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THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN AN ERA OF RISING POPULISM

Institutional Resilience, Democratic Backsliding, and Pathways to Renewal

Author: Deepak Singh Yadav

Affiliation: Lynx Legal Partners LLP, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Correspondence: deepak@lynxlegal.in

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ABSTRACT

Liberal democracy, once widely regarded as the terminal point of political development following the end of the Cold War, now confronts a sustained global challenge from populist movements of both the left and the right. This paper examines the structural, economic, and cultural drivers behind the contemporary rise of populism and evaluates the extent to which populist politics is compatible with, or corrosive of, the core institutional pillars of liberal democracy: constitutionalism, minority rights, independent judiciaries, and a free press. Rather than treating populism as a transient anomaly or a uniformly authoritarian phenomenon, the paper argues that it represents a durable political response to specific failures of representative democracy, namely the hollowing out of intermediary institutions such as parties and unions, rising economic insecurity under globalisation, and a widening gap between elite and popular preferences on questions of identity and belonging. Employing a doctrinal and comparative analytical method grounded in secondary literature and democracy-index data, the paper distinguishes cases of institutional resilience from cases of democratic backsliding and identifies the structural conditions under which liberal democracies absorb populist pressure without abandoning constitutional restraint. It concludes that the future of liberal democracy depends less on suppressing populist mobilisation than on reforming the representative and redistributive functions of democratic institutions themselves.

Keywords

Liberal Democracy; Populism; Democratic Backsliding; Constitutionalism; Political Representation; Illiberal Democracy; Judicial Independence; Majoritarianism



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1. INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy is not a single institution but a compound political settlement: it fuses the majoritarian principle of electoral competition with a set of non-majoritarian constraints, an independent judiciary, a free press, protected minority rights, and constitutionally entrenched limits on executive power, that prevent electoral majorities from converting temporary popularity into permanent control. For roughly two decades after 1989, this settlement appeared to be spreading with the momentum of an obvious historical destination.¹ Since the mid-2000s, however, the number of democracies expanding civil liberties and electoral integrity has been overtaken by the number regressing on both counts, a reversal that democracy scholars have termed a global democratic recession.²

Populist movements, ranging from right-wing nationalist parties in Europe to left-wing anti-establishment coalitions in Latin America to personalist strongman politics across Asia, sit at the centre of this reversal. Populism is best understood not as a fixed ideology but as a thin-centred political logic that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, a virtuous ordinary people and a corrupt elite, and claims that politics should express the unmediated will of the former.³ Because this logic denies legitimacy to any check on the popular will, whether a court, a central bank, or a critical press, it carries an inherent tension with the pluralist premises of liberal constitutionalism.⁴

This paper resists the temptation to treat populism as a monolithic threat to be diagnosed and cured. Instead, it asks a more precise question: under what conditions does populist mobilisation remain within the bounds of democratic contestation, and under what conditions does it curdle into an authoritarian project that dismantles the very institutions that permitted its rise? The paper proceeds by situating the current populist wave in its historical and

¹Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press 1992).

²Larry Diamond, 'Facing Up to the Democratic Recession' (2015) 26(1) *Journal of Democracy* 141.

³Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist' (2004) 39(4) *Government and Opposition* 541.

⁴Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2016).



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economic context, reviewing the principal theoretical accounts of populism and democratic backsliding, and then advancing an original analytical framework, developed in Part 9, that distinguishes resilient from vulnerable democracies on the basis of four structural variables. It closes with policy-oriented recommendations aimed at reducing the vulnerability of liberal democratic systems to illiberal capture without foreclosing legitimate populist demands for representation.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The optimism of the immediate post-Cold War period rested on an implicit wager that market liberalisation and electoral competition would reinforce one another, producing a stable convergence toward liberal-democratic governance.⁵ That wager began to unravel gradually rather than suddenly. Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy project both record a peak in global democratic quality around the mid-2000s, followed by an uninterrupted net decline for nearly two decades, with more countries suffering setbacks in civil liberties and electoral fairness each year than registering gains.⁶

Three shocks accelerated this trajectory. First, the 2008 global financial crisis exposed the redistributive failures of a globalised economy and discredited technocratic economic management in the eyes of large segments of the electorate in advanced democracies.⁷ Labour-market research on regions exposed to import competition found measurable, geographically concentrated declines in manufacturing employment and wages, effects that correlate strongly with subsequent support for anti-establishment political movements.⁸ Second, the 2015 migration crisis in Europe, alongside comparable demographic anxieties in

⁶V-Dem Institute, Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot (University of Gothenburg 2024).

⁷Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (WW Norton 2011).

⁸David H Autor, David Dorn and Gordon H Hanson, 'The China Shock: Learning from Labor-Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade' (2016) 8 *Annual Review of Economics* 205.



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other regions, activated cultural grievances around national identity and social change that pre-date the financial crisis but were sharpened by it.⁹ Third, the disintermediation of political communication by digital and social media platforms weakened the gatekeeping function once performed by newspapers, broadcasters, and party organisations, allowing populist leaders to build direct, unmediated relationships with supporters that bypass traditional institutions of political socialisation.

These developments did not produce a single template of populist politics. In some countries, populist parties have entered coalition government and been absorbed, at least partially, into normal democratic bargaining. In others, populist executives have used electoral mandates to systematically weaken courts, election commissions, and independent media, producing what political scientists now describe as competitive authoritarianism or illiberal democracy, regimes that retain the form of elections while eroding the substance of contestation. Understanding why the same underlying pressures produce such divergent outcomes is the central empirical puzzle motivating this study.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A significant body of scholarship treats populism either as an inherently pathological threat to constitutional democracy or, conversely, as a corrective mechanism that channels legitimate grievances back into an unresponsive political system. Both positions capture part of the truth but neither, standing alone, offers constitutional designers, legislators, or civil society actors a workable framework for distinguishing democratising populism, which pressures unresponsive elites without dismantling checks on power, from authoritarian populism, which uses electoral legitimacy to capture the very institutions responsible for holding power accountable. This conceptual gap has practical consequences: policy responses calibrated to treat all populism as an existential threat risk delegitimising genuine grievances and deepening the elite-mass divide that fuels populist mobilisation in the first place, while

⁹Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge University Press 2019).



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responses that treat all populism as benign risk normalising executive aggrandisement until institutional guardrails have already been dismantled. This paper addresses that gap by developing and applying a framework for distinguishing these two trajectories.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is organised around the following four research questions:

1. What structural, economic, and cultural conditions generate populist mobilisation in contemporary liberal democracies?
2. Is populism inherently incompatible with liberal-constitutional norms, or can populist politics operate within constitutional bounds?
3. What structural factors distinguish cases of democratic backsliding from cases of institutional resilience when democracies come under sustained populist pressure?
4. What institutional and representative reforms could reduce the vulnerability of liberal democracies to illiberal populist capture while preserving legitimate channels for popular grievance?

5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Corresponding to the research questions above, the objectives of this study are:

1. To identify and analyse the economic, cultural, and institutional drivers underlying the contemporary global rise of populist politics.
2. To critically evaluate the theoretical relationship between populism as a political logic and the pluralist premises of liberal constitutionalism.
3. To construct and apply a comparative framework identifying the structural variables that determine whether populist pressure produces democratic backsliding or is absorbed within existing constitutional constraints.

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4. To propose institutional and policy reforms capable of strengthening democratic resilience against illiberal capture without suppressing legitimate populist demands for representation.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study is threefold. First, at a conceptual level, it contributes a synthesis that connects three literatures, on the economic drivers of populism, the cultural backlash thesis, and the constitutional law literature on democratic backsliding, that are frequently treated in isolation from one another, offering a more integrated account of why populist pressure produces divergent outcomes across otherwise comparable democracies. Second, at a policy level, the study is directed at legislators, constitutional drafters, election authorities, and civil society organisations seeking concrete, structurally grounded guidance on which institutional safeguards most reliably preserve democratic resilience under populist pressure. Third, the study is timely: with global democracy indices recording continuous net decline for close to two decades and with populist movements holding executive power in a growing number of the world's largest democracies, the question addressed here is not academic in the abstract sense but bears directly on the constitutional trajectory of dozens of political systems over the coming decade.

7. LITERATURE REVIEW

7.1 Defining Populism

The literature on populism is divided across three broad definitional approaches. The ideational approach, most closely associated with Mudde, treats populism as a thin-centred ideology structured around the Manichean opposition between a pure people and a corrupt elite, an ideology thin enough that it typically attaches itself to a fuller host ideology of the

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left or right.¹⁰ The strategic approach, advanced by Weyland, instead defines populism by its mode of political mobilisation: a personalist leader who governs on the basis of direct, unmediated, and largely uninstitutionalised support from a mass of followers.¹¹ A third, discursive approach, developed by Laclau, treats populism as a distinctive logic of political articulation in which disparate grievances are chained together into a single antagonistic demand against a constructed elite adversary.¹² These approaches are not mutually exclusive; the ideational definition is adopted as the organising frame for this paper because it most directly illuminates the tension between populism and pluralism that is central to the present inquiry.¹³

7.2 Democratic Backsliding and Executive Aggrandisement

A parallel literature examines how democracies decay once populist or personalist leaders acquire executive power. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that contemporary backsliding rarely occurs through coups; it occurs incrementally, through the legal and often popular use of executive authority to weaken referees, courts, prosecutors, election commissions, sideline opponents, and rewrite the rules of political competition in the incumbent's favour.¹⁴ Bermeo describes this pattern as executive aggrandisement, a gradual, cumulative erosion of institutional checks that is difficult to detect and resist because each individual step is often technically legal.¹⁵ Scheppele extends this analysis with the concept of autocratic legalism, describing how governments deploy the formal procedures of law-making itself, constitutional amendment, statutory reform, court-packing, to dismantle liberal constraints

¹¹Kurt Weyland, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics' (2001) 34(1) *Comparative Politics* 1.

¹²Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso 2005).

¹³Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2017).

¹⁴Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown 2018).

¹⁵Nancy Bermeo, 'On Democratic Backsliding' (2016) 27(1) *Journal of Democracy* 5.

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while retaining a veneer of legal continuity.¹⁶ O'Donnell's earlier concept of delegative democracy anticipates much of this literature, describing regimes in which the winner of a free election governs as though entitled to rule unconstrained between elections, treating institutional checks as obstacles rather than legitimate features of democratic governance.¹⁷

7.3 Economic Drivers

Rodrik's globalisation trilemma holds that democracy, national sovereignty, and deep economic integration cannot be fully reconciled simultaneously; when policymakers prioritise integration, the resulting constraints on domestic redistribution generate a democratic deficit that eventually produces political backlash.¹⁸ Empirical labour-economics research corroborates this account at the regional level, finding that localities most exposed to import competition experienced concentrated and durable economic dislocation that appears to be a significant, though not exclusive, predictor of subsequent populist voting.¹⁹

7.4 Cultural Drivers

Norris and Inglehart offer a competing, though not mutually exclusive, account centred on cultural backlash: generational value change toward post-materialist and cosmopolitan norms has provoked a defensive reaction among older, less urban, and less educated cohorts who perceive their formerly dominant cultural status as under threat, a reaction that populist leaders mobilise through appeals to national identity, tradition, and order.²⁰

7.5 Institutional Design and Resilience

A distinct strand of the literature examines which institutional configurations best withstand populist pressure. Lijphart's comparative work on consensus versus majoritarian democracies

¹⁶Kim Lane Scheppele, 'Autocratic Legalism' (2018) 85(2) University of Chicago Law Review 545.

¹⁷Guillermo O'Donnell, 'Delegative Democracy' (1994) 5(1) Journal of Democracy 55.



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suggests that power-sharing arrangements, federalism, proportional representation, and multi-party coalition government, diffuse authority in ways that raise the cost of executive aggrandisement compared with concentrated, majoritarian systems.²¹ Ginsburg and Huq similarly argue that constitutional durability depends less on the text of constitutions than on the strength of three underlying commitments: mutual toleration between political rivals, institutional forbearance in the exercise of formally available power, and public support for constitutional constraint even when it disadvantages one's own political side.²² Przeworski situates the current wave within a longer historical pattern of democratic crises, cautioning against both alarmism and complacency by showing that democracies have weathered comparable pressures before, though not always successfully.²³

Taken together, this literature establishes the economic, cultural, and institutional building blocks required to answer the questions posed in this study, but it has not been fully synthesised into a single comparative framework that explains, rather than merely describes, why structurally similar populist pressures produce divergent constitutional outcomes. That synthesis is attempted in Part 9 below.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a doctrinal and comparative-analytical methodology rather than an empirical or statistical one. It draws on secondary academic literature in comparative politics and constitutional law, together with cross-national democracy-index data published by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, to identify patterns across a broad range of democracies rather than to conduct an in-depth single-country case study. The analysis proceeds by qualitative synthesis and reasoned inference: theoretical propositions from the literature are tested against the observable

²¹Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (Yale University Press 1999).

²²Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (University of Chicago Press 2018).

²³Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press 2019).

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trajectories of democracies that have experienced sustained populist pressure, and an original comparative framework is derived inductively from recurring patterns across these trajectories. This method is appropriate to the research questions, which concern conceptual classification and structural explanation rather than the measurement of a discrete causal effect. The principal limitation of this approach is that it does not generate new primary or field data and relies on the reliability of existing secondary sources and index methodologies; it is also necessarily macro-comparative rather than exhaustive of any single jurisdiction's constitutional history, a trade-off accepted here in order to identify patterns that hold across, rather than within, individual cases.

9. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

9.1 Populism as Symptom: The Representation Deficit

Read against the literature reviewed above, populist mobilisation is best understood as a symptom of a prior representation deficit rather than as a spontaneous pathology. Across a wide range of advanced democracies, mainstream parties of the centre-left and centre-right have converged around broadly similar technocratic policy platforms since the 1990s, particularly on questions of trade openness and fiscal management, narrowing the range of choices available to voters dissatisfied with the economic consequences of that convergence. Where mainstream parties offer near-identical answers to a growing electorate, grievance does not disappear; it migrates toward whichever political entrepreneur is willing to name the grievance and assign it a villain. This is not, in itself, a threat to democracy; it is arguably democracy performing one of its core functions, forcing unresponsive elites to compete for votes they had come to take for granted. The analytical error in much of the alarmist literature is to treat this corrective function and its authoritarian degeneration as the same phenomenon.

9.2 The Majoritarian Temptation: When Populism Turns Illiberal

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The corrective function of populism turns illiberal at a specific and identifiable threshold: the point at which a populist leader, having won an electoral mandate, treats that mandate as license to dismantle the non-majoritarian institutions that constrain executive power between elections, packing or intimidating courts, altering electoral rules to entrench incumbency, or capturing regulatory bodies overseeing media ownership.²⁴ This threshold is analytically important because it distinguishes a populist government that loses power through ordinary electoral defeat, which has occurred in numerous cases, from one that uses its initial mandate to make subsequent electoral defeat structurally improbable. The latter pattern, not the mere fact of populist rhetoric or an anti-elite platform, is what should be understood as the genuine threat to liberal democracy's survival.²⁵

9.3 Institutional Resilience: Why Some Democracies Absorb Populist Shock

Comparing democracies that have experienced sustained populist pressure without significant erosion of democratic quality against those that have suffered pronounced backsliding suggests four structural variables that consistently distinguish the two groups.

1. Diffusion of horizontal accountability: Democracies with multiple, overlapping, and independently staffed accountability institutions, constitutional courts, ombudspersons, independent electoral commissions, and supreme audit institutions, are structurally harder to capture in a single electoral cycle than systems where oversight is concentrated in one or two bodies vulnerable to a single wave of appointments.
2. Plurality of media ownership: Where broadcast and print media ownership is dispersed across independent commercial and public actors, populist executives face a higher cost and slower timeline in constructing a unified information environment than where media ownership is already concentrated or state-adjacent prior to the populist government taking office.

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3. Vertical and horizontal power-sharing: Federal systems, strong local government, and coalition-dependent parliamentary arrangements raise the transaction cost of centralising executive power because aggrandisement requires capturing multiple, semi-independent power centres rather than one.
4. Mainstream party adaptive capacity: Where established parties are capable of absorbing legitimate elements of populist grievance into their own platforms, on trade adjustment, immigration management, or regional inequality, populist challengers face a competitive ceiling on their support; where mainstream parties instead respond to populist mobilisation purely with moral condemnation, they cede the representational space entirely, allowing the populist challenger's vote share, and eventually its institutional reach, to expand unchecked.

None of these four variables is sufficient on its own; resilience appears to depend on their cumulative presence. A democracy strong on horizontal accountability but weak on mainstream party adaptation may experience prolonged social polarisation without acute institutional capture, whereas a democracy weak on all four dimensions simultaneously is the pattern most consistently associated with rapid and severe backsliding.

9.4 The Digital Amplification Problem

A further, comparatively under-theorised factor cuts across all four variables above: the disintermediation of political communication by digital platforms has reduced the practical ability of any single institutional safeguard to function in isolation. A judiciary that remains formally independent can still be delegitimised in public perception through a sustained social-media campaign that operates faster than any formal institutional response. This suggests that institutional resilience in the coming decade cannot rest on constitutional design alone; it must be paired with a functioning, minimally trusted shared information environment, without which even well-designed formal checks may fail to translate into public legitimacy for the institutions that hold them.

10. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the analysis above, the following recommendations are directed at constitutional designers, legislators, political parties, and civil society actors seeking to strengthen democratic resilience against illiberal populist capture.

1. Entrench appointment insulation: Judicial, electoral, and audit-body appointments should be structured through staggered terms, supermajority or cross-party confirmation requirements, and fixed tenure protections, so that no single electoral cycle can produce complete control over any accountability institution.
2. Address the economic substrate directly: Governments should pair trade and technology-driven structural adjustment with place-based industrial policy and portable, worker-attached social insurance, rather than economy-wide aggregate measures that leave regionally concentrated dislocation unaddressed, since it is this concentrated dislocation, not national-level growth figures, that appears most closely associated with populist mobilisation.
3. Diversify media ownership rules: Competition and media-ownership regulators should treat concentration of political and information influence, not merely commercial market share, as an independent factor warranting intervention, given the outsized role of information-environment capture in enabling subsequent institutional capture.
4. Encourage mainstream party adaptation over moral disqualification: Established parties should engage substantively with the material and cultural grievances animating populist support rather than relying primarily on the argument that populist voters are mistaken or illegitimate, since disqualifying the grievance without addressing it tends to deepen, rather than reduce, the elite-mass divide that produced the grievance in the first place.
5. Invest in deliberative and participatory mechanisms: Citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and other deliberative forums can supplement, rather than

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replace, electoral representation, giving voters direct input on contested questions in a manner that channels grievance into institutional process rather than into purely oppositional mobilisation.

6. Support independent cross-border monitoring: Continued investment in independent, methodologically transparent democracy-monitoring bodies strengthens early detection of executive aggrandisement while it is still reversible, before institutional capture reaches the threshold at which ordinary electoral competition can no longer reverse it.

11. CONCLUSION

The future of liberal democracy in an era of rising populism is not foreclosed by the mere presence of populist mobilisation, nor is it guaranteed by liberal democracy's historical association with prosperity and stability. Populism, properly understood, is a symptom of a genuine representation deficit produced by the economic and cultural dislocations of the past three decades; whether that symptom resolves into a healthier, more responsive democracy or metastasises into competitive authoritarianism depends on structural variables that are, to a significant degree, within the control of institutional designers and political actors, the diffusion of accountability, the plurality of the information environment, the distribution of power across levels of government, and the adaptive capacity of mainstream political parties. The evidence reviewed in this study suggests that the most effective response to populism is neither reflexive suppression, which tends to confirm the populist narrative of an unaccountable elite, nor uncritical accommodation, which risks normalising executive aggrandisement until it is no longer reversible through ordinary democratic competition. It is, instead, structural reform that closes the representation deficit while preserving the non-majoritarian constraints that distinguish liberal democracy from unconstrained majority rule. The trajectory of liberal democracy over the coming decade will be determined less by the rhetorical intensity of populist movements than by whether existing democracies undertake this reform before, rather than after, their institutional guardrails have been dismantled.



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12. NOTE ON CITATION STYLE

This paper follows the Oxford Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities (OSCOLA), adapted for comparative-political and interdisciplinary academic writing, as is conventional for interdisciplinary law-and-society journals such as JIRMI. Citations to books, journal articles, and institutional reports appear as numbered footnotes at the point of reference, with full source details collected additionally in the Bibliography below, divided between primary sources (empirical democracy-index data and institutional reports) and secondary sources (books and peer-reviewed journal articles).



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