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The Populist Wave: Democratic Erosion, Institutional Resilience, and the Future of Liberal Governance in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract:

This paper examines the rise of populism in twenty-first-century democracies and its implications for democratic governance, institutional resilience, and political legitimacy. Drawing on the ideational and anti-pluralist approaches to populism, it situates the contemporary populist wave within broader historical and structural contexts. The study argues that contemporary populism is driven by three interrelated dynamics: the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal governance, cultural anxieties associated with rapid social transformation, and the erosion of intermediary institutions that traditionally connected citizens to political power. Through comparative case studies of Hungary, the United States, and India, the paper explores how populist movements interact with democratic institutions and contribute, under certain conditions, to processes of democratic backsliding. At the same time, it highlights the importance of judicial independence, civil society, federalism, and participatory democratic innovations as sources of institutional resilience. The paper concludes that democracy's long-term stability depends upon its capacity for responsiveness, inclusion, and self-renewal.

Keywords: Populism; Democratic Backsliding; Liberal Democracy; Institutional Resilience; Democratic Renewal

1. Introduction: Naming the Phenomenon

Few concepts have generated as much scholarly contention in recent decades as populism. Deployed variously as a pejorative epithet, a descriptive category, and an analytical framework, the term has acquired a degree of conceptual ambiguity that threatens its analytical precision precisely at the moment when the phenomenon it seeks to describe demands rigorous examination. Yet if the conceptual difficulties are real, the political developments are unmistakable: from the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, to the consolidation of Viktor Orbán's illiberal state in Hungary, the rise of the Rassemblement National in France, Jair Bolsonaro's presidency in Brazil, and the electoral victories of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in India, scholars have increasingly argued that contemporary liberal democracy is undergoing transformations that traditional political-science frameworks have struggled fully to explain.

This paper takes as its starting point Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's influential minimal definition: populism is a thin-centred ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps—"the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"—and holds that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale of the former. The virtue of this definition lies in its ideological minimalism: it identifies populism's constitutive logic without predetermining its substantive content. As a result, it accommodates both left-wing populisms, such as those associated with Hugo Chávez and Podemos, and right-wing populisms, including Fidesz, the AfD, and Fratelli d'Italia, while also accounting for the considerable ideological variation found across empirical cases. In some accounts, figures such as Bernie Sanders likewise exhibit important populist characteristics.(Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017)

Yet the thin-ideology approach has its critics and revisions. Jan-Werner Müller argues that anti-elitism alone cannot adequately distinguish populism from other forms of democratic dissent. What marks populism, in his account, is its anti-pluralist claim to exclusive representation: "Populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people" (Müller, 2016, p. 3). Anti-elitism remains important, but it becomes politically consequential when coupled with the assertion that opponents are not merely mistaken but fundamentally illegitimate. The debate between ideational and anti-pluralist approaches is not merely conceptual; it produces different assessments of populism's relationship to democracy and therefore different prescriptions for how liberal institutions should respond to populist mobilization.

The paper proceeds in six sections. Section II provides a historical contextualisation, tracing populism's antecedents and distinguishing contemporary formations from earlier iterations. Section III analyses the structural drivers of the current wave. Section IV develops comparative case studies. Section V examines the relationship between populism and democratic backsliding. Section VI addresses the question of institutional resilience and renewal. A concluding section reflects on the implications for democratic theory.

2. Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Distinctiveness

Populism is not a novelty of the twenty-first century. American Populism—the late nineteenth-century agrarian movement that gave the phenomenon its name—mounted a sustained challenge to the concentrated power of railroad corporations, financial elites, and the gold standard, articulating a producerist vision of democratic citizenship that found its political vehicle in the People's Party (Goodwyn, 1978, pp. xvii–xxiv, 24–56).. In Latin America, the mid-twentieth century witnessed a distinct wave of populist mobilisation, most notably in the movements associated with Juan Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil. These projects combined the political incorporation of previously marginalised workers and popular sectors with charismatic, personalist leadership and appeals to a unified national people (Weyland, 2001, 14–18). .In Europe, the post-war decades witnessed the emergence of movements such as Poujadism in France and a range of nationalist and radical-right formations whose anti-elite rhetoric and appeals to popular sovereignty prefigured later waves of right-wing populism (Shields, 2004; Goodliffe, 2012).

Contemporary populism bears important family resemblances to its historical predecessors—anti-establishment rhetoric, claims to embody an unmediated popular will, and the prominence of charismatic leadership—while also exhibiting features that distinguish the present conjuncture from earlier episodes. Three such features deserve emphasis.

First, the contemporary wave is remarkable for both its global reach and its temporal concentration. The near-contemporaneous rise of electorally successful populist movements across North America, Western and Eastern Europe, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and other regions has encouraged scholars to look beyond national particularities and to consider broader structural transformations operating at a transnational scale. While earlier populist movements were largely confined to specific national or regional contexts, contemporary populism has emerged across diverse political systems and ideological traditions within a relatively compressed historical period. This pattern has prompted explanations centred on the disruptive effects of globalization, neoliberal economic restructuring, the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, growing inequalities, and the perceived erosion of

democratic responsiveness under conditions of global capitalism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Judis, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The significance of the present moment therefore lies not simply in the recurrence of populist politics but in the extent to which similar populist logics have appeared simultaneously across widely different social and political contexts.

Second, the information environment in which contemporary populism operates has been profoundly transformed by digital communication technologies and, above all, by social media platforms. Scholars have argued that these platforms facilitate the rapid circulation of emotionally charged, identity-reinforcing, and anti-establishment messages while weakening the gatekeeping role traditionally exercised by professional journalism and established media institutions (Rooduijn, 2019; Moffitt, 2016). The resulting disintermediation of political communication enables populist actors to cultivate direct relationships with supporters, often presenting themselves as authentic voices of "the people" unfiltered by allegedly biased elites or institutional mediators. In this respect, digital media have not created populism, but they have furnished it with communicative tools uniquely suited to its performative and anti-establishment logic.

Third, contemporary populism has demonstrated a remarkable capacity not only to achieve electoral success but also to exercise and retain governmental power. Although earlier populist movements such as Peronism in Argentina and Vargasism in Brazil also governed for extended periods, the contemporary wave has seen populist actors acquire and sustain power across a wide range of democratic and semi-democratic contexts. In countries as diverse as Hungary, India, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States, populist leaders and parties have shaped public institutions, reconfigured party systems, and, in some cases, pursued significant constitutional and administrative reforms. These developments have encouraged scholars to move beyond the study of populism as an oppositional or protest phenomenon and to examine its governing practices, institutional effects, and long-term implications for democratic governance (Müller, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

3 Structural Drivers of the Contemporary Populist Wave

3.1 The Legitimacy Crisis of Neoliberal Governance

The political economy of the post-Cold War decades provides an indispensable context for understanding the contemporary populist wave. Many scholars have argued that the ascendancy of market liberalism during the 1990s

fostered a convergence among mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties around a broadly neoliberal policy paradigm characterised by fiscal discipline, trade liberalisation, capital mobility, privatisation, and labour-market flexibility. Although important differences remained between parties, the range of economic alternatives presented through democratic competition narrowed significantly, producing what Peter Mair describes as a growing gap between citizens and their representatives and what Wolfgang Streeck identifies as the progressive insulation of economic governance from democratic contestation (Streeck 1–46; Mair 1–20). As electoral politics appeared increasingly incapable of delivering substantive policy change, public confidence in representative institutions began to erode.

The global financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the austerity measures that followed constituted a decisive turning point in this process. Across much of Europe and North America, governments intervened on an unprecedented scale to stabilise financial institutions while simultaneously imposing fiscal restraint, welfare retrenchment, and public-sector cuts. For many citizens, this sequence of events reinforced the perception that political institutions remained highly responsive to the interests of financial markets and economic elites while exhibiting far less concern for the economic security of ordinary voters. Populist actors proved particularly adept at transforming these perceptions into political narratives centred on corruption, elite betrayal, and the reclamation of popular sovereignty.

The decade following the crisis witnessed a series of developments that further intensified political dissatisfaction: sluggish wage growth across many advanced economies, widening regional disparities, the expansion of precarious employment, and growing anxieties regarding intergenerational mobility. As Dani Rodrik argues, the distributive consequences of economic globalisation and technological restructuring created substantial groups of citizens who perceived themselves as excluded from the benefits of economic growth while remaining exposed to its risks (Rodrik 4–23). These material grievances did not mechanically produce populism, but they generated fertile conditions for movements that framed politics as a struggle between ordinary people and self-serving elites.

Wolfgang Streeck's analysis of the structural tensions between capitalism and democracy provides one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding this development. According to Streeck, the post-war compromise between democratic demands for social protection and capitalist demands for profitability and market

efficiency has progressively unravelled under neoliberalism. Economic policy has become increasingly constrained by the imperatives of financial markets, creditor confidence, and global competitiveness, thereby limiting the capacity of democratic governments to respond to popular demands through traditional mechanisms of redistribution and social provision (Streeck 79–113). In this context, citizens encounter a political system in which formal electoral choice remains intact while substantive control over key economic decisions appears increasingly remote.

From this perspective, contemporary populism should not be understood simply as a reaction against liberal democracy but as a response to perceived failures within liberal-democratic governance itself. When representative institutions appear unable or unwilling to translate majority preferences into meaningful political outcomes, appeals to direct popular sovereignty acquire renewed force. Populist movements gain traction not merely because they reject established elites, but because they articulate widespread frustrations concerning the declining responsiveness of democratic institutions. Populism, on this reading, is less the antithesis of democracy than a symptom of democratic deficiency—a political expression of the tensions generated when the promises of popular self-government collide with the constraints of neoliberal capitalism.

3.2 Cultural Anxiety and the Politics of Recognition

Economic dislocation alone cannot fully explain either the timing or the distinctive ideological character of the contemporary populist wave. While material grievances have provided fertile ground for anti-establishment mobilisation, the political salience of populism has depended equally upon questions of identity, belonging, and cultural recognition. Research by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris suggests that support for contemporary populist movements cannot be reduced to income levels or economic insecurity alone. Rather, it is also shaped by what they describe as a "cultural backlash": a reaction among segments of the population who perceive the rapid cultural transformations associated with the post-1960s era as a challenge to established values, identities, and social hierarchies (Inglehart & Norris, 2019).

These transformations have been multidimensional. Increased migration, growing ethnic and religious diversity, changing gender norms, the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights, and the broader cosmopolitan orientation of contemporary liberal societies have altered the cultural landscape of many democracies. For some citizens, these developments

represent progress toward greater inclusion and equality; for others, they generate anxieties concerning national identity, social cohesion, and the continuity of familiar ways of life. The political significance of these anxieties lies not in their objective validity but in their capacity to shape perceptions of loss, displacement, and marginalisation.

David Goodhart's distinction between the "Somewheres" and the "Anywheres" provides a useful framework for understanding this divide. According to Goodhart, contemporary political conflict increasingly reflects tensions between citizens whose identities are rooted in locality, tradition, and national belonging and those whose educational and professional trajectories are oriented toward mobility, cosmopolitanism, and transnational networks (Goodhart, 2017). Within this framework, liberal commitments to multiculturalism, global integration, and open borders are often perceived by their critics not as universal principles but as the cultural preferences of highly educated metropolitan elites whose social position insulates them from many of the disruptions associated with economic and demographic change.

Francis Fukuyama's analysis of recognition adds a further dimension to this account. In *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Fukuyama argues that political behaviour cannot be understood solely through the lens of material interests. Human beings also seek recognition of their dignity, status, and collective identity. Contemporary populist movements have proved particularly effective at mobilising citizens who believe that their identities, values, and experiences are ignored, dismissed, or denigrated by dominant political and cultural institutions. Whether among working-class communities that perceive themselves as objects of elite condescension, religious groups that view secularisation as a threat to their moral world, or national constituencies concerned about the erosion of sovereignty under conditions of globalisation, populist rhetoric offers a powerful language through which experiences of cultural displacement can be articulated and politicised (Fukuyama, 2018).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that contemporary populism is best understood not as a purely economic reaction nor as a purely cultural revolt. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between material insecurity and struggles over recognition, identity, and belonging. Economic transformations create conditions of uncertainty, while cultural narratives provide the symbolic frameworks through which that uncertainty is interpreted and politically

mobilised. The success of contemporary populism lies largely in its capacity to fuse these dimensions into a compelling account of collective grievance and democratic reclamation.

3.3 The Crisis of Intermediary Institutions

A third structural driver of contemporary populism lies in the weakening of the intermediary institutions that have historically connected citizens to the state. Political parties, trade unions, religious organisations, civic associations, and local community structures once served as crucial mechanisms through which social interests were articulated, aggregated, and translated into political representation. Their gradual erosion has contributed to a growing sense of political disconnection and institutional distrust that populist movements have proved adept at exploiting.

Peter Mair's influential analysis of the "hollowing" of Western democracy documents the transformation of political parties from mass-membership organisations into increasingly professionalised electoral machines. Across much of Europe, party membership has declined, ideological distinctions have narrowed, and traditional forms of grassroots mobilisation have weakened. As parties have become more dependent on state resources, media management, and professional campaigning, their capacity to function as vehicles of collective representation has diminished (Mair, 2013). Citizens have consequently come to experience politics less as a participatory process and more as a contest among increasingly detached political elites.

This development intersects with what Bernard Manin describes as the emergence of "audience democracy," in which political communication is increasingly mediated through mass and digital media rather than sustained organisational participation. In such a system, citizens often engage with politics primarily as spectators rather than as members of enduring political communities. The resulting gap between rulers and ruled creates opportunities for populist leaders to present themselves as authentic voices of "the people" capable of bypassing established institutions and restoring direct forms of democratic responsiveness (Manin, 1997).

The decline of organised labour deserves particular attention. Throughout much of the twentieth century, trade unions provided organisational infrastructures through which working-class interests could be articulated and represented. Beyond collective bargaining, unions fostered political participation, cultivated solidaristic identities, and maintained durable connections between working-class communities and centre-left political parties. The processes of

deindustrialisation, labour-market fragmentation, declining union density, and the expansion of precarious forms of employment have substantially weakened these institutions across many advanced democracies. As traditional mechanisms of working-class representation have eroded, significant segments of the electorate have become more politically volatile and increasingly receptive to anti-establishment appeals.

This transformation does not imply a simple causal relationship between deunionisation and populism. Rather, the decline of intermediary institutions has contributed to a broader representational vacuum in which established political organisations appear less capable of expressing collective grievances or mediating social conflict. Populist movements have gained traction, in part, because they offer an alternative language of political belonging and representation at a moment when many of the institutions that once performed these functions have lost much of their social and political authority. Contemporary populism therefore emerges not only from economic and cultural tensions but also from a crisis in the organisational foundations of representative democracy itself.

4. Comparative Case Studies

4.1 Hungary: The Illiberal Laboratory

Hungary under Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party has become one of the most extensively studied cases of contemporary populist governance. Following its return to power in 2010 with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, Fidesz initiated a far-reaching restructuring of Hungary's constitutional and institutional order. The adoption of the 2011 Fundamental Law, reforms affecting the Constitutional Court, changes to the electoral system, the expansion of executive influence over judicial and prosecutorial institutions, and the reorganisation of public broadcasting collectively transformed the relationship between political competition and state power. While interpretations differ regarding the precise character of this transformation, many scholars argue that these developments constitute a form of democratic backsliding that extends beyond ordinary policy disagreement and raises fundamental questions about the future of liberal constitutionalism (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012; Levitsky & Way, 2020).

Orbán's political success has rested on a distinctive combination of nationalist mobilisation, institutional restructuring, and populist rhetoric. His government has consistently framed itself as the authentic representative of the Hungarian nation against a series of external and internal adversaries, including international financial actors, the European Union, migrants, and philanthropist George Soros. These narratives have been coupled with policies that strengthen

networks of political loyalty through economic patronage while simultaneously reducing the autonomy of institutions capable of constraining executive authority. In parallel, Orbán has openly defended the construction of an "illiberal state" grounded in national sovereignty, Christian values, and majoritarian democracy rather than the liberal universalism associated with post-Cold War European integration.

The significance of the Hungarian case lies not simply in the electoral success of a populist movement but in its demonstration of how democratic institutions can be incrementally transformed from within. Elections remain formally competitive, yet numerous scholars contend that the concentration of political, economic, and media resources in the hands of the governing party has produced an increasingly uneven playing field. Hungary therefore serves as a crucial case study for understanding how contemporary populism can evolve from oppositional mobilisation into a durable project of institutional transformation.

4.2 The United States: Institutional Stress-Testing

The presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) subjected American democratic institutions to an unprecedented stress test whose implications remain the subject of intense scholarly debate. On one interpretation, the survival of key institutions—including the judiciary, federal and state electoral authorities, investigative journalism, civil society organisations, and the constitutional transfer of executive authority—demonstrated the resilience of the American system of checks and balances. Despite sustained political pressures, these institutions ultimately constrained attempts to overturn electoral outcomes and preserved the formal continuity of constitutional government.

A competing interpretation emphasises the vulnerabilities exposed during this period. Scholars have pointed to the increasing politicisation of executive institutions, the limitations of existing ethics and conflict-of-interest frameworks, escalating partisan conflict surrounding judicial appointments, and the growing erosion of informal democratic norms. Most significantly, the events of 6 January 2021, when supporters of the outgoing president sought to disrupt the congressional certification of the presidential election, revealed that the peaceful transfer of power—long regarded as a settled feature of American democratic life—could no longer be assumed as entirely secure. From this perspective, the Trump presidency exposed weaknesses within the institutional architecture of American democracy that had previously remained largely latent (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The American case is particularly instructive because it highlights the importance of informal norms in sustaining democratic governance. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that constitutional systems depend not only on formal rules but also on unwritten norms that regulate political behaviour. Two such norms are especially significant: mutual toleration, the acceptance of political opponents as legitimate participants in democratic competition, and institutional forbearance, the self-restraint exercised by political actors in the use of their legal powers. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, the gradual erosion of these norms under conditions of intensifying partisan polarisation creates opportunities for democratic institutions to be weakened from within. Political leaders may continue to operate within constitutional procedures while simultaneously undermining the democratic principles that give those procedures their legitimacy. The American experience therefore illustrates how contemporary populism can challenge democracy not necessarily through outright constitutional rupture, but through the incremental degradation of the norms and practices upon which democratic stability ultimately depends.

4.3 India: Majoritarian Populism and Minority Rights

India presents a distinctive variant of contemporary populism in the form of the Hindu-nationalist project associated with Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Since coming to power in 2014 and securing an expanded parliamentary majority in 2019, Modi has combined developmentalist economic rhetoric, anti-corruption appeals, and a majoritarian conception of national identity rooted in the ideology of Hindutva. This combination has generated extensive scholarly debate regarding the relationship between democratic majoritarianism and the pluralist commitments embedded within India's constitutional framework (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Several developments have become central to these debates. The revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status in 2019, the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and broader controversies surrounding religious identity and citizenship have prompted renewed discussion about the nature of Indian secularism and the protection of minority rights (Jaffrelot, 2021). At the same time, human-rights organisations, democracy-monitoring institutions, and numerous scholars have expressed concern regarding pressures on media autonomy, civil-society organisations, and institutional checks on executive power. Reflecting these concerns, organizations such as Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute have identified signs of democratic deterioration

and increasing majoritarian tendencies within the Indian political system (Freedom House, 2024; Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2024).

The Indian case is particularly significant because it highlights the tensions that can emerge between electoral majorities and constitutional pluralism in highly diverse societies. Scholars of democratic backsliding have argued that populist appeals grounded in religious or ethnocultural majorities may generate pressures on institutions designed to protect minority rights and maintain a neutral constitutional order (Jaffrelot, 2021). Whether interpreted as democratic renewal, majoritarian transformation, or democratic erosion, the Modi era demonstrates how contemporary populism can reshape political competition by redefining the boundaries of national belonging and the relationship between popular sovereignty and constitutional constraint (Jaffrelot, 2021; Freedom House, 2024; Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2024).

5. Populism and Democratic Backsliding: Mechanisms and Debates

The relationship between populism and democratic backsliding is neither logically necessary nor empirically universal, yet it appears with sufficient regularity across contemporary cases to warrant systematic analysis. Nancy Bermeo's influential typology of democratic breakdown distinguishes among classic executive coups, executive aggrandisement, promissory coups, and other forms of democratic regression (Bermeo, 2016). Contemporary populism's characteristic mode of democratic erosion corresponds most closely to executive aggrandisement: the incremental accumulation of power by elected leaders who employ formally legal mechanisms to weaken institutional constraints while claiming democratic legitimacy through appeals to the popular will.

Three mechanisms deserve particular attention. First, the logic of populist legitimacy itself may generate tensions with the countermajoritarian institutions of liberal constitutionalism. Because populist actors frequently present themselves as the authentic representatives of "the people," institutions such as independent judiciaries, central banks, constitutional courts, regulatory agencies, and independent media can be portrayed as illegitimate obstacles to democratic self-government. As Jan-Werner Müller (2016) argues, the populist claim to exclusive moral representation contains an inherent tendency toward the delegitimation of institutional pluralism. The political

resources for challenging institutional constraints are therefore embedded within certain forms of populist discourse rather than arising solely from contingent strategic choices.

Second, populist governments often benefit from self-reinforcing mechanisms that strengthen their position once in office. Control over public broadcasting can enhance informational advantages; patronage networks may deepen political loyalty; modifications to electoral rules can reduce uncertainty regarding future competition; and pressures on civil society organisations may weaken organised opposition. Although the extent and effectiveness of these processes vary considerably across cases, scholars of democratic backsliding have shown how incremental institutional changes can accumulate over time and substantially alter the balance of political competition (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bermeo, 2016).

Third, the international environment shapes both the opportunities and constraints available to populist governments. The weakening of certain multilateral institutions, the rise of competing geopolitical centres of influence, and the declining effectiveness of external democratic conditionality have reduced some of the international costs associated with democratic backsliding. Within the European Union, for example, enforcement mechanisms designed to protect democratic norms have often struggled to respond effectively to persistent rule-of-law disputes. The limitations of Article 7 proceedings against Hungary and Poland illustrate the difficulties that supranational institutions encounter when attempting to discipline democratically elected governments that retain significant domestic support.

At the same time, it is important to avoid collapsing populism into authoritarianism. Comparative evidence demonstrates considerable variation among populist movements and governments. Left-populist parties such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece participated in democratic competition and government without generating the forms of institutional transformation observed in cases such as Hungary. Moreover, theorists including Ernesto Laclau (2005) have argued that populism may, under certain conditions, serve democratising functions by articulating excluded demands, challenging entrenched elites, and expanding political participation. The normative evaluation of populism therefore requires contextual analysis rather than categorical judgment. Whether populism functions as a corrective to democratic exclusion or as a vehicle for democratic erosion depends upon the institutional environment in which it operates, the nature of its leadership, and the substantive content of its political project.

6. Institutional Resilience and the Question of Democratic Renewal

The capacity of liberal democracies to withstand populist pressures has depended significantly on the resilience of their institutional architecture. Among these institutions, the judiciary has often proved particularly consequential. Comparative evidence from the United States, Germany, and other democratic systems suggests that independent courts can function as critical constraints on executive overreach, preserving constitutional norms even when partisan majorities display limited willingness to do so. The effectiveness of judicial resistance appears closely linked to factors such as security of tenure, professional legal norms, institutional autonomy, and the relative insulation of judicial appointments from short-term political pressures (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). Variations in these characteristics help explain why some democracies have proven more resistant to populist encroachment than others.

Beyond formal state institutions, civil-society organisations, investigative journalism, universities, and other knowledge-producing institutions have played vital roles in maintaining democratic accountability. These actors contribute to the public sphere by documenting abuses of power, scrutinising governmental decisions, and sustaining spaces for critical deliberation. Their capacity to perform these functions, however, depends upon access to material resources, legal protections, and informational transparency. Consequently, conflicts over media independence, academic freedom, and civil-society regulation have become central arenas in contemporary struggles over democratic governance.

Electoral systems and constitutional structures have displayed more variable patterns of resilience. Proportional-representation systems have sometimes facilitated the parliamentary entry of populist parties, yet they have also encouraged coalition-building and constrained executive concentration of power. Conversely, majoritarian systems may impede the initial rise of smaller populist movements while enabling more decisive institutional control once power is attained. Federal arrangements have likewise produced mixed outcomes. In the United States, federalism enabled state governments, courts, and local institutions to function as partial counterweights to federal executive authority during periods of heightened political conflict. More broadly, federal systems demonstrate the value of institutional redundancy, dispersing political authority across multiple levels of governance and thereby reducing the risks associated with the concentration of power.

The challenge of democratic renewal extends beyond the defence of existing institutions. If the structural conditions that contribute to populist mobilisation—economic insecurity, social fragmentation, cultural anxieties, and declining trust in representative institutions—remain unaddressed, populist appeals are likely to persist even when particular leaders or movements suffer electoral defeat. The long-term stability of liberal democracy therefore depends not only upon institutional safeguards but also upon the capacity of democratic systems to respond effectively to the grievances that populist actors mobilise. This requires renewed attention to inclusive economic development, regional inequalities, social mobility, and forms of recognition that acknowledge the dignity and concerns of diverse social groups without abandoning commitments to pluralism and equal citizenship.

A further resource for democratic renewal can be found in Pierre Rosanvallon's concept of "counter-democracy." Rosanvallon argues that democratic legitimacy is sustained not only through elections but also through continuous practices of oversight, scrutiny, and public judgment exercised by citizens and civil society (Rosanvallon, 2008). These informal mechanisms of accountability complement representative institutions by increasing transparency and strengthening public oversight. From this perspective, innovations such as participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, and enhanced transparency frameworks should not be viewed as alternatives to representative democracy but as institutional supplements capable of improving responsiveness and rebuilding public trust. Such mechanisms may help address some of the legitimacy deficits that contemporary populist movements have successfully exploited.

Ultimately, democratic resilience depends upon a combination of institutional strength and political responsiveness. Constitutional safeguards, independent courts, free media, and vibrant civil societies remain indispensable protections against democratic erosion. Yet the endurance of liberal democracy also requires the capacity to renew its representative institutions, respond credibly to social grievances, and sustain forms of political participation that convince citizens that democratic government remains capable of acting in their collective interest.

7. Conclusion: Democracy's Self-Corrective Capacity

The rise of populism in twenty-first-century democracies should be understood neither as a transient electoral disturbance nor as an inexorable threat to democratic survival. Rather, it represents a systemic political response to

enduring tensions within contemporary democratic governance. As this paper has argued, the contemporary populist wave has emerged from the interaction of multiple structural forces: the legitimacy crisis associated with neoliberal governance, the cultural anxieties generated by rapid social transformation, and the erosion of intermediary institutions that once connected citizens to political power. These developments have unfolded within a transformed digital media environment and an increasingly uncertain global order, creating conditions in which anti-establishment mobilization has acquired unprecedented reach and intensity.

Several conclusions follow from this analysis. First, the structural drivers of populism are unlikely to disappear with the electoral defeat of particular leaders or movements. Economic inequality, regional disparities, declining trust in institutions, and conflicts over identity and recognition remain embedded features of many contemporary democracies. As long as these underlying conditions persist, the political demand that populist movements seek to satisfy is likely to endure. Populism should therefore be understood not as an episodic deviation from democratic politics but as a recurring possibility generated by unresolved tensions within democratic societies themselves (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Second, the evidence examined in this paper indicates that populism in power can, under certain conditions, contribute to processes of democratic backsliding. The cases of Hungary and, to a lesser extent, developments observed in other contemporary democracies demonstrate how elected governments may gradually weaken institutional constraints, challenge the autonomy of oversight bodies, and redefine political competition in ways that favour incumbent power. These processes are neither inevitable nor uniform across cases, but they underscore the importance of treating democratic erosion as a gradual and often legally mediated phenomenon rather than as a sudden constitutional rupture (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Third, the comparative record also reveals significant resources of democratic resilience. Independent judiciaries, professional civil services, free media, civil-society organisations, federal institutions, and international frameworks of democratic accountability have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to constrain executive overreach and preserve constitutional norms. The endurance of these institutions suggests that democratic systems possess important

self-corrective mechanisms capable of resisting authoritarian tendencies when supported by robust political cultures and active citizen engagement (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

The most profound challenge facing liberal democracy, however, is not solely institutional but political. The long-term stability of democratic governance depends upon its ability to address the substantive grievances that give populism its appeal. Citizens must be able to perceive democratic institutions as responsive to their concerns, capable of delivering material security, respectful of diverse identities, and open to meaningful participation. Where democratic systems fail to satisfy these expectations, anti-establishment movements will continue to find receptive audiences regardless of the strength of formal constitutional safeguards.

Ultimately, the future of liberal democracy depends less on the exclusion of populist challenges than on the capacity of democratic societies to learn from them. Populism often exposes weaknesses in representation, accountability, and responsiveness that established institutions have neglected. The task is therefore not merely to defend democratic institutions against populist pressures but to renew them in ways that strengthen their legitimacy and responsiveness. In this respect, democratic resilience requires a combination of institutional safeguards, social inclusion, and political imagination.

More than a century ago, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that the vitality of democracy rested not only on constitutional structures but also on the habits of association through which citizens learned the practices of collective self-government. That insight remains highly relevant today. The revitalisation of intermediary institutions, the expansion of participatory forms of democratic engagement, and the reconstruction of public trust may prove as important to democracy's future as any constitutional reform. If contemporary populism reveals the vulnerabilities of liberal democracy, it also highlights the possibility of democratic renewal. The enduring strength of democracy lies not in its immunity to crisis but in its capacity for self-criticism, adaptation, and reform.

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