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Keywords: Democratic Institutions, Democratic principles, Pakistan, Populism, Political polarization

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Abstract

This research examines the deleterious impact of populism on democratic institutions, utilizing Pakistan as a case study. Notwithstanding its claims to speak for the majority, populism regularly endangers the democratic institutions that are intended to protect the rights of minorities, uphold the rule of law, and offer checks and balances. This article explores the implications of populism for democratic institutions, arguing that populist politicians undermine the normative underpinnings of democracy as they gain control of government. This study looks into how Pakistani populist movements undermine the independence of important institutions including the judiciary, parliament, and free press. By examining the case of Pakistan, the study presents recommendations to reinforce democratic institutions to enable them to resist populist pressures and ensure resilience to future challenges. Furthermore the study highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the grievances fueling populist movements without compromising democratic norms.

Keywords:

[Democratic Institutions](#), [Democratic principles](#), [Pakistan](#), [Populism](#), [Political polarization](#)

Introduction

The quality of democracies in developed, emerging, and underdeveloped nations has declined as a result of the increase of populism in the twenty-first century. Preventing the disintegration, deterioration, and completion of democracy is frequently how authoritarianism gives way to liberal democracies. Liberal democracies, however, have been under internal pressure in recent years, which has accelerated de-democratization or democratic regression. The interaction of populist leaders'

supply and demand as well as democratic flaws is what drives this phenomenon (Mirza & Azhar, 2021). Since the late 20th century, populism a political philosophy that first appeared in the US in the 1880s has seen a global comeback acknowledgments of its appeal to the general populace, and antagonism to the elite (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Populism is a popular political philosophy that has attracted a lot of attention from across the world because of its many different movements and claims. PTI is one of the social movements that have



shaped South Asia's political landscape. Scholarly research emphasizes the significance of examining populism in many social contexts, despite its numerous manifestations. The People's Rights Movement in AJK is a left-wing populist movement, whereas PTI is a right-wing one (Yasir, 2025).

Panizza's definition of identification and Laclau's perspective on populism, emphasize how populist constructions create a collective identity in the face of conflicting demands, especially by employing the idea of "the people" as a meaningless signifier (Yilmaz et al., 2025). In Pakistan, many identities have emerged, which are probably going to have an impact on public conversation (Yilmaz & Batool, 2025).

A political philosophy known as populism splits society into two hostile factions: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." Because populist leaders are seen as the genuine voice of the people rather than the alleged corrupt elite, this dual paradigm creates a moral conundrum. Populism is a method of

conducting politics that presents a fundamental conflict between the interests of the great majority and an elite few. It is not just a set of ideas or beliefs. Distinctive framing, charismatic leadership, anti-establishment feeling, the reduction of complicated subjects, and grassroots mobilization tactics are some of its salient features. These components provide supporters with a corporate identity and raise irrational expectations for governance and the application of policies (Durrani & Barakzai, 2024).

The intricacy of distinguishing between left and right-wing ideas makes it frequently challenging to classify populist movements as either. While rightists believe in natural disparities, leftists believe in equality and want to improve social equality. Political parties should evaluate their stances on problems of culture and identity, economic structure, and democracy conception in order to differentiate between the left and the right (Fil, 2023).

Concepts of populism

Table 1

Ideological kind of populism	
<p>Right-Wing Populism: The world is experiencing a surge in right-wing populism, a political ideology that combines right-wing politics with populist rhetoric. This ideology often consists of anti-elitist sentiments, opposition to the perceived 'establishment', and speaking to the 'common people'.</p>	<p>Left Wing Populism: Often emphasizing anti-elitist attitudes, antagonism to the establishment, and support for the common people, left-wing populism is a political philosophy that combines populist rhetoric with left-wing politics. While socialist theory or class society ideologies are less important for traditional left-wing parties, key themes include anti-capitalism, social justice, pacifism, and anti-globalization.</p>
<p>Both right-wing and left-wing populism object to the perceived control of liberal democracies by elites, while left populism also opposes the power of large corporations and their allies. Right-wing populism typically supports strong immigration controls.</p>	

Source: European Consortium for Political Research Populism Studies. Compiled by the author, n.d

Table 2

Functional Kind of populism		
<p>Political Populism: Political populism sees institutions as obstacles to the will of the people rather than as checks and balances, it ignores, undermines, or seizes them in an authoritarian way.</p>	<p>Economic Populism: Transferring money from the rich to middle-class and lower-class populations is known as economic populism, and it was initially supported since the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.</p>	<p>Cultural Populism: At the cost of others, particularly migrants, cultural populism elevates a specific race, ethnicity, religion, sect, or class especially natives as the "real people."</p>

Source: Akarca, 2021. Compiled by author

Background of Populism

In post-industrial polities, discontent with democratic institutions changes over time and between nations, impacting both economic performance and political engagement. Dissatisfied with structured elite-mass political intermediation, populist politics aims to do away with middlemen between the people and the ruling class. Populism is characterized by a general mistrust of principals and demands that principal-agent relationships be abolished in order for citizen-principals to make direct, unadulterated political choices. This goal can take many forms, such as populist political parties, but it is distinct from protectionist economic and social policies and anti-liberal market sentiments (Kitschelt, [2002](#)).

Populism is a democratic reaction to the ideals and interests of the weaker classes, not an anti-democratic one. It occurs when political leaders fail to hear the concerns of the populace and implement measures that address those issues. Political leaders must address escalating complaints and respond with policies that address their actual needs in order for democracies to function. When the current order is upset, populism may be seen as both a disruptive force of the status quo and the beginning of a radical reconstruction of a new one. The necessary crisis is frequently brought on by economic loss, but the losers must believe that either the reasons for their losses or the way the government has handled them are unjust.

The moral component of populism is centered on the sense of unfairness, which is more likely to emerge when the government is already seen as corrupt or when policies fail to adequately consider the desires of the common person. A multiple-elite party system that ignores other groups and fosters populism is the result of the industrial working class's shrinkage. Many people who are left behind feel as though they are not being heard as traditional working-class parties turn to highly educated elites for support and to voice their concerns.

Populist leaders frequently provide an artistic output of "proximity to the people," occasionally putting on a gaudy display of listening to members of the relevant classes and reacting with ostentatiously prompt government action. Right-wing populist parties frequently arise from feelings of disdain and status loss, which are frequently brought on by economic issues that are made into

targets of elite mockery. When the politically, economically, and socioculturally strong ignore the needs and ideals of others in society, this recognition struggle which is sometimes based on social disdain can incite and occasionally provide justification for a democratic uprising. Populism may be a democratic means of upending the status quo when the political system becomes inflexible or dominated by the elite.

With traits like homogeneity, exclusivity, more direct authority, nationalism, and hostility to weaker outgroups, the periphery poses a bigger threat to democracy than the center. Opposition populists can prepare for talks with elites and have close ties with their supporters, but doing so necessitates understanding the need for compromise and negotiation. Engaging and bringing in people who are now excluded is the greatest way for those who are not populists to respond to populism. According to negotiation theory, non-populists should oppose racism, xenophobia, and assaults on constitutional democracy while seeking the reasons for their stances and coming up with innovative solutions to populist grievances. A democratic awakening might result from the current populist moment under ideal conditions, but such conditions are not always present (Mansbridge & Macedo, [2019](#)).

Muller's Theory of Populism as Anti-Pluralism

Populism, according to J.W. Müller, is an anti-pluralism and anti-establishment mindset that claims a moral monopoly on representation. Since populists reject pluralist and deliberative institutions and see the populace as homogenous and morally pure, their viewpoint calls into question the fundamentals of contemporary democracy. They reject election results and middle-tier institutions in favor of the people's spirit. Elections make this problematic relationship with democracy clear. (Font, [2017](#)).

Democratic Institutions and Populism

Populism introduces fresh players and agendas into the political system, promising democratic renewal. However, it may weaken institutional balances on executive authority and undercut accountability. Populist governance exemplifies this conflict between preserving liberties, inclusivity, and

electoral fairness and advancing democratic accountability and discourse.

Though it might weaken the government, populist mobilization can strengthen democracy's representativeness. By enlisting new groups, populists might make democracy more representative, but they can also erode democratic accountability and debate. They frequently disregard restraints on government authority and minority rights, which can be anti-democratic. The executive branch has frequently been bolstered by populist parties in power, dividing the public and stifling civil society. The wealthiest democracies to ever collapse have demonstrated that authoritarian reversion can result from this deterioration of balances on presidential authority (Liddiard, 2019).

Both Democrats and populists generally agree with President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address, which said, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people." Both stress the significance of the people and have deep roots in them. The intrinsic conflict between populism and democracy, however, has not been thoroughly examined. It is possible to see Lincoln's words as supporting more authority in democracies (Pasquino, 2008).

Populism is a political ideology that aims to gain or retain the support of the masses by making demagogic statements. It is a method of mobilizing mass support to support certain forces and doctrines. Populism is often seen as anti-elite, as its proponents are part of the political elite. It also disrespects pluralism, spreading the narrative across the political arena and reducing the importance of institutions. Populism can appear in authoritarian and transitional societies, with competitive regimes expressing a desire to replace or change the elites, while non-competitive regimes negate the elite as a political institution. In weak civil cultures, populism can freeze political culture, leading to a plebiscite and the establishment of a populist regime (Makarenko, 2017).

In Pakistan, left-wing populists call for the inclusion of the lower classes, while right-wing populists call for the exclusion of foreigners and immigrants. However, the difference between exclusionary and inclusionary politics is useless in the absence of a liberal discourse (Batool, 2023).

Populist judges seek unmediated contact with the people, circumvent legal restrictions, and assert

that they are better able to represent the public than political elites. Institutionalized dissonance in the political system can give rise to this. For example, in Pakistan, judicial populism was made easier by unresolved conflicts between elected political leadership and civil-military bureaucracy (Kureshi, 2024). Imran Khan, a right-wing nationalist populist, rose to power in 2018 through an aggressive anti-corruption crusade. His rise deepened authoritarian strains in Pakistan's politics, leading to military oversight, repression, and media crackdowns (Faiz, 2022). The anti-elitism sentiment in Pakistan is characterized by nationalistic sentiments, highlighting the nation's struggle and marginalization by regional and global powers (Yilmaz et al., 2025).

Interaction between Populism and Democracy

Pakistan's populism has been impacted by its political and historical evolution since 1947, with politicians employing it to mobilize the populace and counter-populist organizations that emphasize equivalency. Both populists and counter-populists have guaranteed the people justice and honesty in spite of political expediency (Salim et al., 2024).

Since its origin, populism has been a prominent political topic in Pakistan. Over time, Imran Khan's populist themes have changed to emphasize American meddling, religion, and corruption. In Pakistani internal politics, this has resulted in polarization, division, and a decline in tolerance (Shah, 2024). Populist politicians have the ability to gradually seize control of and politicize the military in nations with established and independent armed forces. Although democratization is not always guaranteed by a civilianized military, presidents in nations like Venezuela and Turkey have held their positions for more than 20 years (Gunes, 2025).

According to the maximal theory of populism, which emphasizes people as manufactured identities that leaders use to gain power, populism, and democracy are related. It opposes constitutional democracy by emphasizing radical majoritarianism and winning battles for legitimacy. A politician can act unilaterally and without consultation under the philosophy of populism, which frequently results in authoritarian democracy. In order to increase their authority, this type of direct representation attacks the political establishment and tries to alter the law,

avoiding middle-man affiliations. Viktor M. Orbán and Hugo Chávez are two examples of people who exploited propaganda to use political opponents and minorities as scapegoats.

Using audience democracy rather than iron security, populism seeks to permanently freeze the current majority. To ensure its attractiveness by bolstering people's faith, it employs propaganda against adversaries and enlivens propaganda. The leader mobilizes the populace through media appearances and plebiscitary actions of acclaim. Populism is typified by an ongoing election campaign that is founded more on faith-based trust than on free and open discussion. It turns the democratic people into a social determinant because it lacks an appreciation for responsibility and sees them as sovereign. The extreme and popular anti-establishment position of populism disparages the people's overall ambiguous meaning.

A drastic change in representative democracy, and populism in power challenges the party system, electoral representation, and constitutional democracy by favoring one segment of the public over another. By associating the entire with a portion, it seeks to alleviate tension between the parts and the whole. Populism is a model that stabilized nations following World War II, not the source of democracy. It is necessary to assume democracy in its representative and party forms in order to comprehend and assess populism (Urbinati, 2019).

Dissatisfaction with Democracy

Populism is a multifaceted phenomenon with a range of manifestations and political ramifications. The present dominant populism is authoritarian, but it is also possible for populism to be democratic and anti-establishment, combining democratic and liberal beliefs. (Bugaric, 2019).

Globally, and especially in emerging nations like Pakistan, discontent with democracy is growing. Pakistan has experienced illiberal or procedural democracy instead of substantive democracy as a result of its oscillations between bureaucratic control, military rule, civil martial law, procedural democracy, and hybrid regimes. A prominent third political party has emerged in Pakistan as a result of populism brought on by this discontent (Younis & Din, 2024). Pakistan's rise of populism has significant implications for democratic governance.

Populism divides society into two groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite. It sets moral distinctions and legitimizes the populace while demeaning the elite. While not necessarily anti-democratic, populism threatens individual rights and individual liberties. Populists often support the majority's needs at the cost of diverse interests (Durrani & Barakzi, 2024).

The liberal democratic system is threatened by a new order brought about by the conflicting forces of radicalization and populism in society. Populists use popular media to mobilize the public in support of underrepresented groups, yet they frequently question established norms and cultural values. As a result, Pakistan has seen a surge in populism, with people taking to the streets to make their demands while established political parties fail to demonstrate empathy for the people. This perilous notion causes division, polarization, and uncertainty, which makes government challenging. Dangerous outcomes of this radicalization include the evasion of democratic barriers and the emergence of organized mobs that legitimate authority in the streets (Malik & Cheema, 2024).

Although the rule of law continues to be society's best defense, judicial corruption is a prevalent problem in free democracies. While European politicians are worried by Marine Le Pen's criminal conviction, which might erode trust in the legal system and increase support for her, President Trump in the US has targeted judges and attorneys who oppose his executive orders. Populists are fighting this battle to erode trust in an independent judiciary. The strategy calls for undermining judges who may thwart the nation's will, and this attack on the legal system pits direct democracy against constitutional democracy. The last and most important defense against political corruption and abuse in constitutional democracies is the rule of law. The game ends if the fortress collapses. (Shirmley, 2025).

Impact of Populism on Indo-Pak Relations

Religious beliefs, civil-military ties, and populism all had an impact on the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. 'Quaid-i-Azam' Mohammad Ali Jinnah created the 'Two Nation doctrine', a concept between Muslim and Hindu civilizations. This approach legitimized decisions and made the Islamic religion the core of Pakistan's existence. As a result of Jinnah's advocacy

of this ideology, India was split into two nations, and populism was introduced as an oppositional concept in an independent Pakistan (Shah, [2022](#)).

Both international and internal policy have been impacted by the emergence of populist populism in India under the Modi government. The relationship between India and Pakistan has been impacted by this. Right-wing populism became linked with Indian politics after Modi's election in 2018 when the government implemented measures like the National Register of Citizens and the repeal of Article 370 (Mushtaq et al., [2024](#)).

Role of Social Media in Magnifying Populist Messages

Social media is a popular instrument for political communication among occidental populists, who were among the first to use it. Populists now outshine their centrist rivals on the political internet. Direct connection between party leaders and their supporters is made possible by social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, which support populist demands to return people's sovereignty. Social media upends conventional media's meritocratic ideals and supports populists' anti-establishment viewpoint. Attracting supporters by reacting viscerally to terrorist incidents, candidates frequently react viscerally to sentiments of worry and injustice. This emotional appeal resonates with centrist leaders, who wish to comfort a fearful population while defending multicultural and religious tolerance (Galston, [2021](#)).

Restricted Media

The governments of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey and Imran Khan in Pakistan have both been examples of populist regimes propelled by rivalries, economic failures, and authoritarian tactics. Despite having a sizable following, their populist rhetoric has hampered their ability to govern and communicate, failing to forge a sense of national unity among the general populace (Azam & Falki, [2021](#)). The manner in which populism and faith are connected in Turkey, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia, demonstrates that digital authoritarianism has emerged as a fundamental force behind policy reforms. Religious groups defend internet restrictions as a way to limit "moral ills," creating a hyper-realistic environment in which sociopolitical events occur (Yilmaz et al., [2022](#)).

A significant political demonstration in Pakistan in 2014 brought attention to the role that independent media play in mediated populism. Given the increased scholarly interest in non-Western democratic models and nonliberal middle classes, the liberal narrative in Pakistan centers on populist politics, especially its illiberal aspects (Mulla, [2017](#)).

By maintaining harmony among sociocultural and political groups, the state aims to promote solidarity and stability. From 1999 to 2007, Pakistan's elite political culture developed, which has been blamed for encouraging societal complexity. However, conventional elitism was once again the main opponent to populism, political equality, and democratic liberalism as a result of court decisions and constitutional engineering during the PPP's third administration (Ashfaq & Roofi, [2023](#)).

Mobilising Popular Approval

During the 2007 anti-Musharraf uprising, student-led activist organizations helped Pakistani student politics come back to life. Student and youth collectives affiliated with different political parties are becoming increasingly apparent in daily politics, even if official student unions are still prohibited. The PML-N Youth Wing (PYW), the left-wing Democratic Students Alliance (DSA), and the PTI's Insaf Student Federation (ISF) are three primary student groups (Javid, [2019](#)).

The multi-layered story of "New Pakistan" blends religious elements with a plea for survival to engender pride and a desire for the perfect "homeland." Over the course of the last thirty years, Khan's populist views have changed, evolving from anti-establishment to visionary. The people who are the victims of the "slavery" of the West are both empowered and incensed by this story. The narrative also shifts the burden for the country's problems to outsiders and liberal Pakistanis for their beliefs and ideals. The "others" are portrayed as "brainwashed" in the narrative, which is reinforced by educational and entertainment media. A struggle of ideas between "the people" and "the others," "New Pakistan" exacerbates already existing social divisions and expands them on a regional and national level (Yilmaz & Batool, [2025](#)).

Effect on the Stability of Democratic Institutions

Since 2014, right-wing populism in India has had a major effect on foreign policy and politics, resulting in heightened nationalist sentiments and tense ties with Pakistan. Polarization, anti-Muslim sentiment, and the breakdown of democratic and social norms have resulted from this. There is a need for methods to increase comprehension and collaboration (Aslam, [2023](#)).

Populist leaders' limited governing capabilities have the potential to weaken legislative authority and fundamental democratic elements. According to studies, administrators have greater influence over term-limited state lawmakers than those who do not, and a lack of policymaking skills can transfer policymaking to the presidency. Stronger parliamentary institutions are critical for democratic survival because they can better control breaches of executive authority. Empowered legislatures are linked to longer-lasting democracy, whereas executive limitations often lead to more durable democracy. Weakened legislative control can enable executives to exploit government institutions, targeting opponents for repression, undermining freedom, inclusiveness, and electoral fairness. This has resulted in democratic failures in the wealthiest nations, which have reverted to dictatorship (Riaz, [2020](#)).

Democratic Reforms that can Reduce Populist Threat

By modifying the political discourse to better engage the public, liberal democratic actors could impede illiberal populism and revitalize liberal democracy. They should do this by developing cohesive and compact narratives, advancing aspirational narratives, avoiding right-wing populist language, connecting with shared values, intentionally dispelling myths, highlighting solutions and emphasizing their effectiveness, and avoiding adopting the language of right-wing populists.

A "us versus them" narrative is frequently employed by populist parties, which undermines democracy. Rather, they ought to establish an inclusive conversation that emphasizes shared values, customs, ceremonies, organizations, and procedures. As Western people grow more skeptical of the system's fairness, liberal democratic actors should also promote aspirational narratives.

Liberal democratic actors should also refrain from using right-wing populist rhetoric, connect with shared ideals, be deliberate in dispelling myths, promote solutions, and stress their effectiveness. They can preserve their credibility and prevent support for far-right populist parties by doing this, as well as by fostering a more effective and inclusive political debate. (Kendall-Taylor & Nietzsche, [2020](#)).

Conclusion

Donald Trump and other populist politicians have overthrown the global order in order to seize control of stable democracies. Although populism has always been on the rise, it has taken on a catastrophic global tone. In the majority of European nations, populist parties have trebled their share of the vote, and this trend is gradually spreading around the world. Political systems might become unstable if they are uninformed of the potential repercussions, even though it is too soon to declare that the present global order is about to fall apart. While populism won't destroy democracy, it will put pressure on its institutions. It is crucial to recognize the legitimacy of populist movements and refrain from discounting them (Espinoza Pedraza, [2019](#)).

Extremist left and right populist challengers might pose a threat to the weakened mainstream parties. Democrats must reimagine themselves and present a vision of a brighter future rather than giving in to empty promises (Bugarcic, [2019](#)).

A worldwide phenomenon, populism occurs when political leaders emphasize problems in their election manifestos while frequently falling short of providing the electorate with political benefits. Presidents Rajab Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Narendra Modi of India are examples of successful populist leaders who have controlled and influenced the populace by using their votes. After being ousted by a vote of no-confidence, former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has become more popular. Young people and the elderly have been drawn to the nation by his charm, Dhahrana politics, and anti-American rhetoric. Khan must contend with issues including religious fanaticism, little resources, and bad economic situations.

The PML (N), PPP, and JUI (F) are also against him. Khan should concentrate on inclusive politics in order to tackle these issues since it is crucial for a society that coexists peacefully. A peaceful

coexisting society might result from modern pluralism, which can be linked to the social compact proposed by French philosopher J.J. Rousseau. A strong wave of populism is also sweeping across Pakistan, where Imran Khan is now the most well-liked politician among his constituents. As a result, the idea of pluralism has to be widely accepted throughout the nation (Shah,2022).

Recommendations

Power separation between Pakistan's legislative, executive, and judicial branches is necessary to guarantee accountability, autonomy, and electoral

transparency. Additionally, combating social and economic inequality and bolstering democratic institutions depend on media freedom. Accountability requires raising public understanding of rights and encouraging critical thinking in the educational setting. Strong political parties ought to exist. Authoritative tendency needs to be controlled. In addition to addressing economic and social inequities by granting rights and opportunities without discrimination, local institutions should be robust and independent. Additionally, stronger diplomatic ties with other countries are required.

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