

Populism and the Erosion of Democratic Checks and Balances: A Systematic Literature Review across Regions



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ABSTRACT: Populism has emerged as a significant challenge to democratic governance worldwide, as populist leaders seek to undermine checks and balances and consolidate power. This systematic literature review analyzes how populist movements weaken democratic institutions across different regions, focusing on the erosion of judicial independence, legislative oversight, media freedom, and human rights. This study examines case studies from Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States, revealing how populist leaders centralize authority, manipulate legal frameworks, and exploit societal grievances to sideline democratic norms. Populist rhetoric often frames democratic institutions as elitist and detached from the interests of the "true people," justifying actions that concentrate executive power and limit accountability. This impact extends beyond national borders and affects international law and global governance. In response, civil society, independent judiciaries, the media, academia, and international organizations play crucial roles in defending democratic values and building resilience against populist encroachment. Strategies such as enhancing legal protection, promoting civic education, strengthening oversight bodies, and reforming electoral systems are essential for countering populist threats. This study highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to address the root causes of populism's appeal and protect democratic institutions. Further research should explore how populists exploit digital media and the effectiveness of resistance strategies and conduct comparative analyses across regions to develop robust defenses against the erosion of democracy.

KEYWORDS: Populism, Democratic Erosion, Checks and Balances, Judicial Independence, Media Freedom

I. INTRODUCTION

Populism has emerged as a defining force in contemporary politics, posing a significant challenge to democratic governance worldwide. It is characterized by leaders who claim to represent the "will of the people," often in direct confrontation with democratic institutions designed to maintain checks and balances (Abowitz, 2023). These movements have gained momentum in diverse political contexts in both developed and developing regions, raising concerns about the potential erosion of democratic structures and institutional oversight. Populist rhetoric frequently undermines democratic processes, as leaders portray established institutions as elitist and detached from the interests of ordinary citizens (Adamidis, 2021).

Such democratic institutions, including judicial independence, legislative oversight, and media freedom, serve as essential components of democratic systems, ensuring the separation of powers and preventing the centralization of authority. However, the rise of populist leaders threatens these principles by bypassing these mechanisms and presenting themselves as direct representatives of people's will (Adamidis, 2021). In many instances, populist leaders advocate for direct representation, bypassing intermediary institutions, such as parliaments and courts, that ensure accountability and power distribution (Alston, 2017). This approach jeopardizes democratic integrity by disrupting mechanisms that prevent the centralization of power, ultimately leading to the erosion of democratic norms.

Within this context, democratic erosion refers to the gradual weakening of democratic structures and norms, leading to diminished accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights (Krygier, 2024). Checks and balances represent a system of mutual oversight among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to ensure that no single entity holds excessive power (Adamidis, 2021; Krygier, 2024). Judicial independence is the ability of the judiciary to function without external pressure or influence, ensuring unbiased and lawful decision making (Alston, 2017; Navot & Lurie, 2024). By explicitly defining these terms, the scope of how populist movements undermine democratic foundations becomes clearer (Arregui Acosta, 2023).

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The increasing rise of populist leaders fundamentally challenges established democratic checks and balances by striving to centralize power and portraying themselves as the sole representatives of the "true will" of the people (Alston, 2017). This concentration of power undermines democratic processes, allowing executive branches to operate with little accountability and reducing the effectiveness of other institutions in maintaining checks and balances (Aitchison, 2017). Populist leaders often exploit this perceived legitimacy to bypass institutional constraints, enabling the consolidation of power and diminishing the effectiveness of the mechanisms of oversight (Annison & Guiney, 2022).

This study focuses on Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States as case studies because these countries represent diverse political systems and regions that have experienced significant challenges from populist leaders. Each case provides unique insights into how populism manifests across different democratic frameworks, offering a comparative analysis of how such movements threaten democratic balance.

Addressing this issue requires an in-depth examination of how populist movements use rhetoric and policy changes to undermine democratic institutions. Analyzing these strategies is crucial for developing robust measures that reinforce democratic systems and protect them from the encroachment of populist leaders (Arregui Acosta, 2023). Scholars have extensively studied the impact of populism on democratic institutions, uncovering the various strategies populist leaders use to weaken checks and balances. For instance, Adamidis (2021) noted that populist leaders often attack the legitimacy of existing institutions, framing them as corrupt or self-serving to justify efforts to bypass or dismantle these structures. Similarly, Alston (2017) emphasized that populist movements frequently target the judiciary, aiming to undermine its independence and diminish its role in checking executive power. This tactic weakens democratic safeguards, as an independent judiciary is critical in upholding the rule of law.

Despite its negative implications, populism resonates with citizens who feel marginalized or ignored by traditional political elites. By presenting themselves as defenders of common people against perceived corruption and elitism, populist leaders tap into societal grievances, fostering a sense of empowerment and belonging among their supporters (Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018). Understanding this appeal is essential to comprehensively address how populist movements have gained momentum.

Despite extensive analysis of how populist movements undermine democratic structures, gaps remain in our understanding of the long-term consequences of these actions on democratic institutions and citizens' rights. Existing studies often focus on individual case studies and lack comprehensive comparative analysis across different regions and political systems. There is also a need for a deeper exploration of how populist rhetoric impacts the public perception of democratic institutions, potentially eroding public trust and engagement (Abowitz, 2023).

Given these dynamics, this study aims to analyze how populist movements weaken checks and balances within democratic systems and assess their implications for democratic institutions and citizens' rights. By investigating the strategies employed by populist leaders to circumvent institutional oversight, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how populism threatens democratic foundations.

The guiding research question is: "How do populist movements erode democratic checks and balances across different regions, and what are the implications for democratic governance?" By adopting a comparative approach, this study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the diverse strategies populist leaders use to weaken democratic norms, offering insights into potential measures to reinforce democratic institutions and resilience against populist encroachment. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative analysis of populist movements across regions, which contributes to the development of resilient democratic institutions capable of resisting populist encroachment.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to analyze how populist movements weaken democratic checks and balances. By focusing on peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus over the last 10 years, this study ensured the use of high-quality and credible sources. The research involved identifying and reviewing literature using specific keywords such as "populism," "democratic erosion," "checks and balances," "judicial independence," "media freedom," and "executive power." These keywords guided the selection process, ensuring the inclusion of articles that addressed the core themes of populist strategies and their impact on democratic institutions. The collected data are shown in figure 1.

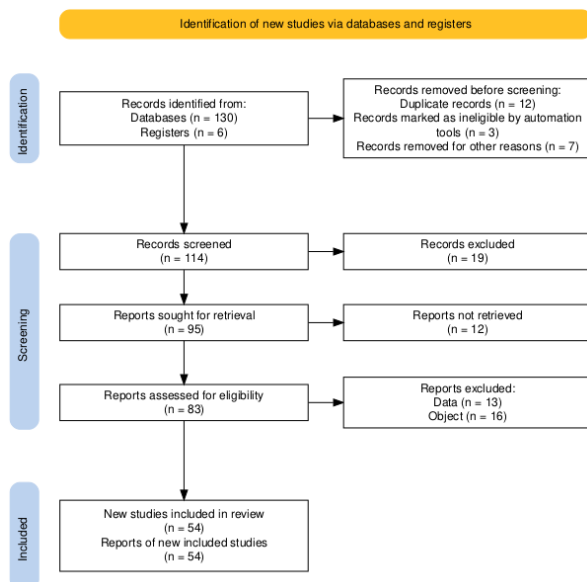


Figure 1. Data Collection Process

The SLR process entailed a thorough examination of case studies from Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States to understand how populist leaders consolidated power, manipulated legal frameworks, and undermined the mechanisms of oversight. The literature also provides insights into the mechanism populist leaders use to challenge democratic norms, such as bypassing legislative processes, weakening the judiciary, and restricting media independence. By synthesizing findings from multiple sources, this study aimed to identify common patterns and strategies employed by populist regimes while also exploring potential measures for reinforcing democratic resilience. This method ensures a comprehensive and systematic analysis, contributes to a deeper understanding of how populism threatens democratic governance, and offers insights into strategies to counteract such threats.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Mechanisms of Erosion – How Populism Undermines Checks and Balances

Populist movements significantly threaten democratic systems by undermining established checks and balances. These leaders seek to consolidate power through the centralization of authority, manipulation of institutions, and erosion of democratic norms. This section examines the specific ways populist leaders undermine democratic structures, focusing on the executive, legislative, judiciary, and independent bodies of oversight.

1. Centralization of Power by Populist Leaders

Populist leaders often concentrate on power within the executive branch, bypassing democratic institutions intended to maintain checks and balances. This centralization allows them to implement policies with minimal accountability (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022). For example, President Erdoğan’s transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system significantly expanded executive power and diminished parliamentary influence (Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020). Similarly, Prime Minister Orbán in Hungary legitimized the expansion of executive power, bypassing legislative oversight and weakening democratic structures (Deák, 2014).

This centralization is further demonstrated by leaders such as Prime Minister Modi in India, where increased executive control weakens parliamentary democracy and opposition parties (Khaitan, 2020). Such examples reveal how populist leaders exploit democratic mechanisms to establish authoritarian rule under the guise of representing the "will of the people" (Adamidis, 2024).

2. Manipulation and Undermining of Legislative Institutions

Populist leaders often weaken legislative bodies, thereby reducing their capacity to serve as checks for executive power (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021). For instance, Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party curtailed parliamentary debate, effectively reducing the legislature's role in scrutinizing executive actions (Maatsch, 2021). In Hungary, laws allow the executive to rule by decree during perceived crises, bypassing parliamentary procedures and consolidating executive authority (Szente, 2021). These tactics undermine democratic oversight and concentrate power on the executive branch (Arregui Acosta, 2023).

3. Assault on Judicial Independence

A hallmark of populist authoritarianism is the undermining of judicial independence, which is essential for upholding the rule of law and checking executive power (Monciunskaitė, 2023). Populist leaders often appoint loyalists, alter judicial procedures,

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or enact reforms that limit the judiciary's ability to challenge executive decisions (Navot & Lurie, 2024). For example, Poland's PiS Party implemented changes that compromised judicial independence by enabling political interference in judicial appointments (Özer et al., 2023). Similarly, proposed reforms in Israel threaten to undermine the authority of the Supreme Court, further weakening judicial checks on executive power (Navot, 2023).

4. Weakening of Independent Oversight Bodies and Media

Populist leaders frequently target independent oversight bodies and the media to limit transparency and operate with minimal accountability (Carević & Novokmet, 2021). In Hungary and Poland, control over media outlets has been consolidated, portraying independent media as enemies of the state or sources of "fake news" (Grigoriadis & Işık Canpolat, 2024). For example, Hungary's government centralized media ownership, promoting pro-government narratives (Petri & Hruskó, 2024). The Philippine administration, under President Duterte, similarly exerted legal and financial pressure to curtail media freedom (Prasad, 2020). Such actions stifle dissent, erode public trust, and diminish the capacity of these institutions to hold the government accountable.

B. Case Studies of Populist Influence on Checks and Balances

A comparative analysis of populist movements in Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States, highlighting their impact on democratic institutions, is shown in Table 1 to offer a quick comparative view of how populism has manifested in different countries.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Populist Movements in Case Studies

Country	Populist Leader	Key Strategies Employed	Institutional Impact	Effect on Democratic Norms
Hungary	Viktor Orbán	Centralization of power, undermining judiciary	Weakening of judicial independence	"Illiberal democracy" with reduced checks
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Executive power expansion, media control	Diminished parliamentary and judicial oversight	Authoritarian shift with reduced pluralism
Brazil	Jair Bolsonaro	Disregard for judiciary, military involvement	Erosion of oversight and human rights	Increased political polarization
USA	Donald Trump	Attacks on media, challenges to judicial rulings	Tested resilience of democratic institutions	Polarization and weakened norms

Source: Processed by Researchers

1. Hungary: The Erosion of Democratic Institutions under Viktor Orbán

Hungary's experience with Viktor Orbán offers a comprehensive example of how populist governance significantly undermined democratic institutions. Since assuming power in 2010, Orbán has methodically weakened democratic checks and balances, steering Hungary towards an "illiberal democracy" (Rydliński, 2018). A central tactic in this shift was the erosion of judicial independence and media freedom. Arregui Acosta (2023) highlights how Orbán's government enacted constitutional reforms that expanded executive control over the judiciary, directly compromising its independence.

Orbán's strategy primarily involved constitutional amendments that consolidated executive power. Szente (2021) documented that these amendments restricted the Constitutional Court's jurisdiction, particularly in financial matters, and introduced laws that enabled the government to override court decisions. This extended to influencing judicial appointments, which severely compromised judicial impartiality and eroded a fundamental check on executive power (Petri & Hruskó, 2024). These actions allowed Orbán's administration to operate with minimal oversight and dismantle essential democratic checks and balances.

Furthermore, Orbán's government exerted control over the media, significantly limiting the freedom of the press, which is another crucial pillar of democratic accountability. As Erőss (2022) illustrates, the government expanded its control over state-owned media, established a pro-government media council, and imposed fines on outlets that deviated from government narratives. This combined attack on judicial independence and media freedom exemplifies how Orbán systematically weakened democratic safeguards, making Hungary a prime case study of the populist erosion of institutional checks.

2. Turkey: The Centralization of Power by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

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Similar patterns of democratic erosion emerged in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, where efforts to centralize power led to a significant weakening of parliamentary and judicial independence. The transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017, as noted by Rogenhofer & Panievsky (2020), was pivotal in significantly enhancing Erdoğan's executive powers and reducing parliamentary influence.

The aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt marked a critical juncture to consolidate Erdoğan's control further. Massive purges in the judiciary and civil service allowed the government to replace judges and officials with loyalists, effectively transforming the judiciary into the arm of the executive branch (Bahçeci, 2023). This shift not only weakened judicial independence but also facilitated the suppression of political opposition and dissent. Additionally, Erdoğan's administration enacted laws that restricted media freedom, exerted control over the narrative, and limited public debate (Grigoriadis & Işık Canpolat, 2024). These measures collectively established a highly centralized and authoritarian political system, effectively dismantling checks and balances.

3. Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro's Challenge to Democratic Norms

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's presidency serves as a case of how populist leadership can threaten democratic institutions, although it was marked by a less systematic approach than Hungary and Turkey. Bolsonaro openly challenged the judiciary and legislative branches, portraying them as impediments to their policy objectives (Guasti & de Almeida, 2019). This tactic undermined public trust in these democratic institutions, fostering an environment of hostility toward checks and balances.

Bolsonaro's disregard for judicial oversight was evident in his public questioning of court decisions and threats to ignore rulings unfavorable to his agenda, as documented by Howe & Covell (2021). Moreover, his encouragement of military involvement in politics raised concerns about the erosion of civilian oversight and the potential shift toward authoritarianism (Alston, 2017). The administration's environmental policies and disregard for indigenous rights further illustrate how populist leaders undermine democratic governance. While less institutionalized, Bolsonaro's actions significantly threatened democratic checks by challenging judicial independence and democratic norms, mirroring tactics seen in other populist regimes.

4. The United States: The Trump Presidency and Challenges to Checks and Balances

The case of the United States under Donald Trump provides a unique perspective on populist challenges to democratic norms in a long-established democracy. Trump's presidency tested the resilience of American checks and balances by seeking to circumvent legislative and judicial constraints. As Foa & Mounk (2021) assert, the administration's disregard for democratic norms, including the separation of powers, posed substantial threats to American democracy.

Trump's two impeachments in the House of Representatives and subsequent acquittals in the Senate demonstrate the limitations of checks and balances when partisan loyalty supersedes institutional accountability (Lee, 2023). Additionally, his efforts to influence the judiciary by appointing judges sympathetic to his political agenda threatened judicial independence (Campani et al., 2022). Furthermore, Trump's persistent attacks on the media as "fake news" represented an assault on press freedom, weakening a crucial democratic check.

The insurrection on January 6, 2021, served as the most extreme manifestation of how populist leadership can challenge democratic institutions. As Abowitz (2023) discusses, this event underscores the fragility of even the most established democracies when confronted with populist pressure, illustrating how populist leaders can exploit institutional weaknesses to threaten democratic principles.

C. Populism and the Impact on Human Rights and Civil Liberties

The influence of populism on human rights and civil liberties has become a central theme in academic and political discourse, revealing its significant impact on democratic societies. This section explores how populist movements have posed challenges to political opposition, minority rights, media independence, and the dissemination of information, using examples and scholarly analysis to highlight the implications for democratic principles.

1. Suppression of Political Opposition and Dissent

Populist governments often suppress political opposition and dissent to maintain power, thereby weakening democratic pluralism. Adamidis (2021) highlights that these regimes frequently manipulate the rule of law to silence dissenting voices, using restrictive laws, state institutions, and targeted actions against non-governmental organizations. This pattern is evident in countries such as Hungary and Poland, where opposition parties face increased restrictions that limit their capacity to challenge populist authorities (Arregui Acosta, 2023).

Furthermore, Aslanidis (2017) emphasizes that populist leaders frame opposition groups as enemies of "the people," justifying their suppression. This tactic not only undermines political competition but also extends to civil society, where NGOs face intimidation and regulatory restrictions, hindering their advocacy for human rights. Such actions reflect a broader trend of

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democratic backsliding, where populist regimes prioritize consolidating power over upholding democratic principles (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022).

2. Threats to Minority Rights and Vulnerable Groups

Populist regimes frequently use nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric to marginalize minority communities and erode their rights. Rogenhofer & Panievsky (2020) show that in countries like Turkey, India, and Israel, populist leaders employ nationalistic discourse to disenfranchise minority groups, framing them as threats to national identity. This marginalization is further exemplified in South Africa, where anti-immigrant populist rhetoric has incited xenophobic policies and violence against migrant communities (Machinya, 2022).

This trend reflects a broader disregard for established human rights norms, as populist governments often prioritize national sovereignty over international treaties designed to protect minority rights (Humble, 2022). By exploiting societal insecurities and fears, populist leaders reinforce discriminatory practices and undermine the protection of vulnerable groups, thereby challenging international human rights frameworks.

3. Erosion of Press Freedom and Media Independence

Eroding press freedom is a hallmark of populist governance because controlling narratives is essential for maintaining power. Populist leaders often view independent media as a threat and employ legal pressure, financial coercion, and direct attacks to undermine journalistic independence. Alston (2017) notes that populist regimes frequently label critical journalism as a danger to national security or "fake news," using this pretext to restrict media operations.

For instance, the Hungarian government has used financial and regulatory measures to gain control over media outlets, promote pro-government narratives, and stifle dissent (Arregui Acosta, 2023). These efforts hinder journalists from operating freely, resulting in self-censorship and a lack of diverse perspectives, which in turn weakens the media's role in ensuring government accountability. The suppression of media freedom ultimately contributes to the erosion of democratic norms by limiting public debate and transparency.

4. The Role of Social Media and Disinformation in Supporting Populism

Social media has emerged as a crucial tool for populist movements, allowing them to bypass traditional media channels and communicate directly with the public. This platform enables populist leaders to spread disinformation, manipulate public opinion, and foster direct connections with supporters. Christodoulou & Iordanou (2021) argue that this dynamic allows for the dissemination of simplified, emotionally charged messages, which can undermine informed democratic participation.

Social media creates echo chambers in which individuals are exposed only to information that reinforces their beliefs, often excluding dissenting viewpoints (Das, 2018). This tactic not only polarizes public opinion but also undermines trust in traditional media, weakening democratic institutions. The spread of disinformation through social media can influence electoral outcomes and foster distrust, making it harder for citizens to differentiate between facts and fiction (Flew, 2019). This presents a significant challenge to democratic governance, as it can facilitate the rise of authoritarian tendencies and undermine core democratic principles.

D. Resilience and Resistance: Responses to Populist Challenges

The rise of populism has undeniably posed challenges to democratic structures globally, yet it has also spurred significant resistance. This section examines how civil society, the judiciary, the media, academia, and international organizations have played vital roles in countering populist threats and defending democratic values.

1. Civil Society and Grassroots Movements

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have proven to be a strong force against populist encroachment, often mobilizing grassroots movements to resist authoritarian trends. Aslanidis (2017) argues that grassroots activism challenges the narratives of populist leaders by representing marginalized voices. In countries such as Hungary and Poland, these movements have actively opposed attempts to undermine democratic norms (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017) by utilizing protests, online campaigns, and coalition-building to protect democratic rights (Carpenter & Perrier, 2023).

The "Yellow Vests" movement in France serves as an example of grassroots resistance, advocating for social and economic justice, even within an existing populist context (Carpenter & Perrier, 2023). Similarly, Greece's Anti-Austerity Movement unified diverse social groups to oppose the austerity measures linked to populist policies (Howarth & Roussos, 2023). Moreover, CSOs have demonstrated solidarity across borders, with organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch collaborating with local activists to highlight human rights abuses, thereby exerting pressure on populist governments (Alston, 2017). These examples underscore the critical role of civil society in fostering democratic resilience and resisting populist encroachment.

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2. The Role of Independent Judiciary and Legal Professionals

An independent judiciary is the cornerstone of democracy and serves as a bulwark against populist attempts to erode democratic principles. As Adamidis (2021) notes, the judiciary provides a counterbalance to populist efforts to centralize power. In Poland, for example, the Constitutional Tribunal has faced pressure from the ruling party but continues to resist through legal channels and public advocacy (Stambulski, 2024). Similarly, Hungarian judges have pushed back efforts by Viktor Orbán's government to weaken judicial independence, maintain oversight, and resist unconstitutional reforms (Arregui Acosta, 2023).

Israel's judiciary also faced populist pressures attempting to diminish its independence, yet it managed to uphold democratic values by maintaining a strong legal system (Navot, 2023). These instances demonstrate that independent legal professionals and institutions are essential for confronting populist threats and protecting democratic checks and balances.

3. Media, Academia, and the Defense of Democratic Values

Media and academia are instrumental in defending democratic values from populist encroachment. Investigative journalism plays a crucial role in exposing corruption and authoritarian practices within populist regimes, often at great personal risk to journalists. For example, media outlets in Turkey and Hungary have reported government misconduct despite facing threats, censorship, and legal consequences (Yabanci & Taleski, 2018). Such efforts are vital for raising public awareness of the dangers of populist governance.

Academia, on the other hand, promotes evidence-based research and engages in public debates, countering populist narratives that undermine scientific knowledge (Abowitz, 2023). Institutions like Hungary's Central European University, despite being forced to relocate to Austria because of restrictive policies, continue to serve as bastions of critical thinking and challenge authoritarian tendencies (Grigoriadis & Işık Canpolat, 2024). Public intellectuals contribute to this resistance by actively engaging in discourse, articulating democratic values, and challenging populist rhetoric (Hamilton, 2023), despite facing criticism and attacks from populist leaders.

4. International Organizations and Pressure Mechanisms

International organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have been pivotal in addressing the erosion of democratic norms by populist governments. For example, the EU has taken action against member states such as Hungary and Poland, where populist governments have undermined the rule of law by implementing Article 7 procedures and withholding funds to enforce democratic standards (Csehi, 2023).

The UN has also played a role in condemning human rights violations and advocating democratic principles, while the OSCE has been active in monitoring elections, ensuring transparency, and protecting democratic processes (Blatter & Schulz, 2022). By collaborating with local actors and civil society, these organizations contribute to reinforcing democratic resilience and countering the effects of populist backsliding.

E. Strategies for Strengthening Checks and Balances Against Populist Threats

1. Enhancing Legal Protections for Democratic Institutions

Strengthening legal protection is crucial for protecting democratic institutions from populist encroachment. Populism often exploits legal and constitutional loopholes to consolidate power (Adamidis, 2021), making it essential to reinforce constitutional safeguards that uphold the separation of power. For instance, clearly defining the limits of executive authority can prevent the manipulation of laws by leaders aiming to entrench their rules (Adamidis, 2024).

The case of Hungary demonstrates how weak constitutional safeguards can lead to democratic backsliding, with populist leaders exploiting legal gaps to consolidate power (Arregui Acosta, 2023). To counter this, implementing provisions for judicial review, impeachment processes, and executive term limits can serve as vital bulwarks against populism (Stambulski, 2024). Additionally, regular review and revision of laws can ensure adaptability to emerging threats, helping maintain the integrity of democratic structures (Humble, 2022).

2. Promoting Civic Education and Awareness

Civic education is fundamental to building resilience against populist tendencies by fostering informed and engaged citizenry. Abowitz (2023) highlighted the importance of educating citizens about democratic principles, the rule of law, and the dangers of authoritarianism. An informed electorate is more likely to hold leaders accountable, acting as a check on populist ambitions (Howe & Covell, 2021).

Populist leaders often exploit misinformation; therefore, civic education programs should prioritize media literacy, enabling citizens to distinguish facts from propaganda (Howarth & Roussos, 2023). By emphasizing pluralism, tolerance, and democratic participation (Osler & Starkey, 2018), societies can cultivate a population committed to defending democratic ideals.

3. Strengthening Independent Oversight Bodies

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Independent oversight bodies, including the media, anti-corruption agencies, and electoral commissions, play a crucial role in countering populist threats. For example, media independence ensures the dissemination of unbiased information and serves as a safeguard against populist manipulation (Annison & Guiney, 2022). However, populist leaders often attempt to undermine these institutions to control their narratives (Blatter & Schulz, 2022).

To protect these bodies, legal frameworks should guarantee autonomy and impartiality through transparent appointment processes and adequate resource allocation (Bickerton & Accetti, 2017). International cooperation can also support oversight bodies by facilitating collaboration between organizations, NGOs, and national institutions, providing technical assistance and sharing best practices for maintaining independence (Campolongo & Scanni, 2023; Soyaltin Colella et al., 2023)

4. Reforming Electoral Systems and Political Party Structures

Electoral system reforms are essential for mitigating the appeal of populism and ensuring balanced democratic representation. Populist leaders often exploit majoritarian systems to gain disproportionate power (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Introducing proportional representation can address this issue by ensuring that diverse political views are represented (Mauk, 2020).

Proportional representation encourages multiparty systems, reducing the likelihood of any single party dominating and minimizing unchecked populist influence (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). Additionally, measures such as ranked-choice voting foster coalition-building and political compromise, promoting pluralism over populist extremism (Wuttke et al., 2023).

Reforming political party structures is also vital for preventing the rise of populist factions within established parties. This can be achieved by promoting transparency in party funding, limiting the influence of special interest groups, and encouraging the participation of marginalized groups in the political process (Campani et al., 2022). These reforms contribute to a more inclusive political environment, countering divisive populist tactics (Metawe, 2024).

IV. CONCLUSION

The rise of populism represents a significant threat to democratic governance by systematically challenging democratic institutions, norms, and the rule of law. Populist leaders erode essential checks and balances that safeguard democratic integrity through strategies such as centralizing executive power, bypassing legislative oversight, undermining judicial independence, and weakening independent oversight bodies. As seen in case studies of Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States, populism's ability to dismantle democratic structures can ultimately jeopardize the foundational principles of democracy.

Moreover, populist movements often exploit societal grievances, disillusionment, and fear to position themselves as the voice of the "true people," sidelining minority rights, press freedom, and other democratic safeguards. The erosion of democratic norms can extend beyond national borders and affect human rights, international law, and global governance. Thus, there is an urgent need to reinforce democratic institutions and implement strategies that counter populism's appeal, such as promoting civic education, strengthening legal frameworks, and protecting the independence of bodies of oversight.

In response, a coordinated effort involving civil society, independent judiciaries, the media, academia, and international organizations is essential for building resilience against populist threats. These entities play a crucial role in ensuring the durability of democracy by actively defending democratic values and reinforcing institutional checks and balances. Addressing the root causes that make populism appealing and developing comprehensive strategies to protect democratic norms are critical for preserving democratic institutions for future generations. Ultimately, a multifaceted and sustained approach is needed to counteract the corrosive effects of populism and maintain the strength and sustainability of democratic governance.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research should explore how populist movements exploit societal grievances and use digital media to weaken democratic institutions by focusing on their impact on checks and balances, minority rights, judicial independence, and media freedom. Comparative studies across regions can reveal the diverse strategies populist leaders use to undermine democratic norms. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of resistance strategies such as civic education, legal reforms, and international interventions can help develop more robust defenses against populist threats.

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