

## **The Rise of Populism in Modern Democracies: A Comparative Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*In this article, the global phenomenon of populism is treated in various perspectives focused onto such phenomena towards democracy, media and even ways to cope with intimacy (Sugden & Peplow 2023). Drawing on recent scholarly literature, the study frames populism as a multidimensional phenomenon with a “Janus faced” character that embodies an essential tension: it can be at once democratic corrective and the very negation of this. The results show that although populism causes an increase in political participation among disadvantaged groups, at the same time it does jeopardise institutional stability by undermining judicial independence and civil liberties (Bugarcic, 2019). The analysis further augments how commercialised media environments enable populist communication strategies. Lastly, it assesses whether existing conflict management tools, which include mediation and peacekeeping, can be adapted to address this polarisation that populism tends to exacerbate (Mumtaz et al., 2025).*

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## **Introduction**

In the early decades of the twenty first century, populism became one of the most consequential global political phenomena. Its forms have been a kaleidoscope: from the nationalist rhetoric of the “America First” movement in the United States, to the socialist “pink tide” that swept across Latin American politics, to right wing parties’ electoral successes throughout all of Europe. They may be grounded in opposing ideologies, but these movements share one common narrative: they portray themselves as the true voice of “the people” and enable dominant political, economic and cultural elites to appear illegitimate, self interested and removed from ordinary citizens.

This resurgence is not accidental. It spoke of a deep malaise with neoliberal globalisation – a series of policies that promised prosperity but wrought deindustrialisation, wage stagnation and cultural disquiet for many communities (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). When mainstream parties of the right and left alike coalesced around a lightly criticized centrist consensus that offered little in the way of substantive policy alternatives, they created a vacuum. Populist figures have been skilled at exploiting that void by providing tidy, emotionally engaging answers to complicated problems.

The normative assessment of populism, however, is deeply contested. Others view it as a prerequisite for accountability — a pressure valve that makes representative systems pay attention to the grievances they have ignored and re-engage with voters whom they no longer respect. Others caution populism contains authoritarian tendencies, highlighting what has been referred to as the “two faces of populism”: one democratic and the other authoritarian (Bugarcic, 2019). Once populists gain power, they tend to focus on consolidating the authority that comes with it by eviscerating the institutional checks and balances — independent judiciaries, free media, minority protections — that are vital to democratic resilience. An adequate understanding thus demands going beyond binary assessments. We need to take and implement a multidimensional framework that considers the economic, communicative, and historical contexts in which different types of populism emerge (Olivas Osuna, 2021).

## **Literature Review**

### **1. Ideology, Strategy, Style: The Ontological Debate**

Defining populism has given rise to a handful of different research traditions. Every tradition provides an alternative lens through which we can explore the movements and leaders we see today (Abromeit, 2017)

#### **a. The Ideational Approach**

The ideational approach, currently the leading perspective in political

science, treats populism as a “thin centred ideology”. Unlike full-fledged worldviews like liberalism or socialism, populism provides a narrow yet potent mental map: Society consists of two homogeneous and antagonistic groups — “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite.” As thin, populism has to be attached and identified with some host-ideology (nationalism, socialism, etc.), which helps explain its left-wing as well as right-wing manifestations (Abromeit 2017). This method is well suited to cross national comparisons, as it recognizes a consistent set of ideational features in disparate settings.

### **b. The Strategic Approach**

Scholars who take the strategic perspective pay little attention to ideas and more to political mobilisation tactics. For them, populism is a device used by charismatic, personalist leaders who aspire to circumvent established intermediary institutions — political parties, unions and professional media. And by fostering this direct and unmediated relationship with followers, these leaders are able to mobilise mass support while delegitimising any opposition as illegitimate or even treasonous. This explains why populist movements tend to coalesce around a single leader, and why they often have a distinctive contempt for institutional limits on power.

### **c. The Discursive and Performative Approaches**

A third line of inquiry moves to the “how” of populism — its unique mode of political communication. Advocates of this view argue that populism is marked by deliberate transgressions of established norms: bad manners, the performance of ordinariness, the constant invocation of crisis. That hyperbolic rhetoric generates urgency that makes it OK to violate the normal rules of politics. More recently these dimensions have been synthesised in multidimensional models that include measuring populism with indicators such as the moral framing of leadership, how the polity is depicted and the signalling or rhetorical devices used (Olivas Osuna, 2021).

## **2. The Political Economy of Populist Backlash**

A significant literature argues we cannot understand the contemporary wave of populism either by cultural factors: rather it has its roots in the structural transformations of capitalism. Many scholars are working from a Polanyian framework and read populism as a backlash against the market liberalisation policies which have dominated since the end of the 20th century.

In this period, centre left and centre right parties united around a neoliberal consensus of deregulation, privatisation and the shrivelling up of social protections. This convergence also helped to narrow the range of policy choices available to voters. When established left parties turned their backs on their working class bases

to embrace market friendly reforms, they created a political vacuum that populists were ideally positioned to fill. Evidence shows a direct empirical connection between the decline of social democracy and the rise of right wing populism, indicating that economic dislocation and real or perceived cultural dispossession are often conjoined (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). Populists portray themselves as the only true defenders of those “left behind” by globalisation, intertwining material appeals with identity-based ones.

### **3. Media Populism and the Reformatting of Political Communication**

The association between media systems and populist success is becoming increasingly viewed as overwhelmingly symbiotic. In parallel, market-driven news commercialisation has motivated “newsroom populism”: the recourse to sensationalism, emotionalisation and personalisation as a strategy for audience attention. These editorial strategies dovetail directly with the narrative structures of populism, which revolves around conflict and moral polarisation.

The comparative research across countries demonstrates that exposure to tabloid newspapers and specific online platforms correlates with greater support for populist parties, especially during periods of heightened salience such as European Parliament elections (Doroshenko, 2018). High quality newspapers and public service broadcasters can, at least in theory, help defend against populist appeal with more nuanced evidence based coverage. Social media has added another dimension to this trend, allowing populist leaders to circumvent traditional gatekeepers and speak directly to the true believers. Such “unfiltered” communication, then seems to confirm perceptions of authenticity and deepen the leader follower relationship, whilst at the same time encouraging the viral dissemination of polarising material (Doroshenko, 2018).

#### **Research Methodology**

The analysis presented within this article is based on a qualitative comparative review of recent relevant scholarly literature and exemplary case studies. Let me stress that to achieve a comprehensive comprehension, this study assembles results from four intertwined disciplines.

**1.Theoretical Frameworks:** The work deploys multidimensional models that disaggregate populism into analytically separable dimensions — including the moral framing of the polity, discursive construction of leadership, and the performative aspects of political style (Olivas Osuna, 2021). This will enable systematic comparison across cases without reducing populism to a one-dimensional approach.

**2.Comparative Case Selection:** The analysis draws on populist regimes and movements as they are found across a range of geopolitical contexts (including the US, Brazil, Turkey, Hungary and several Western European countries). This wide

geographical and ideological scope allows for the recognition of patterns that cross national contexts, while being sensitive to local specificities (Kaya, 2016; Bugaric, 2019).

**3.3. Empirical Data:** Where possible, the entry integrates results from panel survey and digital content analyses that establish an association between media consumption habits and populist voting behaviour. These data provide an important link between theoretical claims regarding media effects and observable political outcomes (Doroshenko, 2018).

**4. Conflict Management Literature:** In a necessary response to the social polarisation intrinsic to populist regimes, the study engages with empirical assessments of mediation and pacification as accounted for in databases on international conflicts. It informs us not just about how tools originally designed to deal with inter state or civil wars can also be used to regulate internal divisions within democracies (Clayton & Dorussen, 2022; Hellmüller, 2023).

### **Research Gaps**

Despite a veritable explosion of populism studies, two significant gaps hinder the translation of academic knowledge into effective policy and practice.

#### **1. How Far the Academy is From Practitioners' Needs**

A more common challenge in the literature is that of the gap between high level scholarly research and the practical imperatives of conflict resolution in polarised societies. Most academic production is still concentrated in Western institutions and is heavily rationalist, scholarly models that emphasise analytic beauty over contextual relevance. Research explicitly oriented toward mediation still tends to be “practice oriented, but not practice relevant,” as Hellmüller tells us (2023). The practitioners in the field require tools that enable navigation of the emotionally charged, identity driven dynamics of populist politics – spaces where compromise is often characterized as betrayal. Bridging this gap, though, would require increasing the use of collaborative, context sensitive designs for research that engage practitioners from the beginning.

#### **2. Not Enough Integration Between Media Systems and Political Theory**

Although the emerging field of “media populism” has made enormous strides, systematic cross national research addressing specific features of media systems (degree of commercialisation, strength of public service broadcasting) to the prevalence/strength/political reception/behaviour effects in terms of different varieties of populism at individual level is lacking. Most existing work focuses on the “supply side” – the rhetoric and social media activity of populist leaders —

without fully considering the “demand side”: the idiosyncratic media diets, psychological dispositions and local information environments that shape how people take in populist messages. Future studies should embrace more holistic approaches that view media systems as constitutive components of the political context (and not only as transmission belts for elite communication; Doroshenko, 2018).

### **Findings and Conclusion**

The earlier discussion underlines that populism is not a unitary phenomenon. Its effects vary widely according to its ideological contents, institutional arrangement and leaders’ strategic choices.

### **The Two Faces of Populism**

There is also a strong need to differentiate between democratic and authoritarian variants. But for all its confrontation, democratic populism can galvanize political participation and push mainstream institutions to grapple with long ignored problems. Authoritarian populism, by contrast, threatens liberal democracy directly. After they gain power, authoritarian populists tend to pursue “state colonisation” — a systematic process of filling judicial and administrative positions with loyalists, using state resources to advance clientelistic politics and targeting civil society organisations. It is not a side effect but an actively sought characteristic of such governance (Bugaric, 2019; Mumtaz et al., 2025).

### **Media as an Amplifier**

The commercialisation of information environments has been a boon for populist communication. The “us versus them” schema is not just a political strategy — it’s also an enormously lucrative media product, especially in hyper-competitive, deregulated markets. Social media exacerbate this dynamic by facilitating the viral spread of polarising content – free from any attenuating effect that traditional editorial oversight may have (Doroshenko, 2018)

### **The Social Democratic Vacuum**

One of the most robust findings of comparative studies is the association between the weakening of traditional social democratic parties and increasing right wing populism. In doing so, these parties betrayed their traditional working class base by retreating to the neoliberal centre. For these voters, many of whom eventually gravitated toward populist parties that appealed to cultural belonging and national protection as compensation for lost economic comfort (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019), losing estates meant losing status.

### **Complementary Approaches to Conflict Management**

Combatting the polarisation driven by populism requires much more than electoral rivalry. Research from the peace and conflict literature indicates that

mediation and peacekeeping are not mutually exclusive but instead are complementary strategies. Mediation could be an important first step to stem inflamed hostilities and open communication channels. Peacekeeping – conceived in a transformative spirit – can offer the secure backdrop for political and social remedies (Clayton & Dorussen, 2022). The application of these tools in a democratic backsliding context would mean fortifying local institutions, supporting independent media and establishing opportunities for cross partisan communication.

To stem a capitalist meltdown in an age of populist resurgence requires more than rhetorical opposition to democratic sovereignty. It needs a serious alternative to the economic policies that have created vast insecurity and a recommitment to shoring up the institutional “immune system” of democracy — independent courts, a free press and strong civil liberties. Understanding populism in its multidimensional complexity is thus not simply an academic exercise; it is a necessary precursor to defending democratic values in an ever more splintered world.

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