effect:** Extensive media coverage of populist leaders can unintentionally legitimize and normalize their messages, sometimes giving them disproportionate visibility.

**Focus on Conflict and Scandal:** Media’s tendency to focus on dramatic and confrontational aspects can play into populists’ strategies that thrive on controversy.

## **Challenges Faced by Mainstream Media:**

### **Loss of Trust:**

Many populist movements capitalize on declining trust in mainstream media, branding it as “biased,” “elitist,” or “fake news,” thus undermining its credibility.

### **Adaptation to Digital Era:**

Traditional outlets struggle to compete with the speed and personalized reach of social media, often facing financial and audience erosion.

### **Balancing Coverage:**

Media face dilemmas between providing fair coverage of populist actors and avoiding the spread of harmful or misleading rhetoric.

### **Potential Responses:**

Some media organizations have responded by fact-checking, media literacy campaigns, and experimenting with new formats to engage audiences critically, though these efforts face significant challenges in the polarized media environment.

Media and social networks are central to the rise and sustenance of populism in Western democracies. Social media empowers populists to communicate directly and amplify divisive narratives, while mainstream media plays a complicated role that can both challenge and unintentionally reinforce populist influence. The evolving media landscape thus shapes the dynamics of populist politics profoundly.

## **Case Studies**

### **United States: The Trump Phenomenon**

#### **Populist Style and Strategy:**

Donald Trump’s rise to the presidency (2016) epitomizes personalistic, right-wing populism. He leveraged social media to speak directly to voters, bypassing traditional media, and used nationalist, anti-elite rhetoric.

#### **Core Themes:**

“Drain the swamp” – anti-corruption, anti-establishment message targeting Washington elites.

Nationalism and economic protectionism, including tough stances on trade and immigration.

Appeals to cultural identity and backlash against globalization, immigration, and progressive social changes.

## **Impact:**

Trump reshaped U.S. politics by energizing a large base of disaffected voters, fostering political polarization, and challenging democratic norms and institutions.

## **United Kingdom: Brexit and Right-Wing Populism**

### **Brexit as a Populist Movement:**

The 2016 referendum to leave the European Union was fueled by populist rhetoric emphasizing national sovereignty, anti-elitism, and immigration control.

### **Role of Populist Parties:**

The UK Independence Party (UKIP), under Nigel Farage, played a pivotal role by popularizing anti-EU and anti-immigration messages, pressuring mainstream parties.

The Conservative Party, under Boris Johnson, adopted populist themes to secure electoral victory by promising to “get Brexit done.”

### **Cultural and Economic Drivers:**

Brexit’s support base largely consisted of older, working-class voters in deindustrialized areas who felt economically and culturally left behind.

### **Consequences:**

Brexit deepened political divisions, reshaped party politics, and highlighted tensions over national identity and globalization.

## **Europe: Hungary and Italy’s Populist Governments**

### **Hungary (Fidesz under Viktor Orbán):**

Orbán’s government blends right-wing populism with authoritarian tendencies.

Rhetoric focuses on defending national sovereignty, Christian identity, and resisting immigration and “liberal elites.”

Institutional reforms have centralized power, curtailed media freedom, and challenged EU norms.

### **Italy (Five Star Movement and Lega):**

The Five Star Movement (M5S) began as an anti-establishment, populist force with a mix of direct democracy demands and skepticism toward elites.

The Lega (League), under Matteo Salvini, is a right-wing populist party emphasizing anti-immigration and nationalist themes.

Their coalition governments have pushed policies reflecting nationalist, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic sentiments.

## **Broader Implications:**

These governments exemplify how populism can reshape policy, democratic institutions, and relations within the EU.

These cases illustrate diverse expressions of populism shaped by local political, economic, and cultural contexts—ranging from Trump’s personalistic nationalism in the U.S., Brexit’s national sovereignty and anti-elite mobilization in the U.K., to Hungary and Italy’s mix of right-wing populism and institutional challenges in Europe.

## **Implications for Democracy**

### **Effects on Political Institutions**

#### **Erosion of Checks and Balances:**

Populist leaders often challenge the independence of judiciary, legislative oversight, and other institutions meant to limit executive power, seeking to centralize authority and weaken institutional constraints.

#### **Undermining Political Parties and Intermediary Institutions:**

By claiming to represent “the true people” directly, populists delegitimize traditional political parties, civil society organizations, and media outlets, weakening democratic intermediaries that foster debate and compromise.

#### **Polarization and Institutional Gridlock:**

Populism can deepen political polarization, making cooperation across parties difficult and leading to legislative paralysis or volatile shifts in policy direction, undermining institutional stability.

#### **Institutional Capture and Reforms:**

In some cases, populists have enacted constitutional reforms to extend their power, control electoral rules, or restrict opposition, thereby altering democratic institutions structurally (e.g., Hungary under Orbán).

## **Threats to Democratic Norms and Pluralism**

### **Majoritarianism vs. Pluralism:**

Populism’s emphasis on the “general will” of a supposedly homogeneous people can lead to intolerance of dissenting voices, minorities, and opposition groups, threatening pluralistic democracy.

### **Discrediting Democratic Norms:**

Populist rhetoric often questions the legitimacy of electoral processes, the independence of the press, and the impartiality of institutions, eroding public trust in democratic norms and procedures.

## **Freedom of the Press and Expression:**

Populists may attack journalists and media organizations as “enemies of the people,” undermining press freedom and the watchdog role of media in democracy.

## **Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Tendencies:**

Persistent populist rule can lead to democratic erosion, including reduced civil liberties, diminished electoral competitiveness, and increased executive overreach, raising concerns about the resilience of democratic systems.

While populism can highlight real grievances and increase political engagement, its implications for democracy are ambivalent. Populist challenges to institutions, norms, and pluralism risk weakening democratic governance and stability, potentially paving the way for democratic backsliding or authoritarianism.

## **Policy Responses and Democratic Resilience**

### **Addressing Economic Grievances**

#### **Reducing Inequality and Economic Insecurity:**

Implement policies that improve income distribution and provide social safety nets, such as progressive taxation, minimum wage increases, and expanded access to healthcare and education. Strengthening labor rights and supporting retraining programs can help workers displaced by globalization and technological change.

#### **Supporting Affected Regions and Communities:**

Targeted investments in deindustrialized or economically lagging regions—through infrastructure, innovation hubs, and local development projects—can reduce economic marginalization and revitalize communities.

#### **Promoting Economic Inclusion:**

Ensuring that economic growth benefits a broad spectrum of society helps rebuild trust in institutions and reduce grievances that populists exploit.

#### **Promoting Inclusive Political Dialogue**

#### **Encouraging Deliberative Democracy**

Facilitate forums, citizen assemblies, and participatory policymaking initiatives that allow diverse groups to voice concerns and engage constructively with policymakers.

#### **Strengthening Political Representation:**

Reform electoral and party systems to better reflect societal diversity and foster trust in democratic institutions. Enhancing transparency and accountability mechanisms can also increase legitimacy.

## Combating Polarization:

Promote cross-partisan dialogue and coalition-building to reduce political fragmentation and create shared agendas that address common challenges.

## Inclusive Messaging:

Political leaders and institutions should communicate policies and reforms in ways that acknowledge citizens' concerns without scapegoating or divisive rhetoric.

## Regulating Misinformation and Digital Platforms

### Improving Media Literacy:

Invest in education programs to help citizens critically evaluate information sources, recognize misinformation, and understand the dynamics of social media influence.

### Platform Accountability:

Implement regulatory frameworks that require social media companies to take responsibility for the spread of harmful misinformation, hate speech, and extremist content, while balancing free expression.

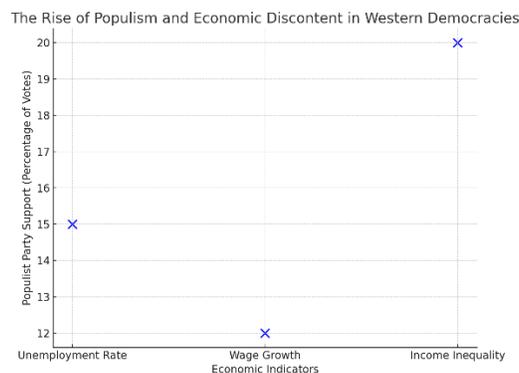
### Transparency and Fact-Checking:

Encourage collaboration between media outlets, fact-checkers, and digital platforms to flag false information and promote accurate reporting.

### Promoting Diverse Media Ecosystems:

Support public service media and independent journalism to provide reliable information and counterbalance sensationalist or partisan content.

Democratic resilience to populism depends on addressing the root economic causes fueling discontent, fostering inclusive and constructive political dialogue, and adapting to the challenges posed by misinformation and digital media. Through comprehensive policy responses, democracies can strengthen trust, reduce polarization, and uphold democratic norms.



## Graph on Populism and Economic Discontent

## 1. Title: *The Rise of Populism and Economic Discontent in Western Democracies*

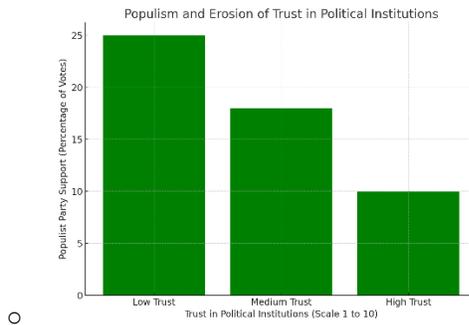
- **X-Axis:** Economic Indicators (e.g., Unemployment Rate, Wage Growth, Income Inequality)
- **Y-Axis:** Populist Party Support (Percentage of Votes)

### Data Representation:

- Scatter plot showing the correlation between key economic indicators (such as unemployment, wage stagnation, and income inequality) and support for populist parties.
- **Groups:** Countries with varying levels of populist support, with different economic conditions.
- **Purpose:** To examine how economic discontent (such as job losses, income inequality, and economic insecurity) contributes to the rise of populism in Western democracies.

### 2. Graph Description:

- The graph will show that as economic challenges such as unemployment and income inequality increase, so does the support for populist parties.
- It will illustrate the sociological perspective that populism thrives in times of economic crisis or dissatisfaction with the economic system, with populist parties often blaming the establishment or elites for these issues.



## Graph on Populism and Trust in Institutions

**Title:** Populism and Erosion of Trust in Political Institutions

- **X-Axis:** Trust in Political Institutions (Scale 1 to 10)
- **Y-Axis:** Populist Party Support (Percentage of Votes)

### Data Representation:

- Bar chart or scatter plot showing the relationship between the level of trust in political institutions (e.g., government, parliament, media) and the percentage of votes for populist parties.
- **Groups:** Different countries with varying levels of political trust and populist support.
- **Purpose:** To explore how the erosion of trust in political institutions, including governments and established political parties, fuels the rise of populism.

### 2.Graph Description:

- The graph will demonstrate that as trust in political institutions decreases, support for populist parties increases, reflecting the growing appeal of outsider or anti-establishment candidates.
- It will emphasize that populism often arises in environments where people feel disconnected from traditional political structures, viewing them as corrupt or out of touch.

### Summary

The digital age has ushered in profound changes in voter behavior, fundamentally altering the channels through which political information is disseminated and consumed. Social media platforms serve as critical arenas for political communication, enabling real-time interaction and mobilization (Chadwick & Dennis, 2019). However, algorithm-driven echo chambers and filter bubbles exacerbate political polarization by reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

Misinformation poses a significant threat to electoral integrity, shaping voter perceptions through false or misleading narratives (Lazer et al., 2018). Meanwhile, digital tools

facilitate novel forms of political participation that complement traditional voting, such as online petitions and social media activism (Boulianne, 2015). Addressing the challenges of misinformation and polarization requires coordinated efforts to enhance media literacy, regulate digital platforms, and promote transparent political communication. Ultimately, the digital transformation of voter behavior presents both opportunities and risks for democratic systems, underscoring the need for adaptive governance and informed citizen engagement in the digital era.

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