

“A STUDY OF POPULISM AND THE HOLLOWING OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY”

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: populism; popular sovereignty; democratic backsliding; constitutionalism; pluralism; democratic legitimacy	Populism has emerged as one of the most significant challenges to contemporary democratic governance, characterized by its moralized appeal to a unified “people” set against allegedly corrupt elites. Although populist actors frequently attain power through democratic means, their modes of governance often undermine the institutional and normative foundations that sustain democracy. This study examines populism as a thin-centred ideology and analyses its complex relationship with democratic legitimacy, constitutionalism, and pluralism. Using a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in political theory, the paper explores how populism simultaneously reflects genuine societal discontent and contributes to democratic backsliding by eroding checks and balances, delegitimizing opposition, and narrowing the boundaries of political community. Through conceptual analysis and illustrative case studies of the United States and Hungary, the study demonstrates that populism operates within democratic frameworks while progressively hollowing out democratic institutions and norms. The findings highlight the paradox at the core of populism: its claim to restore popular sovereignty often results in the concentration of power and the weakening of liberal-democratic constraints. The paper concludes that defending democracy in the populist era requires renewed commitment to constitutionalism, institutional autonomy, pluralism, and civil liberties.

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INTRODUCTION: -

Populist actors often rise to power through democratic means, yet their governance practices tend to weaken the institutions and norms essential to democratic life. In recent decades, populism has emerged as a major challenge to democratic governance across both established and transitional regimes by mobilizing political disaffection through appeals to a unified “people” opposed to political and cultural elites. While gaining electoral legitimacy, populist leaders often contribute to democratic regression through institutional hollowing and the erosion of pluralist norms.

This development raises a central theoretical paradox: how can a political logic that claims to restore popular sovereignty simultaneously undermine the democratic frameworks that sustain it? Scholarly debates remain divided between those who view populism as a democratic corrective and those who see it as an anti-pluralist project that subordinate’s constitutionalism and minority rights to a moralized popular will. This ambiguity underscores the need for a systematic analysis of populism as a contemporary democratic challenge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: -

This study is based on a **qualitative and analytical approach** using secondary sources, including scholarly books and articles, institutional reports, and policy briefs (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, 2018; Vallon, 2011; Tony Blair Institute, n.d.; Freedom House, 2021). Through **conceptual and interpretive analysis**, the research examines key themes such as populism, democracy, popular sovereignty, constitutionalism, and democratic backsliding. **Case studies of the United States and Hungary** provide insights into how populist politics operates within democratic frameworks, highlighting patterns of institutional weakening, erosion of pluralist norms, and the impact of moralized claims to “the people” on democratic legitimacy.

Concept of Populism and Democracy: -

Populism is a thin-centred political ideology in which leaders claim to embody the “true” people, framing politics as a moral conflict between a virtuous majority and a corrupt elite, as conceptualized by **Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser**. Historically rooted in reformist movements responding to institutional failure and exclusion, populism has re-emerged in the contemporary era amid rising inequality, institutional distrust, and social polarization, often amplified by direct rhetoric and digital media. By mobilizing popular grievances and challenging institutional checks and pluralist norms, populism reshapes political discourse and authority. At a deeper level, it reflects societal discontent while redefining democratic legitimacy, revealing the fragile and contested nature of modern democratic governance.

Democracy, at its philosophical core, is more than a mechanism of governance; it is an ethical experiment in collective self-determination. It embodies the tension between unity and plurality-the pursuit of a common will while safeguarding the diversity of individual voices. Grounded in freedom, equality, and deliberation, democracy is both a process and a promise, sustained through ongoing negotiation between authority and autonomy, majority, and minority. Never fully complete, it exists in constant tension, renewed through participation, dissent, and claims to legitimacy. It is within this unresolved space that populism intervenes, presenting itself as the voice of the “true people” while

undermining the pluralistic and deliberative foundations essential to democratic life.

Populism and Democracy: A Complex Interplay

Populism and democracy exist in a fraught, almost paradoxical relationship: one arises within the other, yet often undermines it. Democracy, as an ideal, thrives on pluralism, deliberation, and institutional checks that prevent the consolidation of power in the hands of a single actor or group. Populism, by contrast, thrives on the moral polarization of society into a virtuous “people” and a corrupt “elite,” claiming to give voice to the will of the people directly, often bypassing institutional intermediaries. In this sense, populism can be understood as both a critique and a symptom of democratic dysfunction: it exposes gaps in representation and legitimacy, but in asserting the singularity of popular will, it challenges the pluralistic and deliberative foundations of democracy itself.

Populism is a particularly contemporary challenge to democracy because it exploits vulnerabilities that are characteristic of the modern era. The speed and reach of digital communication platforms amplify emotive, simplified narratives, allowing populist leaders to bypass traditional deliberative forums and speak directly to mass audiences. Social media creates echo chambers, where confirmation bias and polarization flourish, weakening the space for rational debate and mutual understanding-foundational pillars of democratic culture. Economic inequality and perceived social marginalization further intensify the appeal of populist rhetoric, as citizens, feeling excluded from the benefits of liberal democracy, become receptive to claims that a morally virtuous “people” are being oppressed by a corrupt “elite.” Declining trust in established institutions-courts, legislatures, electoral bodies, and bureaucracies-compounds this effect, as procedural safeguards are portrayed as obstacles to the “true” popular will rather than as necessary checks on power.

These theoretical mechanisms are not merely speculative: empirical studies confirm the democratic consequences of populism. A comprehensive study by the **Tony Blair Institute**, drawing on a global database of populist governments (1990–2018), shows that “populists are about four times more likely than non-populist leaders to damage democratic institutions”. In the same dataset: -

- Only **34 %** of populist leaders leave office through free and fair elections or respect term limits, while the rest either resign under pressure, are impeached, or remain in power without clear democratic transition.
- **Over 50 %** of populist leaders amend or rewrite constitutions-often extending terms or weakening checks on executive power-undermining institutional constraints on authority.
- Populist rule is associated with declines in core democratic freedoms, including an approximate **7 %** drop in press freedom, an **8 %** decline in civil liberties, and a **13 %** decrease in political rights compared with non-populist contexts (Tony Blair Institute, n.d.).

At the same time, the structure and resilience of democratic institutions influence the form populism takes. Strong, inclusive democracies can constrain populist excesses, whereas fragile systems amplify their disruptive potential. The interaction is thus reciprocal: democracy provides the space for populism, while populism tests democracy’s capacity to preserve freedom, pluralism, and institutional integrity.

The consequence is a destabilization not only of political institutions but also of the ethical and deliberative fabric of democracy itself. By insisting on the singularity of the popular voice and delegitimizing dissent, populism transforms democracy from a pluralistic experiment in collective self-determination into a contest of moralistic claims, where emotional resonance outweighs reasoned debate. In this sense, “populism does not merely challenge specific policies or leaders; it challenges democracy at its core-testing whether the system can sustain pluralism, freedom, and institutional accountability amid complex social, economic, and technological pressures.”

Case studies of America and Hungary: -

1. America

The United States witnessed a significant rise of populist politics during the presidency of Donald Trump, which highlighted how populism can emerge even within long-established democratic systems. Trump rose to power through democratic elections by mobilizing popular discontent against political elites, mainstream media, and global institutions, presenting himself as the voice of the **“forgotten people.”**

Key Policies and Practices Relevant to Populism and Democracy

- **Anti-Elite and Anti-Media Rhetoric:** Frequent labelling of mainstream media as “fake news” undermined trust in independent journalism and democratic accountability.
- **Delegitimization of Institutions:** Repeated attacks on the judiciary, electoral processes, and bureaucratic institutions weakened public confidence in democratic norms.
- **Executive Personalization:** Governance became highly leader-centric, with emphasis on loyalty over institutional norms.
- **Immigration Policies:** Restrictive immigration measures, framed in nationalist and exclusionary terms, reinforced majoritarian populist narratives.
- **Electoral Legitimacy Discourse:** Questioning the credibility of election outcomes challenged democratic norms of peaceful acceptance of results.

The American case demonstrates that populism does not only threaten new or fragile democracies but can also strain the institutional resilience of consolidated liberal democracies. While democratic institutions in the United States largely endured, this period revealed how populist rhetoric and practices can polarize society, weaken democratic norms, and test the limits of institutional safeguards.

2. Hungary

Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orbán represents a clear example of populism operating within democratic frameworks while weakening democratic institutions. Orbán rose to power through free and fair elections by promoting a strong populist narrative of the **“true Hungarian people”** against liberal elites, foreign influences, and supranational institutions, portraying himself as the defender of “national sovereignty” and “ordinary citizens.”

Key Policies Relevant to Populism and Democracy

- **Constitutional Reforms:** The government introduced constitutional amendments that expanded executive power and reduced institutional checks and balances, weakening the independence of democratic institutions.
- **Judicial Restructuring:** Changes in judicial appointment procedures and administrative control reduced judicial autonomy, undermining the rule of law.
- **Media Control Policies:** Media regulations and ownership concentration favoured pro-government outlets, limiting press freedom and critical public discourse.
- **Civil Society Restrictions:** Laws regulating NGOs, especially those receiving foreign funding, constrained civic space and delegitimized dissent.
- **Nationalist Identity Politics:** Policies emphasizing national identity and sovereignty reinforced majoritarianism while marginalizing pluralism.

This case illustrates how populism does not reject democracy outright but reshapes it by concentrating power, weakening institutions, and redefining popular sovereignty in exclusionary and majoritarian terms. Hungary thus exemplifies democratic backsliding driven by populist governance rather than abrupt authoritarian breakdown.

CONCLUSION: -

Populism represents a significant contemporary challenge to democratic systems by reshaping the meaning of popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy. Although it emerges from genuine social discontent and operates through electoral mechanisms, populism often weakens the pluralistic and institutional foundations of democracy by moralizing politics and concentrating power in the name of an “authentic” people. Democratic erosion under populism typically occurs gradually through the undermining of constitutional constraints, institutional autonomy, and tolerance for dissent rather than through the outright rejection of democratic procedures. Safeguarding democracy in the present era therefore requires a renewed commitment to constitutionalism, pluralism, and democratic norms that preserve accountability and diversity.

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