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FROM PROTEST TO POWER: RIGHT-WING POPULISM, DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL COOPERATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract
Right-wing Populism is one of the most important political phenomena of the twenty-first century and is not only relevant for the electoral process but also for the basis of democratic cooperation around the globe. Right-wing populism as a thin-centered ideology, a performative political style, and a strategic political tool systematically attacks the cooperative processes of democracy at the national and international level. The paper uncovers the moralisation of political conflict, the centralisation of executive power, the erosion of social cohesion and the tensions of multilateral institutions in the context of right-wing populism. The paper summarizes the potential nativist and national-populist political revival (single salvo) in the next few decades in Western and Central European countries based on the outcomes of the 2024 elections to the European Parliament and draws experiences from India and Latin America, and how this will impact Multilateralism in the near future. It builds on the groundbreaking research of several scholars such as Mudde, Müller, Norris and Inglehart, Moffitt and Levitsky, but also on new empirical studies conducted from 2023 and onwards on the foreign policy impact of right-wing populism on foreign aid, international norms and democratic resilience. It is not strategic nationalism and polarization that are the issue with today's democracies, it's how to keep nationalists cooperating and institutions credible during those times, the paper concludes.

Keywords: *Right-wing Populism, Democratic Backsliding, Political Cooperation, Nativism, Affective Polarization, Multilateralism, Illiberal democracy, Strategic Nationalism*

1. Introduction

Right-wing populism has experienced a dramatic reemergence in the early twenty-first century in both the oldest and newest democracies around the world. Previously, we had episodes or locally limited disturbances of the liberal democratic order, but now it has become a solid structural force. The 2024 European Elections to the Parliament of the European Union (EU) delivered record victories for far-right and national-populist groups in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. The election for Trump's presidency in November of 2024 revealed the massive staying power of Donald Trumpism as an ideology that has irrevocably changed the Republican Party in the United States. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has carried on the governmental business in India through a union,

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building and honoring its primary job of being a majoritarian-nationalist party. The other key examples in Latin America are of right-wing populist leaders like Javier Milei in Argentina and the unyielding model of Bolsonarismo and its effects in Brazil, which continue to be a key model for right-wing populism across the region.

Anyone interested in the issue of populism and democracy will engage in endless debates as to whether this type of regime is a threat to democracy or just a failure of the democratic promises. But in the name of theoretical importance, this discussion has been gradually replaced by a more pragmatic question: what happens when the normalisation of right-leaning populism impacts the collaborative mechanisms that allow for democracy's functioning? Democracy's not just an election process; it needs a wonderful network of informal norms: mutual toleration, institutional restraint, a spirit of compromise and pluralistic respect for legitimate opposition (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), which are not observable and are hardly remembered or enshrined in a single building. It is against such norms that right-wing populism is directed, and it is these norms upon which it bases its claims for a "pure people", which are opposed to a "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016), which make absolutely no attempt to compromise, while "opposition" is perceived as disloyalty.

The ramifications go beyond the home environment. Along with decades of developments since 1945, international cooperation, called for in the agrimeriement, underpinned by multilateral institutions, treaty regimes and norms of collective governance, is facing new pressure because of populist governments, which emphasize on national sovereignty, question the legitimacy of supranational institutions, including the euro and worsen the tendency toward unilateral foreign policy. In Right-wing Populism: Dracula in Power, the Review of International Organizations (2024) showcased how right-wing populist governments act as "norm spoilers", curbing the international order, reducing the production of norms and "reinfusing illiberal content" onto multi-lateral platforms.

2. Research Problem

The central problem tackled in this paper is how, under the circumstances of right-wing populist normalization, the norms and practices of cooperation in politics are undermined. Despite the prolific scholarly attention that has been given to the populist success and ideology, much less work has systematically investigated the impact of populism on the cooperative logic in democratic politics, both at the institutional level of political behavioral change, at the level of political culture, at the level of international relations, and at the level of social cohesion, and across multiple geographical milieus. The lack of progress is even starker in the context of developments since 2022: returning geopolitical instability after Russia invaded Ukraine, a post-2020 inflationary cycle, growing climate displacement and growing 'far-right' electoral alliances in the 2024 European and American elections. The changes have led to new circumstances enabling populist mobilisation and new strains on cooperative institutions for which there is no systematic literature on their adaptive capacity. In this paper, a number of three core questions will be tackled:

1. What is contemporary right-wing populism and what are the distinct features of its ideology, style, and strategy?
2. Second, how do the politics of the far-right undermine domestic and international democratic cooperation?
3. Third, what are the forms of democratic resilience that have fallen out of adaptive response, and what structural conditions enable or hinder adaptation?

This paper will contribute to scholarly and policy discussions of the future of democratic governance in the Populist normalization era by engaging these questions in comparative analysis and a new empirical foundation

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3. Research Methodology

The research method of this study is a qualitative, interpretive and comparative method. The research design is non-experimental and secondary sources such as international organisations' reports (Freedom House, V-Dem Institute, European Council on Foreign Relations), electoral data, party programmes, political speeches, policy papers and peer-reviewed academic literature are used. The comparative case study method uses examples from the United States, some Western and Central European countries, India and Latin America to draw out some parallels in changing cooperative politics and differences by region.

Mainly, the analytic tools used in the transcription were thematic analysis and discourse analysis, which resulted in the identification of any patterns in the narration of ideas between the cases and in the identification of rhetorical strategies and institutional patterns. The theoretical framework presented builds on the "ideological approach" (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), the performative/stylistic approach (Moffitt, 2016), and the "strategic-institutional approach" (Weyland, 2001, 2021), considering them not necessarily mutually exclusive lenses. Through its multi-dimensional framework, the research documents the populism-oriented ideology that singles out those who would like to cooperate as enemies, that seeks to turn any such contentious political situation into "normality," and that paves the way for the monopolization of power by exploiting weaknesses in the institutions.

The main drawbacks of this study are the inference of qualitative research and the use of secondary sources of information, which limit the scope of cause-and-effect statements that can be made. The findings are also not necessarily generalizable beyond the contexts that were explored in this survey, for example, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, where populism is also taking shape along rightist lines. Across the analysis, these limitations will be recognised.

4. Literature Review

The significant research on the meaning of populism has resulted in three prevailing frameworks, all of which are somewhat similar to one another. Organically shaped by Cas Mudde (2004) and further elaborated by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), the most influential is an ideology-powered approach. According to Mudde, the concept of populism as a "thin-centered ideology" posits a polarized division of society into two camps: the "pure people," and the "corrupt elite," and claims that the real function of any political movement should be to mirror the popular will of the former by debating and containing the influence of the latter. Populism's "thinness" is analytically fruitful as a reason for the necessity of populism to force its way onto other ideologies (nationalism, socialism or religious traditionalism) in order to provide a complete political program. This approach has allowed for explicit comparative analysis across states, and continues to be the most favored paradigm in comparative politics.

One of the main objections to the ideological account is that it downplays the significance of agency, performance and the dynamics of the media within the political effectiveness of populism. Populism, suggests Benjamin Moffitt (2016), is best seen as a style of politics, a performative way of doing politics, in which appeals to "the people" are made, the rules of political behavior are challenged, and a drama surrounding "crisis" is performed. As the name implies, populism's stylistic appeal is much more descriptive of what accounts for its success in highly mediated societies in which emotional power often bears more weight than clarity of ideas. A third perspective, championed by Kurt Weyland (2001, 2021), treats populism as a political tool used by entrepreneurs to rally unmediated personalistic support in order to secure

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and sustain power. This conceptual model zooms in on the structural incentives, institutional settings, and elite decisions that influence the way in which populist movements perform.

In this paper, populism will be understood as an ideology, a style and a strategy. To understand how right-wing pop! affects these cooperative norms, it is important to grasp this multidimensional view, as the ideology provides a projection of enemies to cooperation, the style normalizes confrontation, not deliberation, and the strategy makes use of institutional vacancies.

The literature has pointed to the relative success of right-wing populism in the elections, having two main, but also competing, drivers: cultural anxiety and economic grievance. Understanding this phenomenon requires attention not only to the analytical work of political economists but also to the structural conditions, wage stagnation, deindustrialization, and public service decline that create the material conditions for populist demand among communities who feel abandoned by mainstream parties. Documenting is just part of the reason that such stories of elite betrayal are so fertile in the advanced world, because of Thomas Piketty's documentation of the increasing concentration of wealth in the rich world.

Addressing economic determinism, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart show in the World Values Survey that cultural values, such as opposition to progressive social norms in the areas of gender, sexuality, immigration, and cultural multiculturalism, are greater drivers of the support of right-wing populism than economic factors. They liken their "cultural backlash thesis" to the idea that many populist voters have felt that they are "strangers in their own country" due to “rapid social change that strips away traditional identities.” Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin summarise these two perspectives in the “Four Ds” model: distrust of political elites, deprivation based on economic inequality, destruction of traditional cultural identities, and dealignment from mainstream political parties.

These frameworks have been further developed in more recent scholarship. Mudde's 2022-2024 survey of annual reviews in political science highlights how the rise in right-wing populist messaging focused on economic protection and cultural security has been heightened by the inflationary crisis of the last two years, the Russia-Ukraine war and a growing number of migrants as climate change is driving populations beyond their borders. This research, published in the Journal of International Development (2024), shows how right-wing populist messages, as part of its cultural and economic narratives, successfully diminish public support for foreign aid and multilateralism in Germany, the U.S., and the UK.

The connotations of populism and democracy are ambivalent. A minority view, linked to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, sees populism as a necessary corrective that can be democratizing, by rendering the voice of the excluded majority audible, and by questioning the technocratic governance, which has lost its supervision over the people. The more prevalent line of contemporary scholarship, however, focuses on the anti-democratic inclinations of populism.

In this book, Jan-Werner Müller challenges the anti-pluralist core position of populism, namely that only the populist leader or populist movement speaks for the people.In this book, Jan-Werner Müller contends that populism's anti-pluralist core position fundamentally undermines the legitimacy of democratic opposition. The democratic erosion of norms that typically occurs under populism, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain, proceeds often not through dramatic coups but rather through the formation of new rules that erode over time. New rules that erode over time are how the democratic erosion typically occurs under populism, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt write. Drawing on the broader concept of democratic backsliding, a term that entered comparative politics through Schedler (1998) and Diamond (1999), Takis Pappas (2019) offers a more specific account of how populist governments systematically

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erode the quality of democracy from within: maintaining the formal procedures of elections while simultaneously undermining judicial independence, press freedom, and civil society organizations.

The V-Dem Institute's Liberal Democracy Index also shows at scale that the countries where populist governance has been uninterrupted have measurable reductions in judicial independence, academic freedom, and civil society strength, despite not having a formal electoral battle. In 2024, the worldwide democratic backslide was the 18th such year in history, and most of the documented regressions were caused by right-wing populist governments or parties, as reported in the Freedom House Freedom in the World Report (2024). The findings of this study provide empirical backing for the analytical claims in this paper about how populism affects cooperative practice.

There has been a lot of work on domestic impacts of populism, but a less studied and theory-driven research area is the impact of populism on international cooperation. Scholarship in recent years has started to chart how populist governments systematically damage the structures of cooperation that have emerged from states' recognition of their own benefits from these stable institutions. The research published in The Review of International Organizations illustrates how right-wing populist governments act as "norm spoilers" in multilateral bodies, but do not simply exit, rather they slow down the production of norms, they introduce illiberal elements, and they decrease adherence to existing norms in areas they consider to be the "overreach" of elites or cosmopolitans. Empirically, Argentina's realignment has been quite evident under President Milei, with greater alignment with the United States and less with multilateral human rights structures within the United Nations, in 2024. This emerging literature forms the basis for this paper's analysis of populism's effects on international cooperation, which is developed in the Discussion section.

5. Discussion

The most basic and widespread way right-wing populism undermines democratic cooperation is by moralizing the contest between good and bad. The first and most universal way that right-wing populism undermines democratic cooperation is to moralize the contest between good and bad. Populist talk is not only about political rivals having divergent interests or taking misguided stances, but it is also about their being morally corrupt enemies of the people. Müller states that the "real" representation argument of the populists is fundamentally anti-pluralist: If there is only one real popular will, then all opposition is illegitimate. This rational organization is a change in the grammar of democratic politics.

A healthy democracy provides room for disagreement, seeing it as a way to challenge ideas, reflect different perspectives, and reach lasting decisions together. This system rests on the informal rule of "mutual toleration": that opponents are legitimate opponents and not "existential threats". This norm is systematically undermined by populism, which constructs political life as a moral struggle between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, what Mudde (2004) identifies as the defining binary of populist ideology , thereby converting legitimate political rivalry into an existential confrontation that leaves no space for the compromise democratic governance requires. As the democratic virtue of getting something done despite differences, compromise is now reframed as capitulation to the enemy: capitulation to the political treason of the pure people.

The most thoroughly documented is that of the United States. In the mid-2020s, affective polarization, or partisanship that is not necessarily based on policy disagreements but on deep feelings of hostility toward the opposition, had hit an unprecedented peak. The January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill breach was the most dramatic example of this dynamic: Populist rhetoric about the 2020 election as a fraud triggered physical supporters to block the transfer of good governance.

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After Trump's 2024 election victory, bipartisan cooperation in Congress is structurally problematic; the GOP's shift to an effectively populist movement has led to party policy compromise with Democrats routinely being described as party betrayal. What emerges is institutional paralysis, which affects government in all aspects, from fiscal policy to climate legislation.

AfD was the second largest party in national elections in Germany and thus entered the 2025 federal election cycle, albeit there is an informal "firewall" between the mainstream parties and the AfD which is quickly cracking at regional and local levels. As a result of the moralization of politics, Hungary and Poland, which were the two countries where right-wing populist governments existed for extended periods, have seen the following institutional effects: judicial packing, media co-optation, and delegitimization of civil society organizations as "foreign agents. Both Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Pappas (2019) report this as the typical democratic backsliding strategy of populist regimes.

Right-wing populism's other key mechanism in changing democratic cooperation is its connection to crisis. For Moffitt, populism is not only reactive to the crisis but a political style that is performative and magnifies it. The real crises in contemporary politics abound—the Russia–Ukraine war, inflation in the post-pandemic world, climate displacement, irregular migration, but the ones that are most typical of populist leaders are ones that are overstated and deemed urgent to justify a strong, central leadership and to discredit institutional checks as impediments.

This is directly related to democratic cooperation. In the context of an existential emergency where decisive action is needed right now, deliberation seems to be a danger, consensus-seeking seems to be sign of weakness, and institutional constraints seem to be an obstacle. The outcome is a steady growth of executive unilateralism. Modi's nationalism and emphasis on strong central leadership have been linked to notions of efficiency and unity in India, but critics, such as Varshney and Jaffrelot, have reported increasing threats to judicial independence, press freedom and the organizational ability of opposition parties. The systems of governance by decree set by Viktor Orbán during the migration crisis, the Ukraine war and the COVID-19 pandemic have allowed the government in Hungary to bypass parliamentary oversight and constitutional limitations.

More crucially, executive centralization alters the nature of intergovernmental cooperation, in addition to how governments cooperate within them. Populist governments often favour bilateral deals, transactional diplomacy over multilateralism, basing their approach on direct head-to-head negotiations where they can assert more control over decision-making than can rules-based institutions. This preference was evident in both Trump's first and second administrations: In the first term, pulling out of the Paris Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Iran nuclear deal, and in the second term, a renewed skepticism about NATO burden-sharing frameworks and trade institutions, all showed a preference for unilateral national authority over cooperative institutional arrangements.

Democratic cooperation at the societal level is predicated on the notion of citizenship that all the people who constitute the political community are citizens and are entitled to equal status in the political community and equal citizenship regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. In response to this, right-wing populism proposes to establish citizenship as dependent on a culturally based national community. The imaginative center of this construction is Paul Taggart's notion of the "heartland," an imagined, homogeneous community of "true" individuals whose values and way of life are in danger of being "overrun.

In the real world, this thinking about citizenship has limited the scope of who can be counted on to have interests that are seen as legitimate. Brubaker traces the way that the debate on

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migration in Europe has moved from addressing a humanitarian and economic issue to one that has become “securitised” of the refugee and immigrant populations as a cultural and demographic threat. A "reframing" like this has real consequences for social cohesion: if people believe they're waging a “civilizational war” with “outsiders” they are less likely to be willing to participate in the “redistributive” and “solidaristic” practices required of democratic welfare states. The results of the European Social Survey (ESS) data show that there is statistical significance in the negative relationship between party support for the right-wing populists and interpersonal and institutional trust in Northern and Western Europe.

The Hindu nationalist agenda of the BJP is basically a religious one, which has implications for the Muslim minority, as pointed out by Jaffrelot and Chatterjee, which is the dominant agenda in India. The Citizenship Amendment Act and related measures vividly demonstrated that they had given priority to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Christian refugees over Muslim refugees in institutionalizing the populist idea of conditional citizenship in the law.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the economic aspect of modern right-wing populism has undergone a great transformation. The modern variant (which I call “strategic nationalism”) is more advanced than the early populist economic policies, but is also characterized by anti-austerity talk and protectionist trade measures. It goes hand in hand with economic protectionism, industrial policy, and geopolitical self-sufficiency of key sectors (electronic components, energy, food security, digital infrastructure), and populist ideology, which highlights the national sovereignty and the abandonment of domestic workers by the global elite.

This development was what Rodrik had predicted would happen when he wrote that right-wing populism thrives when "certain segments of society feel insecure about the process of globalization and believe that the political elite no longer speaks for them. A new trend of economic nationalism has been introduced in both the United States (the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS Act) and the European Union (the Green Deal Industrial Plan), and as such, it is a structural shift that has been taken up by both mainstream and populist actors, albeit in different registers. In populist performances, though, strategic nationalism does not just refer to an economic strategy; it's an approach to shaping national identity and political allegiance. In the modern right-wing world, "cultural nationalism" is increasingly mixed with “selective state intervention,” as fares increasingly blur the left-right economic spectrum, observes Mudde.

The implications for the economic co-operation between nations are important. Multilateral trade system since 1945 is under stress as countries increasingly stress interdependence rather than resilience. The realignment of Argentina underway under President Milei, characterized by deregulation at home and transactional sovereignty abroad, is a telling example of how a populist economic nationalism can rapidly, and unforeseeably, change a nation's foreign policy.

Digital media has transformed the infrastructure of political communication in ways that structurally favor populist politics. Social media platforms designed to maximize engagement systematically reward emotional intensity, simplicity, and outrage—qualities that align precisely with the populist political style. Moffitt argues that these platforms amplify crisis-driven politics by enabling direct, unmediated communication between leaders and followers, bypassing the institutional intermediaries, traditional media, party structures, and civil society organizations that historically enforced norms of factual accuracy and deliberative accountability.

The algorithmic architecture of platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram creates what Sunstein (2001) presciently called "echo chambers": information environments in which users are exposed primarily to content that confirms and intensifies their existing beliefs.

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Tucker et al. document how this dynamic contributes to political polarization and the proliferation of misinformation. In the context of right-wing populism, digital media ecosystems become spaces where conspiratorial narratives, stolen elections, globalist plots, and demographic replacement circulate without the friction of institutional fact-checking or editorial accountability. The emergence of "knowledge populism", the evaluation of truth claims primarily through political identity rather than empirical evidence, represents a profound challenge to the shared informational foundation that democratic deliberation requires.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these dynamics with particular clarity. Public health measures and scientific expertise were systematically framed by right-wing populist actors as instruments of elite domination, driving anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination movements across the United States, Brazil, Germany, and the Netherlands. The consequence was not merely poor public health outcomes but a deeper erosion of the epistemic commons, the shared acceptance of basic facts that underlie any possibility of democratic cooperation.

The post-1945 international order was built on the idea that states can do more in cooperation within rules-based multilateral institutions than in competition. Keohane's (1984) theory of cooperation after hegemony explained how international institutions could provide the incentives for cooperation in an anarchic system of states. The premise is being systematically challenged by the right-wing populist governments, which stress national sovereignty, consider supranational institutions as illegitimate encroachments by the global elite, and practice strategic nationalism.

In The Review of International Organizations (2024), the research showed that right-wing populist governments are not so much pullers and pushers as norm spoilers, as they gradually decrease the scope of institutions, prevent the advancement of norms, and inject ‘illiberal’ elements into institutions built on liberal principles. It is still relevant here that Susan Strange's (1996) account of structural power, power over production, finance, security, and knowledge, still applies: right-wing populist governments wish to have national control over these spheres, instead of international institutions, and consider the latter as a restriction on their rightful sovereignty.

The most important single case is the Brexit process, the world's largest regional integration project, the outcome of a democratic referendum based on populist sovereignty narratives, which cost the United Kingdom a significant amount of economic damage and which is representative of a national popular political logic that can produce results that are both democratic and institution-destructive.

The story isn't all bad, however, as some of the above pressures can be overcome. For democracies, it has been a very resilient period when challenged by right-wing populist movements. Even though the AfD has made tremendous gains at the polls, institutional integrity in Germany has remained thanks to the Basic Law's 'eternity clauses,' which guarantee fundamental democratic principles, and to the active role of the Federal Constitutional Court. The United States, despite the polarization and January 6th attack, peacefully transferred the presidential power in 2021 and 2025. The National Rally has been contained by the manner in which French republicans have formed a coalition ahead of the 2024 legislative elections.In the 2024 legislative election, the National Rally's advance has been thwarted by the way the French republicans have formed a coalition. The recent electoral defeat of Jair Bolsonaro in 2022, followed by the judicial accountability process, have shown that democratic institutions are resilient in the face of populist pressure, when they are backed by civil society and independent courts, as they are in Brazil.

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In his comparative study of populist governments in Latin America (Weyland, 2021), a cycle of populist mobilization and rebalancing of democratic institutions is observed, where the democratic institutions are capable of absorbing shocks, and over time gradually regain their functional role. The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (2024) shows that democratic backslides have occurred, but also identifies some cases which were able to withstand the populist government due to effective institutional resistance. . They share several similarities: independent and robust judiciaries, robust and developed civil societies, free and pluralistic media and political cultures of institutional forbearance. The over-arching analytical message is that democratic resilience is not a natural state, but rather the product of efforts to keep institutions, norms, and social trust alive and functioning, which are often active, yet in some cases invisible.

The main question in this paper has been how to make populism part of the competitive game of a democratic political system without eliminating the democratic cooperative machinery for that purpose. Involves deliberate and sustained investment in informal norms – mutual toleration, institutional restraint, epistemic honesty, civic pluralism – that enable the formal democratic institutions to function.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that popular right-wing populism is not going away, but has become a part of the present political scene and that its most potent effect is to systematically weaken the cooperative norms and practices that make democracy possible. Right-wing populism does not simply change the rules of the electoral game, but changes the conditions under which the game is played, for each of which it has seven interlinked mechanisms: the moralization of political conflict, crisis performance and executive centralization, the narrowing of citizenship to identity-bound categories, the rise of strategic nationalism, the strain on multilateral institutions, the fragmentation of public discourse through digital media, and the gradual but measurable weakening of informal democratic norms.

The parallels in this paper between the United States, Western and Central-Eastern Europe, India and Latin America are basically the same: Democratic institutions have withstood the challenges well; the social norms that give them meaning and utility are increasingly under attack. This finding, corroborated by the V-Dem Institute's Liberal Democracy Index (2024), provides systematic empirical evidence for the paper's central argument about the corrosive effect of populist governance on democratic norms.

But the paper, too, has shown that democracy does not have to be the rule of the day. In fact, it has been the experience of countries with well-established sectors of civil society, independent judiciaries, norms of institutional restraint, and well-developed constitutional frameworks that they have withstood the populist strain without cracking. Institutional resilience is not something that simply happens, but a result of the political actors, civil society organisations and citizens' active participation with democratic principles, such as Germany's Basic Law, France's realpolitik or Brazil's judicial accountability process following Bolsonaro's 2022 victory.

The basic thesis of this paper is that the question of today's populism in democracies is not whether it exists or not, but whether it is now being “normalized” as anti-cooperative. Populism, in the end, is no more than a component of democratic politics, and it is crucial that it is part of democratic politics in a cooperative manner, or if it undermines democratic institutions from within. Enforcement of democratic norms, and their subsequent success, relies as much on informal norms of mutual respect, epistemic honesty, and willingness to compromise as on the formal power of democratic institutions. These norms are more difficult

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to govern than institutions, but they are no less vital to the continuing existence of democratic life. The political challenge of our time is to keep them going amid rising right-wing populism.

7. Recommendations

Based on the results of this paper, the following policy and institutional recommendations are put forward for scholars, policy makers, civil society and democratic governments:

- Parties should ensure that judiciaries, audit institutions, anti-corruption institutions and electoral commissions are not susceptible to party capture. A key protection against the incremental erosion of democracy that occurs during the populist era is constitutional mechanisms that guarantee judicial independence, open procedures for judicial selections, and sufficient budgetary resources.
- International institutions must tackle the legitimacy shortcomings that populists have adeptly seized on. The United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and regional organizations need to be reformed in a way that brings a more comprehensive representation, more transparency and better connections between institutional decisions and citizens' welfare. The more visible an institution is seen to serve the people, not mere states or corporate interests, the more it will be able to withstand attacks from populists on the legitimacy of the institution.
- Governments and international organizations need to create proper algorithms to curb the spread of misinformation and political extremism on social media without affecting registered people's right to free speech. The EU's Digital Services Act (2023) is a positive example, and its impact should be tracked and its measures strengthened if there are signs that they are not affecting polarization and misinformation dynamics.
- The seeds of populism are sown in the fertile soil of economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, and political voicelessness. Thus, a successful anti-populist strategy should tackle the structural factors that engender populist demand: growing inequality, deindustrialization, under-provision of public services, and unresponsive political institutions. Reducing such structural vulnerabilities can be achieved by progressive industrial policy, inclusive growth strategies, more robust welfare states, and more effective participatory democratic processes, which are all targets of right-wing populism.
- To sustain democratic resilience over time, citizens need to be able to think critically about political claims, not fall for political manipulation, and respond to differences in constructive ways. Civic education, media literacy, and democratic values must be part of the national curricula across all levels of education. Public broadcasting institutions need to be safeguarded and funded to be a trusted source of information.
- As recent scholarship has documented, this is the case, both with respect to Mudde's (2023) Annual Review survey, which focuses on the CDU's use of populist themes, and in the study of the German CDU's relationship to populist right parties, which shows how mainstream parties have been adopting populist themes and forming coalitions with radical right parties to constrain the latter electorally. Mainstream political parties will need to fight on the issues of real public concerns and to uphold democratic principles and 'moral warfare' as an approach to politics.

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